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AN ETHICAL UNDERWORLD? LEGENDARY CON ARTISTS
IN ARABIC VERNACULAR FICTION

Preamble: The Outlaw as Hero

The commercial and critical success of Ang Lee's martial arts film, *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000),¹ is an important landmark not only in the history of Chinese Cinema but also in the history of Hollywood. It departs from earlier Hollywood films about the East, such as the Fu Manchu series, and strikes out on its own in its quest for a place in the Hollywood pantheon. Its difference from the *Arabian Nights* films made in Hollywood cannot be more conspicuous. This difference is significant, especially in view of the one and same origin of Hollywood films based on 'Eastern' material and on the 'East', traceable to the silent *The Thief of Bagdad* (1924), the unrepeatable precursor of all cinematic adaptations of *The 1001 Nights*, and equally the progenitor of cultural stereotypes, of both the Middle Easterner and the Far Easterner. The 'Mongol Prince from eastern Asia', the arch-villain of *The Thief of Bagdad*, had for decades provided the blueprint of Hollywood portrayal of an 'opium smoking, treacherous, lecherous and despotic' mandarin from the far 'Orient'. *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, preceded by three decades of *kung fu* films made globally familiar and popular by Bruce Lee and his generation of movie stars from Hong Kong and Taiwan, has neutralized this Hollywood 'Oriental' despot and opened up the global cinematic landscape for a more diverse Chinese world inhabited by complex Chinese characters.

These Chinese *kung fu* films, just like *The Thief of Bagdad*, are based in indigenous vernacular fiction. While the genre of films constituting *The Thief of Bagdad* and its 'sequels' may all be attributed to transmutations of *The 1001*

1 – This film is adapted from a martial arts novel of the same title written by Wang Dulu (Wang Baoxiang, 1909-1977). This belongs to a long tradition of Chinese storytelling about knight-errants (*xia*) that started perhaps as early as the fifth century BC. The tradition includes oral performance and multiple written versions 'compiled' by different authors from various historical eras. The most popular works may be divided into two main trends in accordance with the time of their publication: the 'old' school which proliferated throughout the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth century; and the 'new' school that flourished in Hong Kong first then Taiwan beginning in the second half of the twentieth century. *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, the novel, belongs to the 'old' school. For a quick survey of the development of this genre of storytelling in Chinese, see Hamm, *Paper Swordsmen*, p. 1-31.

Nights, the *kung fu* films are similarly derived from a long, multivalent tradition of writing on what James Liu calls ‘knigt-errant’ (*wu xia*).² Moreover, *The Thief of Bagdad* and *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* are similarly constructed around ‘underworld’ characters who are ‘heroic’ in many considerations. Ahmed, outcast and thief of Baghdad, proves more ‘princely’ and deserving of the ‘princess’ than all the princes, who have travelled far and wide to be in Baghdad in order to compete for her hand, and the ancient kingdom of Baghdad she will inherit from her father the Caliph. Ahmed is, like the main characters in *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, a shadowy figure whose appearance on the centre stage of action exposes the imperfection of kingship and the limited reach of its beneficence, the imperfection of its law.

The thief of Bagdad evokes not the *Nights* forty thieves of ‘Alī Bābā fame but the low life of other stories more akin to the Chinese knight-errants who, just like the low life of *The 1001 Nights*, encompass con artists (*muhtālūn*, *mu-kaddūn*, *ṣūtṭār*), martial artists (*ayyārūn*, *ahdāt*, *futuwwah*) and mendicants (*ḥarāfiṣ*). I turn to this underworld in *The 1001 Nights* and Arabic vernacular fiction, not to give a survey of their types and recurrence in Arabic writing,³ or trace their historical origins,⁴ or examine their organization into guilds in order to date them to the Mamluk period,⁵ but to think of their significance, situated as they are within and outside the corpus of generically variegated *Nights* stories, and their politics in their engagement with existential issues arising from living in a specific type of community, constructed as they are around an array of characters as ‘heroic’ as the princely or kingly empire builders at the centre of the narratives of ‘epics’ and ‘romances’ known as *al-sīrah al-ṣā‘biyyah* in Arabic.

I draw attention to Chinese ‘knight-errant’ type figures in Arabic vernacular fiction, to a number of historical ‘brigands’ whose exploits have spawned urban legends peculiar to the pre-modern world of Islam, inhabiting, as they do, a number of stories in *The 1001 Nights* and *al-sīrah al-ṣā‘biyyah*. These stories, which detail their ‘careers’ as ‘low life’, have been mentioned as ‘crime stories’ and described in scholarship and criticism of Arabic popular (folk) literature, and even related to historical figures,⁶ but have not been analyzed in such a way that would bring out their significance as statements on the culture that produced them. Why do we tell stories about con artists, thieves, bandits, martial artists and mendicants? Why are their exploits the stuff of legends? More impor-

2 – See Liu, *The Chinese Knight-errant*.

3 – See Bosworth, *The Mediaeval Islamic Underworld*; Irwin, ‘6 Low Life’, in *The Arabian Nights*, p. 140-158; and al-Naġgar, *Hikāyat al-ṣūtṭār*.

4 – See Zakeri, *Sāsānid Soldiers in Early Muslim Society*.

5 – See A. Miquel’s analysis of the stories of Ahmād al-Danaf and ‘Alī al-Zaybaq (incorporated into the *Nights*) in *Sept contes des Mille et une nuits*, p. 51-78; and Shoshan, ‘Comedy, Pornography, and Social Critique’, p. 216-226.

6 – See Elisséeff, *Thèmes et motifs des Mille et une Nuits*, p. 51; Gerhardt, *The Art of Story-telling*, p. 169-190; Irwin, ‘6 Low Life’, in *The Arabian Nights*, p. 140-158; Lyons, *The Arabian Epic*; Miquel, *Sept contes des Mille et une nuits*, p. 51-78; and Tāğ, *Maṣādir alflaylah w-alaylah*, p. 370 footnote 22.

tant, what do the stories gain from elevating, for example, the *muhtālūn*, *ṣūtṭār* and ‘*ayyārūn* from sidekicks to epic heroes?⁷ Are they heroes?

I turn to Chinese vernacular fiction for inspiration in my discussion of these stories from *The 1001 Nights*, because I hope to extract from it, as well as from critical insights into it, some ideas to help me think through the body of Arabic stories that have thus far escaped serious critical attention. Although the Chinese vernacular fiction was equally marginalized from the literary canon until very recently,⁸ the world of Chinese knight-errant is well-known—practically every educated middle class Chinese has read extensively in this genre today. I will focus on four main themes: (1) the world of *wu xia* constructed in Chinese vernacular ‘novels’ and *kung fu* films that have resonance in Arabic vernacular fiction based in Arab low life; (2) the organization of, rules governing, and the maintenance of order in this world; (3) the status of the knight-errant; and (4) the subversive figure of female con/martial artists.

The world of wu xia in Chinese culture

In the *Thief of Bagdad*, Ahmed lives in an underworld made up of dark catacombs and caverns hidden from the public eye. He emerges from this underworld into market places, streets, courtyards and even balconies in order to make a living, pick-pocketing, shop-lifting, food-stealing and even robbing. He may on occasion intrude onto the private world of the palace, fortified behind high walls and rows of guards, into the princess’s private chambers or the Caliph’s court. However, the theatre of his action, like that of *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, is the ‘public space’ represented by market places, streets and courtyards. This ‘public space’ is the site of collusion and collision between the underworld and the world, where chaos sanctioned by the ‘law of the jungle’ of the former seemingly threatens the order purportedly upheld by the ‘Caliphal law’, system of justice and structure of order. Just as Ahmed flagrantly flouts the ‘Caliphal law’ in the markets and streets of Baghdad, the protagonists of *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* engage in to-the-death sword fights in outdoor spaces, roof tops, courtyards, alleys, restaurants, market places, bamboo thickets and even deserts. This ‘public space’ is understandably perceived as full of danger. In one of the most popular pre-modern Chinese Knight-errant novels, *Qixia Wuyi* (seven knight-errants and five loyal warriors),⁹ we read an interesting dialogue

7 – See John Renard’s discussion of the ‘*ayyār* in *Islam and the Heroic Image*, p. 55-59.

8 – The vernacular *wu xia* tradition of storytelling has been attracting much attention in the past decade, and there is now a body of literature, especially in Chinese, on the subject. For a quick survey, see Jiandong Yi, *Wuxia Wenhau* (Chivalrous Culture).

9 – Or ‘seven heroes and five gallants’, ‘heroes’ and ‘gallants’ being Lu Xun’s translation in *A Short History of Chinese Fiction*, p. 359-71. The version with this title is an alternative version to *Sanxia Wuyi*, also attributed to storyteller Shi Yukun (active 1810-1871). The references in this paper are made to *Qixia Wuyi*, attributed to Shi Yukun according to my text, is in fact a revised version of *Sanxia Wuyi*, shortened by twenty chapters and first published by Yu Yue (1821-1906) in 1889. For more details, see Blader, *Tales of Magistrate Bao*, p. xii-xlii. Selections from *Sanxia Wuyi* have been translated by Blader.

between a literary scholar and his loyal attendant that evokes to readers of *The 1001 Nights* the dangers of the ‘public space’, or, let us say, the ‘street’.

Scholar Yen comes from a literary family and is traveling to the Capital to take the Government examination in order to obtain a government post. His servant Yu Muo attends to his needs on his journey to the Capital. On the way, they meet a well-dressed handsome Mr. Jin at a restaurant. Scholar Yen and Mr. Jin seem to get along and they strike up a friendship. After every meal together, however, Mr. Jin never seems to have any money on him. Scholar Yen always ends up footing the bill out of his very modest budget. His servant, Yu Muo, is both suspicious and indignant. He decides to have a talk with his young master. This is how the dialogue goes:

- Yu Muo: Master, what do you think of Mr. Jin?
- Scholar Yen: He is a well-educated good man!
- Yu Muo: Master has never left home before and does not know the dangers lurking in the streets. There are people who lie to you in order to get you to pay for what they eat. There are also people who will con you out of what you own. There are other people who will set traps for you and get you into trouble. There are so many strange and weird people out there – *qi-qi guai-guai de ren*. Master, if you think Mr. Jin is a good man you will fall for his tricks one day. In my humble opinion, I think Mr. Jin is nothing more than a thief or a charlatan.
- Scholar Yen: Oh, shut up! And don’t you dare say such nasty things about Mr. Jin. I cannot believe that you can say such things about other people at your young age. Mr. Jin seems to me not only scholarly but also rather heroic. He will be an extra-ordinary person in the future. Stay out of my business, Yu Muo. So what if he is a trickster. It’s just a matter of few extra silver coins. So what? It’s none of your business!
- Yu Muo (laughing to himself under his breath): No wonder people call him a geek. I am thinking of what would be best for him and he yells at me! I’ll let him be for now.¹⁰

As the story of Scholar Yen unfolds, his assessment of Mr. Jin would be the accurate one. Mr. Jin is the youngest, and most talented, of the titular five loyal warriors, or more aptly, five heroes who operate outside the ‘imperial legal system’ and who would always come to the aid or rescue of ‘common people’ especially when law is inaccessible and justice impossible. In the end, he repays Scholar Yen in manifold, and saves him from a certain death when Scholar Yen is accused of, arrested and sentenced to death for a murder he does not commit.

The ‘street’ is the locus of action, and street life is unpredictable, treacherous, and full of unsavory characters. Nasty things can happen to people in the street, outside the protection of homes, government offices, legal courts, governor’s mansions, and emperor’s palaces. Even things that happen indoors are often

10 – *Qixia Wuyi*, attributed to Shi Yukun, p. 173-174.

directly responsive to what happens in the street, what is brought into the private space from the public space. Encounters, negotiations, conflicts take place outdoors, in the ‘street’, especially in urban centres, where the limits of the Law are tested, negotiated and, on occasion, redrawn; for it is in the ‘street’ of urban centres that organization and maintenance of order are most necessary and, therefore, immediately visible.

Organization and maintenance of order in the ‘street’

The ‘street’, just as Yu Muo says, is full of ‘strange and weird’ people, of ‘crouching tigers and hidden dragons’, and of thieves, robbers, bandits, murderers and con artists ready to take advantage of innocent ‘folk’. On a good day, Hārūn al-Rašīd takes his vizier Ja‘far and his chamberlain Masrūr out into the street of *The 1001 Nights* in order to make sure that order in his empire is maintained, here through the dispensation of justice in the peculiar style of vernacular fiction, imposed from above. A murder mystery, such as ‘The Story of Three Apples’, is not solved by intelligent detection, but by a series of accidents, all responsive to Hārūn al-Rašīd’s command to Ja‘far to find the murderer or be killed.¹¹ Hārūn al-Rašīd’s way of meting out justice is familiar to Judge Bao. Judge Bao, a historical character from Sung Dynasty (960-1278) turned into a fictional hero in a body of Chinese crime stories, most famously in *Baogung An* (the court cases of Judge Bao), plays both detective and judge in *Seven Knight-Errants and Five Loyal Warriors*. Crimes here are solved in the *Nights’* fashion. There is no skillful detection worthy of mention. A hunch or a dream would direct attention away from the falsely accused and to the real culprit. Aided by his entourage of knight-errants, he would arrest the criminal, intimate him or torture him until the criminal confesses his crimes, identifies his partners-in-crime and reveals the details of a murder conspiracy. On a bad day, however, law is absent. The ‘street’ comes to be the playing field for all the unsavory characters, of which Yu Muo warns his master. As soon as Scholar Yen steps out of the house and into the street, he is per force subject to con tricks, robbery and perhaps even murder.

The ‘street’ in Arabic and Chinese vernacular fiction is of dual personality. Its order is expected to be maintained by the imperial system of law, the Law, overseen by the King himself (as in the stories of Hārūn al-Rašīd in *The 1001 Nights*), or by the law enforcers the King personally appoints (as in the stories of Judge Bao in *The Seven Knight-Errants and Five Loyal Warriors*). The Law, alas, recedes behind the walls and the ‘street’ becomes a lawless place where ‘criminals’ come out and play, wreak havoc in the life of innocent passers-by, and make a mockery of the Law. In other words, the world - that which benefits from the order imposed by the Law, becomes the playing field of the underworld - that which flagrantly ignores the Law and the order it tries to maintain.

11 – For more on this story, see Allen, ‘An Analysis of the “Tale of the Three Apples”’, in Savory and Agius (eds.), *Logos Islamikos*, p. 51-60, reprinted in Marzolph, *The Arabian Nights Reader*, p. 239-248; and Malti-Douglas, ‘The Classical Arabic Detective’, p. 59-91.

This does not mean that the underworld is entirely lawless. The knight-errant, despite his ambiguous status, embodies a 'Code of Chivalry' that competes with the Law in maintaining justice.

The ambivalent status of the knight-errant

Mr. Jin is in fact the famous knight-errant, Bai Yu-t'ang, in disguise. His motto is to 'speak up for and act on behalf of the downtrodden against their oppressors' - *xing xia zhang yi* - or, put differently, to seek justice for the oppressed. Oppression comes in different forms but in the world of vernacular fiction it is 'doing wrong' to a helpless, hapless ordinary man, such as taking away his money, property, or wife by force. In extreme cases, it also entails pinning a crime or murder on him and ensures that he pays for a crime he has not committed. The knight-errant intervenes here to 'right the wrong', to re-establish justice, to save the innocent and expose the guilty. However, he always operates outside the remit of the Law and in the shadows. He is an individualistic subversive figure who abides by his own moral principles and pursues justice accordingly. More often than not, he takes it upon himself the task of exposing and punishing imperial officers who abuse their power and oppress ordinary citizens. From the perspective of the Law, he is an outlaw. From the perspective of the ordinary citizen, he may be a good guy or a bad guy dependant on the perspective that determines what is right and wrong. This dual perspective comes from two paradigms of knowledge: one, the Law; and two, a 'Code of Chivalry' operative outside this imperial system of law.

The knight-errant straddles two worlds - the world and underworld - and moves between them freely physically and morally. As a knight-errant with superior command of martial arts, he or she easily evades detection or capture. As a moral being with a strong sense of what is right and what is wrong, he rights wrongs and imposes justice through whatever means possible. It is acceptable for him to kill a corrupt government official, for example, to steal from homes as long as his ultimate objective is to right a wrong. It is understandable from the perspective of the Law that he or she ought to be pursued, to be brought under the rule of Law. However, it is often the case that the Law pursues the knight-errant in order to secure his or her service. As soon as he or she submits to the Law and renders his services to the Imperial Order, he or she is celebrated, even decorated as officers of the Law. The seven knight-errants and five loyal warriors of *Qixia Wuyi* begin as outlaws living in communities out of reach of the Imperial Order but end as the servants of Judge Bao and the Law.

The Underworld in Arabic vernacular fiction

There are six main figures in the *The 1001 Nights* and *al-sīrah al-ṣā‘biyyah* who have a great deal of affinity with the Chinese knight-errants: Ahmad al-Danaf, Hasan Šūmān and ‘Alī Zaybaq; and Dalilah al-Muhtālah (Dalilah the Wily), her daughter Zaynab al-Nassābah (Zaynab the Deceitful), and ‘Alī Zaybaq's mother, Fātimah al-Fayyūmiyyah. ‘Alī al-Zaybaq's father, Hasan Ra’s al-Ğūl, is

too a famous *šātir*, but he dies very young and has no real presence in *Sīrat ‘Alī al-Zaybaq* or *The 1001 Nights* beside his reputation. These characters, usually described as *muhtāl* (trickster), *šātir* (larrikin) or ‘*ayyār* (ruffian or vagabond), are masters of disguise and martial arts.¹² Their stories are, on the surface, about the tricks (they play on others) in order to exact a payment of some sort. Upon a closer scrutiny, they are just like the Chinese knight-errants who straddle two worlds, and only emerge out of the underworld when the world, as Robert Irwin points out, is saturated with corruption.¹³ Their stories, like Chinese *wu xia* stories, tell of collusion and collision between the world and the underworld as part of an interrogation of justice. Does and can the Law really dispense justice? What is the limit of justice as defined by the Law? Who are qualified to be officers of the Law?

Each of the six characters mentioned above may be the main protagonist in a story of their own but may also appear as a secondary character in the stories of the others. The stories of these six figures overlap in the popular *al-sīrah al-šā‘biyyah* and *The 1001 Nights*. Ahmād al-Danaf and Ḥasan Šūmān, who are mentioned in historical sources as real persons, boast of their leading roles in *Sīrat Ahmād al-Danaf*,¹⁴ and appearance as secondary characters in a number of *Nights* stories. These include ‘‘Alā’ al-Dīn Abū al-Šāmāt’ (*Alf laylah wa-laylah*, vol. 2, p. 466-475), ‘‘Alī Šār and Zumurrud’ (vol. 3, p. 542-563), and ‘Dalīlah al-Muhtālah’ (vol. 4, p. 204-217), and ‘‘Alī al-Zaybaq’ (vol. 4, p. 217-235). ‘Alī al-Zaybaq is the titular character of *Sīrat ‘Alī al-Zaybaq*¹⁵ as well as an entire story in *The 1001 Nights*. However, he does not appear in other *Nights* stories. His mother, Fātimah al-Fayyūmiyyah, plays a central role in the development of the story. Dalilah al-Muhtālah, who is seemingly a real person as well,¹⁶ does not have an epic to her name but has a story devoted entirely to her exploits in *The 1001 Nights*. She also makes a major appearance on two other stories. She plays a major role in ‘‘Azīz and ‘‘Azīzah’ (vol. 1, p. 259-288), one of the inset stories of the ‘epic’ of ‘Umar al-Nu‘mān’. Here she is the ‘other’ woman who

12 – ‘*Ayyār* was a technical term denoting a class of Sassanian soldiers who were incorporated into the Muslim army during the Umayyad period but were later let go and they became a type of ‘mercenaries’, or ‘strong men’ who sold their martial skills to neighbourhoods in urban centres, such as Baghdad, and helped to maintain security and safety for these neighbourhoods. See Zakeri, *Sāsānid Soldiers in Early Muslim Society*.

13 – See Irwin, *The Arabian Nights*, p. 156-158.

14 – It is extant only in manuscript form. See ‘Abd al-Ǧawād, ‘Muqaddimah: Fī ՚l-bidāyah kānat al-ḥikāyat’, *Sīrat ‘Alī al-Zaybaq*, p. 19.

15 – My references are to *Sīrat ‘Alī al-Zaybaq*, ed. Hayrī ‘Abd al-Ǧawād, 2004. This version belongs to an Egyptian family. There is, according to Hayrī ‘Abd al-Ǧawād, a Syrian family and a number of versions published in Damascus, Aleppo and Beirut (p. 22). The story of ‘Alī al-Zaybaq is re-written in Arabic by Fārūq Hūrṣid in ‘*Alī al-Zaybaq* (1981) and *Malā’ib ‘Alī al-Zaybaq* (1990), and summarized in English by Lyons in *Arabian Epic*, vol. 2, p. 9-17 and vol. 3, p. 2-16.

16 – On this aspect of these historical outlaws, see Elisséeff, *Thèmes et motifs*, p. 51; Gerhardt, *The Art of Story-telling*, p. 169-190; Irwin, ‘6 Low Life’, in *The Arabian Nights*, p. 140-158; and Miquel, *Sept contes des Mille et une nuits*, p. 51-78.

entices ‘Azīz away from her cousin ‘Azīzah.¹⁷ She also plays the role of ‘Alī al-Zaybaq’s nemesis.

These stories are all set in Baghdad during the reign of Hārūn al-Rašīd (the eighth century), even though the historical characters are all traceable to the Mamluk period (the fourteenth century and later). The four stories in which Ahmād al-Danaf and Ḥasan Šūmān make cameo appearances are a good example of the structure, themes, characters, plot and narrative typical in *Nights* stories on the underworld and its shady inhabitants, and the role and status of *muḥtālun*, *ṣūṭṭār* and ‘*ayyārūn*. More important, they provide a blueprint for an interpretation of similar stories, whether within or outside the *Nights*. It is immediately observable that they all begin their career as thieves and bandits. In ‘‘Alī Šār and Zumurrud’, they seem to lead a band of 40 thieves (*luṣūs*) who call themselves *ṣūṭṭār*. They are outlaws. One of them by the name of Čawān al-Kurdī al-Šāṭir kills a solider, puts on his clothes and goes into town to steal. He inadvertently ‘kidnaps’ Zumurrud and brings her to the cave to be the ‘sex toy’ for his companions. He entrusts her to his mother and leaves again for the city to steal. Zumurrud outwits the mother and escapes to a city where she becomes king. Čawān al-Kurdī happens to pass through her kingdom and she spots him, has poison put in his food and kills him, exacting her revenge. Ahmād al-Danaf and his ‘band of brothers’ are thieves and bandits, or outlaws, who operate outside Law. As outlaws, they commit crimes and are punished for them.

They then appear in ‘‘Alā’ al-Dīn Abū al-Šāmāt’. Here, they seem to have joined the service of Hārūn al-Rašīd. Ahmād al-Danaf is ‘police’ captain of the right watch (*muqaddam al-maymanah*), leading 40 guards, or police officers, and with an annual salary of one thousand gold dinars. Ḥasan Šūmān is now ‘police’ captain of the left watch (*muqaddam al-maysarah*). Their relationship with Hārūn al-Rašīd and with his system of justice, however, is ambivalent. ‘Alā’ al-Dīn becomes at one time Hārūn al-Rašīd’s boon-companion and the chief merchant (*sahbandar al-tuqqār*) of Baghdad. (Hārūn al-Rašīd comes upon the down-and-out ‘Alā’ al-Dīn and his first wife Zubaydah al-‘Udiyyah, the lute-player, one night in one of his night journeys and rescues them from a certain fate). Later in the story, the son of Baghdad’s governor competes with him for the favour of a slave-girl, Yāsamīn, and employs a thief who steals Hārūn al-Rašīd’s ring (and other things) and plants them in ‘Alā’ al-Dīn’s house. When Hārūn al-Rašīd’s personal effects are found in ‘Alā’ al-Dīn’s house, ‘Alā’ al-Dīn is sentenced to hang in the public square. When Ahmād al-Danaf finds out – and he has adopted ‘Alā’ al-Dīn as an honorary, or ‘god’ son since they first met at one of Hārūn al-Rašīd’s parties – he secretly rescues ‘Alā’ al-Dīn from the gallows. To deceive Hārūn al-Rašīd, he puts in ‘Alā’ al-Dīn’s place the body of an already executed ‘criminal’. He then takes ‘Alā’ al-Dīn to Cairo. ‘Alā’ al-Dīn is of course exonerated at the end and the real culprits are caught and punished. Here, Ahmād al-Danaf and Ḥasan Šūmān serve Hārūn al-Rašīd when he is

17 – References are made to the 1999 Dār Ṣādir reprint of Bulaq in six volumes: *Alflaylah walaylah*.

right, but they also do not hesitate to disobey his orders, albeit in secret, when they deem what he has done is wrong, unjust. They are now akin to the knight-errant in Chinese *wu xia* fiction and *kung fu* movies.

We next find them entrenched in positions of authority worthy of subversion themselves in ‘*Dalīlah al-Muhtālah*’. The story begins when *Dalīlah* feels completely indignant that *Aḥmad al-Danaf* and *Ḥasan Šūmān* should be *Hārūn al-Rašīd*’s ‘police’ captains (managing forty men for a generous annual salary) while she, the widow of a deceased ‘police’ captain and someone equally skilled in con tricks and martial arts, should be ‘disinherited’, to be barred from taking up the post vacated by her now dead husband? In addition, she is also the daughter of a police captain who provided the Caliphal postal service with an indispensable tool. She has inherited her father’s mastery in training and managing carrier pigeons. She should have inherited her husband’s, as well as her father’s, positions and salaries. Why should she be deprived of similar recognition and condemned to live in poverty with her daughter, *Zaynab*, just because she is a woman?

This is how she looks at her situation. *Aḥmad al-Danaf* and *Ḥasan Šūmān* are two vagabonds from Cairo who attracted the attention of *Hārūn al-Rašīd* because they gained notoriety playing con tricks on citizens of Baghdad. They do not deserve this ‘Caliphal’ recognition more than she does. At her daughter’s instigation, she sets out to prove herself and to attract the attention of *Hārūn al-Rašīd*. She wreaks havoc in the streets of Baghdad, playing dirty tricks on the hapless citizens of *Hārūn al-Rašīd*’s imperial capital. When *Hārūn al-Rašīd* hears of her mischief and sets his two ‘police’ captains on her. They prove unable to contain her or her daughter *Zaynab*. In fact, *Zaynab* sneaks into their enclave in disguise, drugs them, using *bañg* (henbane or hashish) as a sinister Chinese ‘hotel’ owner would do in order to knock the customers out and dispossess them, and steals all their possessions. *Hārūn al-Rašīd*, as an emperor would do for Chinese knight-errants, indeed summons her and bestows upon her recognition worthy of her, gives her an annual salary of one thousand gold dinars and forty men (slaves). She is appointed the mistress of carrier pigeons, as well as of a ‘hotel’ (*hān*) where all itinerant merchants stay when they come to Baghdad.

They finally become ‘fatherly’ figures in ‘the Story of ‘*Alī al-Zaybaq*’. They have adopted ‘*Alī al-Zaybaq*, who is the son of another *ṣāṭir*, *Ḥasan Ra*’s *al-Ğūl*, and now that they are secure in their ‘Caliphal’ posts, they send for ‘*Alī*, bring him to Baghdad, and initiate him into a career that follows their footsteps. In order to prove himself and attract the right attention, ‘*Alī* pits himself against *Dalīlah al-Muhtālah* – she is, after all, the last winner in the games of clever con tricks. In the end, ‘*Alī* outmaneuvers *Dalīlah*, but with a lot of help from *Aḥmad al-Danaf* and *Ḥasan Šūmān*, and especially his mother, *Fātimah al-Fayyūmiyyah*. However, ‘*Alī* falls in love with *Dalīlah*’s daughter, *Zaynab*, and she with him, and after many trials and tribulations they eventually marry. As they all become one big happy family, ‘*Alī al-Zaybaq* too becomes a ‘police’ captain in the service of *Hārūn al-Rašīd*.

The ‘public sphere’ in the Arabic stories of muhtāl, šāṭir and ‘ayyār

The Arabic stories of underworld figures, as I have summarized them, are arguably political. The kind of political consciousness they espouse, impart and promote, like in Chinese knight-errant stories, comes to light in a third, luminal space located between the two spaces constituting the two seemingly separate but overlapping worlds: the world that is the domain of the Caliphal Law, and the underworld where the Caliphal Law is flagrantly ignored, undermined and broken. These two worlds collide in the ‘street’ and impose their respective ‘order’ or ‘disorder’ on the innocent citizens who happen to pass through. The law of the underworld abides by a ‘Code of Chivalry’ and shares with the Caliphal Law a commitment to justice. Justice here is defined simply. It is to support what is ‘right’ and ‘right’ what goes ‘wrong’. What is ‘right’ is also defined simply. It means ownership of rightfully earned property, of any kind, and the integrity of one’s life. If one is wrongfully accused of a crime and set to be punished for it, it is ‘wrong’. Taking the life of ‘wrong doer’ in the style of vigilantism is ‘right’ and ‘just’. Violence is not the ‘code of conduct’ per se here; rather, it can be the means of ‘justice’, especially when the system of justice put into place and maintained by the Caliphal Law malfunctions as a result of corruption in the ranks of the officers of the Law. When this occurs, when the Caliphal Law recedes from the ‘street’, the underworld takes over the responsibility of justice, of protecting the ‘wronged’, or ‘righting wrongs’. It breaks, resists or intervenes in the Caliphal Law when the Caliphal Law is blind to ‘real’ or ‘true’ justice. When Dalīlah al-Muhtālah first appears before Hārūn al-Rašīd, he wants her executed immediately. Ḥasan Šūmān intervenes and sets the matters right. However, when the Caliphal Law is fully operative, the above-world co-opts the underworld and integrates it into itself and its order.

The underworld paradoxically desires to be part of the ‘world’, and ‘acts up’ when the world is not functioning properly, when it is defunct and can no longer safeguard ‘justice’. It will happily join it when ‘things’ are right. In its integration into the world, the underworld brings to it its own law. This law of the underworld, as I have sketched above, remains operative. We see this more particularly in the workings of the ‘law of inheritance’. The stories of the underworld interrogate the principles of organizing and maintaining the world based on kingship as well as kinship. What binds the underworld together is not kingship based on blood relation, but brotherhood, which defines ‘family’ in a different way. Family is structured around ‘loyalty’ to members of a brotherhood network regardless of blood ties, genealogy. Aḥmad al-Danaf looks after ‘Alā’ al-Dīn Abū al-Šāmāt and ‘Alī al-Zaybaq not only because of his sense of justice but also because both are his ‘adopted’ sons. ‘Inheritance’ takes place among the members of this network of brotherhood. The ‘law of inheritance’ of the underworld is, however, very different from that of the world of kingship. In the Caliphal world, sons inherit kingship from their fathers, but in the underworld ‘brothers’ or ‘adopted sons’, bound by allegiance to a similar set of ethical principles rather than blood ties, inherit positions of power from one another, just as ‘Alī al-Zaybaq takes over from Aḥmad al-Danaf and Ḥasan Šūmān in the end.

Origin, class and blood ties play a much less significant role in the structure of their world.

The Arabic stories of the underworld, like their Chinese counter parts, detail the ideological contests between two worldviews, each structuring a world inhabited by citizens who are expected if not required to stand up for a shared sense of justice. The debate is concerned less with notions of justice, or right and wrong - for they are common, but more with the building blocks of the system devised, designed and put in place to safeguard justice, to ensure not only political but also social order. This is especially poignant in the revisionist interrogation of the 'law of inheritance' practiced in passing on 'leadership' from one generation to another. The microcosmic textual underworld of the *Nights* proposes a paradigmatic moral universe based in 'brotherhood in ethical principles' that is responsive to the similarly textualized macrocosmic world constructed around kingship and kinship. The world of con and martial artists, embodying a universal sense of justice, may be seen as a corrective to the Caliphal world that is easily open to corruption because its 'law of inheritance' is liable to turn a blind eye to the ethical principles necessary in maintaining justice.

The contest of ideologies, I have already pointed out, takes place in the 'street', which may be understood as akin to the 'public sphere' Habermas theorizes as 'a realm of social life', from which state authority recedes, and in which something approaching public opinion can be formed.¹⁸ The 'street' in these stories, and in Chinese *wu xia* novels and *kung fu* films, is a sphere where citizens can confer in an unrestricted fashion about matters of general interest. 'What give force to the opinions formed in the public sphere', J. M. Bernstein explains, 'is that its debates are regulated solely by the criteria of rational argument and criticism, and hence without deference to existing forms of privilege, traditional customs, or collective prejudices' (p. 38).¹⁹ The 'public sphere' Habermas sees is necessarily political, concerned with good and just life, when its discussions deal with concerns connected with the activity of the state. Even though Habermas' notions of the 'public sphere' are based on his observations of modernity, 'when the state is displaced as the domicile of political action proper by the [bourgeois] public sphere' which, as Bernstein further elaborates, 'emerged during the eighteenth century in order to mediate the growing division between state and civil society' (p. 38), it has resonances of the 'street' in pre-modern Arabic and Chinese vernacular fiction.

It is possible to link the membership of this public sphere to the storytellers of *The 1001 Nights* and Chinese *wu xia* novels and their readership: private individuals who are excluded from the then dominant institutions of government, but whose economic position gave an interest in public arrangements. While the bourgeois membership of the modern public sphere seek, through newspapers and journals, to make government more open, accountable, and responsive to interests beyond those of the elite, the tellers and readers of stories of Arabic and

18 – Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*.

19 – Bernstein, *Recovering Ethical Life*.

Chinese underworld interrogates and subverts the practices of the government through storytelling, and perhaps even on the pages of vernacular fiction.²⁰ The vernacular is the medium through which the pre-modern Arab and Chinese educated ‘middle class’, as opposed to the courtly or religious elite, expressed themselves in writing. It is, furthermore, possible to relate their respective pedagogical impulses ‘to cultivate a virtuous character’ in possession of ‘prudent understanding of contingent conditions with a view to what [is] to be done’, or in other words, to form ‘citizens capable of virtuous action under such conditions’ (p. 37).

There is, however, a significant difference between the Habermasian ‘public sphere’ and the *Nights*’ ‘street’. While the ‘public sphere’ is located within what he sees as the domain of politics, not concerned with ‘questions of economy, personal welfare and contractual relations between persons for the sake of gain’ - for these depend on ‘skilful means-ends calculations and not a virtuous character’ (p. 37), the ‘street’ contrarily views economic prosperity, financial transactions and personal welfare as both political and social, their stakes entirely invested in virtuous actions and the ethical principles underpinning them, as the story of Dalīlah al-Muhtālah shows. Dalīlah’s actions, as I have already explained above, are motivated by loss of income, therefore, lifestyle and social status. Moreover, as I have highlighted in the following sequence of events in her story, her ‘victims’ have membership in either the government or the wealthy, merchant class.

Sequence of events in the story of Dalīlah al-Muhtālah

1. She dresses as a devout Sufi woman and tricks the childless wife of the *Captain of the Caliph’s guards* into decking up completely in order to see the sheikh famed for his ability in helping women conceive.
2. She then goes to the shop of a *young merchant*, who has inherited a large fortune from his merchant father, and presents to him the captain’s wife as her daughter and promises him marriage. Her daughter, she says, has inherited a large fortune and whoever marries her will inherit. The young merchant demands to see the daughter naked.
3. She goes to a *famous master-dyer* and tells him that she is having work done in her house and needs to rent a place for herself, son and daughter. He gives her keys to his house.
4. She takes the *captain’s wife* and the *young merchant* to the *master-dyer’s* house and puts them in different rooms. She tricks both into giving all their clothes, jewelry and money (a thousand dinars from the young merchant) for safe-keeping. She leaves them naked and waiting for her to come back.
5. She goes back to the *master-dyer’s* shop, having had him sent away by a trick, and ‘bundles up’ his valuables and leaves.

20 – This is well-known in the Chinese context but under researched in the Arabic context. For a recent work on pre-modern middle class reading public and their use of the vernacular in the Arabic context, see Hanna, *In Praise of Books*.

6. She runs into a donkey-driver, borrows his donkey, and sets him on the task of destroying the *master-dyer's* shop on the pretext that the master-dyer is bankrupt and the police will be coming by shortly to seize his possessions. She goes home and leaves her 'loot' there.
7. All of the victims find out they have been fooled and go to the *governor*, who sends out the police to apprehend her.
8. Dalilah then dresses as a servant of a wealthy family. She goes to the house of the *chief merchant* (*şahbandar al-tuğgar*), where the wedding of his daughter is taking place, tricks the nurse-maid into handing over his completely decked out infant son, strips him and takes him to the shop of a Jewish jeweler.
9. She leaves the *chief merchant's* naked boy as 'hostage' in the *jeweler's* shop and walks away with pieces of very expensive jewelry, saying that the *chief merchant* wants to buy some as gifts for his daughter on her wedding day.
10. The donkey-driver recognizes her in the street. To get out of his grip, she takes him to the *barber*, claiming that the donkey is there. While he waits, she goes in and tells the barber that her son, pointing to the donkey-driver, is mad and in need of a cure. The cure should be in the form of pulling out two of his teeth and singe in jaws (or temples).
11. They find out soon enough, get the *Chief of Police* and together chase after her, grab her and take her to the *Governor*. While waiting they fall asleep.
12. She goes into the *Governor's* house, tells the *Governor's wife* that her husband has bought five slaves from her and told her come into the house and in order to get money from the wife. She walks away with the money.
13. She is caught and taken to the *Judge* and tied to a crucifix. The watchmen fall asleep.
14. A Bedouin longing for Baghddadi honey-fritters passes by. She tricks him into taking her place and slips away.
15. When the *Governor*, *Chief of Police*, the *Judge* and her victims find out, they turn to the *Caliph*. The *Caliph* sets Ahmād al-Danaf and Ḥasan Šūmān, now *police captains* serving the *Caliph*, on her trail.
16. Her daughter Zaynab enters the game. She goes to the enclave of Ahmād al-Danaf and Ḥasan Šūmān, drugs all of them, including the two *captains*, and steals all their valuables, including clothes.
17. Ḥasan Šūmān intercedes. He convinces Dalilah to turn her self in and return all stolen properties to their rightful owners. She agrees. Ḥasan Šūmān then convinces the *Caliph* that what Dalilah wants is Caliphal recognition and to inherit her father and husband's posts.
18. The Caliph, Hārūn al-Raṣīd agrees. He appoints her the care-taker of the Caliphal Hotel (*bān*) for itinerant merchants in Baghddad and of the carrier pigeons. He bestows on her forty slaves and forty dogs. She and her daughter move into the 'palace' adjacent to the Caliphal Hotel.

Gender and Subversion in 'the Story of Dalilah al-Muhtālah'

Dalilah al-Muhtālah, however, takes on more than merely the powerful and rich members of the community. She additionally takes to task the 'brotherhood'

pattern of ‘law of inheritance’ proposed in the ‘street’ as a foil of kingship founded on kinship. Women are excluded from inheritance in both laws of inheritance. The story of Dalīlah al-Muhtālah follows the pattern of interaction between the world and underworld as set up in the stories of Ahmad al-Danaf, Hasan Šūmān and ‘Alī al-Zaybaq, but it diverges in many respects. This story, in contrast to all other stories, is bloodless – no one is killed and no blood is shed. The gender of the protagonist(s) cannot explain the absence of violence in this story of women con artists. Women outside this story in *The 1001 Nights* kill without hesitation. The role gender plays here is of a different order. It is mobilized to interrogate the ‘law of inheritance’ in both networks of power: the world and the underworld. Dalīlah al-Muhtālah, as well as her daughter Zaynab al-Naṣṣābah, go out into the street to play con tricks on ‘innocent’ people because Dalīlah is disinherited, deprived of adequate income, respectable lifestyle and social status. As a woman, she is barred from inheriting the positions of both of her father and husband. Her daughter is too disallowed from taking over her father’s post despite her intelligence and mastery of martial arts. It is not acceptable to them that they, ‘heirs’ to prominent members of Hārūn al-Rašīd’s entourage, must be stripped of the life familiar to them and simply because their respective fathers and husband are dead. Their background, especially in comparison with Ahmad al-Danaf and Hasan Šūmān, for example, is more ‘honourable’. If those vagabonds can get ahead in the world because of their ‘cleverness’ (*šatārah*) alone - origin, class and blood do not matter in the ‘law of inheritance’ of the underworld - why are they held back? After all, they are as clever if not cleverer.

What they ‘advocate’ here is some kind of ‘meritocracy’ that is premised on talent and discipline. Here, the sense of ‘justice’ is not the usual ‘righting of wrong’, to ‘avenge’ a murder or return property to its rightful owner, but is elevated to what we may call ‘rightful recognition of merits’. This recognition can only be bestowed ultimately by the Caliph and manifest in the Caliphal order or organization of the world. There is method in the havoc Dalīlah wreaks in the streets of Baghdad. While she targets primarily the rich and the powerful in the City, she is not interested in stealing from them. She does not operate out of greed; rather, she is keen on attracting the attention of the Caliph by showing him how vulnerable his ‘order of the world’ is to her ‘cleverness’. She penetrates this world with ease. She freely gains access to inner sanctum of ‘homes’, ‘shops’, ‘governor’s mansions’ and enclaves of the ‘captains of the watch’ from the street. And wherever she goes she leaves chaos behind. She takes away their possessions and sets them against each other. She proves that she is ‘the smartest of them all’, and worthy to live in style, to be in position of responsibility, of power.

Dalīlah does get her recognition in the end. Merits do count in her story. The Caliphal recognition, however, comes with a heavy price tag. ‘Dalīlah al-Muhtālah’ sends a very ambivalent message. In order for Dalīlah to gain Caliphal recognition, she has to submit to his Law. She loses out on two counts. She, as a spokesperson for the underworld, just like Ahmad al-Danaf and Hasan Šūmān before her, loses her right to be subversive, to take the Caliphal world to

task for its failings. She becomes the establishment. No wonder ‘Alī al-Zaybaq pits his skills against her achievements. More importantly, she does not really overcome the gender barrier. The Caliphal recognition of her is not equal to that of Ahmad al-Danaf and Hasan Šūmān. She is, after all her toils, relegated to domesticity, to take care of a hotel and to train and manage carrier pigeons.

Concluding remarks: alternative heroism

The outlaws in Arabic and Chinese vernacular fiction (including filmic adaptations) are clearly not the kind of mythic or epic heroes celebrated in, for example, Joseph Campbell’s *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949) and Dean A. Miller’s *The Epic Hero* (2000). They may experience the tripartite journey of heroic transformation outlined in Joseph Campbell and anthropological studies of cultural performances, such as Arnold Van Gennep’s *The Rites of Passage* (1960) and Victor Turner’s *The Ritual Process* (1969), but they lead no cosmological battles of good and evil and build no empires. ‘Alī al-Zaybaq, who resembles most the mythic or epic hero in the trajectory of his rite of passage and career, starting out as an orphan, then travelling from Cairo to Baghdad, and going through a series of adventures before gaining Hārūn al-Rašīd’s recognition, is in the end only a ‘police captain’ in the service of a ‘king’, an epic hero proper. He is not exactly, for example, Sayf Ibn Dhī Yazan, ‘Antarah, and al-Zāhir Baybars of *al-sīrah al-ṣa‘biyyah*, or even ‘Umar al-Nu‘mān and Qamar al-Zamān of *The 1001 Nights*. Neither is he their sidekick, destined to be of secondary importance, serving as foil or anti-hero in their epic adventures. He is rather a hero of his own right, equally engaged in battles of good and evil, albeit at a much smaller scale and in a most unconventional fashion.

His story, so are the stories of his cohorts, are all about the ethics of good life and not simply the Code of Chivalry. The stories of low life, of outlaws, especially read together, are about the ethics of the underworld and how they may be brought to bear on the world and to tests the limits of the Law of the latter. Justice and righting wrongs are all important in the underworld, just as they are in the world, but meritocracy must also have a role in determining the destiny of the citizens of the world. What stands out in magnitude in the stories of the outlaws is perhaps the ‘right’ of the individual to rebel, to revolt, to turn the world upside down when the world fails to observe the ethics of good life and safeguard good life for every citizen. We see this most clearly in the ways in which the underworld continuously goes against the parts of itself that get integrated into the world. ‘Dalilah al-Muhtālah’ is both a part of the discourse of the underworld and its anti-discourse. While it asserts its commitment to the ethical code of the underworld, the right to good life based on justice and meritocracy, it also questions the logic of its desire for integration. The domestication of Dalilah al-Muhtālah and her daughter - their relegation to the domestic sphere after their notorious adventures in the public sphere – subverts the logic of integration, for harmony is necessarily monolithic and monologic; it reduces individuality to collectivity and suppresses difference. What would, then, be the way

out of this all hegemonic drive to sameness that is so integral to the world at large?

The Arabic stories do not provide an answer but their Chinese counterparts do. *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* is, like ‘*Dalīlah al-Muhtālah*’, about the adventures of women, the older Yu Xiulien and the younger Yu Jiaolung. Gender is at the heart of its inquiry into the Law, the Code of Chivalry and the ethics of good life. It is clear that both, as women, find the Law limiting, especially when their ‘good life’ is at stake. Yu Jiaolung is being forced to give up her love for Luo Xiaohu and enter into a political marriage. She is bound to the Law, as a member of aristocracy, which she expresses as her lack of freedom even in her physical movement. Her earlier adventure in the Western desert of China, where she met and fell in love with Luo Xiaohu, taught her to fantasize about living Yu Xieulien’s life, not knowing that the Code of Chivalry in the underworld, premised on ‘brotherhood’, is equally restrictive. Yu Xieulien’s career as ‘body guard’ (like the ‘*ayyār* for hire) escorting valuable goods for the rich and powerful may be buoyed by her adherence to the ethical codes of the underworld, but the code of brotherhood has also prevented her union with Li Mubai. Li Mubai, a friend to Yu Xieulien’s now dead fiancé, is unable to even contemplate marrying Yu Xieulien, the love of his life, out of loyalty to his ‘brother’ in chivalry. The collusion and collision between Yu Xieulien and Yu Jiaolung’s worlds accentuate the constraint the two codes of ethics place on individuality, manifest in the desire for freedoms of all kinds, and at the same time demonstrate the danger individuality poses for community and other individuals. The ‘tragic’ ending of the film with the killing of Li Mubai and suicide of Yu Jiaolung points to an impasse that may be transcended only through death, through giving up the two worlds.

The outlaws of Arabic vernacular fiction are heroic because they are, like mythic and epic heroes, leading battles of good and evil that are seemingly small in scale but of tremendous significance. They arguably represent the common people who strive for ethical living every day, taking advantage of the possibilities afforded them by observing the Law, and struggling against its oversights, its injustices and, more importantly, its hegemony. The alternative they propose is, however, no less problematic. It too is vulnerable to wrong-doing and liable to becoming ‘master discourse’. Its clandestine pleasure in exposing people’s gullibility where fulfilling their desires, for more children, riches, status, even food, throws up all forms of human foibles hidden in the recesses of the mind and heart, the underworld, especially his/her attempts to balance between being good, being a responsible member of community attentive to the good life of the other members, and being free, even to be bad, simply because humanity is imperfect and human beings are selfish and susceptible to easy temptations. The Law and the Code of Chivalry, mirrors of each other in this case, encode principles that willy-nilly privilege one set of desires over another at the expense of perfect justice and, more to the point, freedom. The result is the same: hegemony. The outlaws’ are the heroics of daily life that repeatedly tackle and manage the perpetually same tension between law and justice, ethical codes and freedom, and the two desires for harmony and chaos. The answer is always the same, an

impasse, but the significance lies in its cyclicity; it is a reminder that heroism lies equally in the day-to-day grappling with an existence whose meaning refuses to cohere by any law.

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