



Book Review on *Xiangjiang Shentan Fu Er, Zi Mosi* 香江神探福邇，字摩斯 [The Great Hongkong Detective] by Trevor Morris

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Morris, Trevor, *Xiangjiang Shentan Fu Er Zi Mosi* 香江神探福邇，字摩斯 [The Great Hongkong Detective] (Taipei: Yuan-Liou Publishing Co., Ltd, 2021)

In *The Great Hongkong Detective*, Morris pays tribute to the classic Anglophone detective novel *Sherlock Holmes*. *Sherlock Holmes* has long been a favourite character for pastiches globally, finding adaptations on stage, in modern TV series and in movies. Holmes' stories traverse different eras, from the Victorian period to contemporary times, featuring male and female protagonists. In Morris's novel, the setting shifts from the capital of the British Empire to the Pearl in the Orient, its reputed colony in the Far East. As in the original story, Morris's work is set in the Victorian Era, in the 1880s. Unlike Arthur Conan Doyle, who set his story in his contemporary era, Morris takes a retrospective look at Hong Kong, placing his narrative one hundred and forty years ago. Through a series of historical events, the book presents Hong Kong's colonial past to the book's modern-day readers. The book has been published in three different languages to date: traditional Chinese, simplified Chinese, and Japanese. The Japanese translation, published by Bungeishunju Ltd. (文藝春秋) in 2022, earned a translation award in Japan this year. The content remains consistent between the traditional Chinese version in Hong Kong and Taiwan. However, due to censorship concerns in mainland China, the simplified Chinese version underwent modifications beyond the conversion from traditional to simplified characters.

The novel contains six stories, each presenting a distinct case against the backdrop of Hong Kong between 1881 and 1885, arranged chronologically. While the plots are fictional, Morris intricately weaves in actual historical events to vividly portray the characteristics and details of Hong Kong. The book captures the unique social atmosphere of the time, highlighting its cross-cultural features. In each story, the author subtly introduces Oriental elements, incorporating historical figures and events to offer readers a more immersive experience. The first case, "A Character in Scarlet" (血字的故事), pays homage to the first Holmes story, "A Study In Scarlet". Adopting the difference in writing direction between Mandarin and English as a clue, the case unravels the mystery of a murder. The second chapter, "Red-Hair Belle's Street" (紅毛嬌街), intertwines with the real-life local legendary figure *Ng Akew* (吳亞嬌), homaging Doyle's "The Red-Headed League". It captures the city's complexity as a trading port, where foreign and Chinese influences converge, reflecting the intricate connections between the Southeast Asian cities and the Chinese diaspora. The third case, "The Yellow-Faced Hunchback" (黃面陀子), combines elements of "The Yellow Face" and "The Crooked Man", exploring the impact of opening the five treaty ports following the Nanjing Treaty (1842) after the First Opium War (1839-1842). Hong Kong has become an entrepôt in Asia, connecting East and the West and witnessing the influx of Westerners who arrive as missionaries, merchants, and emissaries to enter China through Hong Kong. The setting of the fourth story, "A Manchurian Scandal" (清宮情怨), a homage to "A Scandal in Bohemia", emphasises the freedom that Hong Kong accrued as a stepping stone from the West to the Chinese mainland. Set against the backdrop of the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 in the United States, the story delves into the escape of a Qing Dynasty princess who seeks to pursue freedom of marriage and break away from traditional social restrictions on women. The fifth story, "The Vietnamese Translator" (越南譯員), incorporating Holmes' "The Engineer's Thumb", revolves around a kidnapping

case against the backdrop of the Sino-French War in 1884. Although Hong Kong, a British Colony, was expected to support the Allies of the British Empire, many Hong Kong-ers chose to support the Chinese and refused to serve France during the Sino-French War. An interpreter from Vietnam is the client in this story, which shows that the city is glued with agencies that harbour competing agendas while simultaneously providing numerous possibilities. The last case, "The Comprador's Clerk" (買辦文書), a homage to "Homes' Stockbroker's Clerk", narrates the trade function of Hong Kong at the time. Positioned as mediators between China and the West, compradors (買辦) become emblematic of trade and business in the city, where business people of mixed Chinese and Western ethnicity find their place and play pivotal roles.

In the original Sherlock Holmes series, the protagonist was a quintessential English gentleman adorned in a deerstalker, puffing on a pipe and serenading a violin. However, Morris replaces this iconic figure with Foo Erh (福邇), a Manchurian man hailing from the noble Border Blue Banner (鑲藍旗). Deviating from the conventional image of Sherlock Holmes, Morris's Foo Erh dons a pigtail in the Qing fashion and plays the Chinese violin, Erhu (二胡), often infusing Western tunes into his improvisations. While the original Holmes occasionally indulged in snorting white powder; Foo Erh grapples with opium addiction. Similar to actual intellectuals in the late Qing Dynasty, Foo Erh studied in Japan and the United Kingdom, and fervently champions reform and regards himself as responsible for China's future. Sherlock Holmes' best friend, Dr Watson, who retired from the British Army, finds an analogue in Dr Hwa Sheng (華笙), a former military attaché who served the Qing dynasty and participated in suppressing unrest in Xingjiang before settling in Hong Kong. Dr Hwa Sheng, having retired to practise Chinese medicine, narrates the novel from a first-person perspective – a conventional choice in detective fiction. To illuminate the complexity and diversity of Hong Kong society, Morris introduces a diverse array of characters, including Chinese individuals from the Mainland and overseas Chinese from Southeast Asia, alongside others from South Asia. Cantonese, then and now, serves as the lingual franca uniting the diverse people in this city.

In addition to the detailed descriptions of Hong Kong amidst the tumultuous clashes between the Qing and the British Empire in the 1880s, the book draws rich elements from Chinese popular literature, particularly the Wuxia genre. This infusion becomes most evident in the vividly portrayed fight scenes, where Kung Fu and swordplay take the centre stage. Yet, beyond the martial arts prowess exhibited in these scenes, the protagonist Foo Erh is an intellectual bearing the weighty responsibility of his country during the late Qing period. Foo Erh also values and cherishes highly friendship (情) and righteousness (義). Value in relationships (情) encapsulates a spectrum of emotions, extending from romantic love to encompass affection for friends, family, community and one's homeland. These principles find resonance with the ethos of Wuxia novels, where characters are not merely defined by their martial prowess but equally by their benevolence, morality, and ethics. Foo Erh's character exudes humility, empathy, and righteousness, mirroring also the gentlemen representation in the original Sherlock Holmes novel.

Scholars have long emphasised the role of language as an instrument in crafting literature. The interplay of vocabulary, register, languages, and styles in writing serve as a rich terrain for the field of literary analysis. Such elements are often considered by analysts seeking insights into the author's

intentions, characterisations and overarching perspectives conveyed in the text. In *The Great Hongkong Detective*, Morris diverges from the conventional detective novel, where the spotlight typically shines on intricate plots and red herrings. Instead, he successfully delivers a writing style that resembles closely the linguistic nuances of late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century Chinese, a departure from the prevalent use of modern language in other Sherlock Holmes's pastiches. Notably, the constant integration of Cantonese vocabulary, such as *hang bit* 行必 [night watch] (44), *si daam* 士擔 [stamp] (48), *yin so* 燕梳 [insurance] (117), *Saam wich zi* sandwich [山域治] (139), and *saa zin* 沙展 [sergeant], serves as a linguistic ode to the unique identity of the city. These linguistic choices transcend mere words, they become an integral part of the city's fabric. Hong Kong, with its strong historical roots, stands as a doorway for outsiders into the Qing Empire. The negotiation of Sinitic characters with Cantonese pronunciation, occasionally intertwined with English transliterations, becomes a linguistic metaphor for Hong Kong's precarious position – sandwiched between two formidable powers, continually navigating the struggle for survival.

In the Japanese translation of the book, Morris refers to his monograph as a literary love letter to Sherlock Holmes. Yet, Morris's contribution transcends the mere homage to the original novel. Beyond being a noteworthy pastiche set in a distinct cultural and historical milieu, the book unfurls the tapestry of the city's history and intricacies, dedicating itself to recovering the lost social history of Hong Kong during the British colonial era. When revisiting Hong Kong's history under British rule, do we often overlook the exploitative aspects of British colonisation? Or do we overemphasise a Chinese national ethos that tames the rich diversity in Hong Kong's identity? Literature, with its inherent capacity to capture and preserve the essence of a particular time and place, becomes also a tool for reflecting on historical inadequacies. Morris's extensive research within the realm of historical fiction transcends the stereotypical conventions of detective novels. It exposes the city's indivisible cultural fusion with the British and it unravels the profound impact of imperialism on Hong Kong. Simultaneously, the narrative delves into the complex dynamics of Hong Kong's love-hate relationship, fetters and intercrossings, with mainland China in the past as well as in the present.