

The Dan Brown Craze

The Dan Brown Craze:

An Analysis of His Formula for Thriller Fiction

By

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This book is the product of several years' worth of brainstorming and development. The original idea for a book-length study on Dan Brown first occurred to Zhenwu Zhu when his Chinese translation of *The Da Vinci Code* became a huge hit and instantly brought the "Dan Brown Craze" to China in 2004. As he started his translation of Brown's early novels in the following years, this idea turned into a strong desire.

In 2010, during Aiping Zhang's lecture tour at Shanghai University, we had a series of conversations about the new developments in the contemporary American novel, including the "Dan Brown Craze" that was quickly spreading around the world. To our pleasant surprise, we discovered that we both had a keen interest in Brown's innovative thriller fiction and its mesmerizing impact upon his readers in the West as well as his non-English-speaking readers in China. We thought that a comprehensive study of all the novels that Brown had published so far would be a valuable contribution to the international criticism of Brown's writing. Our hope was to write a book that would not only offer rich information and a luminous analysis on the wide range of subjects covered in Brown's novels but also show readers and scholars around the world how Brown's thriller fiction had been appreciated and studied in China.

The authors could not have gotten anywhere on this project without advice and help from so many people. First, we would like to thank the editor and publisher at the People's Literature Press in Beijing, China for their permission to use some of Zhu's Chinese writings in *Decoding Dan Brown*. Also, many scholars, colleagues and friends at Shanghai University in China and California State University, Chico in the United States have helped us complete the book. They gave us much more than merely intellectual assistance: they offered valuable comments, excellent suggestions and unflagging encouragement. Zhu is especially grateful to Li Li at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, You Wu and Limei Yuan at Shanghai University, Dan Li at the Zhejiang University of Industry and Commerce, Yu Guo at Fudan University, and graduate students, particularly Hongying Dong, Jitao Sun, Xiaomeng Chen, Xiujuan Xie, and Yi Zhang, for their enthusiasm and early assistance in research. Zhang would like to give special thanks to the College of Humanities and Fine Arts at CSU, Chico for the benefit of a research grant, and to Sharon DeMeyer for her thoughtful support and her untiring effort to minimize

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INTRODUCTION

In early March 2003, the world of fiction was ruled by one author, J.K. Rowling. The most well-known character in fiction was a young spectacled boy, Harry Potter, and the most coveted work was the long-running series of fantasy novels, *Harry Potter*. While millions of *Harry Potter* fans had been waiting anxiously for the release of the fifth novel in the series ever since the fourth one came out in July 2000, in Exeter, New Hampshire, Dan Brown, the writer of two humor books and three novels, was nervously waiting for the release of his fourth novel. He had come up with his own series of thriller fiction filled with codes, mysteries, and exciting settings, but his first try, *Angels & Demons*, did not get off to a promising start in 2000. The following novel, *Deception Point*, published in 2001, did not do well, either. The income from the sale of his novels was barely enough to keep his writing career afloat.

“*The Da Vinci Code* Phenomenon”

On March 18, 2003, the release of *The Da Vinci Code*, his fourth novel and the second one in his “Robert Langdon Series”, quickly changed everything. Certainly he had hoped for a big break in his writing career but it was beyond his wildest dreams that the novel would become an instant hit and take the world of fiction by storm. Within just a week or two, he and his novel had caught the attention of numerous book reviewers, critics and, more importantly, millions of readers. The novel climbed to the top of *The New York Times* bestseller list during the first week and dominated the list for more than two years until November 2005. For months, Brown appeared on numerous TV and radio shows, his photo appeared on the cover of dozens of magazines, hundreds of newspapers and websites carried reviews of his books, and his fiction was the hottest subject of debate on social media.

Many critics and scholars of Brown, including J.B. Hixson, used the phrase “*The Da Vinci Code* Phenomenon” to describe the sensational success and widespread response that the novel generated after its release.¹

¹ J.B. Hixson, “The Da Vinci Code Phenomenon: A Brief Overview and Response,” *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society* 17.33 (Autumn, 2004): 41.

It is a fitting characterization of the tremendous impact of Brown's book since a slew of impressive statistics reinforces the claim: millions of copies were sold within a few months, hundreds of book reviews were published through various media outlets, and numerous translations of the book became available throughout the world. Within a year or two, dozens of books came out, cracking Brown's codes, scrutinizing his errors, exposing his distortions of history, dismantling his mysteries, or refuting his assumptions altogether. Despite harsh criticism from many reviewers and vehement protests from various organizations, millions of readers felt unsatisfied after reading *The Da Vinci Code* so they went back to Brown's previous novels for more exciting coding, suspense, and action. Soon, his first three novels, published before 2003, had to be reprinted to meet the surging demand and all appeared on the bestseller list, one after another. In his review of Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* for *The Telegraph*, Michael Deacon writes, in a tongue-in-cheek manner, "His books were read by everyone from renowned politician President Obama to renowned musician Britney Spears. It was said that a copy of *The Da Vinci Code* had even found its way into the hands of renowned monarch the Queen."¹ Before long, "*The Da Vinci Code* Phenomenon" had turned into a bona fide "Dan Brown Craze" around the world.

The "Dan Brown Craze"

No other book or author in America has generated both success and controversy at such magnitude in recent decades. Readers and scholars cannot help wondering why *The Da Vinci Code* "has become more than a novel."² Timing was certainly one of the key factors. We remember well that the months preceding March 2003 were not easy for America and the world. At home, America was still reeling from the 9/11 tragedy and trying to adapt to a new way of living, with less liberty but more fear under the unpredictable threat of terror. While the war in Afghanistan was dragging on, another war with a much more formidable foe, Iraq, seemed inevitable and imminent. Abroad, an outbreak of Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) was raging in Asia, taking many lives there and posing a potential risk elsewhere. People desperately wanted to know what was happening in their life and where the world was heading next.

¹ Michael Deacon, "Don't Make Fun of Renowned Dan Brown," *The Telegraph*, May 10, 2013.

² Bradley Bowers, ed., *The Da Vinci Code in the Academy* (Newcastle, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2007), vii.

Due to the growing dominance of the Internet and social media, and the revolutionary changes in education, communication, and dissemination of knowledge they engendered, the publishing industry was in a deep slump and interest in book reading was diminishing. True, the *Harry Potter* series filled a void and presented readers, old and young, with a pleasant surprise every couple of years. However, readers needed more than one juvenile fantasy novel series. They wanted something that would not only validate what they had learned and cherished in the past, such as history, art, and religion, but also resonate with what they had to cope with at present. Bradley Bowers puts it well:

It is not about Brown, the novel, or Leonardo da Vinci. It is the rekindling of *desire*, desire to reconnect with the divine in a world which has been robbed of divine secrets and stripped of divine codes, a world which continues to erase the wisdom of the ancients, and which denies that our stories can contain truth, even a glimpse of it.¹

For many, reading Brown's novels, which were consistently written with a formula of mysteries mixed with historical wonders and realistic issues, is like discovering "alternative texts" that "may exist and may have as much, even greater, authority than the standard versions."² More importantly, readers have found Brown's novels both thought-provoking and entertaining because, on the one hand, they enlighten readers by transmitting knowledge about a wide range of subjects that connect history and reality, and they delight through fascinating discoveries and endless thrills on the other.

It should be pointed out, though, that the "Dan Brown Craze" is by no means a chorus of praise for the author. Since the week his book appeared on the bestseller list, Brown has been a frequent target for harsh criticism and scathing ridicule. In his review on *Inferno* for *The Telegraph*, Michael Deacon notes, "The critics said his writing was clumsy, ungrammatical, repetitive and repetitive. They said it was full of unnecessary tautology. They said his prose was swamped in a sea of mixed metaphors."³ Many scholars believe that his novels are potboilers of historical anecdotes or mysteries and, therefore, belong to the low-brow popular novel category. A more contentious charge has come from Christian scholars and religious leaders, who regard Brown's thriller fiction as outrageous heresy against Christianity. As Eric Spitznagel observes, however, "The louder the critics

¹ Ibid, vii.

² Ibid, viii.

³ Michael Deacon, "Don't Make Fun of Renowned Dan Brown," *The Telegraph*, May 10, 2013.

declare his mediocrity, the more books he sells.”¹ More than ten years later, the “Dan Brown Craze” still shows no sign of abating. The blockbuster movies adapted from two of the “Robert Langdon Series” novels, *Angels & Demons* and *The Da Vinci Code*, have certainly helped to keep its momentum going. After all, Brown’s novels have already sold close to 200 million copies globally. “No one can be that successful without doing something right.”²

Brown’s Secrets for Success

One question that Brown often has to answer in interviews is whether he has a secret formula for writing bestselling novels, or for his phenomenal success as a novelist. Naturally, he is always a bit coy, evasive, or diplomatic in answering. He has said that he wished he did have a working formula so he could write faster and produce more novels. An observant reader can certainly see the similar elements – codes, symbols, and locations – in his first six novels and the innovative way he has mixed them together seamlessly for maximum effect.

It has been widely acknowledged that each of Brown’s novels not only covers a wide range of subjects, such as history, art, literature, religion, and science, but also connects them to long-standing mysteries and sensitive issues in today’s world. As many of the incidents and controversies featured in his novels are either well-documented or have been frequently debated over the years, or even centuries, the tough challenge for Brown is to be able to collect data and disseminate them in his narrative both accurately and forcefully. Brown has frequently claimed in interviews that he is a writer who values research. For him, the first step is always a ritual of indefatigable search for information. Once the outline for his novel is basically set, his research starts on different fronts simultaneously, such as posting questions on the Internet, consulting librarians and experts in different fields, checking numerous books for details, scouting sites, cities, and countries for the selection of settings, and spending long hours in museums and libraries to verify his sources. During his second “Question & Answer” session on Facebook in May 2014, someone asked him, “How many times have you been to the Louvre?” Brown answered with a smile, “Never enough!”³

¹ Eric Spitznagel, “Books: Five Business Lessons from 'Inferno' Author Dan Brown,” *The Bloomberg Businessweek*, May 15, 2013.

² *Ibid.*

³ The Official Website of Dan Brown, accessed August 5, 2014.
<http://www.danbrown.com>

Over the years, he has counted on two reliable sources for assistance and support: one is his dedicated and resourceful wife, Blythe; the other is his circle of “expert” friends. Thanks to his growing popularity since the publication of *The Da Vinci Code*, he has easy access to more sources of information than before. Unlike other writers, Brown shows his confidence about the accuracy of the details in his work by placing a fact note at the beginning of all the novels in the “Robert Langdon Series”, claiming that all references, organizations, and incidents are factual.

What is also essential to his success is his determination to strive for an organic textual construction of meaning, value, and excitement. He says that he writes novels that are designed not only to be “entertaining and fun to read, but also to inspire intellectual curiosity on topics that I find interesting.”¹ His novels are full of elements of history, science, art, religion, anecdote, and mystery. He seldom, if ever, relies on simple citation. Instead, he prefers to revise, deconstruct, and even subvert his materials in order to facilitate what Renjing Yang called “the fusion of history and imagination”² and offer his readers a refreshing and enlightening reading experience. The “Robert Langdon Series”, which includes *Angels & Demons*, *The Da Vinci Code*, *The Lost Symbol*, and *Inferno*, is a perfect combination of religion, suspense, art, and excitement, while *Digital Fortress* and *Deception Point* address the inevitable clash between high technology and political maneuvering in today’s world. His stories might be entangled with ancient history, obscure works of art, or mysterious legends but they are always related to the real issues we all face in life. Even his harsh critics, like Robert Price, have praised the good qualities in Brown’s writing style:

Its brisk narrative is full of twists and turns, and the reader’s perseverance is frequently rewarded with deft turns of phrase, sparkling metaphors, and resonating observations, the stock in trade of an author who can show us not only what we did not know but also what we did know but were not aware of knowing.³

The ambiguity of Brown’s mystery-filled narrative has been a frequent subject of controversy. The critics see it as a result of his shaky references or troubling claims that cannot be substantiated by concrete

¹ Bob Minzesheimer, “Dante’s *Inferno* Inspired Dan Brown’s *Inferno*,” *USA Today*, May 14, 2013.

² Renjing Yang, *The Theory of Postmodern American Novel* (Qingdao: Qingdao Publishing House, 2004), 98.

³ Robert T. Price, *The Leonardo de Vinci Fraud: Why the Truth Is Stranger than Fiction* (Amherst, New York: Prometheus Books, 2005), 12.

facts. In his view, however, ambiguity contributes tremendously to the success of his novel writing. If placed strategically, ambiguity can function as an effective measure to reveal different sides of the issue and create ample space for the reader's imagination. As a writer of thriller fiction, Brown usually does not like to give all the answers; instead, he tries to invoke opposing views and let his readers draw their own conclusions. He is more interested in exploring the paradoxical nature of intriguing and contentious issues that have been debated throughout history. His use of ambiguity attracts more attention because it often leads to a more paradoxical assumption of the theme or makes the premise of the story much vaguer. In a way, it is quite similar to a common practice in postmodernist fiction. As Randall Stevenson points out, "Postmodernism radically extends such uncertainty, often assuming reality – if it exists at all – to be quite unknowable, or inaccessible through a language grown detached from it." This is because "in the postmodern world, nothing is central and everything seems paradoxical."¹

Mary Klages offers a more specific definition of postmodernism when she says, "Postmodernism, like modernism, follows most of these same ideas, rejecting boundaries between high and low forms of art, rejecting rigid genre distinctions, emphasizing pastiche, parody, bricolage, irony, and playfulness."² What she says can be easily applied to the main features of Brown's writing. Compared to his early work, Brown's last two novels, *The Lost Symbol* and *Inferno*, seem to have accomplished more by breaking away from the conventions in novel writing and bringing historical, cultural, and spiritual connotations into full play. Embedding thought-provoking issues about history, culture, and life in a code-filled, suspense-driven, and fun-oriented story is clearly Brown's creative move and a key factor in his unprecedented success. He has proven himself a master of exploring different aspects of complex issues by channeling the mysteries of art, culture, and history into his narrative. His approach is consistently sensible and objective rather than imposing and heavy handed.

A case in point is his treatment of the age-long conflict between science and religion. When asked about his view on the debate between science and religion, Brown said that in many cases, science and religion mean the same thing to him. In his view, both are inquiries into divinity,

¹ Randall Stevenson, *Modernist Fiction: An Introduction* (Louisville, KY: University of Kentucky Press, 1992), 196.

² Mary Klages, *Literary Theory: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London: A&C Black, 2006), 165.

and what sets them apart is that “religion focuses on the question itself, while science concerns itself with the search for the answer. Science and religion use two different languages to tell the same story,” and his books are a “quest to fuse those two worlds.”¹

Controversies over Brown’s Novels

To understand the phenomenal appeal and true value of Brown’s novels, it is imperative to look into two things – his innovative writing style and all the controversies he has generated. It is no exaggeration to say that controversy has followed him around since *The Da Vinci Code* earned him the title of the most popular novelist in America. As Robert Price notes, “Every time a book like Dan Brown’s *The Da Vinci Code* makes waves in the religious public, one can be sure it will call forth a raft of books trying to refute it.”² But Brown seems to have taken criticism in his stride.

At first, some critics suspected wayward borrowing from other novels that had been published earlier. For instance, soon after his *The Da Vinci Code* came out, Brown was accused of picking up some ideas from a 1983 novel by Lewis Perdue, in which the term, the Da Vinci Codex, was used several times. Perdue’s novel was republished as *The Leonardo da Vinci Legacy* in 2004. Then, Brown was attacked for making “subversive” interpretations of Leonardo da Vinci’s *Mona Lisa* and *The Last Supper*. Many Christians found his interpretation of *The Last Supper* extremely disturbing. His suggestion that instead of 13 men in the painting there are 12 men and one woman, and his assumptions that Jesus Christ, the unearthly saint worshiped by people, resumed his human nature, married Mary Magdalene whom he once saved, and probably had descendants were strongly condemned. More seriously, as Rachel Wagner writes, “Critics of the novel deal quite explicitly with its implications for biblical interpretation, Christianity, and views about early Christian history. Many Christian critics of the book see its purpose as sinister, intended to destroy the credibility of the Bible and of Christianity.”³ Not surprisingly,

¹ Lauren Yarger, “Dan Brown Interviewed by NPR at Mark Twain House Benefit,” *Publishers Weekly*, June 16, 2014.

² Robert Price, *The Leonardo de Vinci Fraud: Why the Truth Is Stranger than Fiction*, 11.

³ Rachel Wagner, “The ‘Scholar’s Code’: Biblical Interpretation, Postmodernism, and *The Da Vinci Code*,” in *The Da Vinci Code in the Academy*, ed. Bradley Bowers (Newcastle, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2007), 31.

Brown's hint at Jesus Christ's bloodline has been viewed by many theologians and church leaders as an intolerable defiance.

In the spring of 2014, however, an article by Jonathan Beasley, which appeared on Harvard Divinity School's website and was soon picked up by major media outlets, reported on a scientific test on a papyrus fragment containing the words, "Jesus said to them, my wife." It is an ancient document that has been analyzed by scholars from Harvard University, Columbia University and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, all of whom declared it an authentic document. Even though it "does not in any way provide evidence that the historical Jesus was married," it affirms that "women who are mothers and wives can be disciples of Jesus – a topic that was hotly debated in early Christianity."¹ The official website of Dan Brown posted a report about this study and cited it as "the first-known reference to a married Jesus Christ" and new scientific evidence that "further supports the premise of *The Da Vinci Code*." In his address to a sold-out gathering of writers in Portsmouth, New Hampshire, Brown said, "It is not up to me to address the controversies." He admitted that his novel was "about big ideas, you can love them or hate them...But we're all talking about them, and that's really the point."²

The "Dan Brown Craze" in China

By contrast, Brown's reception in China has been overwhelmingly favorable since his *The Da Vinci Code* was translated into Chinese 12 years ago. Since then, readers have swarmed to the bookstores every time a Chinese translation of his novels was released. The social media was full of chat about the reading of Brown's novels. Many bloggers described how they found it hard to put down Brown's novels, and would finish the reading in one sitting. Scholars caught the tidal wave of the "Dan Brown Craze" every time, offering their commentaries on TV shows and other media outlets, and presenting their evaluation of Brown's work through book reviews, articles and presentations at scholarly conferences. The only debate among the scholars has been focused on whether Brown's work

¹ Jonathan Beasley, "Testing Indicates 'Gospel of Jesus' Wife' Papyrus Fragment to be Ancient," Harvard Divinity School Website, April 10, 2014, accessed August 5, 2014.

<http://gospelofjesusswife.hds.harvard.edu/testing-indicates-gospel-jesuss-wife-papyrus-fragment-be-ancient>

² BBC News, "Brown Plays down Code Controversy," Entertainment, April 24, 2006, accessed August 5, 2014.

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/entertainment/4937754.stm>

should be defined as “serious” or “popular” American novel. But most scholars prefer to regard Brown as a writer who has brilliantly blurred the rigid line between the so-called “serious” and “popular” novels, or the “high-brow” and “low-brow” forms of novel writing, through his innovative fusion of somber themes, postmodernist techniques, and thrilling playfulness.

China did not catch up with the “*The Da Vinci Code* Phenomenon” until February 2004 when the Chinese translation of the novel hit the bookshelves in bookstores, but it wasted no time before riding the wave of the worldwide “Dan Brown Craze.” In the past 12 years, it seems fair to say that China has been a large part of the ongoing worldwide “Dan Brown Craze” as no country, other than America, can match China’s contribution to either book sales or scholarly studies.

As soon as Zhenwu Zhu, a professor of American literature and the author of several academic books on William Faulkner and Edgar Allan Poe, read about the phenomenal success of *The Da Vinci Code* in the West, he realized that the novel would surely become a hit in China as well. He approached the Shanghai People’s Press, one of the leading publishers in China, with a tentative plan to introduce Brown to Chinese readers. To his surprise, he did not even need to give any justification before receiving its endorsement for his plan. The Press immediately began the task of contacting Brown’s agency, and Zhu recruited a couple of his colleagues as his co-translators. In early 2004, the Chinese translation of *The Da Vinci Code* came out. Three hundred thousand copies were sold initially, and it ran 18 printings before the end of the year. The release of the Chinese translation of Brown’s novel was so successful that the People’s Literature Press in Beijing, the most prestigious publisher in China, decided to take over all the translating and publishing rights of Brown’s novels. It published the translation of *Digital Fortress* a few months later in the same year. As the sale of the first two translations shot up into the millions, the Press decided to bring all of Brown’s novels to China. Hence, the translation of *Angels & Demons* was published in 2005, followed by *Deception Point* in 2006, *The Lost Symbol* in 2010, and *Inferno* in 2013. To this day, no one knows the exact number of the total sale of Brown’s novels in China as it is considered a trade secret by the Press, but the media claims that over 3 million copies of *The Da Vinci Code* have been sold, and that his other novels have run many additional printings since their initial release.

In a way, the “*The Da Vinci Code* Phenomenon” and the “Dan Brown Craze” occurred in China simultaneously and swept through the country almost overnight, creating many “firsts” in the history of Chinese

translation of foreign books. Twenty years ago, Qian Xiao's Chinese translation of James Joyce's *Ulysses* caused a big stir but the enthusiasm was primarily confined to the community of Chinese scholars and Joyce fans. The sale of that book was less than 1 percent of the total of Brown's novels, and fell into oblivion shortly afterwards. So far, no other foreign author has had all his novels translated into Chinese during his lifetime; no Chinese translation of any foreign book has sold the same number of copies within a few years; no foreign author has been a hot topic for blogging by ordinary readers and a popular subject for scholarly publications at the same time.

Evidently, the sale of Brown's books has easily broken all the records of Chinese translation of foreign authors. What is more impressive and important, though, is the high output of scholarly studies of Brown's fiction writing in recent years in China. In the past twelve years, academic research on Brown's fiction has been steadily expanding both in number and variety. A quick search on a few major research databases, including the China National Journal Index (CNKI), Chinese Scientific Journal Database (VIP), and the Abstracts of Dissertations and MA Theses in Hong Kong (KHLIS DTC), shows that by July 2014, the study of Brown's fiction has produced 110 articles in scholarly journals, 46 MA theses, and one doctoral dissertation. A check on WorldCat, the largest book catalog in the world, finds 37 Chinese books on Brown (22 were published in mainland China and 15 in Taiwan). Among them, 23 are translations of books about Brown and cryptography and two are monographs on Brown's writing. In addition, there have been hundreds of media reports, reviews, lectures and interviews about Brown's work and its Chinese translation. In the meantime, his fiction has been a popular topic for presentations at various scholarly conferences.

An Overview of Dan Brown Studies in China

China has been translating and introducing writers from the West since the beginning of the 20th century. True, there have been a few writers who have left a lasting impact upon Chinese literature and even culture in the past but it is absolutely unprecedented for a foreign writer to have millions of fans and generate so much scholarship in China within a relatively short period of time. No one has done that; not even Toni Morrison or J.K. Rowling. Brown is the first and only writer from the West who has done that so far. As we can imagine, a great deal of the Chinese scholarship initially focused on his *The Da Vinci Code*, documenting his writing of the novel, and exploring the various elements

and reasons that enabled him to score such a sensational hit. In recent years, however, Chinese scholars have taken a holistic approach to analyzing Brown's thriller fiction. They have paid more attention to what may be termed "the Brownian formula" of thriller fiction, his candid representation of sensitive but vital issues, his narrative modes, and his marketing strategies for promoting his novels.

As Dan Burstein suggests, "In a time of growing fundamentalism and religious extremism in the world, *The Da Vinci Code* offers an important study of Western history."¹ Brown's novels touch upon sensitive issues related to an essential part of Western civilization – Christianity. Despite the fact that his claims about the Christian faith have been questioned and criticized widely in America, most Chinese readers and scholars embraced Brown's coverage of religious controversies with great interest because they found it informative, revealing and thought-provoking. Generally speaking, most Chinese readers have limited knowledge of Christianity and, therefore, are unable to comprehend the sensitivity and severity of the controversies involved. Given the growing popularity of the Christian faith in China, however, many of them read Brown's novels with keen curiosity about the religious issues and saw the reading as a chance to learn more about Western society. At the same time, they realized that some of the issues addressed in Brown's novels, such as overpopulation, science, technology, security, and privacy, were universal and should be addressed carefully in all countries. Although no one has openly called for any drastic reform due to the existing political and social system in China, some scholars noted that Chinese readers could learn a lot from the debate over Brown's coverage of religious issues. They concluded that in today's Western society, many people, those born since the 1980s in particular, have already shifted their focus from religion to technology, and that Christianity, once considered the foundational belief system in the West, is not as dominant as it used to be. A few scholars, such as Chuanqi Li, asserted that "keeping one's faith is more important than knowing what the truth really is," and that "faith could take different forms; it could be religious or objective as long as one knew it could empower oneself."²

As for Brown's writing style, most of the scholars agree that his fiction, as we can see in his last three books, is not only fascinating and well-crafted but also informative and engaging. The contentious issue among Chinese scholars is how to define the generic form of Brown's

¹ Dan Burstein, ed., *Secrets of the Code: The Unauthorized Guide to the Mysteries behind The Da Vinci Code* (New York: CDS Books, 2004), xxii.

² Chuanqi Li, "The Power of Faith in Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code*," *Literature* (Literary Criticism) 6 (2011): 217.

novels. Before Brown's novels hit the market in China, Chinese scholars were already quite familiar with the terminology for various subgenres of novel writing in the West, such as "popular novel," "bestselling novel," "adventure novel," and "suspense novel." Many of them have reservations about defining Brown's work as "thriller fiction" because they believe that Brown offers much more than the standard elements of the genre. Instead, they prefer to call Brown's work "cultural suspense fiction." Some like the term "gleefully erudite suspense novel" used by Janet Maslin in her review for *The New York Times*.¹ In October 2004, Zhenwu Zhu and Yuanxiao Zhou published the first critical essay on Brown, "*The Da Vinci Code*: An Exemplary Fusion of High-Brow and Low-Brow Forms of Art," in *The Contemporary Foreign Literature*, one of China's leading journals on foreign literature. They used Maslin's term, "erudite suspense novel," for the first time.² Other scholars have since followed suit.

It is unlikely that anyone will dispute the fact that knowledge and suspense are two principal ingredients in Brown's formula of page-turning fiction. Clearly, Brown cannot take the credit for being the first writer in America to disseminate a large amount of knowledge about a subject while telling a gripping story. Herman Melville did it in his *Moby Dick*; so did Upton Sinclair in *The Jungle*. But Brown is surely the first writer who managed to pack his titillating plot with encyclopedia-like sources of knowledge in all his novels. Meng Wang, a renowned writer and scholar in China, notes in his article on Brown,

Dan Brown's novels, such as *The Da Vinci Code*, preponderate on wisdom as we usually see in the traditional novel of knowledge. He does it by transmitting a large amount of references to historical facts, classical works, and scenic spots, and tapping into the knowledge of religion, history, mathematics, architecture, geography, art, and literature.³

However, incorporating copious information about different subjects or fields into his novels is neither Brown's ultimate purpose nor his sole narrative strategy. He always finds a way to mix knowledge with his deployment of successive suspense in the plot development. The use of suspense is nothing new in conspiracy and detective stories in Western

¹ Janet Maslin, "Spinning a Thriller from a Gallery at the Louvre," *The New York Times*, March, 17, 2003.

² Zhenwu Zhu and Yuanxiao Zhou, "*The Da Vinci Code*: An Exemplary Fusion of the High-Brow and Low-Brow Forms of Art," *The Contemporary Foreign Literature* 4 (2004): 105.

³ Meng Wang, "The Temptation of Code," *China Reading Weekly*, June 8, 2005.

literature. Brown knows how to intertwine the two elements, knowledge and suspense, in a reciprocal way so as to inform us about little-known but vital facts about key issues on the one hand and entertain us with tantalizing playfulness on the other. In a way, as several Chinese scholars point out in their articles, Brown has done much more than just reviving a moribund genre fiction to its former glamor. He actually deserves the credit for breaking down generic boundaries and creating a new type of genre fiction that charms readers in the information age.

Another point of contention is whether Brown's fiction is literary enough to be classified as "serious literature." Early commentaries in the West tended to identify Brown as a fine storyteller who is good at churning out stories with twisted plots but awkward with words and grammar. After the publication of *The Lost Symbol* and *Inferno*, critics noticed Brown's visible improvement in prose and found his writing more literary than ever. Recent publications by Chinese scholars reflect the same kind of shift in perspective. As a result, the debate over the literary value of Brown's fiction has intensified since the release of the Chinese translation of *Inferno* in October 2013.

Traditionally, Chinese critics use the words "雅" (elegant) and "俗" (popular) to distinguish "serious literature" from "popular literature." The former refers to a work of literature that has a decent chance of being canonized after passing the test of time, whereas the latter is always associated with popular taste and a bestseller for leisure reading and, therefore, will not be elevated into the literary canon. Judging from the high sales and enduring popularity of his fiction, Brown clearly qualifies for the latter – "popular literature" – but many scholars claim that identifying Brown as another writer of popular fiction is simply a failure to recognize and appreciate the high quality of literary writing in his fiction, especially his innovative narrative schemes, his multi-faceted portrayal of characters and his use of rhetorical devices. Jiande Lu, a well-known literary critic and the director of the Institute of Literature at the Chinese Academy of Social Science, insists, "Brown's fiction could be categorized as 'intermediate and superior' in terms of its literary value."¹ Brown's fiction defies the conventional designation of genres as it shows a perfect integration of high-brow and low-brow forms of fiction writing and retains effective techniques and good qualities from both "serious literature" and "popular literature." In alternating narrative mode, he is as skillful as many well-established postmodernist writers.

¹ Jiande Lu, "Dan Brown: Is He a Good Model for Chinese Writers?" *China Book Business Report*, June 24, 2005.

However, some critics still have doubts about Brown's commitment to and potential for literary writing. Brown's fiction, as scholars like Qi Zhang insist, tends to spend "too much time and energy on the setup of word puzzles, number games, codes, and the meticulous description of the captivating code-breaking process."¹ What is missing is a coherent and in-depth rendition of the central theme.

The popularity and the studies of Brown's novels have, thus, shaken the long-standing boundaries between "serious literature" and "popular literature" in China. More specifically, the debate over Brown's proper affiliation to "serious literature" or "popular literature" has expanded to a much broader discussion of the existing definition of both categories in China's own contemporary literature. In fact, many leading scholars of so-called "serious literature" have called for the elimination of the arbitrary division between the two.

Lianke Yan, a renowned writer and the recipient of the prestigious Franz Kafka Prize in October 2014, spoke highly of Brown's imagination and scope of knowledge, but he also proposed forming a new definition of literary genres because the conventional concept of the so-called "serious or pure literature" was already obsolete. In his view, it is not appropriate to draw a rigid line between "serious literature" and "popular literature."

That the Chinese study of Brown has been quite robust and comprehensive in coverage is another indicator of the extensive reach of the "Dan Brown Craze" in China. There have been numerous articles on Brown's biographical experiences, writing process, interviews with media, and movie adaptations of his novels. Some scholars have done comparative studies on the different Chinese translations of Brown's novels published in the mainland, Hong Kong and Taiwan, and presented their research findings in dozens of articles as well as a monograph by Shao Fu, *Vague Language in Literature and Translation: A Comparative Study of The Da Vinci Code and Its Chinese Translations* (2010). The translations of Brown's novels have been used as model texts in courses for translation programs at undergraduate and graduate levels. Other scholars conducted research on Brown's work in connection to semiotics and narratology, using a wide range of literary theories, from mythological criticism to cultural criticism, deconstructionism, reader-response theory, new historicism, and feminism.

Occasionally, even scholars from other fields presented their readings of Brown's fiction with a focus on science, book editing, publishing, and marketing in America in a series of articles, such as, "Galileo Password in

¹ Qi Zhang, "Foucault's Pendulum and *The Da Vinci Code*: A Tentative Definition of the Popular Novel," *The Contemporary Foreign Literature* 4 (2007): 35.

Angels and Demons” by Yunru Qiu in *Science and Culture* (2011); “The Digital Aesthetics and Thinking in *The Da Vinci Code*” in *Information Technology* by Tongwen Zou (2008); “Online Promotion of Best-Sellers: A Case Study of *The Da Vinci Code*” by Hong Zhang and Yang Tian in *Publishing Research* (2005); “The Marketing Strategy of *The Da Vinci Code*” by Xiaodong Yin in *Editors Bimonthly* (2006); and “The Three-Year Income-Earning of *The Da Vinci Code*” by Li Li in *China Book Business Report* (2006).

Brown’s Influence on Chinese Writers

As the “Dan Brown Craze” swept through China, Chinese fiction writers were not content to be bystanders. They also set their keen eyes on Brown’s novels, listened attentively to the comments from the newly-minted “Dan Brown experts” on TV, and read the highly charged arguments about Brown’s fiction in newspapers and journals. A few young fledging writers were inspired by Brown’s formula for thriller fiction and encouraged by the widespread craving for suspense stories from Chinese readers. They saw an opportunity to experiment with a new genre of fiction. In his article, “Thriller Fiction: A New Experiment in Genre Fiction,” Xiping Wu writes, “Beginning with *The Da Vinci Code*, thriller fiction has been on a joy ride in the book publishing and reading market in China.”¹ In fewer than ten years, Chinese thriller fiction has gone through a rapid transformation from inception to maturity and has secured a solid standing in the market of genre fiction. Today, books with words like “codes,” “decoding,” or “treasure hunting” in their titles are clearly displayed on the shelves and readily available in bookstores. Most city bookstores have set up special counters for thriller fiction. Many of the books have been adapted into popular TV series and blockbuster movies.

A group of writers have taken the book market by storm with their sensational series of thriller fiction, such as Jia Mai’s series of espionage-suspense fiction, *Covert Scheming* and *Encryption*, Jun Cai’s series of psychological suspense fiction, *The Deserted Village*, Gang Cheng’s series of spiritual suspense fiction, *The Man Hunter*, Ma He’s *Codes in Tibet*, and Guigunu’s *Broken Face*. Their works have attracted a large following and turned the sagging Chinese market of genre fiction around completely. Some of their books have been introduced to other countries as well. In

¹ Xiping Wu, “Thriller Fiction: A New Experiment in Genre Fiction,” *China Writers Weekly*, June 12, 2007.

March 2014, Jia Mai, who has been called “the Dan Brown of China,” burst into the international arena with his bestselling novel *Encryption* and created a craze for Chinese espionage-suspense fiction in the West. The English version of the novel broke the record for the total overseas sale of any Chinese novel in history and received rave reviews from more than 40 Western media outlets. Even though Jia Mai has stated repeatedly that his and Brown’s fiction do not have much in common, Brown’s influence and the similarity between the two writers are too apparent to miss. Many of the ingredients in Brown’s formula for thriller fiction can also be found in Mai’s work. Mai builds his stories on a fast-paced quest that is often complicated by a series of suspenseful and surprising events. Also, he is good at blending history, legends, mysteries, anecdotes, codes, and unsolved cases seamlessly into the plot and funneling bits of information on various subjects into the tight narrative. The key to his success is his conscientious effort to integrate what works well in Western thriller fiction with time-tested devices of traditional Chinese fiction. Furthermore, his innovative exploration of some classical themes that have remained popular since the 1950s has turned out to be a masterful move that mesmerizes his readers.

Other writers have also acknowledged their debt to Brown. Jun Cai, for instance, admits,

Brown’s *The Da Vinci Code* has a huge influence on me. It gave me a clear definition of thriller fiction, and it boosted my self-confidence about exploring the ‘suspense + knowledge’ model for genre fiction, which has been the strongest technique in my writing all along.¹

Cai and other thriller fiction writers are quite optimistic about the future of genre fiction in China as the readership has been growing steadily, and the study of genre fiction has become a popular and, more importantly, legitimate subject in academia. But they also see daunting challenges in indigenizing thriller fiction with unique Chinese characteristics and high literary quality if they refuse to conform to old conventions and capitulate to commercial temptations.

The impact of the “Dan Brown Craze” in China has fostered some unprecedented changes in the traditional circle of writers and scholars. Many well-established writers, who used to stay away from genre fiction or “popular culture” altogether, carefully studied Brown’s formula for thriller fiction and tested a few feasible techniques in their own writing.

¹ Zhiqian Ren, “Cai Jun: Carry the Suspense to the End,” *China Book Business Report*, A3, April 8, 2005.

Some scholars launched a new wave of comparative studies between Brown and other Western writers, or between Brown and Chinese writers both in the past and at present. There are several articles that compare *Foucault's Pendulum* by the Italian author, Umberto Eco, to Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* with in-depth analyses of their "knowledge + suspense" structure and their similar techniques in narrative mode and characterization.

There are some comparisons between Brown and Chinese writers of genre fiction from different time periods. One comparative study shows a long list of similarities between Brown's novel and a contemporary Chinese kung-fu novel, *A Deadly Secret*, by Jin Yong in narrative pattern, symbology, characters' personality traits, use of suspense, and witty dialogue. A few scholars went back to classical Chinese novels to show how the "knowledge + suspense" model had been utilized by writers centuries ago. A good example is Zhenwu Zhu's study on the Qing Dynasty novel, *Flowers in the Mirror*, in which medicine, phonology, poetry, and arts of all kinds are all synthesized, and the Qing Dynasty collection of stories, *Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio*, in which some drunkards' betting games are quite similar to the riddles and anagrams in Brown's novels.

A Chinese Perspective on Brown

Twelve years ago, when *The Da Vinci Code* was first presented to Chinese readers, no one predicted that the novel would take China by storm and launch the "Dan Brown Craze" across the country. No one could have imagined that such a craze would have lasted this long and exerted a sweeping and enduring impact upon the writing, reading, studying, translating, publishing, and marketing of fiction in China.

In the summer of 2013, we met after a panel discussion of Brown's newly released novel, *Inferno*, and had a series of long conversations afterwards regarding the Brownian formula for thriller fiction, the magic power that has sustained the "Dan Brown Craze" in the US and China, and the latest development in the study of Brown's novels. As our conversation shifted toward the interesting differences between American and Chinese interpretation of Brown's novels, we instantly realized that we should present a book in English about the Chinese reception and appreciation of Brown's novels to his followers and critics around the world because a Chinese perspective on the "code" of Brown's success could be a valuable contribution to the ongoing global exploration of Brown's novels.

As a comprehensive study of Brown's formula for thrill fiction from a different perspective, this book starts with a long introduction, defining the major elements that have turned his novels into bestsellers, summarizing various controversies over his work, and reviewing not only the Chinese translation and study of Brown's novels but also his tremendous impact upon the Chinese reading, publishing, and scholarship on genre fiction in the last twelve years.

There are seven chapters in the book. Chapter one is a brief account of Brown's early experience and his persistent pursuit of a successful writing career. Despite his worldwide popularity, Brown has somehow managed to maintain a low profile and live a private life. So far, only one unauthorized biography is available. He seldom, if ever, offers any information about himself, and he keeps his appearance in public to the minimum. Even when he does an interview, he will just focus on the book he is promoting and will not reveal much about his personal life voluntarily. The information in the brief account of Brown's early years has been put together through extensive research on the publications about him, interviews over the years, reports by various media outlets, and postings on websites, including his own official website. It is our belief that Brown's success will be much better understood once we know what kind of upbringing he had and how he embarked on his road to fame after a couple of detours.

Chapters two through seven present a thorough examination of Brown's six novels, based on the chronological order of their publication. The purpose is to offer a progressive view of his writing career. Each chapter follows a regular outline of eight sections: plot, characterization, themes, setting, codes, knowledge, institutions, and techniques. All chapters are intended as an aesthetic evaluation of Brown's intrinsic thriller fiction through a careful textual analysis, a selective dissemination of relevant information on different subjects, and a perceptive comparison, whenever appropriate, between Brown and other writers, either Chinese or Western.

Many critics have offered their divergent assessment of Brown's representation of religious doctrine and Christian history. We have no desire to stir up controversies or disrespect other people's views. What this book intends to offer is a unique perspective from two scholars who are not only well-immersed in both Chinese and Western history and literature but also well-seasoned in comparative studies and analysis of texts in different languages. We see this book as a worthy endeavor because we imagine that readers and scholars of Brown outside China would be interested in how his thrillers are appreciated and studied by their

counterparts in China, and why Brown has won over millions of fans in a nation on the other side of the world. Our wish is to inform scholars and readers of Brown in the West about the discoveries, challenges, controversies, and insights that have surfaced in the Chinese appreciation of his novels. Moreover, by reading through this book, scholars and readers will also learn much about literary studies, translation and readership in China, a fast-rising country with millions of learners of English and fans of Western literature as well.

When asked by an interviewer about his place in world literature, Brown hesitated for a second and then said,

You know, it's funny, I don't know where I would place myself in the literary landscape. I really just write the book that I would want to read. I put on the blinders, and I really — it is, for me, that simple.¹

After all, Brown is a writer of thriller fiction. His purpose in writing is to entertain rather than to preach. Although he has deconstructed and explored so many intriguing dichotomies, such as science and religion, humanity and divinity, good and evil, liberty and privacy, in his novels, Brown seems to have no interest in imposing his views upon his readers. What he wants to see, as he often insists in his conversations with the media, is that all readers will leave his novels with some ideas and continue their own search for threads, answers and inspirations. His rendering of all these paradoxical issues resonates well with his Chinese readers because they feel that these issues are no longer irrelevant to them. In their view, these issues are borderless and have already become new realities in their life. They see an urgent need for a revision, if not entirely a redefinition, of their existing beliefs and values in the wake of China's fast-growing economy, large-scale urbanization, unprecedented prosperity, and increasing mobility through globalization.

Since October 11, 2012, the day the Swedish Academy picked a Chinese writer, Mo Yan, for the first time in its long history as the recipient of the 2012 Nobel Prize in Literature, writers in China have been trying diligently to present Chinese literature to the world while people outside China have become more and more interested in discovering the new writings from the ancient civilization. But more needs to be done to

¹ NPR Staff, "Dan Brown: 'Inferno' is 'The Book That I Would Want to Read,'" The National Public Radio: Author Interviews, May 18, 2013, accessed August 5, 2014. <http://www.npr.org/2013/05/18/183902954/dan-brown-inferno-is-the-book-that-i-would-want-to-read>

facilitate a candid and meaningful exchange between the two sides. Hopefully, this book will be a worthy contribution to that.

CHAPTER ONE

BROWN'S JOURNEY TO FAME

1. Coming of Age

One day in March 2003, Dan Brown was walking on a street in Seattle. Ostensibly, he was not much different from other fast-walking pedestrians but he had so many worries on his mind. His new book, *The Da Vinci Code*, had just been released and how well it would be received was still unknown. He had already published three novels: *Digital Fortress*, *Angels & Demons*, and *Deception Point*. Sales were far below his expectations; one or two had even fared badly. Now, Brown was placing all his hopes on *The Da Vinci Code*. If it became a big hit, his fortunes might turn; if it ended up the same failure as his first three novels, he might have to give up his dream of a writing career and return to school, resuming his teaching job and a life accompanied by textbooks and student papers.

Just then, the exciting news came: *The Da Vinci Code* had climbed to the top of the bestseller list! He had waited eight years for this day. As the old saying goes, light travels like an arrow, and time like a shuttle. Eight years had slipped by quietly as Brown went through all kinds of hardships, getting up at 4:00 am and starting his writing at dawn every morning. To make a living, he had to maintain his day job while keeping the writing going in his spare time. The dismal sale of his first three novels had already given him a bitter taste of failure and, at one point, sent him into total despair. Nonetheless, he had never thought of giving up his writing altogether. Finally, he was rewarded for all the sacrifices he had made. All his sufferings turned into sweet memories. Since he was walking the streets in Seattle, he could not see the smiling faces of his family or enjoy the adoring hugs from his friends but he must have had so much emotion rushing through his mind and so much joy pounding in his heart.

Brown found it hard to believe that *The Da Vinci Code* had reached the bestseller list, but others never doubted that he would succeed someday. Book sellers raved about it after they read the advance copies; reviewers showered all kinds of praises on the book; readers responded

even more enthusiastically. The novel was an instant hit and triggered a widespread craze that only *Harry Potter* could match in recent years.

While savoring his sudden fame, Brown realized that he was deeply indebted to Exeter, New Hampshire, where he was born and raised, to the family that had nurtured him with all possible care and passion, and, particularly, to the rigorous and quality education he'd received at his school. These early experiences, as noted in many book reviews, imperceptibly facilitated his growth from a young literary prodigy to an accomplished writer.

In the fall of 1962, a young couple, Richard G. Brown and his wife, Constance, came to Exeter, New Hampshire for a teaching position at the Phillips Exeter Academy, one of America's most prestigious preparatory boarding schools for students between the 9th and 12th grades trying to enter elite universities. Founded in 1781, the school brought an elegant tradition and the fervent pursuit of knowledge to the town. Brown's father was a teacher of mathematics and his mother a teacher of religious music.

The couple decided to settle down in Exeter mainly because the town had a long history and an excellent school that could offer a first-rate education to their children. The Phillips Exeter Academy is well-known, both at home and abroad, for its outstanding faculty and sophisticated facilities, and has been ranked one of the top three private schools in America. A graceful and serene town by the sea, Exeter also has a Center of Masonic Association. Over the years, local folks have relished the rumor that the Masonic Association built all kinds of secret passages across the town. Moreover, local notables have formed various secret societies that operate in odd and mysterious ways. Members of these associations are pretty active in public when raising funds for poor citizens or charity organizations, yet their dress code, communication methods and initiation ceremony are kept secret. However, the shiny domes and exquisite wood carvings, which can be seen on both sides of Water Street across the town, testify to an ancient and mysterious past. On June 22, 1964, the couple's first-born son, Dan Brown, came to this world and started his worry-free childhood in this old and peaceful granite state. As he grew up in this land of wonders, Brown became fascinated with the stories about the secret associations and historical anecdotes. The traditions and stories handed down from ancestors over hundreds of years were ingrained into his consciousness during his childhood so it was only natural that, years later, he started exploring cryptography and history as themes for his novel writing.

Brown was a shy boy in his early years. For years, there was no TV set in his house, but he did have a dog. In summer, he and his parents took