Chinese Culture Essay, Research Paper

Chinese Culture

The Chinese Lake Murders were written by author, Robert Van Gulik and can be used to learn about pre-modern Chinese civilization. The book was set during the Ming Dynasty in the town of Han-yuan, which is about 60 miles north west of the imperial capital. The novel tells the tale of how Judge Dee, the magistrate (an official responsible for catching criminals as well as sentencing them) of Han-yuan solves crime cases while indulging himself in beautiful women, greed and political matters. Van Gulik uses this book and many of his others to describe the culture that of Imperial China.

Imperial/Confucian culture lasted in China for about 2,100 years (from 200 BCE to 1900 CE and it) and it still keeps the image oh Chinese society strong. To many we are unable to know what Imperial/Confucian culture was like. In reading Robert Van Gulik’s book The Chinese Lake Murders, it placed me within Chinese culture, explaining the aspects of Chinese culture better than reading some test books.

In reading the book, I learned that each village or section of a town had a warden who was responsible for knowing who lived in his area and what they did. I also learned that districts were ruled over by judges who in turn reported to provincial magistrates, who in turn reported to the Imperial court. To keep things honest, imperial censors traveled throughout the empire incognito, with the authority of the Emperor himself to arrest or condemn officials deemed abusing their authority. Districts judges and provincial magistrates were rotated to different places throughout their career, to avoid the abuses of long rule in any one place. Lastly, ranks of nobility decayed from one generation to the nest. So if you were of one noble rank, your children would be of the next lower rank, and their children would just be commoners, but this rule did not apply for the emperors children.

Yet, there are many positive aspects to Imperial/Confucian culture and civilization there were down sides to it too. It had no specification for technological change or advance. The district judges and provincial magistrates could and did abuse their power. In addition, treatment of women and minorities was very poor. Imperial/Confucian culture was a man’s world. Women had no say in politics and little legal protection. The best for a woman could hope for was to marry well and rule as first wife over a household.

Another aspect that I got from the book is that Robert Van Gulik tries to portray Judge Dee as a superhero. Even though it can be seen as a reinforcement of the feudal structure since, it is only because the judge represents the central power, the Emperor. In many ways the world of Judge Dee was totalitarian because everything stabilized the social order.

In conclusion, in reading The Chinese Lake Murders I have learned a lot about pre-modern Chinese civilization and culture. Van Gulik’s story and other stories are not biographical, although many of the crimes he describes appeared in various Chinese texts. Robert Van Gulik the author of The Chinese Lake Murders was in fact an historian and an expert on Chinese culture.

Kevin Reilly, the West and the World: History of civilization (Princeton: Markus Weiner Publishers, 1989).

Robert Van Gulik, The Chinese Lake Murders (The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1977).