

Yunte Huang, *Charlie Chan: The Untold story of the Honourable Detective and his rendezvous with American history*. NY: W.W. Norton, 2010 (hardback); 2011 (paperback). 354 pp. ISBN 978-0-393-06962-4 (hardback); ISBN 978-0-393-34039-6 (paperback).

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Huang's monograph is devoted to the discussion and historical contextualisation of the literary and cinematic representations of Charlie Chan, a fictional Chinese-American detective. Chan was famously criticised in the essay "Racist Love" (Chin & Chan 1972) for allegedly idealising the assimilation of Chinese Americans through standards of submission towards white people. More recently, other scholars have also criticised the figure of Chan. Kam (2002:144) accuses Chan of being one of the "cultural and racial impersonators" that Westerners have used to assimilate Chinese men.

In the current climate of frequent criticisms of the representation of Charlie Chan, Yunte Huang consistently avoids positioning his book either as mere apologetics for the figure of Charlie Chan or as a one-sided denigration of Chan as a "Yellow Uncle Tom" (p. xvi). For example, while "Charlie Chan embodies some stereotypical traits" (p. xvii), he can "be as mentally brazen and combative as Bruce Lee or Jackie Chan" (p. xix). Indeed, for Huang, Chan "epitomizes the racist heritage *and* the creative genius of this nation's culture" (p. xx, emphasis added). Here and elsewhere in the monograph, Huang acknowledges the racist characteristics and context of the figure of Charlie Chan, but *also* recognises the complexity of the origins and representational strategies of the figure itself.

The monograph also interweaves discussions of Charlie Chan with accounts of the real-life Chinese-American detective who inspired the figure of Chan (that is, Chang Apana), as well as with anecdotes of Huang's own experiences as a Chinese immigrant. An early example of such interweaving appears in the prologue, where Huang describes a real-life sting that Chang Apana once made. The account of Chang's arrest of some crooked gamblers serves to remind the reader that this is not just Charlie Chan's story. Huang does not deny that Chan, Apana, and Huang have their own individual characters and history, but here, as elsewhere in the monograph, he often juxtaposes or compares Chan, Chang, and himself.

Part One, "The 'Real' Charlie Chan", introduces Chang Apana and the Hawai'i of his time. Huang writes about Chang's tombstone, intermingling this account with an aphorism from Charlie Chan: "tombstones [...] often engraved with words of wisdom" (p. 8). In a second juxtaposition of Chang and Chan, Huang frames Chang's early employment as a case investigator of animal cruelty as follows: "the 'future Charlie Chan' debuted before the public as the first humane officer in Honolulu" (p. 43).

Such juxtapositions bring together the real-life Chang and the fictional Chan, while simultaneously emphasising the difference between both; for example, Huang humorously notes that Chang's tombstone contains a factual error, thus implicitly subverting Charlie Chan's own aphorism on tombstones as often emblematic of wisdom. By the end of Part One, the reader knows something of the family and professional life of Chang Apana, including aspects of his daring and dedicated character.

Part Two, "Charlie Chan's Pop", details Huang's search for information on Earl Derr Biggers, the author of the Charlie Chan novels. Huang reminisces about his own discovery of two Charlie Chan books as a graduate student at SUNY Buffalo and his subsequent investigations regarding Biggers himself. Huang portrays the character of Biggers in terms of existing factual information and the opinions of his contemporaries: he was honest (for some, too honest), witty (or facetious), or a frenetically diligent, prolific and eccentric writer.

Part Three, "Charlie Chan, The Chinaman", begins by informing us about racist attitudes towards Chinese in nineteenth-century America. Huang discusses the hostility of many white Americans towards Chinese people who had migrated to the USA in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as seen in racist songs, physical violence, and a biased justice system. Huang believes that Biggers intended to oppose the racist stereotypes of that era with a new representation of his own: Charlie Chan.

However, some of Biggers's contemporaries were unimpressed with his Charlie Chan novels. Reasons included errors regarding Hawai'ian names and customs, as well as the implausibility of Chan's quaint pseudo-Chinese idiolect. Indeed, Biggers's justification of Chan's communicative quirks, as Huang correctly notes, "employ[s] the worst kind of Orientalist cliché", those clichés regarding the so-called "Oriental mind" (p. 180). Thus, it seems that Huang does not completely acquit Biggers of the prejudices of his time. As with Huang's ambivalent representation of the figure of Chan himself, he neither uncritically idealises nor sweepingly denigrates Biggers.

Part Four, "Charlie Chan at the Films", discusses the Charlie Chan films and their historical context, contextualising the films in terms of the Hollywood exoticism that already existed. "Yellowface", "Blackface", and "Jewface" entertainment were forms of stereotyping in the early twentieth-century USA. Huang's discussion of such cultural phenomena reminds us that the cinematic versions of the Charlie Chan stereotype (and the consistent refusal of Fox studios to let a Chinese actor play Chan) cannot be isolated from forms of racial stereotyping already then in wide currency.

As with "face" stereotypes, the stereotyping in Charlie Chan films was not limited to stereotypical representations of Chinese people. The film *Charlie Chan in Egypt* "in some ways [...] feels more like a racial parable than a detective mystery" (p. 239). For Huang, the Chinese, Black, Jewish, and Arab characters in the film are creations of a time of anxiety, of totalitarian political leaders and contemporary racial tensions.

Huang's disturbing portrayal of these historical-context factors will probably succeed in leading the reader to feel uneasy at the "endearing" or "twee" character of cinematic representations of Charlie Chan. The reader may also become concerned about the non-Chinese stereotypes in films such as *Charlie Chan in Egypt*. Reading the monograph, it strikes me that, if Huang is correct, there was a strong measure of sanctioned ignorance and "patness" on the part of the film producers.

Part Five, "Charlie Chan Carries On", focuses on the expansion of Charlie Chan representations and Charlie Chan products beyond the earliest films. Chan became popular in

Republican-era China while concurrently inspiring derivative cultural products in the USA. The figure also provoked a wave of criticism of Charlie Chan by Chinese Americans and Asian Americans.

Yet Huang believes that such criticisms have also “caricatured” (p. 280) Chan. Even if Chan (like others, including Black stereotypes such as Stepin Fetchit) “are indeed rooted in the toxic soil of racism”, yet “racism has made their tongues only sharper, their art more lethally potent” (p. 287). Thus, once more Huang presents Charlie Chan as a racist figure, but one whose racist implications do not conclusively exhaust the signifying potential of the figure itself.

“As a man from China, a Chinese man come to America [*sic*], I say: Chan is dead! Long live Charlie Chan!” (p. 288). This (almost) closing allusion to the monarchical acclamation is easy to interpret in this context. Earlier in the monograph, Huang cited the words of the writer and performance artist Hagedorn: “Charlie Chan is dead” (p. 279). Yet the epilogue affirms that Chinese diaspore experiences continue, not in a mythologised China of the imagination, but in the USA and in an open future.

The epilogue includes Huang’s reminiscences about a poem he once wrote (a pastiche of Chan’s curious idiolect) and also discusses his visit to the grave of Chang Apana. In this way, the epilogue implicitly identifies Huang’s own diaspora experience with those of Chang and Chan. For Huang, these free figures (including himself) belong to the ongoing journey of Chinese Americans. “The story of Chang Apana, as this book affirms, is much more than just one man’s biography” (p. 296).

As already stated above, the book interweaves accounts of the fictional Charlie Chan with the biography of Chang Apana and self-reflections of Huang himself. If Huang spends a significant portion of the book speaking of himself and Chang Apana, not only of Charlie Chan, one may ask how useful such a book is for cinema scholars. Naturally, this depends on the individual scholar. However, I would suggest that the feature of interweaving characters does not detract from the book’s focus on Charlie Chan. Discussions about Chang provide background information on the man who inspired Biggers to create Chan. This is not only of intrinsic interest, but may also aid or inspire future scholars in further exploring the dynamics of how historical Chinese-American (or other) figures have been idealised (or denigrated) in fictional representations. Criticism of stereotypical characters might thus benefit from an increasingly clear understanding of how this particular figure (Charlie Chan) initially came to be invented.

As for the relevance of the positional reflection and anecdotes of Huang himself, the monograph’s interweaving of personal reflections with other historical material raises the question of how scholars of cinema (including scholars of diaspora themes) might follow Huang’s lead. In terms of incorporating accounts of one’s own positionality or other aspects of one’s own personal reflexivity into one’s work, can similar (or completely new) strategies succeed?

One final question remains: will others who discuss stereotypes accept Huang’s ambivalent evaluative attitude or will they decide that such an approach risks mere apologism? Future responses to this question will be interesting.

REFERENCES

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