

The Evolutionary Characteristics and Transformation Trends of Chinese Forensic Narratives

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Abstract: The evolution of the forensic profession in China has catalyzed multiple transformations in forensic writing: from academic discourse focused on technical inquiry to contemporary popular literature that integrates multidisciplinary perspectives spanning forensic science, sociology, and literary arts. This paper examines academic literature, novels, and screenplays authored by forensic practitioners, exploring their narrative characteristics and evolutionary trends. It analyzes their impact on aesthetic expression and audience engagement, while proposing pathways for innovative development through the integration of contemporary media technologies.

Keywords: forensic scientist; narrative system; Internet celebrity

1. Introduction

The forensic narrative system in China has evolved over approximately two thousand years. During the Eastern Han Dynasty, in Cai Yong's commentary on the "Rites of Zhou·Monthly Orders"(Liji: Yueling), there are records of "observing injuries, examining wounds, inspecting fractures, and assessing ruptures," which specified different degrees of injury, indicating that judicial examinations were already practiced in ancient China. In the Han Dynasty, there were specialized officials known as "ling shi" (official clerks) responsible for corpse inspection and injury examination, which can be considered the beginning of official forensic identification.

The Tang Dynasty established explicit legal provisions for the inspection system—corpse examination was carried out by individuals called "Zuozuo ren" (literally "funeral handlers"). The term Zuozuo" referred to those who handled funeral and burial matters, and this is an important source of the term "Wuzuo". By the Song Dynasty, the judicial inspection system reached its peak. Completed in the seventh year of the Chunyou era of the Southern Song Dynasty (1247), *The Washing Away of Wrongs:Forensic Medicine in the Thirteenth-Century China* (translated by Brain E.McKningt) became an essential handbook for inspection officials and Wuzuo. It was compiled by the official Song Ci. At the same time, it is also the world's first systematic work on forensic medicine, predating the earliest European forensic medicine work, *De Relationibus Medicorum* (1598,this book was written in Latin), by more than 350 years. The book systematically summarizes techniques and methods such as autopsy, wound identification, and poison detection, many of which still offer reference value today.

In the Song Dynasty, the main personnel conducting corpse examinations were officials (county magistrates and assistant magistrates), while the Wuzuo assisted as technical personnel, responsible for handling corpses and reporting injuries. During the Song Dynasty, they were also referred to as "Xingren" (practitioners) or "Tuantou" (group heads). In terms of the nature of their work, the ancient Chinese Wuzuo can be regarded as an important predecessor of modern forensic scientists. However, there remain significant differences in knowledge systems, social status, and the degree of professionalization. The knowledge of traditional Wuzuo was primarily derived from practical experience and passed down through master-apprentice relationships, making it a skill-based occupation. In contrast, the knowledge of modern forensic scientists is built upon systematic natural sciences such as cytology, biology, analytical chemistry, and imaging science.

2. Author Identity: From "Wuzuo" to "Forensic scientist"

2.1 The Ascent from "menial service job" to "Ph.D. in biochemistry"

In ancient times, Wuzuo belonged to the category of "menial service jobs" or "minor officials", with a very low social status. They were usually barred from taking the imperial examinations. Their work mainly consisted of external body inspections — due to ethical and technical limitations, Wuzuo rarely performed dissections. The term "Wuzuo" as a specialized official title first formally appeared in legal documents of the Yuan Dynasty and was continued in the Ming and Qing dynasties. The *Examination Procedures* (1304) issued during the Yuan Dynasty, which recorded the results of external corpse examinations, is the oldest extant formal document on corpse inspection and was used until the early Qing Dynasty.

Throughout the long river of history, Wuzuo were mostly silent. They were unseen by those in power and had little opportunity to be seen by the world.

During the Ming Dynasty, Wuzuo were incorporated into the local government establishment, but their status remained low. The Qing Dynasty had the most comprehensive system. Wuzuo were required to undergo official training, examinations, and registration, and were issued a “Wuzuo License”. The Great Qing Legal Code contained detailed provisions on examination procedures and the responsibilities of Wuzuo. In the late Qing Dynasty, amid the wave of Western learning spreading to the East, Western forensic anatomical knowledge was introduced and translated into China.

2.2 The Sinicization of Western “Forensic Medicine”

In 1915, the Beijing Medical College introduced a course in “Judicial Medicine” (forensic medicine). The implementation of autopsies marked the beginning of China’s transition into the modern era of forensic medicine. The work of modern forensic scientists typically includes: comprehensive external body examination, systematic autopsy, toxicological analysis, DNA identification, and so on.[1]

Modern forensic scientists are usually state-employed technical personnel or judicial officials with professional qualifications. For example, Dr. Henry Changyu Lee, a ChineseAmerican detective known as the “modern-day Sherlock Holmes,” holds a Ph.D. in biochemistry from New York University and has served as the Commissioner of the Connecticut State Police and the Director of the Forensic Science Laboratory.

Another example is Qin Ming, the author of *Medical Examiner Dr. Qin* (also known as *The Forensic Doctor Qin Ming*). Born in 1981, he grew up in a military and police family — his grandfather was a soldier, and his father was a police officer. In 1998, when Qin Ming was filling out his college application, his father hoped he would also join the police force. However, his mother, who was a nurse, objected. She said, ‘I’ve been worried and frightened for half my life; I can’t live like that for the rest of my life.’ She wanted Qin Ming to become a doctor. In the end, Qin Ming chose a ‘compromise’ major — forensic medicine. He was the only student in his class to list forensic medicine as his first choice.

Qin Ming graduated from the Department of Forensic Medicine at Wannan Medical College. He currently serves as a Level 4 Police Technical Director in the Criminal Investigation Department of the Anhui Provincial Public Security Bureau, and is also a member of the Chinese Writers Association.

Since 2012, Qin Ming has been serializing forensic stories online, adapting real cases he handled and blending forensic science knowledge into suspenseful mysteries. His representative works include *Corpse Whisperer*, *Silent Testimony*, *The Eleventh Finger*, and *The Cleaner*. *The Eleventh Finger* was adapted into the web series *Medical Examiner Dr. Qin*[2], starring Zhang Ruoyun and Jiao Junyan, which had a significant impact. And the author Qin Ming himself became an ‘internet celebrity’ (social media influencer) due to the popularity of the series.

Qin Ming’s original intention in writing was ‘to help more people understand forensic medicine and eliminate misconceptions about the work of forensic scientists.’ Therefore, his works are both rigorous in medical logic and rich in literary quality.

3. The Motivation and Consequences of Forensic Scientists Becoming Celebrities

3.1 The Boost of the Modern Entertainment Industry Has Given Rise to the “Internet Celebrity” Phenomenon Among Forensic Scientists

Forensic scientists who become “internet celebrities,” once stripped of their celebrity glamour, are, at the end of the day, still scientists in terms of their professional identity, not entertainers. Or rather, they are “speakers for the dead,” translators for the deceased — they are accountable only to the dead, responsible for interpreting the cause of death and speaking on behalf of those who have passed away.

In an era dominated by the “attention economy,” for Henry Lee, reputation and aura meant funding for his laboratory.

Having witnessed all the life and death in the world, yet still warm at heart — this is how many readers describe Henry Lee. On March 27, 2026, Henry Lee passed away peacefully at his home in the United States. At the same time, his Chinese autobiography, *Making the Impossible Possible*[3], which had been authorized for publication and reprinted multiple times during his lifetime, sold out on major online shopping platforms. Its inventory status immediately switched from “in stock” to “pre-order” (reprint) mode.

3.2 Motivation for Forensic Scientists’ Demand for Publicity: To Secure Research Funding

In his autobiography *Making the Impossible Possible*, Henry C. Lee recounts major events and interesting anecdotes from various stages of his life through a series of short essays. One of these includes his experience of leveraging his fame

to “solicit donations”. In his early years teaching at the Department of Forensic Science at the University of New Haven, he personally led students in designing, fundraising, and building a forensic science laboratory. After being appointed director of the Connecticut State Police Forensic Science Laboratory, he went even further, tirelessly lobbying and campaigning to expand a single testing room into a world-class forensic science building.

Lee’s methods of fundraising included networking with business and political elites, cooking for them personally, giving commercial speeches, publishing books, and making media appearances. Over the decades, Lee has raised and donated tens of millions of dollars. Even today, when top forensic scientists from around the world walk through the maze-like halls of the forensic building Lee built, they cannot help but be impressed by the sophisticated instruments and amazed by the completeness of the evidence and database collections.

The confidence to monetize his fame to the fullest came from his rock-solid professional competence. Lee has participated in the investigation of thousands of criminal cases across all 50 states in the U.S. and in 17 countries around the world. Many of these were once considered “unsolvable” cold cases and have since become classic examples in international forensic science and police training, including the O.J. Simpson murder case, the suspicious death of White House counsel Vincent Foster, and the murder case of former CIA officer Richard’s wife...

For the families of the deceased, Lee’s compassion is reflected in the smallest details: he carries photos of the victims with him at all times, constantly reminding himself to find their killers as soon as possible, to speak for the dead, and to fight for the living.

3.3 Becoming an Internet Celebrity: To Better Fulfill the Mission of Science Popularization

Since entering the forensic field in 1983, Liu Liang has handled nearly 10,000 forensic cases and performed autopsies on over 4,000 bodies. Over more than four decades in the profession, the question he is most frequently asked is: “Do you forensic scientists only deal with dead bodies?” The truth is that 80% of the work in forensic science involves interacting with living people — assessments of injury severity, disability grading, paternity testing, medical malpractice evaluations, and so on, are all part of a forensic scientist’s daily routine.

In an era of “amusing ourselves to death,” the once obscure profession of forensic science has been over-exploited by novels and films, with writers and screenwriters who have mastered the secrets of internet publicity imposing various filters and even demonizing it. In light of this, Liu Liang, guided by a simple spirit of science popularization and the principle of disenchantment, began experimenting with short videos and live streams to showcase the daily life of a forensic scientist. As a result, he unexpectedly became an internet celebrity.

The documentary *The Decoder of Life and Death*, which features Liu Liang as its main subject, achieved a reach far beyond the producers’ expectations. It not only dispelled public misunderstandings and biases about the profession of forensic science but also attracted many young people to pursue careers in this field. One fan sent Liu Liang a small gift with a note: “You guard the truth; we guard your happiness”. This sentence became Liu Liang’s motivation to persist in his science popularization work.

In March 2026, Liu Liang’s new book *Truth Will Not Be Silent*[4] was published. Within less than a month of its release, it had already gone through three printings. As a forensic scientist, Liu Liang’s daily work involves conversing with the end of life; writing books and appearing in media, on the other hand, represent his dialogue with ordinary readers as a science popularization author. He presents classic cases he has handled in a clear, accessible, and easy-to-understand language, aiming to popularize professional knowledge for the general public.

Truth Will Not Be Silent includes more than twenty cases of unnatural death that Liu Liang has handled. Through cases such as accidentally drinking “bone-dissolving liquid,” over consuming “smoke powder,” and mistakenly applying “whitening miracle cream,” it warns of safety risks. By directly confronting cases like murder for insurance fraud and the tragedy of matricide, it explores ethical dilemmas. The most touching part of the book is his account of his own psychological journey in having his entire family sign body donation agreements. Through this act, he completes his ultimate exploration of the meaning of life.

For a science popularization author, striking the right tone in writing is difficult. Being too academic, throwing out medical jargon and harsh terms at every turn, feels unfriendly to ordinary readers; while wording that is too plain and colloquial may not seem scholarly enough. It is worth noting that the text of *Truth Will Not Be Silent* has a raw, unpolished quality. Many sentences are clearly not elegant or refined, but they maximally preserve the tone of Liu Liang’s speech when he appears in media or gives interviews. This convinces readers that the book is not some professional writer’s attempt to imitate the voice or ideology of forensic scientist Liu Liang in a perfunctory manner. It is simply the everyday chatter of Liu Liang the forensic scientist.

On the autopsy table, forensic scientist Liu Liang uses his scalpel to uncover the cause of death and speak for the de-

ceased. In the popular science book *Truth Will Not Be Silent*, author Liu Liang concludes with these words: “China has the lowest homicide rate in the world and also the highest homicide clearance rate. To be able to participate in this as a forensic scientist, to use my expertise to safeguard lives and bring comfort to the innocent — my life has been worth it”.

4. Conclusion

Since the 21st century, especially after 2010, literary works written by Chinese forensic scientists have undergone significant changes in terms of narrative subject, style, function, and audience reception. These changes are mainly manifested in the following aspects:

First, the narrative subject has shifted from a “tool character” to a “professional protagonist”. After 1949, in local documentary literature and detective novels, forensic experts often appeared as supporting characters or “technical tools,” with their role limited to providing identification conclusions and their personalities remaining flat. However, represented by the Medical Examiner Dr. Qin series and its adaptations, forensic experts have become the narrative protagonists in literary works, with their professional identity, specialized thinking, and emotional world being deeply explored. Creators extensively employ the first-person perspective and internal focalization to enhance immersion and professionalism.

Second, the writing style has evolved from “documentary reporting” to “literary narrative”. Early forensic-themed writing focused on case documentation, with plain and objective language, such as *Making the Impossible Possible* and *The True Record of Chinese Forensic Doctors*, serving functions close to legal education and professional records. In contrast, contemporary forensic narrative techniques have significantly improved. Authors extensively use literary methods such as suspense, reasoning, psychological description, and scene rendering to enhance the sense of mystery and readability. For example, in the Medical Examiner Dr. Qin series and *The Truth Will Not Be Silent*, each case includes a “forensic knowledge tip,” but the overall narrative is closer to genre fiction, balancing scientific accuracy and readability. Film and television adaptations or documentaries based on these famous IPs strengthen audiovisual language, using close-ups and slow-motion shots to depict autopsy details, forming a hybrid text style of “hardcore science popularization plus emotional resonance”.

Third, character portrayal has shifted from “cold authority” to “humanized image”. In traditional documentary literature, the forensic doctor was often portrayed as a calm, objective, and almost emotionless scientific worker. However, in the works of post-80s forensic doctor and author Qin Ming, forensic characters are endowed with more life-like details (e.g., foodie, obsessive-compulsive disorder, social awkwardness). In film and television character development, creators deliberately showcase the “conflict between professional persona and everyday persona” to enhance the character’s arc and richness. Meanwhile, some film and television works also attempt to explore ethical issues such as the psychological trauma of facing death and professional burnout through dialogue and monologues, provoking deep thought and heated discussion among audiences.

Fourth, the method of knowledge dissemination has evolved from “dogmatic science popularization” to “embedded narrative”. Cold forensic knowledge is no longer isolated; instead, it is organically integrated into the reasoning process by the author. For example, forensic principles (e.g., livor mortis, gastric contents, insect evidence) are naturally presented through the protagonist’s thoughts, dialogue, or discovery of clues during the investigation. In film and television dramas featuring forensic doctors as protagonists, creators also use visual 3D special effects (e.g., bone reconstruction, blood spatter simulation) to provide “visual science popularization” to the public.

Fifth, the social function of these works has shifted from “judicial assistance” to “providing public cultural services”. The traditional motivation for forensic writing was mainly to serve the judicial system, professional teaching, or case records. Today, forensic-themed works have become popular IPs in mass cultural consumption, combining entertainment, science popularization, and social critique. Authors with forensic backgrounds, in works such as the TV series *Heart of the Forensic Doctor* or the show *The First Job (Forensic Season)*, have begun to focus on deeper issues such as wrongful convictions, procedural justice, female victimization, and cycles of violence.

The underlying driving forces behind these transformations come mainly from three aspects. First, the drive of social demand: the public’s awareness of judicial transparency and scientific evidence has continuously increased, making the forensic doctor a symbolic figure of “uncovering the truth”. Second, the impetus of media change: emerging media such as short dramas, web series, short videos, and audio-books require faster narrative pacing and stronger visual impact, forcing forensic writing to adapt its form to meet audience needs. Third, the endorsement of the author’s identity: an increasing number of “professional authors” with real forensic backgrounds have entered the field of popular writing. They bring first-hand experience and professional knowledge, endowing their works with higher technical content, and at the same time, shifting forensic narrative from “outsider imagination” to “insider narration”. In addition, under the existing content review mechanisms, forensic themes benefit from the “halo of scientificity,” gaining a relatively relaxed narrative space. This has

become an institutional factor supporting the sustained development of forensic literature in China.

Looking ahead, forensic writing may present the following trends: First, with the popularization of technologies such as artificial intelligence and virtual reality, forensic creations may further explore cross-media integration, such as interactive narratives, VR immersive experiences, and scripted murder mystery games, thereby enhancing audience participation and immersion. Second, in the context of globalization, local forensic doctors have more opportunities to participate in international academic exchanges and broaden their global perspectives. This will promote a “globalization turn” in their writing, especially through comparative studies of Chinese and foreign forensic systems and cases, which may help construct a narrative framework with more universal values in literary works.

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