

Inference-World/Instructions

1.

This is a world desperate for re-definition and re-inference, since everything has become a flood. Money, body, data, heart, and the legendary AI that is already here. Underneath such torrents, truth and axioms are increasingly confusing terms.

At such historic moment, the inference novel in its traditional sense, its social function, unsurprisingly, has undergone a significant shift. Its goal is no longer to let people hide behind the shade, spy upon the street of danger, imagine the evil inside prosperity, and then add to one's sense of security and peace of mind. In contrast, after the Bildungsroman entered into aphasia, the baton was handed off to the inference novel, which, not so far as teaching how to commit crime, demonstrates how to grow up gingerly in a world where the truth is messy.

At the same time, such world of inference has become a point of nostalgia for the contemporaries. The detectives, as well as the novelists who worked so hard to create them, would never have thought that today we would be confronted with such messiness, disorder and collapse. So much so that, from where we stand today, all the well-planned murders and plots of the past become unintentional evidence of a past world of order.

2.

When it comes to inference and its literary world, two figures that ordinary people are the most familiar with are Conan Doyle and Agatha Christie. This is largely because the figures they created, Sherlock Holmes and Paul, exist, with different transfigurations, in popular literature and television drama.

However, such an inference world has a totally different meaning for people today. This may be because, when the pipe-smoking Holmes and the slow-moving Paul with his exceptionally active grey cells were created, the influence of the British Empire was still there. The celebrated detectives, and even the novelists hiding behind them, sitting within the historical framework of the Empire and with a high sensitivity of the modern/order, strategically handled/exorcised the evils returning or invading British society from distant "areas of darkness".

Therefore, in Britain, whether it was in the prosperous city or the pleasant countryside, there was always a smartest figure gifted of exceptional understanding and insight of the order of the modern world, even if she was just an old lady lying in the sun and knitting sweaters all day long – our Miss Marple, who revealed plots, pursued truths, helped a world that made mistakes to restore its orders.

Today, the influence of the Empire has long gone. Even its echoes have disappeared with few traces. Thus, from today's point of view, such inference and investigation that do not give in until reaching its purpose, is no longer a battle for justice, but a confession similar to "white-hair'd courtesans talking of Emperor Xuanzong". The nostalgia for the early modern period pervades in the new world that behoves inference and explanation.

3.

The world of inference, however, does not disappear with the Empire. It continues as the new Bildungsroman.

Nevertheless, without the order of the Empire, without justice being promised, and living in such a world of nothing but ruins, how can one infer, explain and demarcate anything? The write who was

dedicated to answering this question was Seichō Matsumoto, the Japanese master of “social school” (shakai ha) detective fiction.

In 1950s, Japan was buried in ruins. What became debris was not only the army or the streets, but the heart. Starting to create his inference novels at that time, Seichō Matsumoto, though with a fame parallel to the aforementioned two figures, faced a very different set of problems to deal with.

Comparing Seichō Matsumoto to Conan Doyles who soaked in the sunset of the Empire, one would find: in the inference world built by Seichō Matsumoto, extraordinarily smart professional detectives that worked to undo the problems did not exist. Rather, it was composed of ordinary folks who did not even have a clear name.

In this way, Seichō Matsumoto’s inference world faithfully marks and responds to the turning point of his era: as the two world wars ended and the old order of the Empire came to a complete collapse, what power would this new round of modern world depend on? To provide an accurate outline of the new world through inference was the ambition of Seichō Matsumoto. The ordinary folks he created provided completely different bricks and behavioral guides for this new world.

4 .

For these ordinary people, Seichō Matsumoto wrote quite a number of short stories.

In one of such stories, the narrator was a clerk whose job was to answer phoned-in reports about building violations. One day, he received a call from a zealous citizen who reported an unlicensed construction project and asked them to demolish it. It was a period of Japan when everything was about to rise from the ruins and unlicensed buildings were everywhere. Although the government set rules, they were hard to follow in practice. From ordinary people to governmental departments of all levels, everyone turned a blind eye to such phenomenon and rarely implement the policy strictly. Thus, this over-zealous report did not let “him” feel his job being supported by people, or becoming easier. On the contrary, “he” found this zealous report suspicious, “what exactly is going on?” Therefore, he tracked all the way to the bottom and eventually found that it was actually the criminal who built the unlicensed building on purpose, committed murder there and, through the zealous report, wanted to destroy the criminal evidence for good, through the hand of the government.

It was not because the writing was too short for the writer to insert an incredibly smart detective or an intelligent, decisive and good policeman. Rather, in Seichō Matsumoto’s inference world, there was no need for such figure that stands outside and is always right. What existed were ordinary individuals who led a scrupulous, serious life and who cared because of their own dignity.

For example, in “The Woman Who Wrote Haiku”, because the fans of the haiku magazine did not hear back from the author, they were deeply concerned and wanted to know exactly why the author did not reply. As it turned out, they discovered a murder. The lonely haiku author, whose murder was known to none, thanks to these enthusiastic readers, obtained the chance to be concerned about after death and get vindicated eventually.

For instance, the writer in “The Woman Who Took the Local Paper” did not have a successful career and could only publish low-brow serials in the local newspaper. Thus, when he learned that the woman subscribed to the paper for his serials, his inner professional dignity was stimulated and satisfied a little. It was also because of this that the woman’s seemingly unreasonable unsubscription puzzled him. His writing did not have substantial improvement, but neither did it get worse. Why would she unsubscribe? To be responsible for his professional dignity, the writer began his investigation. Finally, he found that the woman’s subscription and unsubscription had nothing to do with his writing. She was just concerned about whether her murder had been found out in the local newspaper.

When your job got “zealous” cooperation, you did not feel grateful or relaxed, but suspicious; when you did not get reply from others, you did not blame them, but became deeply concerned and spared

no effort to inquire about the whereabouts; when the undeserved appreciation of your works was suddenly gone, you did not spend time feeling sorry for yourself but investigated and eventually discovered a crime from the traces left.

From today's perspective, these ordinary people led an extremely scrupulous life. Every one of them was comparable to the legendary "people of Chaoyang District". They were never the so-called important people. Nor could they afford to be self-righteous. Yet in their world, they were exceptionally rigorous. It seemed that their motivation to live was never to make themselves easier, but to give themselves more dignity.

5.

From the perspective of today, people would envy such scrupulous and structured new world. Yet we should not overlook the context in which such world was from.

After all, the debris was the result of the failed imperial conquest of Japan, who was inserted in a particular swift way into an already-defined modern moment by the United States and its allies, who represented justice at that time. The turbulence of the old order of the world was over, and a new order named "Modern-America-Democracy" was prepared for Japan that was ready to rise from the ruins.

So far, what loomed over these ordinary people was the vast, strict and rigidly hierarchical post-war Japanese society that was being modernized meticulously. It was like a machine, rumbling away and determining everyone's fate. Criminals wanted to locate a gap inside this machine to place their desires. Those ordinary citizens, who seek dignity in life and thus revealed the truth inadvertently, automatically became the vibrissa of the social machine, making it impossible for any crevice to exist. In this way, every piece of Seichō Matsumoto seems to tell the readers that the justice system would not leave anyone outside. Every ordinary person who lived scrupulously could be the one holding the sword of justice. It was these ordinary, scrupulous people, who were neither gifted detectives nor part of the omnipotent government, whose ups and downs and whose meticulousness, constructed a new world.

6.

Whether such creation had its instructive effect in the Japanese society at that time, we did not know.

Across time and space, when we retrospect such an inference world where crimes were carefully committed and citizens were all scrupulous detectives, firstly we felt strange: in the contrast of such an extremely scrupulous world, we live in a real world of looseness and careless. After all, as the Chinese reader pointed out long ago, classic cases of inference like Points and Lines were only possible in Japan, where trains are accurate to the exact second. Anywhere else, whether it is a late-running train or an unreasonable passenger, such designs would sound absurd and flawed.

It is actually far more than the matter of the train schedule in a different space and time.

Behind the loose, careless world of today, it was another failure of the modern world order, represented by the United States. For the politicians, financial oligarchs and historians who seek for lessons from history, the signs of the collapsing order of the world may come from the fall of the Berlin Wall, the triumph of the free market, or the rise of the "world factory". For those who grew up reading inference novels, nevertheless, this collapse meant the shift from Seichō Matsumoto to Higashino Keigo.

Higashino Keigo, a bestseller in both Japan and China, has held Seichō Matsumoto in high esteem. Yet in his inference stories, the scrupulous Japanese society that had been confident of the order was gone. The whole society has a totally different understanding of "what crime is", the position of evil in society, and even the ways in which ordinary people could support justice. Take Higashino Keigo's most well-known novel, *The Devotion of Suspect X*, as an example. In the novel, the murder of an anonymous homeless was used to cover another murder, in the hope to realize the mutual protection and help between ordinary people. Such understanding and design of "crime" obviously has gone beyond the imagination of the society where Seichō Matsumoto was embedded.

For people today, it was not a surprising shift. It was inevitable for the modern order to fall again, which signified the loss of confidence in truth, justice and even the external world which should be maintained by truth and justice. If it is true that every modern society would grow a desire for truth and a basic view of good and evil that match its contemporary history, then the popular inference novels, and of course movies and television dramas, are simply recording the attitude towards truth, good and evil at that time. If we put together the inference worlds constructed for one society in the past few decades, play, watch and yearn, what they present would inevitably be the shift of the times, no matter how frustrating or dismal such shift has been.

7.

Such shift also took place in China. The great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation, what sense of order does it bring? The truth of it, cannot be found in lengthy government reports, nor the overwhelming live streaming, but in detective novels piling up in the bookstores, as well as the castrated, ambivalent Chinese inference dramas.

At such moment, there have always been people eager to jump at the Chinese inference works for their lack of creativity. They would say, for example, that Zijin Chen's *The Long Night Before the Light*, is no more than a parody of Higashino Keigo. Such exclamation may have its point, but it neglects that the function of inference in this era is no longer innovation or imagination. Rather, it is the exact instructions of the world, printed, distributed, publicly displayed, while privately discussed.

In this sense, *The Long Night Before the Light* undoubtedly belongs to a particular type of the inference world. It is hard to know whether such novels exist in other countries of late development or socialism. If not, then the problem that this particular type of inference deals with would be of striking Chinese characteristics: In a world where criticism is not allowed, how could evil be outlined and narrated? And in a world where evil cannot be articulated, how could good be defined?

From the very beginning, the novel sets out for a complete disruption of the fights between good and evil, and justice and viciousness in the existing world. A corpse was founded in the suitcase carried by a refined gentleman when he tried to pass the security checkpoint of the subway. The incident naturally ignited wide discussion in the community and turned into a national sensation. When the police were going to collect evidence so as to convict the crime of the man who had been carrying around the body in the suitcase, however, they found he had perfect alibi when the victim was murdered. Confronted by the series of evidence that gradually surfaced in the course of investigation, it was not the "criminal", but the justice department involved in the investigation and conviction of the case, that was cornered and stranded.

Obviously, the situation Zilin Chen has to face is more complicated than that of Seichō Matsumoto, and subtler compared to his contemporary Higashino Keigo. The reason lies in that the ordinary people in the era of Seichō Matsumoto, though living in ruins, have a modernizing timetable which looked extraordinarily accurate at that time. Most people relied on this timetable to maintain the sense of rigor and self-esteem in their life. As a result, even in the world of Higashino Keigo where the modern order has collapsed, the ordinary people in his writings, though helping each other out by replacing one sin with another, are full of hesitation, perplexity and guilt.

In the inference world of Zijin Chen, ordinary people behave in a completely different way. Compared to the hesitate and anxious process of committing a crime, they focus more on how to "commit the crime" in public. For only with the best use of wisdom and a sensational "crime", would another real crime be unveiled, rather than being concealed and swallowed by the darkness again and again. This desperate gamble for social justice is where lies the novelty of the Chinese inference world's contribution to the current order of the world.

8.

"Will the world be all right?"

In the turbulent times, Liang Shuming's father, before committing suicide, asked his son.

During the prosperous times, few parents would throw such big question to their children and confront them with such shocking fear for no reason. Consequently, although kids may love the exciting or frustrating inference world, they have completely forgot that inference was the social instructions to answer such heavy question.

Thus, no matter how many times Seichō Matsumoto and Higashino Keigo were re-read, for them, a world where axioms exist is as far as the exotic lands.

So, we waited.

After all, the inference world since then must be written by a generation(s) of people who do not truly believe the existence of axioms or justice.

There is, of course, another possibility. If we feed all the inference texts to artificial intelligence, they would soon learn to automatically write out the order that the world should have and supervise human beings to complete their world project by following the epitomizing instructions.

The part of the discussion that was reserved for us was simply, which inference world could be the better version?

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