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SANTA CRUZ

**THE HARDBOILED AND THE HAUNTED:
RACE, MASCULINITY, AND THE ASIAN AMERICAN DETECTIVE**

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in

LITERATURE

by

Calvin McMillin

June 2012

This dissertation of Calvin McMillin is approved:

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Vice Provost and Dean of Graduate Studies

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2012

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ABSTRACT

*The Hardboiled and the Haunted:
Race, Masculinity, and the Asian American Detective*

Calvin McMillin

Created by Earl Derr Biggers in the 1920s, Charlie Chan appeared in six popular mystery novels and a long-running film series that starred white actors in the title role. Since the early 1970s, however, attempts to revive the fictional character have drawn fervent protests from Asian American critics and activists. Despite his initial fame, Chan became closely identified with the racist stereotyping of Asians in U.S. popular culture. While he may indeed be culturally “dead,” Charlie Chan remains a controversial figure in Asian American discourse even today. Seeking to clarify this agonistic relationship, this dissertation presents the first critical examination of Asian American detectives in literature and film that have emerged in the wake of Chan’s ostensible demise.

Chapter 1 provides a close reading of the “canonical” body of work featuring Charlie Chan and explains why this infamous cultural icon – an otherwise moribund relic of the early twentieth century – remains deeply inscribed in the U.S. cultural imaginary. Chapter 2 examines three detective films – *Phantom of Chinatown* (1940), *The Crimson Kimono* (1959), and *Chan Is Missing* (1982) – that eschewed Yellowface casting in favor of spotlighting Asian Americans in starring roles. While historicizing these movies within the context of the often Orientalist representations

of Asians in classic Hollywood cinema, I demonstrate how each of these landmark films re-signifies Asian American male subjectivity, examining what it means to be Asian American in the shadow of Charlie Chan. Chapter 3 explores the work of a group of Asian American male writers – Dale Furutani, Leonard Chang, Ed Lin, and Henry Chang – who each confront the emasculated stereotypes of the past and reframe Asian American masculinity through the use of the hardboiled detective genre.

This dissertation concludes with an overview of more recent efforts to revive Charlie Chan onscreen and a survey of contemporary Asian American detective fiction. Through an analysis of these various attempts to exorcise Charlie Chan's lingering specter, this dissertation seeks to illuminate the long shadow that this notorious Yellowface icon has cast for nearly a century and bring a new subgenre of Asian American cultural production into the light.

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The seed of inspiration for this dissertation originated out of my master's project at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa. Craig Howes, Gary Pak, Albert Wendt, Glenn Man, and Chip Hughes were all instrumental in my development as a writer and scholar. Further credit should also be given to my professors and academic advisors at Oklahoma State University: Martin Wallen, Brewster Fitz, Robert Mayer, Edward Jones, Eric Anderson, and Lance Millis, among many others. Of course, my academic journey began with the initial encouragement of my teachers at Rush Springs Public Schools, all of whom deserve the highest praise for their often unsung efforts as educators.

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INTRODUCTION

Ingrained in American popular culture, Charlie Chan is as much a part of the legacy of cultural stereotypes that continue to haunt, frustrate, and – dare I say it? – sometimes inspire us. (xxvii)

– Jessica Hagedorn, *Charlie Chan is Dead 2* (2004)

In Raymond Chandler’s inaugural detective novel, *The Big Sleep* (1939), private eye Philip Marlowe takes on a blackmailing case involving Carmen Sternwood, the wild daughter of an aging patriarch. Marlowe’s investigation quickly leads him to Arthur Gwynn Geiger, the owner of a store that professes to deal in rare books. However, in this bygone era long before the ubiquity of internet pornography, Geiger’s bookstore actually serves as a front for what Marlowe calls a “lending library of elaborate smut” (30). When Marlowe asks the clerk at the rival bookstore across the street to give him a description of Mr. Geiger, she makes the following comparison: “Fat face, Charlie Chan moustache, thick soft neck. Soft all over” (29). The woman’s casual reference to Charlie Chan suggests that the fat, aphorism-prone Chinese sleuth had become thoroughly ingrained in the fabric of American pop culture, perhaps in no small part due to his appearance in six detective novels by Earl Derr Biggers and a number of subsequent Hollywood films. In fact, by the time of *The Big Sleep*’s publication in February of 1939, Twentieth Century Fox had already released *Charlie Chan in Honolulu*, the seventeenth film in their successful franchise, only a month earlier.

While Geiger's distinctive Charlie Chan moustache garners at least two more mentions in *The Big Sleep* (31, 102), it is not just his physical appearance that becomes racialized in the text, but also his place of business, his personal wardrobe, and even his home. As described in Marlowe's first person narration, the X-rated bookshop boasts store windows "backed with Chinese screens;" and when the detective later stumbles upon Geiger's corpse inside his personal residence, the deceased is found "wearing Chinese slippers" [and] "a Chinese embroidered coat" (36). The décor of Geiger's house, too, is Orientalized in the text, as Marlowe describes the interior as "decked out with strips of Chinese embroidery and Chinese and Japanese prints in grained wood frames" (34). This subtle linking of Asian culture with criminality and vice would not have been lost on readers at the time, as such an association has existed in U.S. popular culture since at least the 1870s. Although Arthur Gwynn Geiger himself cannot be clearly seen in the 1946 film adaptation for Warner Bros, the set design takes its cues from the book, as director Howard Hawks even replaces an otherwise nondescript pole in Chandler's original text, which contains a hidden camera Geiger used to take "dirty pictures" of a drugged, cheongsam-wearing Carmen Sternwood, with an ornate Buddha head statue. Here, through the simple substitution of a single prop, a sacred object of the East becomes a profane signifier for Western corruption.

In sum, Geiger's Charlie Chan-like appearance coupled with the faux-Chinese, Orientalist décor of his home serves as a kind of visual shorthand for readers and cinemagoers of the era, further emphasizing to audiences that which "good taste"

(or more specifically, the censors enforcing Hollywood's Production Code) simply could not allow American viewers to see – the lewd acts of the home's decadent occupant, Arthur Gwynn Geiger. However, there remains one heretofore undisclosed detail about Mr. Geiger that deserves further attention – his sexual orientation. In Chandler's original novel, the increasingly homophobic Marlowe disparagingly refers to Geiger as a "queen" (99) and a "fag" (100), as it becomes clear to the detective that the murdered pornographer's ambiguously named henchman, Carol Lundgren, is actually Geiger's young male lover.

In light of this characterization of Geiger in *The Big Sleep*, we catch an early glimpse into a veiled and largely inchoate articulation of a racist stereotype. With his "soft-bodied," Charlie Chan-like appearance, Arthur Gwynn Geiger embodies a demeaning conflation of the Asian with homosexual "deviance," marking both the character and these two already marginalized minority groups as unsuitable models of normative masculinity. This "unsuitability" becomes especially pronounced when placed in stark contrast with the "hard-bodied" all-American brand of manhood emblemized by the novel's protagonist, Philip Marlowe, and his onscreen doppelganger, Humphrey Bogart.¹ In her critical analysis of literary and cinematic noir entitled *The Street Was Mine* (2001), Edgar-award-winning novelist Megan

¹ This difference is emphasized in other ways as well. In both the novel and 1946 film, Marlowe poses as a stereotypically flamboyant gay man to infiltrate Geiger's bookstore – "I put my voice high and let a bird twitter in it" (Chandler 23) – a ploy which Humphrey Bogart plays for comic relief in the 1946 film. In Michael Winner's 1978 version of *The Big Sleep* starring Robert Mitchum, the Charlie Chan reference is dropped altogether, although the Orientalist trappings of Geiger's private lair remain intact.

Abbott identifies the cultural impact of this onscreen merging of actor and character in Howard Hawks' memorable film adaptation:

The yoking of Bogart with Marlowe eventually fixes the once-threatening lone urban white male as an eminently safe nostalgia icon suggesting a phantasmal time when 'men were men,' and tough white guys moved through the city with all the assurance their race and gender status accords, a status that, through the gauze of nostalgia, seems endless. (153)

Defined against this racialized and queered "deviant," Marlowe/Bogart emerges as a desirable, normative figure of hegemonic masculinity. Of course, in life as in literature, the utilization of a contrasting foil remains a common tactic in masculine identity formation. In "Masculinity as Homophobia: Fear, Shame, and Silence in the Construction of Gender Identity," American sociologist Michael S. Kimmel elaborates on socially constructed aspects of such a phenomenon: "We come to know what it means to be a man in our culture by setting our definitions in opposition to a set of 'others' – racial minorities, sexual minorities, and above all, women" (120). Similarly, in *The Big Sleep*'s Orientalized and queered portrayal of Arthur Gwynn Geiger, we see firsthand the essentializing, reductionist, and naturalizing effects of stereotyping, especially in relation to issues regarding manhood and national belonging – in other words, who or what gets to count in U.S. culture as a "Real American." For the better part of the twentieth century, these distinctions have held a particular relevance for both mainstream perceptions and fictive constructions of Asian American masculinity, many of which circulate even today.

Raymond Chandler's invocation and "queering" of the infamous Asian sleuth as early as 1939 – a historical moment contemporaneous with the Charlie Chan film

series itself – would perhaps be surprising to many, considering that the origins of associating Chan with discourses of emasculation has been traditionally traced to a specific strain of Asian Americanist critique that began in the early 1970s. From Frank Chin’s early critical writings to Rick Shiomi’s play *Yellow Fever* to poet John Yau’s “Genghis Chan Private Eye” series and beyond, it has become abundantly clear that for at least the last forty years, a number of Asian American male artists and critics have been grappling with Charlie Chan’s corpulent specter through a variety of culturally mediated forms of expression we collectively refer to as “Asian American Literature.”² In the realm of prose, poetry, stage, screen, and criticism, we can see that the lasting remnants of Charlie Chan have impacted Asian American cultural production, as the character has remained a viable means for debating what it means to be an Asian American in contemporary American culture. Although skeptics may be puzzled by the divisive impact of a character as passé as Charlie Chan, a look back at an oft-quoted passage from Earl Derr Biggers’ *House Without a Key* (1925), the

² While the relationship between Charlie Chan and Frank Chin’s creative and critical output is well-documented and explored further in this dissertation, the appearance of Chan’s specter in the work of Shiomi and Yau perhaps deserves further consideration here. Canadian playwright Rick Shiomi’s *Yellow Fever* (1982) is at once an anachronistic parody, faithful pastiche, and full-on reinvention of the hardboiled genre, exploring issues of emasculation, tokenism, and the Japanese internment of World War II. Not surprisingly, the play includes a reference to Charlie Chan – in this case, with the inclusion of a hip, fast-talking lawyer named Chuck Chan. *Yellow Fever* was followed by a sequel, *Once is Never Enough* (1984), co-written with Marc Hayashi and Lane Nishikawa, and a prequel, *Rosie’s Café* (1987). For his part, John Yau has a long-running series of poems grouped under the title “Genghis Chan: Private Eye,” which have appeared in *Radiant Silhouette: New & Selected Work 1974-1988* (1989), *Forbidden Entries* (1996), *My Heart Is That Eternal Rose Tattoo* (2001), and *Borrowed Love Poems* (2002). Three other poems in Yau’s collections play with the Yellowface casting conceit of early Hollywood films, focusing expressly on actors Peter Lorre and Boris Karloff: “Peter Lorre Improvises Mr. Moto’s Monologue” (*Forbidden Entries* 77-79), “Movies as a Form of Reincarnation: Boris Karloff Remembers Being Chinese on More Than One Occasion.” (*Borrowed Love Poems* 31-36), and “I Was Poet in the House of Frankenstein” (*Borrowed Love Poems*, 49-57). The entire “Genghis Chan: Private Eye” series has been collected in John Yau’s *Further Adventures in Monochrome* (2012).

inaugural Chan novel, gives the first clues as to why he has become such an infamous figure:

He was very fat indeed, yet he walked with the light dainty step of a woman. His cheeks were as chubby as a baby's, his skin ivory tinted, his black hair close-cropped, his amber eyes slanting. As he passed [...] he bowed with a courtesy encountered all too rarely in a work-a-day world. (69)

While it is true that unflattering characteristics can be found in nearly any literary or cinematic detective regardless of ethnicity, the emasculation of Charlie Chan – described in the first novel as “grotesque,” “little,” yet somehow still obese – remains a special case indeed. As Chinese American author and scholar William F. Wu states in his book *The Yellow Peril: Chinese Americans in American Fiction 1850–1940* (1982), the problem with Charlie Chan centers on his lackluster embodiment of a masculine ideal, as he “lacks the stern demeanor and physical impact of a Sherlock Holmes, the physical strength or toughness of a Philip Marlowe, or the hard-boiled and romantic drive of a Sam Spade” (191). Unlike his predominantly white, mostly male peers in detective fiction from the same era, Charlie Chan has come to represent an entire ethnic community, at least during much of the first half of the twentieth century.

My project builds on the critical work conducted by Asian Americanist critics like David Eng, Jachinson Chan, and Daniel Y. Kim, among others, but whereas the majority of texts dealing with Asian American masculinity focus predominantly on the intersection of mainstream, often stereotypical representations of Asians with cultural productions from authors like Frank Chin, Maxine Hong Kingston, David Henry Hwang, Amy Tan, and Louis Chu, my critical intervention centers on a very

different representational battle with the pernicious specter of Charlie Chan, one being waged within the *very genre* popularized by the character himself. Titled *The Hardboiled and the Haunted: Race, Masculinity, and the Asian American Detective*, my dissertation seeks to clarify the agonistic relationship with Chan's specter that exists in a variety of Asian American works, albeit with a singular focus on the self-representational depictions of Asian American detectives in popular culture that have emerged in the wake of Charlie Chan's literary and cinematic demise.

While Chan may indeed be "dead" in terms of a pronounced lack of new installments in the series, he remains an intermittently haunting and largely controversial figure for the predominantly male Asian American artists covered in this project. My dissertation views Chan as a cultural icon who, over the course of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, has been infused with an often contradictory layering of meanings, which paint him as everything from the first truly positive representation of Asians in popular American culture to the most egregious and reviled example of racist stereotyping.

I contend that the literary and cinematic Asian American detectives that emerged in the post-Charlie Chan era take their cues not from the intellectual sleuths of the classical English detective story as their Yellowface predecessor did, but from the tough guy protagonists of the hyper-masculine American hardboiled detective novels of Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler. With this difference in mind, I view this appropriation as a strategic maneuver to confront the racist stereotypes embodied by the spectral figure of Charlie Chan and reframe Asian American

masculinity through the use of recognizable genre conventions, adopting and adapting an approach that typified the cultural nationalist writings of earlier generations of Asian American male writers. In contrast with the asexual Orientalized caricatures of the past, these self-represented literary and cinematic Asian American detectives are meant to possess the same heroic agency, sexual drive, and traditionally masculine qualities as their fictional peers in the American hardboiled detective genre. What it means to be strong, powerful, and male – particularly Asian American and male in U.S. culture – emerges as a substantial concern within these texts, a lingering issue seemingly “resolved” through the lens of this masculinist genre. My project not only reveals a complex, uncanny relationship between the stereotypical portrayals of the past and these more recent articulations of Asian American masculine identity, but lays bare the contested origins, historical transformations, and enduring legacy of Charlie Chan – one that haunts specific aspects of Asian American cultural production even to this day.

Haunted Masculinity: Asian American Manhood in Crisis

Despite whatever positives the character of Charlie Chan may have been meant to embody in Earl Derr Biggers’s time, there remains little doubt that he has been and continues to be perceived by many as a racist icon, one of several in our nation’s history that have been charged with perpetuating negative stereotypes of minorities in the larger culture. Such externally defined visions of Asian American masculinity have had a lasting impact. For example, in the 2006 documentary *The*

Slanted Screen, director Jeff Adachi examines the portrayal of Asian and Asian American men specifically in U.S. film and television. Throughout the film, he introduces the viewer to numerous Asian American actors who lament the dearth of onscreen male role models during their formative years and express a desire to fill that void for young Asian American children today. Similarly, the publication of the graphic novel *Secret Identities: The Asian American Superhero Anthology* (2009) by Jeff Yang, Perry Shen, Keith Chow, and Jerry Ma only further emphasizes the enduring desire on the part of some Asian American males to have heroes in U.S. pop culture that, in some demonstrable way, reflect their respective lives and ethnicities. And as recently as February of 2012, one cannot ignore the flurry of excitement – dubbed by the press as “Linsanity” – among both diehard and casual basketball fans over the rise to prominence of NBA basketball player, Jeremy Lin. The emergence of this Taiwanese American point guard for the New York Knicks spurred Asian American scholars, journalists, and activists like Timothy Yu, Scott Kurashige, and a slew of others to not only express their enthusiasm for Lin’s seeming overnight success, but to openly contemplate what this young man’s ultimate impact could be in regard to overturning racist stereotypes of Asian American men in U.S. culture.

To be sure, the word “stereotype” gets used in contemporary culture so often that it perhaps no longer has any meaning. Originally referring to a method of printing used to make duplicate impressions, the term has generally come to be understood as an oversimplified impression of a specific type of individual or group. In *The Cultural Capital of Asian American Studies: Autonomy and Representation in*

the University (2009), Mark Chiang proposes that in today's parlance a stereotype "is simply any representation that the group being represented perceives as negative" (188), especially since said stereotypes are often presented as self-evident in public discourse, thus requiring no further theoretical reflection. I would argue that while the casual use of the term "stereotype" has come to take on such a meaning, my usage takes pains to locate particular racial stereotypes within a specific sociohistorical context. With that difference in mind, I would offer that the collective aspirations of the Asian American artists and critics I just mentioned ranks as only the most recent iterations of a longstanding, multivalent cultural project to recuperate Asian American manhood, a quest that has origins tracing back to at least the 1970s.

Although many Asian Americanist critics have researched and analyzed Asian American masculinity, few have articulated a prescriptive solution, which is perhaps why Frank Chin remains an intriguing figure to succeeding generations of scholars, even those who would take issue with his methodology. In the landmark 1972 essay "Racist Love," Frank Chin and Jeffrey Paul Chan explained the twisted logic of racist stereotypes such as Charlie Chan. They argued that minorities in the U.S. are largely perceived by whites at the level of mere stereotype and that "each racial stereotype comes in two models, the acceptable model and the unacceptable model" (65). The "unacceptable" type encompasses a dangerous, uncontrollable vision of the minority in question, while the "acceptable" kind remains obedient and passive. These seeming polar opposites are, in fact, two sides of the same coin, and are characterized by Frank Chin and Jeffrey Paul Chan as examples of "racist hate" and "racist love." Their

groundbreaking declaration that Charlie Chan serves as an icon of “racist love” strikes to the very heart of the danger of stereotyping and immediately counters any argument that would wish to position the character as a wholly positive figure – his “acceptability” is, in fact, part of the problem. At length, “Racist Love” is primarily concerned with Asian American masculinity and stereotypes, offering the following memorable, albeit infamous characterization:

The white stereotype of the Asian is unique in that it is the only racial stereotype completely devoid of manhood. Our nobility is that of an efficient housewife. At our worst, we are contemptible because we are womanly, effeminate, devoid of all the traditionally masculine qualities of originality, daring, physical courage, creativity. We’re neither straight talkin’ nor straight shootin’” (68).³

Separately and as a collective, Frank Chin, Jeffrey Paul Chan, Lawson Fusao Inada and Shawn Wong, all of whom served as editors for the groundbreaking *Aiiieeeee! An Anthology of Asian American Literature* (1974) and its sequel, *The Big Aiiieeeee! An Anthology of Chinese American and Japanese American Literature* (1991), have vehemently criticized what they called the “emasculatation” of the Asian American man through white racism: “It is an article of white liberal American faith today that Chinese men, at their best, are effeminate closet queens like Charlie Chan and, at their worst, are homosexual menaces like Fu Manchu” (*The Big Aiiieeeee!* xiii).

While these sentiments express the authors’ legitimate fury over the stereotypical

³ This passage appears, with minor alterations, in *Aiiieeeee! An Anthology of Asian American Literature* (1974, xxx). As to the origin of the essay “Racist Love” – in the early 1970s, Frank Chin and Jeffrey Paul Chan were invited to attend a seminar sponsored by the National Council of Teachers of English at its headquarters in Urbana-Champaign. After joining a committee of minority English teachers to review existing American literature anthologies and to comment on issues of ethnic representation, Chin and Chan penned “Racist Love” for the NCTE. However, the essay was deemed libelous and was not included in the report. The essay later found a home in *Seeing Through Shuck* (1972), an anthology edited by Richard Kostelanetz.

depiction of Asian males in popular culture, their blunt characterization of traditional gender roles and reinscription of heteronormative sexuality have garnered charges of misogyny and homophobia, thus remaining incredibly problematic even for readers sympathetic to their cause.

Literary critic King-Kok Cheung characterizes the *Aiiieeeee!* editors response as a desire for “a specifically masculine ethnopoetics,” saying they offer “an androcentric solution to racist representations” (*Words Matter* 6) while Jinqi Ling points out that while the term emasculation is “used as a metaphorical expression of outrage over the humiliations historically suffered by Asian men in America, the term nevertheless evokes a scenario in which being a woman necessarily implies an inferior social existence, to be both feared and repudiated” (313). Perhaps the most extensive response comes from David L. Eng, author of *Racial Castration: Managing Masculinity in Asian America* (2001):

This reification of a strident cultural nationalism, with its doctrine of compulsory heterosexuality and cultural authenticity, mirrors at once the dominant heterosexist and racist structures through which the Asian American male is historically feminized and rendered self-hating in the first place. Not to question cultural nationalism’s heterosexist discourse of authenticity, in other words, reinscribes the same mechanisms of identification that support oppression in the first instance. (21)

Eng’s critique of their seeming masculinist positioning carries some relevance for the conceivable pitfalls of my own critical project, but for the moment, I would prefer to table these concerns at least temporarily in favor of extracting a crucial insight buried beneath the seemingly inflammatory rhetoric of the *Aiiieeeee!* editors’ decades-old work. Taken in isolation, these passages have earned these writers – Frank Chin

especially – charges of sexism and homophobia, but a deeper look at the full scope of Chin’s work reveals a much more complex engagement with the issue of racism in the United States than one might assume. In his extensive body of work, there exists both an implicit and explicit critique of the way in which white racism in the United States – on an institutional and interpersonal level – imposes limitations on both the relative visibility and legitimacy of the cultural traditions of various non-white groups within the nation. In other words, beyond questions of racial hatred or legal exclusion, the underlying issue here involves limitations of the imagination. For white American males, there exist models of masculinity in the dominant culture not only in the contemporary moment, but in the imagined past as well. After all, a white man could invoke the mythography of a collective “Western Culture,” conceivably envisioning an imagined lineage for himself dating from the frontier heroes of the American West to the Knights of the Round Table to the time of Homer’s *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, as ridiculous as such a patently fictive construction may seem. Nevertheless, in this flattened and purposefully misremembered cultural history, such a hypothetical white heterosexual male possesses at least an illusory sense of what it means to be a man in Western Culture, complete with an easily evocable masculine “heritage.”

In contrast to this accepted, but wholly mythic genealogy, the Asian American cultural tradition more or less begins on arrival to the New World. Although Filipino sailors disembarked in what became Louisiana in 1750, the first substantial wave of Asian immigrants were the Chinese, who arrived on the west coast as coolie laborers in the late 1840s. However, Chinese culture and history remained largely inaccessible

to mainstream white culture due to language differences and white ethnocentrism. Thus, the rich cultural history that the Chinese brought with them was rendered illegitimate and illegible under white hegemony, the legacy of which persists even to this day in the so-called “melting pot” discourses that tend to surround discussions of U.S. citizenship. In “This Is Not An Autobiography” (1985), Frank Chin writes of such cultural illegibility: “In the English speaking Americas, I am an original, an invention, without a past, without a history” (119). Perhaps this perceived “lack” explains why Chin’s commitment to re-establishing what he called a “recognized style of Asian American manhood” (“Racist Love,” 76) involved the controversial thesis that Asian American writers must embrace the heroic tradition and draw upon such classics of Chinese literature as *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, *The Water Margin*, and *Journey to the West* as source texts to reclaim their cultural heritage to become truly authentic artists.⁴

Whatever merits of such a “solution,” one can presume that this first wave of Asian immigrant laborers left China with dreams of a better life in 金山 (“Gold Mountain”); however, the reality proved far more difficult than they likely imagined. Between the years 1865 and 1869, thousands of Chinese laborers worked on the Central Pacific Railroad, “laying tracks, clearing trees and rocks, handling explosives, and boring tunnels in the Sierra Nevada” (Maria Hong 201). But a growing resentment against “cheap Chinese labor” by white labor unions caused these

⁴ Frank Chin also makes this argument in “Come All Ye Asian American Writers of the Real and the Fake” (1991) and further develops these issues at length in his forthcoming book, *The Chinese Heroic Tradition in America*.

immigrants to struggle in the years that followed. Unable to find work in mining camps, industrial jobs, and agricultural labor, these Chinese men were forced into working in laundries, running restaurants, and doing domestic work. In *Chinese American Masculinities: From Fu Manchu to Bruce Lee* (2001), Jachinson Chan expands on the consequences of such discrimination:

The combination of exclusion laws and discriminatory socio-economic practices that refused jobs to Chinese men effectively emasculated the Chinese men. They were treated as inferior men who could not demonstrate their heterosexual identities and they could only find jobs that were deemed by mainstream American society as feminine work. (5)

Beyond confinement to so-called “women’s work,” Chinese men suffered further indignities due to a litany of anti-Chinese immigration laws, including the Page Law of 1875 and the Scott Act of 1889. In the former, single Chinese women were often classified as prostitutes and summarily barred from entering the country, while the former ruling prohibited Chinese wives of immigrant laborers from entering the country. Coupled with anti-miscegenation laws and the resultant initiation of bachelor societies in the segregated ghetto of Chinatown, this ostensible “emasculatation” of an entire population of immigrant men would have a huge impact on Asian American masculinity, one that would resonate all the way into the twentieth century.

Incipient notions of what constituted the American Dream may have been possible or at the very least conceivable for European immigrants of white descent, but for the Chinese, the same dream was not so readily attainable. Whereas European-born arrivals to the New World could more readily “become American” by changing their names, adopting American styles of dress, and leaving their customs behind in

the Old World, Chinese immigrants, even those attempting to erase their cultural differences with whites, had a much more difficult time assimilating, as they were racially marked as “Other” by their distinctive physical features. In his landmark work of Asian American history, *Strangers from a Distant Shore* (1989), the late Ronald Takaki (1939-2009) mobilizes F. Scott Fitzgerald’s most famous character to help illustrate the unique challenges of achieving a sense of true national belonging for Asian immigrants:

Immigrants of European ancestry had certain advantages in America. The promise of this new world for them, as F. Scott Fitzgerald portrayed it, was mythic: here an individual could remake himself – Gatz could become Gatsby [...] Physically indistinguishable from old-stock whites in America, they were able to blend into the society of their adopted country. Asian immigrants could not transform themselves as felicitously, for they had come “from a different shore.” (12)

Takaki’s invocation of Jay Gatsby as the consummate self-made American serves as an apt cultural metaphor, for how else do we imagine what constitutes an American but through collective fictions? While Benedict Anderson explains this mental leap of community-forming and nation-building in *Imagined Communities* (1983) through the rise of print culture, I would argue that it is within a particular popular mode – the novel (and now television, film, and the internet) – in which ideas about what makes a “real American” get formulated and concretized. As Lisa Lowe, noted scholar in Asian American studies, points out in *Immigrant Acts* (1996), “With the emergence of print culture as an institution of modernity in the ‘West,’ the Anglo-American novel has held a position of primary importance in the interpellation of readers as subjects for the nation, in the gendering of these subjects, and in the racializing of spheres of

activity and work” (98). How better, then, to explore and translate into ethnic terms deep-seated questions of masculinity, race, and national belonging than to use a popular American icon – whether it be Jay Gatsby or the hardboiled detective? While Frank Chin advocates a return to Asian cultural roots through the historio-mythological figures of Chinese literature as a means to remasculinize the Asian American male, the texts I wish to discuss embrace a homegrown myth of a more recent vintage to achieve similar cross-cultural aims.

Hardboiled Masculinity – The Dangerous Allure of Noir

My opening analysis of *The Big Sleep* takes on additional meanings and a deeper relevance when one considers the second figure in that opening comparison. After all, if the Charlie Chan-like Arthur Gwynn Geiger represents a kind of queered, Orientalized masculinity, then Philip Marlowe could be construed as an icon of heteronormative, “real American” manhood. In many ways, Raymond Chandler (1888-1959) took the already established figure of the hardboiled detective from the pulps of the 1920s and 30s and created a retroactive prototype in the form of his famous private eye. Although preceded by similar detective heroes in novels and pulp magazines like *Black Mask* and *Dime Detective* – a list of characters which includes Carroll John Daly’s Race Williams, Raoul Whitfield’s Ben Jardinn, and Dashiell Hammett’s Sam Spade and the Continental Op, among others – Marlowe has arguably become the representative figure of the genre. As Chandler writes in his notebooks: “To me Marlowe is the American mind; a heavy portion of rugged

realism, a dash of good hard vulgarity, a strong overtone of strident wit, an equally strong undertone of pure sentimentalism, an ocean of slang, and an utterly unexpected range of sentimentality” (MacShane, *The Life of Raymond Chandler* 207). Marlowe was, in Chandler’s own estimation, how America viewed itself – tough, individualistic, and serving the greater good.

The sheer “Americanness” of the hardboiled detective and the genre in which he appears registers as a crucial, alluring component to these reformulations of Asian American masculinity I wish to discuss in later chapters.⁵ In fact, the Western detective genre itself can be traced back to an American source: the mid-nineteenth century works of Edgar Allen Poe (1809-1849). His Auguste Dupin mystery tales, which include *The Murders in the Rue Morgue* (1841), *The Mystery of Marie Roget* (1843), and *The Purloined Letter* (1844), function primarily as whodunits, that is – complex, plot-driven detective stories in which the puzzle remains of utmost importance. Scottish author Sir Arthur Conan Doyle (1859-1930) further popularized the genre with his famous, London-set Sherlock Holmes stories in the late nineteenth century, as did authors like Josephine Tey (1896-1952), Agatha Christie (1890-1976), and Dorothy L. Sayers (1893-1957) who wrote during the “Golden Age of Detective Fiction” that ran from the 1920s to the 1930s. And yet, the formal elements of the classical detective story, as this quintessentially English version has come to be

⁵ Additionally, we can also locate the “Americanness” of the hardboiled mode amongst a number of more canonical writers in American fiction. For example, Mark Twain’s Americanizing of the English detective story through the use of Southern vernacular and local color in burlesques like *Tom Sawyer, Detective* (1896) and his Sherlock Holmes send-up, “A Double-Barreled Detective Story” (1902). In the 20th Century, we can see echoes of the hardboiled voice in Ernest Hemingway’s terse, oft-imitated prose style. Even in F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby*, the doomed title character ranks as a soft-boiled, more overtly sentimental variation of the hardboiled gangster with a personal code.

called, are now so easily identifiable – an intellectual sleuth, a limited number of suspects, a secluded location, and a puzzle-like plot – that the genre itself came to be considered cliché, dated, and sub-literary. Although writing during the emergence of the hardboiled detective genre in the mid-1920s, Earl Derr Biggers chose instead to emulate the conventions of the classical detective story, molding Charlie Chan in that image, an aesthetic choice which makes the subsequent decision by the various Asian American writers, filmmakers, and actors to adopt and refashion the hardboiled detective story all the more compelling.

Unlike its classical predecessor, the American hardboiled mode involves, as film scholar Frank Krutnik argues in his book, *In a Lonely Street: Film Noir, Genre, Masculinity* (1991), “an emphatic process of masculinization” in which the detective “seeks to prove his masculine professionalism” by successfully navigating a forbidding urban landscape, thereby consolidating his masculine identity through the completion of a mystery-related quest against dangerous women as well as an occasionally racialized criminal element seeking to thwart him at every turn (42). This formulaic contrivance thus provides a narrative vehicle through which masculinity – an issue of undeniable importance in the discourse surrounding racist stereotypes of Asian American men – can be an integral, yet narratively unobtrusive component to the mystery itself.

The cultural status of the hardboiled hero as a nostalgic icon of American manhood should not be underestimated either. Thanks in no small part to the performances of a number of Hollywood actors in the 1940s – Robert Mitchum in

films like *Out of the Past* (1947) and, most notably, the aforementioned Humphrey Bogart in *Maltese Falcon* (1941), *The Big Sleep* (1946), and others – the hardboiled detective leapt from the cheap pages of pulp fiction to become an even more iconic figure: a tough-talking, cigarette-smoking man of the people, so identified by his costume of a trenchcoat and a fedora that his silhouette alone would be immediately recognizable to a legion of international audiences even today.⁶



Figure 1. Humphrey Bogart.

In hardboiled detective fiction, the detective is no longer expected to be merely the eccentric solver of plots as in the English style, but becomes instead an urban variation of “a man’s man,” that is – a clever integration of two earlier traditions – the frontier hero of the American Western and the questing knight of medieval romance. In his essay “Chinatown and Generic Transformation in Recent American Films,” literary critic John Cawelti extrapolates on the cultural import of the hardboiled detective genre: “If a myth can be defined as a pattern of narrative known throughout the culture and presented in many different versions by many different tellers, then the hard-boiled detective story is in that sense an important

⁶ Robert Mitchum went on to play Philip Marlowe twice during the neo-noir era – in Dick Richards’ *Farewell, My Lovely* (1975) and Michael Winner’s *The Big Sleep* (1978).

American myth” (499). Rather than draw from an Asian mythic tradition for inspiration, the artists spotlighted in this dissertation are instead tapping into a Western one, taking their rightful place in a long line of ever-evolving literary and cinematic characters by recasting this decidedly American myth with heroes boasting undeniably Asian faces.

What We Talk About When We Talk About Asian America

Despite the groundbreaking status of the works I plan to treat in my dissertation, I should confess a certain amount of reservation about trumpeting their arrival. In *Writing Manhood in Black and Yellow* (2005), literary scholar Daniel Y. Kim expresses a similar concern in his study of the masculinist writings of Frank Chin and Ralph Ellison when he admits that “what can look and feel like empowerment or liberation from the perspective of heterosexual men of color can easily depend on a disturbing disidentification with and a denigration of other racially and sexually stigmatized identities” (xxii) So rather than uncritically endorse or valorize these various recuperative projects, I believe we must recognize the ways in which some of these texts may not only critique, but in some ways reproduce the very same hegemonic masculinity that they seem to be working so hard to confront, challenge, and ultimately overthrow. In what ways, do these examples drawn from the Asian American detective subgenre reproduce violent, misogynistic, homophobic, and/or chauvinist traits, which, in turn, marginalize other minority groups or peoples in order to attain legitimacy as “real Americans”? This speaks to the dangerous allure

of hardboiled masculinity, especially if we accept Meghan Abbott's proposition that hardboiled texts often "seek to perpetuate and maintain the illusion of whiteness as a universal, as an invisible, raceless norm" (95). And yet, the hardboiled detective genre has evolved considerably since the days of Hammett and Chandler. No longer confined to tracking the adventures of the typical white male heterosexual lead, detective fiction now encompasses an increasing number of books written by and about racial, ethnic, gender, and sexual minorities. Rather than die out, the hardboiled mode has endured as a complex and evolving world literary form even to this day, crossing over to the world of comics, television, and, of course, cinema – the latter most notably evident in the film noir of the 1940s and 1950s as well as its subsequent neo-noir revival in the 1970s and beyond. How is it possible, then, that a literary and cinematic form that contains so many misogynistic, racist, and homophobic instances in its canon could also be so accommodating to minority subjects? What makes the genre so friendly to critiquing hegemony? And what possibilities does it hold for engaging the diverse field that makes up the Asian American experience? These are questions I hope to address and answer in the body of my dissertation.

In addition, I recognize that the suggestion of a collective Asian American masculinity – particularly one shadowed by an Orientalized Chinese specter – may seem as problematic as positing a generalized Asian America or "Asian American experience." As Lisa Lowe points out, "The grouping 'Asian American' is not a natural or static category; it is a socially constructed unity, a situationally specific

position assumed for political reasons” (82). The origin of the term “Asian American” goes back to 1969 with the Third World Strikes at San Francisco State College and was coined – purportedly by UCLA historian and community activist Yuji Ishioka – to describe a pan-ethnic political alliance concerned with social justice. In *Racial Formation in the United States*, critical race scholars Michael Omi and Howard Winant write that the political label “Asian American” was meant to reflect “the similarity of treatment that various groups such as Chinese Americans, Japanese Americans, Korean Americans, etc. (groups which had not previously considered themselves as having a common political agenda) received at the hands of state institutions” (89). This racially based conglomeration of U.S. citizens of Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Filipino and later Vietnamese, Thai, Laotian, Cambodian, and Singaporean descent into a category called “Asian American” is not without its problems, as it instantiates the collective fiction of a reducible, easily objectified idea of a single “Asian America.”⁷

I would suggest, then, that an “Asian American” as described in my dissertation should not be thought of as an easily definable entity with fixed or shared characteristics, but should perhaps instead be seen as a discursive formation or cultural performance that hinges on perpetual, often complex interactions among numerous parties with vested or nominal interests within this imaged and imagined community. Whatever the term’s descriptive feasibility, it can be agreed that in its most preliminary form “Asian American” was meant as a direct counter to the

⁷ Not to mention whether or not Americans of South Asian descent – Indian, Pakistani, and Bangladeshi – are included or excluded from this categorization.

xenophobia inherent in the term “Oriental,” which thus made this neologism a symbolic claim to an American identity. Political solidarity and mobilization across Asian ethnicities comes in no small part, then, from the uncritical lumping together of these different groups by the a white racist power structure – the same one that would uncritically embrace and endorse Charlie Chan as a positive icon of Asian American representation. Historically, there is no self-defined monolithic Asian American masculinity; such collective representations have been largely external. In her survey of writings on Asian American masculinity, Yen Ling Shek writes, “Within the framework of hegemonic masculinity, Asian American masculinities are then subordinated, as are other forms of masculinity, such as those among men of color, gay men, and bisexual men” (383). Thus, in both lived reality and cultural productions, self-determined constructions of Asian American masculinity are often in reaction to these widely circulated images. This study seeks to examine one such avenue of self-expression, one that can be both reactive *and* innovative in its engagement with this racist discourse.

Further, I define “Asian American detective fiction and film” in an inclusive manner, relying not just on conventional assumptions about categorization, but also on the self-definitions of the artists involved to guide my choices. Asian Americans make up a small percentage of the general population, and perhaps even a smaller percentage of the total number of authors writing within the detective genre. The choices presented here are not meant to be taken as prescriptive or exclusionary, but instead reflect my interest in self-represented male portrayals that exist within that

comparative dearth. If this study seems to weigh heavily in favor of Chinese Americans (and to a lesser extent Japanese Americans and Korean Americans) as representative figures of “Asian America,” I further would offer that this is neither a case of personal bias nor active omission, as these are the ethnic groups that a) are represented in the available literature, b) have historically been the most visible in the United States, and c) have been the most crucial to the prevailing views on Asian American masculinity in the U.S. racial imaginary.

While it may indeed be technically erroneous to characterize Charlie Chan as a cultural (mis)representation of an “Asian American identity” due to the non-existence of the term during the time of the character’s initial popularity, Hawai‘i’s then-position as a U.S. territory (Chan is a resident of Hawai‘i), and the contested fiftieth state’s unique identity politics in contrast to familiar mainland constructions of Asian American subjectivity, I hold that this correlation is historically and critically informed.⁸ After all, the vast Asian Americanist critical scholarship on Charlie Chan suggests he has been both received and perceived as a symbolic and stereotyped precursor for Asian American identity nonetheless.⁹ With these deeply

⁸ In *Reimagining the American Pacific* (2000), Rob Wilson provides a snapshot of the tourist trade coming into Hawai‘i around the time of the Charlie Chan novels and films: “Prior to World War II, Hawai‘i was one destination of choice for a more wealthy, upper-class clientele, who typically came by luxury cruise passenger liners [...] and stayed at such sites as the Hawaiian, the Royal Hawaiian [...], and the Moana hotels in Waikiki” (xiv). In several of the Charlie Chan books and some of the films, Hawai‘i serves as the exotic backdrop for romance and adventure for the predominantly white outsiders who populate these texts.

⁹ As indicated in the case of *United States v. Wong Kim Ark*, 169 U.S. 649 (1898), the Supreme Court ruled that a person becomes a citizen of the United States at the moment of birth, by virtue of the first clause of the Fourteenth Amendment of the Constitution – that is, if the individual in question meets at least one of four requirements, chief among them being born in the United States. Further, a birth certificate issued by a U.S. state or territorial government counts as evidence of citizenship. In the case

complex issues in mind, I argue that Charlie Chan and the stereotypes he has come to embody have determined a singular vision of Asian American masculinity, and that these Asian American-centric detective texts have been positioned to create new spaces for alternative masculinities to emerge and flourish.

The Hardboiled and the Haunted

In chapter one, “The Specter of Charlie Chan: Racial Masquerade and the Unmanning of the Asian American Male,” I investigate the enduring presence and figurative transformations of Charlie Chan in American popular culture. Endowed with a deep, sometimes contradictory layering of meanings since his introduction in 1925, Chan’s ghostly presence allows a number of racial stereotypes to be articulated onto this once popular, now infamous cultural icon. I argue that while the decades-long lack of new Charlie Chan literary, cinematic, and televisual cultural artifacts should signal the character’s ostensible “death,” his ethereal presence can still be felt in many works by and about Asian Americans long after his proverbial fifteen minutes of fame has passed. To explain this curious phenomenon, I contend that the filmic Charlie Chan serves as an iconic representation of the Hollywood practice of Yellowface, a racial masquerade that instantiates white supremacy through performance as a dehumanizing act of cultural erasure. Through a close reading of the

of Hawai‘i, which was formally annexed by the United States in 1898 following an illegal overthrow of the Native Hawaiian sovereign state in 1893 and remained an organized incorporated territory to 1959, all persons born in the Hawaiian Islands on or after April 30, 1900, are native-born citizens of the United States, as per *The Immigration and Nationality Act*, Title III, SEC. 305. [8 U.S.C. 1405]. Although the fictional Canton-born Charlie Chan would hypothetically not qualify for American citizenship under this law, his Hawai‘i-born children automatically would.

“canonical” body of work featuring the infamous character, I explain why the specter of Charlie Chan – an otherwise moribund relic of the early twentieth century – remains deeply inscribed in the U.S. cultural imaginary.

In chapter two, “Asian American Noir: Haunted Spaces and the De-Orientalizing of Asian American Subjectivity,” I examine three detective films – *Phantom of Chinatown* (1940), *The Crimson Kimono* (1959), and *Chan Is Missing* (1982) – that eschewed Yellowface casting in favor of spotlighting Asian American actors in starring roles. All three of these filmic portrayals positioned Asian American actors as leading men, testing the limits of tolerance not just in respect to narratives of assimilation and miscegenation, but also in terms of what constitutes an acceptable protagonist for predominantly white mainstream American audiences both immediately before and during the Cold War. The “haunted spaces” of the title not only refers to both the importance of the city to film noir and the specific ethnic enclaves featured within these texts, but also to the space of the cultural imaginary, one that has been infiltrated with Orientalist stereotypes that haunt both the silver screen and real life. While historicizing these movies within the context of the often Orientalist representations of Asians in classic Hollywood cinema, I demonstrate how each of these landmark films re-signifies Asian American male subjectivity, examining what it means to be Asian American in the shadow of Charlie Chan.

In chapter three, “Asian American Detective Fiction: Haunted Men and the Hardboiled Genre,” I investigate how Asian American writers in the post-Civil Rights, post-Cold War era began to expand the parameters of Asian American

literature through an engagement with the hardboiled detective genre. At the turn of the twenty-first century, a group of Asian American male writers emerged – Dale Furutani, Leonard Chang, Henry Chang, and Ed Lin – who chose to address Charlie Chan through their own literary repudiations of racist stereotypes related to emasculation, exoticism, and perpetual foreignness. Even within the arena of the detective genre, these Asian American writers find themselves saddled with the same burden of cultural representation assigned to their predecessors in literary fiction, each employing various strategies to accommodate, adapt, or actively subvert those racially fraught expectations.

In the dissertation's epilogue, I address the various stalled attempts to revive the Charlie Chan franchise in the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries and explore the character's unexpected return at the hands of an unlikely source – Chinese-born literary scholar, Yunte Huang and his award-winning book, *Charlie Chan: The Untold Story of the Honorable Detective and His Rendezvous with American History* (2010). Here, I offer a sustained engagement with this text, its popular reception, and its impact on contemporary perceptions of Charlie Chan. More importantly, I point to the future of the Asian American detective in U.S. popular culture through a survey of contemporary mystery fiction written by a diverse group of authors. In differing ways, these writers have crafted alternative approaches to the detective genre that seek to further problematize issues of gender and sexuality, as well as interrogate accepted notions of masculinity in U.S. culture.

This dissertation, then, serves as the first substantial critical examination of literary and cinematic detective stories featuring Asian Americans. Even if Asian American Studies as a discipline has long since moved away from paradigms of masculinity and cultural nationalism, it is within the realm of detective fiction and film where these formulations get repeated and refashioned. After all, we cannot deny that struggles of identity and cultural visibility continue to be played out within the domain of the nation even today, as Lisa Lowe articulates:

It is through the terrain of national culture that the individual subject is politically formed as the American citizen: a terrain introduced by the Statue of Liberty, discovered by the immigrant, dreamed in a common language, and defended in battle by the independent, self-made man. The heroic quest, the triumph over weakness, the promises of salvation, prosperity: this is the American feeling, the style of life, the ethos and spirit of being. (2)

In the body of work to be analyzed in my dissertation, the hardboiled detective genre becomes, in Lowe's terms, the specific "terrain of national culture" in which these struggles for national belonging on the part of Asian Americans are given voice and/or image. Through these disparate novels and films, the figure of the detective becomes the chosen avatar to explore issues of masculine identity and national belonging, as Asians in the United States have long lived under the shadow of perpetual foreignness and uncanny marginality in the American popular imaginary. Through an analysis of these various attempts to exorcise Charlie Chan's lingering specter, I hope to illuminate the long shadow this portly detective has cast for nearly a century and bring a new subgenre of Asian American cultural production into the light.

CHAPTER ONE

The Specter of Charlie Chan

Racial Masquerade and the Unmanning of the Asian American Male

If Charlie Chan uses first-person pronouns, does not walk in the fetal position, is not played by a white man, and looks and acts like a real Chinese, he's not Charlie Chan anymore. (355)

– Frank Chin, *Gunga Din Highway* (1994)

There is a specter haunting Asian American masculinity – the specter of Charlie Chan. However, despite his enduring reputation as an emasculated figure, Charlie Chan resembled, at least during the height of his popularity, another icon of Western masculine identity – Ian Fleming's James Bond, albeit in less obvious ways. The Honolulu-based Chinese detective was the creation of Ohio-born white author, Earl Derr Biggers (1884-1933), who featured the character in six popular novels, including *The House Without a Key* (1925), *The Chinese Parrot* (1926), *Behind That Curtain* (1928), *The Black Camel* (1929), *Charlie Chan Carries On* (1930), and *The Keeper of the Keys* (1932), which were all first serialized by the *Saturday Evening Post* prior to full-length publication by the Bobbs-Merrill Company. But as was the case with 007 in the 1960s, it took the jump to the big screen for Chan to truly capture the public's imagination. More so than the novels, it was Hollywood that put forth, amplified, and widely disseminated the image of Charlie Chan to the masses.

Audiences hungry for a double dose of exoticism and escapism seemed to find exactly what they needed from the Charlie Chan franchise. Just as James Bond would

embark on globetrotting adventures for Her Majesty's Secret Service, Charlie Chan, too, became an international presence, representing U.S. interests abroad by solving strange crimes in such foreign locales as London, Paris, Germany, and even Panama – much to the delight of Depression-era viewers nationwide. At forty-seven films, the sheer number of Charlie Chan movies that were released between 1925 and 1949 ranks as an astounding achievement even by contemporary standards.

The most famous of these films were produced by the Fox Film Corporation (later known as Twentieth Century Fox). Beginning with 1931's *Charlie Chan Carries On*, Swedish actor Warner Oland (1879-1938) played the detective in sixteen movies. After Oland's death in 1938, the mantle of Charlie Chan was passed to another white actor, Missouri-born Sidney Toler (1874-1947) for eleven more films with Twentieth Century Fox. However, the outbreak of World War II in Europe and Asia caused the studio to lose its film markets outside of the United States. Unable to cover the cost of production solely through domestic ticket sales, Fox halted all of its B-picture units, including the Charlie Chan series (Rothel 47). Still, the franchise soldiered on, as Toler reputedly acquired the rights to the character from Earl Derr Biggers's widow, and the Charlie Chan movies moved to the low budget, "Poverty Row" studio, Monogram Pictures. After Toler's death in 1947 following an additional eleven picture stint at Monogram, he was replaced by Roland Winters (1904-1989), also white, who played Chan for the final six pictures, concluding in 1949 with the release of the *The Sky Dragon*. Although additional installments of the series were planned, none ever materialized.

But even though the long-running series had finally come to an end by mid-century, Charlie Chan had already infiltrated American popular culture in a myriad of popular forms. In fact, the number of ancillary materials that emerged during this era – assorted merchandise and cultural productions I would call “Chansploitation” – are legion. First, Valentine Davies adapted *The Keeper of the Keys* into a stage play called *Inspector Charlie Chan* starring William Harrigan. Five years later, artist Alfred Andriola (1912-1983) created a memorable Sunday comic strip entitled *The Case Files of Charlie Chan* for the McNaught Newspaper Syndicate, which lasted from October of 1938 to May of 1942. In addition to these Andriola strips and other comic book adaptations, the Whitman Publishing Company capitalized on the character’s popularity by releasing three “Big Little Books” meant for children featuring artwork by Andriola: *Charlie Chan* (1939), *Charlie Chan Solves a New Mystery* (1940), and *Charlie Chan, Villainy on the High Seas* (1942).¹⁰ The character was even popular enough for Milton Bradley to release *The Great Charlie Chan Detective Mystery Game* in 1938 and for Whitman to produce *The Charlie Chan Card Game* the following year. And from 1932 to 1950, the character thrived on the radio in at least five different incarnations, each starring white voice actors

¹⁰ The Andriola strips have been anthologized during their initial run in *Feature Comics* (1939) and *Big Shot Comics* (1940) before being rereleased by Eternity Comics in the 1990s and the Pacific Comics Club in the 2000s. Comic book industry legends Joe Simon, Jack Kirby, and Carmine Infantino collaborated on a five-issue series, *Charlie Chan* (1948-1949) for Prize Comics, which was later continued at Charlton Comics for an additional four issues (1955-1956). DC Comics released a comic book tie-in to TV’s *The New Adventures of Charlie Chan* in May 1958-March 1959 with the creative team of John Broome and Sid Greene, while Dell Comics’ commissioned a short two-issue run in 1965-66 with art by Frank Springer.

ventriloquizing the famed Asian detective.¹¹ Perhaps one of the more interesting examples of Chansploitation occurred in the realm of music when legendary African American jazz singer Cab Calloway (1907-1994) released “Chop, Chop Charlie Chan (From China)” in 1940. Featuring lyrics like, “A-chop, chop, Charlie Chan from China / He’s the heppest cat in town,” the upbeat tune showcased Calloway’s famous scat singing style, sprinkled with goofy faux-Chinese gibberish clearly meant for the amusement of his listening audiences. If these various incarnations of Charlie Chan serve as any indication of his popularity, it is no exaggeration to say that the character had already become firmly established within the U.S. cultural imaginary prior to the end of the series in 1949.¹²

However, despite the tremendous success of the character in the first half of the twentieth century, Charlie Chan eventually lost his status as a beloved matinee icon and became closely identified with the racist stereotyping of the Chinese and other East Asians in the United States. In the years that followed, Charlie Chan –

¹¹ Charlie Chan was played on the radio by William Connolly from 1932-1933, an unidentified actor from 1936-1938, Ed Begley from 1944-1945, and Santos Ortega from 1947-1948. In 1950, the Australian Broadcasting Company did their own fifty-two episode Charlie Chan series, featuring William Reece as a falsetto voiced Charlie Chan, complete with a Number One Son with an Australian accent (Rothel).

¹² The popularity of the Fox films was so great that there were even unauthorized Chinese-made Charlie Chan films. Produced by the Hsin Hwa motion picture company in Shanghai, the titles of these films include *The Pearl Tunic* (1938), *Murder at the Taiwan National University Radio Station* (1939), *The Great Charlie Chan Smashes an Evil Plot* (1941), *Net of Divine Retribution* (1947), *Hero of Our Time* (1948), and *The Wise Charlie Chan Fights the Prince of Darkness* (1948). The most popular films in the series were written and directed by Xu Xinfu, featuring actor Hsu Xinyuan as private detective Charlie Chan and actress Gu Meijun (and later Bai Yan) as his daughter, Chan Man-Na (Marion).

whose face had been plastered on lunch boxes, board games, and comic books – came to represent a twisted mirror image of Asian Americana.

Summarizing Charlie Chan’s contemporary reception as a racist icon, Josephine Lee, current president of the Association for Asian American Studies, declared in her book, *Performing Asian America* (1997), that she views the detective as “a self-effacing, polite, ‘domesticated’ Asian who speaks in broken English despite his native-born status, spouts pseudo-Confucianisms, and exemplifies loyal service to a white superior” (11). What Lee’s largely accurate assessment lacks, however, is any real treatment of the character as an emasculated figure. As indicated in the introductory chapter of my dissertation, criticisms of Charlie Chan have largely focused on the character’s physiognomy, sexuality, and physical toughness. To put it bluntly, many charge that Charlie Chan represents a demeaning image of Asian men because he is fat, effeminate, and passive. In her novel, *Tripmaster Monkey* (1989), Maxine Hong Kingston summarizes the collective animosity toward Charlie Chan through her character Wittman Ah-Sing, a thinly veiled analogue for her literary nemesis, Frank Chin:

I want to punch Charlie Chan too in his pregnant stomach that bellies out his white linen maternity suit. And he’s got a widow’s hump from bowing the humbleness. He has never caught a criminal by fistfighting him. And he doesn’t grab his client-in-distress and kiss her hard, pressing her boobs against his gun. He shuffles up to a clue and hunches over it, holding his own hand behind his back. He mulls in Martian over clues. Martians from outer space and Chinese monks talk alike. Old futs talking fustian. Confucius say this. Confucius say that. Too clean and too good for sex. [...] We’re de-balled and other-worldly, we don’t have the natural fucking urges of the average, that is, the white human being. (320).

Kingston's impersonation of Chin encapsulates the dominant view of Charlie Chan in Asian American masculinist discourse. They charge that Chan is not the idealized, rugged heterosexual hero who defeats the villain and gets the girl at the end. Instead, he's an ugly, overweight, and asexual "foreigner" who speaks in riddles and solves his cases, not with his fists, but with the faux-wisdom of the East. Such critiques have focused on discourses of emasculation, effeminacy, castration, and/or queerness in characterizing Charlie Chan, and while the underlying heteronormativity of these criticisms may have both their limitations and drawbacks, the basis of their attacks against anti-Asian racism remains valid and should not be dismissed.

While this negative perception of the character has become more widespread and acknowledged, somehow, the specter of Charlie Chan has endured. In each subsequent decade since the demise of the Monogram series in 1949, there have been numerous attempts by book publishers, Hollywood studios, television networks, and various other individuals and corporate entities to resurrect Charlie Chan. However, on nearly every occasion, the prospects of such a return have been met with heated controversy. Why is it, then, that an ostensibly moribund character like Charlie Chan persists in his refusal "to go gentle into that good night"? In the following pages, I posit that the language of spectrality serves as an appropriate critical lens through which to view the cultural phenomenon of Charlie Chan, as it a) accurately characterizes the detective's haunting presence on Asian American masculinist discourse, b) illustrates how advocates of Charlie Chan tend to refute the charges of racism levied against the character, and c) best describes the root cause of this

nominal “unmanning” of the Asian American male – the cultural practice of racial impersonation. In this chapter, I will shed light on the complex history surrounding the genesis of both the literary and cinematic incarnations of Charlie Chan in the early twentieth century and demonstrate how the character remains deeply inscribed in the U.S. cultural imaginary as a pernicious racial masquerade that naturalizes the popular displacement of self-determined articulations of Asian American masculinity.

While I will concede that some arguments made on Charlie Chan’s behalf may hold some merit, I ultimately argue that these types of defenses tend to invoke post-racial rhetorical strategies that ignore both the white privilege involved in the practice of racial masquerade as well as the fact that Yellowface performance itself emerged under white supremacist conditions. While admirers of “racial ventriloquism” may find pleasure in such impersonations, I seek to show how, if one takes this metaphor to its logical conclusion, such a practice renders the Asian man as no better than a soulless, wooden dummy, a veritable mouthpiece for white-created visions of Asian America that are patently artificial and grossly dehumanized.

Specters of the Past, Omens of the Future

In critical discourse, the term *specter* may first draw to mind the work of French philosopher Jacques Derrida and, in particular, his treatise, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International* (1993). “In literary critical circles,” Colin Davis, professor of French at the University of London, asserts, “Derrida’s rehabilitation of ghosts as a respectable subject of enquiry has

proved to be extraordinarily fertile” (373) and spawned a “minor academic industry” (376).¹³ The impetus for Derrida’s *Specters of Marx* emerged in the aftermath of the Tiananmen Square protests in the summer of 1989, the fall of the Berlin Wall later that same year, and the implosion of the Soviet Union in 1991, as advocates of neoliberalism viewed these events as sounding the death knell of communism and Marxist critique. Consequently, in the spring of 1993, the Center for Ideas and Society at the University of California, Riverside held a conference on the future of Marxism entitled “Whither Marxism? Global Crises in International Perspective.” At this event, Derrida gave the plenary address in two parts, and the content of these talks were published in French as *Spectres de Marx* later that same year and translated into English by Peggy Kamuf as *Specters of Marx* in 1994. In both the talk and the expanded published version, Derrida suggested that despite Marx’s seeming obsolescence at the contemporary moment, his “spirit” had even more relevance than ever before. In the post-Communist era of the early 1990s, Derrida posits that what we inherit from Marx’s legacy may no longer be communism in itself, but instead a renewed sense of responsibility and a recommitment to radical critique.

As evidenced by the title of Derrida’s text as well as his citation of the opening words of *The Communist Manifesto* (1848), which I both referenced and parodied at the beginning of this chapter (“A specter is haunting Europe—the specter of communism”[Marx and Engels 8]), his central concept is the *specter*, a

¹³ Such critical works that deal with the concept of specters include, but are not limited to Benedict Anderson’s *The Spectre of Comparisons* (1998), Pheng Cheah’s *Spectral Nationality* (2003), Ian Baucom’s *Specters of the Atlantic* (2005), David Ratmoko’s *On Spectrality* (2006) and Christopher Peterson’s *Kindred Specters* (2007).

deconstructive figure that is neither absent nor present and hovers somewhere between the living and the dead. In characterizing the rush among his contemporaries to disavow and exorcise the ghost of Marx once and for all, Derrida views this specter as “a threat that some would like to believe is past and whose return it would be necessary again in the future, to conjure away” (48).

At face value, such a barebones description of Derridian spectrality could be seen as a parallel to Charlie Chan’s ongoing relationship with Asian Americanist critique and cultural production. As I will demonstrate, Chan indeed registers as a kind of phantom threat from the past, one that must that be dealt with each time he resurfaces. What would be controversial about this form of spectrality when applied to Charlie Chan is Derrida’s invitation to treat such a specter hospitably, a rhetorical tactic that differs sharply from how many Asian American writers and critics have chosen to contend with Charlie Chan for the last forty years:

The question deserves perhaps to be put the other way: Could one *address oneself in general* if already some ghost did not come back? If he loves justice at least, the “scholar” of the future, the “intellectual” of tomorrow should learn it and from the ghost. He should learn to live by learning not how to make conversation with the ghost but how to talk with him, with her, how to let them speak or how to give them back speech, even if it is in oneself, in the other in oneself: they are always there, specters, even if they do not exist, even if they are no longer, even if they are not yet. (221)

In sociologist Avery F. Gordon own critical treatment of ghosts entitled *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (1997), she offers a similar admonition to her readers: “When a ghost appears, it is making contact with you; all its forceful if perplexing enunciations are for you. Offer it a hospitable reception we must, but the victorious reckoning with a ghost always requires a partiality to the

living” (208). In these short passages from both Derrida and Gordon, there arises the suggestion of an ethical obligation to ghosts, a sense that we must listen to them and let them speak. But what does that mean for the specter of Charlie Chan? If he could speak, what would he have to say?

To apply such a critical rubric to Charlie Chan immediately raises the question of whether or not Biggers’s character has been hospitably treated by Asian Americanist critics, whose analyses of Charlie Chan have ranged from critiques that have attempted to maintain an objective distance from the subject to more openly polemical refutations. To be clear, if Asian Americanists have been “inhospitable” toward Charlie Chan, it has not been without good reason, as the character came to embody a racist stereotype that existed in direct opposition to more credible, self-determined enunciations of Asian American identity. In the context of these writings of the 1970s and 1980s, Charlie Chan was a cultural icon in need of annihilation, not recuperation. Considering this contentious history, my deployment of the term *specter* takes on added significance. Unlike “ghost” or “phantom,” the word *specter* carries an implicit adversarial component, which effectively characterizes the relationship between the famous detective and Asian American cultural critique.¹⁴

My mention of “hospitality” coupled with my insistence on referring to Charlie Chan as a specter may suggest to some canny readers of literature that his

¹⁴ Perhaps the adversarial nature of the term is the reason why Ian Fleming’s 1961 novel has James Bond fight off the forces of SPECTRE, an international terrorist organization that will come to haunt him in numerous literary, cinematic, and comic book incarnations of the popular franchise. It is perhaps no surprise that SPECTRE itself was comprised of such Orientalized threats as the half-Chinese archvillain Dr. Julius No (Joseph Wiseman) and Auric Goldfinger’s Korean henchman Oddjob (Harold Sakata).

return speaks to a certain repressed guilt, as the ghost of Hamlet's father signals to his melancholic son in Shakespeare's classic play. As literary scholar David Ratmoko observes, "Popular treatises on ghosts concur in their often implicit assumption of a causal link between guilt and haunting, between a debt incurred and a ghost appearing to collect it" (9). But in contrast to such conventional speculations on the hypothetical "nature" of ghosts, I wish to emphasize that the specter of Charlie Chan is not some sin from Asian America's past, but instead serves as damning evidence of "the crime" itself – the crime of racial misrepresentation, demeaning caricaturization, and cultural erasure that was committed *against* this imagined cultural community.

For Derrida, the specter of Marx deserves to be treated hospitably, as its absent presence gestures toward the possibilities of an as-of-yet unformulated future. I, however, would not go so far as to implore critics of the character to be more accommodating to the specter of Charlie Chan – after all, various "apologetics" on the character's behalf already exist – but instead suggest that perhaps the lingering ambivalence of Charlie Chan's particular brand of haunting is worthy of further exploration. Rather than dismiss the character offhand, I set out on this project to reevaluate the character and come to my own conclusions. Ultimately, I argue that the controversial icon exists as a foil through which something more productive emerges for Asian Americans. Thus, in revisiting this much reviled, yet contradictorily *much beloved* character, we can come to view Charlie Chan as a site of intertextual traffic, a place of recuperative affirmation in which self-determined articulations of the Asian American detective can both emerge and evolve.

While my usage of the term *specter* certainly owes a debt to Derrida's (and Gordon's use of "ghost"), ultimately, the subject matter, context, and specific critical intervention differs, making my interpretation a unique formulation, one that also returns *ab ovo* to the semantic possibilities that I believe the word holds in helping others to understand this peculiar cultural phenomenon. After all, *specter* is not a coinage by Derrida; in fact, the English usage of the term dates back to at least the seventeenth century, according to the Oxford English Dictionary:

spectre, n.

Pronunciation: /'spɛktə(r)/

Forms: Also 16– **specter** (now *U.S.*).

Etymology: < French *spectre* (16th cent., = Italian *spettro* , Spanish *espectro*, Portuguese *espectro*), or < Latin *spectrum* , < *specĕre* to look, see.

- a. **An apparition, phantom, or ghost, esp. one of a terrifying nature or aspect.**
- b. *fig.* **An unreal object of thought; a phantasm of the brain.**
- c. *fig.* **An object or source of dread or terror, imagined as an apparition.**
- d. *transf.* **One whose appearance is suggestive of an apparition or ghost.**
- e. **A faint shadow or imitation of something.**

Following in the spirit of Sigmund Freud's extended inquiry into the title subject of his famous essay, "The Uncanny" (1919), I shall conduct a similar semantic investigation of the word *specter* as it has been understood in the English language for the last four hundred years. Viewing the trope of the specter within the context of Asian American history, I find it to be a critically fruitful tool for not just discussing, but interrogating how Charlie Chan became a racist cultural icon in the U.S. popular imaginary.

The Specter That Haunts – Charlie Chan and Asian America

The first meaning of specter – “An apparition, phantom, or ghost, esp. one of a terrifying nature or aspect” – has the most immediate and obvious relevance, considering the character’s “death” in 1949 and his subsequent figurative “afterlife.” With the 1993 publication of *Charlie Chan is Dead: An Anthology of Contemporary Asian American Fiction*, author Jessica Hagedorn celebrated the demise of the by-then-infamous “Oriental detective.” This landmark collection of short stories by Asian American writers seemed to proclaim through its much-celebrated existence that the emergence of Asian American literature over the last few decades had replaced the effectively “dead” icon, one of the few existing fictional representations of Asians in American popular culture during the first half of the twentieth century. In her preface to Hagedorn’s initial volume, pioneering Asian American studies scholar Elaine Kim even suggests that Chan’s demise was permanent: “Charlie Chan is indeed dead, never to be revived. Gone for good his yellowface asexual bulk, his fortune-cookie English, his stereotypically Orientalist version of ‘the [Confucian] Chinese family’” (xiii). Whether or not Asian American literature can claim responsibility for what many would view as a justifiable homicide, the evidence for a metaphorical “death of Charlie Chan” initially seems persuasive – at least, when taken at face value. After all, decades have passed since a Charlie Chan novel or film was released – a key piece of evidence that marks the character’s literal absence from the cultural terrain. And yet Charlie Chan persists as a haunting presence, a nominally “dead” cultural artifact that continues to haunt the land of the living.

Quite insightfully, Avery F. Gordon elaborates further on this type of phenomenon in *Ghostly Matters*: “If haunting describes how that which appears to be not there is often a seething presence, acting on and often meddling with taken-for-granted realities, the ghost is just the sign, the empirical evidence that a haunting is taking place” (8). Gordon’s description of the way in which the specters of the past impinge upon the “taken-for-realities” of the present proves to be an apt way of characterizing my own interpretation of the figure of Charlie Chan, as his occasional reappearances on the contemporary cultural landscape are often met with exasperation by those would had perhaps come to believe that such a dated racist stereotype was a thing of the past.

After all, since at least the early 1970s, attempts to revive Charlie Chan onscreen have drawn fervent protests from numerous Asian American activist groups.

For example, in the early 1970s, controversy erupted over NBC’s proposed new Charlie Chan television series. Filmed in Vancouver in 1970, this ninety-minute pilot endured a troubled production history. Directed by Darryl Duke from a teleplay by



Figure 2. Ross Martin in *The Return of Charlie Chan* (1973).

Gene Kearney, this Universal Studios-funded production premiered on British television as *Happiness is a Warm Clue* in July of 1973 and did not reach U.S.

airwaves until it was shown on NBC on July 17, 1979.¹⁵ According to Hal Erickson's review for the *New York Times*, Universal shelved the picture for years due to complaints by Asian American activists that, even after a publicly announced "worldwide casting" search for an Asian actor to take on the role of Charlie Chan – the producers once again hired a white man – in this case, Poland-born Ross Martin (1920-1981).¹⁶ In 1980, an independent studio called American Cinema Productions was looking to film the quasi-spoof *Charlie Chan and the Curse of the Dragon Queen* in San Francisco's Chinatown, but instead of hiring actors of Asian descent, the filmmakers cast Sir Peter Ustinov (1921-2004) as the Chinese detective; Richard Hatch as his half-Jewish, half-Chinese grandson, Lee Chan, Jr.; and Angie Dickinson as a Chinese femme fatale, the titular "Dragon Queen." Not surprisingly, the local Chinese American community – led by the Chinese for Affirmative Action, the Chinese Historical Society, and the Chinese Cultural Center – proved to be less than enthusiastic about this newest revival of the Charlie Chan series. According to *Cineaste* writer Erick Dittus, hundreds of protestors halted production on the film, more or less ejecting the filmmakers from Chinatown. As a result, the 1981 farce was forced to shoot all its Chinatown sequences on studio backlots. Upon its eventual theatrical release, the movie fared poorly with both audiences and critics, becoming

¹⁵ *The Return of Charlie Chan* is not currently available on licensed VHS or DVD formats, making it a rarity among Charlie Chan ancillary materials. For this dissertation, I viewed a DVD copy transferred from a VHS television recording.

¹⁶ Ross Martin's involvement with Charlie Chan did not end with this film. Eugene Franklin Wong describes a related protest that occurred on August 3, 1977, in which "Asian and Pacific actors and actresses went to Los Angeles' Chinatown to protest the filming of a Charlie Chan character for Dodge Aspen automobiles, with Chinatown as a mere background" (69). According to Wong, Ross Martin reprised his turn as Charlie Chan for the commercial.

the last Charlie Chan film to date, as attempts to resurrect the detective in the 1990s and 2000s have never made it past the script stage.

Protests over Charlie Chan have not been limited to the prospect of new television and film productions, as even screenings of the original films have been subject to public dispute. For example, when the Fox Movie Channel announced its intention to air a “Charlie Chan Film Festival” in the summer of 2003, these programming plans were met with outrage by various civil rights organizations, including the National Asian Pacific American Legal Consortium, the National Asian American Telecommunications Association, and the Organization of Chinese Americans (*CNN.com*). In response to this criticism from activist groups, the Fox Movie Channel canceled the proposed marathon. After receiving complaints from fans of the series, the Fox Movie Channel ended up broadcasting four Charlie Chan films. In conjunction with the reduced “festival,” the network agreed to air an Asian American-led panel discussion to defuse the controversy. George Takei served as moderator, while Peter Feng, Frank H. Wu, Helen Zia, Perry Shen, and Roger Fan, and several others participated (Fox Movie Channel Press). And finally, as recently as March 2010, the *New York Times* published an article suggesting that the controversy over Charlie Chan had been reignited once again after a 1968 documentary, *The Great Charlie Chan*, was discovered in the archives and screened by the New York Chapter of the National Academy of Television Arts and Sciences. In truth, these incidents make up just a small sample of the total number of public protests and controversies in response to the attempted revivals of Charlie Chan.

Until the overwhelmingly positive reception of Yunte Huang's 2010 book, *Charlie Chan: The Untold Story of the Honorable Detective and His Rendezvous with American History*, for most of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, any threat of Chan's possible reemergence on the cultural landscape was likely to spark a firestorm of controversy. To be clear, in my characterization of Charlie Chan as a specter that haunts Asian America, I don't mean to suggest that somehow the ridiculous image of Charlie Chan in itself is "terrifying" to Asian Americans. Instead, what remains truly frightening about the character centers on the stereotypes he represents and the pervasive, but subtle racism that allows these racist images to persist. However, many advocates of Charlie Chan would argue that this haunting racist legacy is largely imagined – nothing but a specter of the mind.

Specter of the Mind – Imagined Racism and “A Correct Portrayal of the Race”

If we consider the secondary and tertiary definitions of the term *specter* as “an *unreal* object of thought; a phantasm of the brain” and “an object or source of dread or terror, *imagined* as an apparition,” one can begin to understand additional layers of complexity to my repeated invocation of the term in relation to Charlie Chan.

Viewing the specter as a figure confined to the realm of pure imagination proves critical to any discussion of the character, as those who come to the defense of the Charlie Chan tend to dismiss concerns over his racist legacy as misinformed, purposefully misleading, or largely imagined – in other words, prime examples of political correctness run amok.

Viewing Chan “on all levels [as] a positive figure,” Charles P. Mitchell, author of *A Guide to Charlie Chan Films* (1999) offers that “critics of Charlie Chan are usually not familiar with the films themselves, and sometimes confuse them with the ‘Yellow Peril’ films of the early Thirties that were quite demeaning” (xxvii). In a close reading of the Chan series in a 2007 article for *PMLA* entitled “Race, Region, and Rule: Genre and the Case of Charlie Chan,” scholar Charles J. Rzepka uses his knowledge of the detective genre to complicate, if not overturn the conventionally espoused view of Charlie Chan as a purely racist caricature. He concedes that “Asian Americans’ hostility toward this parade-balloon version of Charlie Chan is entirely justified,” but insists that “their animus is often as tenuously moored as its target” (1465). Similarly, scholar Yunte Huang suggests that criticism of Charlie Chan within the Asian American community is the product of one generation parroting the ideas of its elders without deeper investigation:

Unfortunately, Charlie Chan has remained a thorn in the side of many Asian Americans today. Judging by their response whenever the iconic Chinaman pops up, it seems likely that some of the younger anti-Chan clan have not had the opportunity to take another look at the films for themselves—they have inherited their critical views from the older generation. (283)

In addition to suggesting critics are misinformed about the character, Huang mocks the decades of Asian American-led protest against the character and anti-Asian racism in general: “if every time we smelled the odor of racism in arts and literature we went out and rallied in the street, then we probably would have killed off

everything from jazz to hip-hop, from George Carlin to Jerry Seinfeld” (282-283).¹⁷ His ardent defense of Charlie Chan, however, falls in line with that of Chan’s previous supporters, all of whom seem somewhat baffled by the intense hatred the character has garnered from the Asian American community.

While these apologists are right to question armchair critics who decry Charlie Chan as a racist stereotype without citing evidence from the books or films to support their claims, this overall view calls to mind a memorable scenario envisioned by author Nicholas Meyer in his revisionist Sherlock Holmes pastiche, *The Seven-Percent Solution* (1974). In the novel, the notorious Professor Moriarty is revealed to be a complete innocent, as his status as the infamous “Napoleon of Crime” turns out to be merely the product of the Great Detective’s cocaine-addled imagination. In Meyer’s version, Holmes is responsible for concocting the arch-nemesis he so desperately needed. By the same token, Charlie Chan apologists – ranging from fans to amateur film enthusiasts to even serious scholars – tend to traffic in the reductive view that Charlie Chan serves merely as a convenient scapegoat for Asian Americans who want someone to blame for a long history of discriminatory treatment. Howard Berlin, author of two books on Charlie Chan, wrote an editorial entitled “Anti-Chan Hysteria” in which he diagnoses Asian Americans critical of Charlie Chan as suffering from such a fictive ailment. Do such charges have merit? Is Charlie Chan

¹⁷ Exactly how two influential African American musical styles or the wildly different work of two white stand-up comedians relates to Charlie Chan is a discrepancy Yunte Huang leaves unexplored. Nevertheless, Huang returns to Jerry Seinfeld again to admonish those who would complain about Charlie Chan’s inscrutability: “In fact, blaming him for acting ‘inscrutable’ is like accusing Jerry Seinfeld of being too funny or whining too much” (280).

nothing more than a specter of the mind? To answer this question, we have to look deeply at arguments made on Charlie Chan's behalf, ones which rely heavily on the intersection of authorial intention, historical context, and the heroic traits Chan allegedly embodied in both his literary and cinematic incarnations.

Had he been alive to experience it, Earl Derr Biggers would likely have been puzzled by the persistent, storied animosity directed toward the character by Asian American critics, authors, and activists. Although Frank Chin and the *Aiiieeeee!* editors were quick to characterize Biggers as "subtly racist" (xi), most published accounts suggest that Biggers, a commercially successful novelist who died in the early 1930s just prior to the height of the film franchise, believed his motive for introducing the character to American audiences was an admirable one: he simply wished to create a positive, more fully-realized representation of a Chinese man to combat the negative depictions prevalent in his day.¹⁸ Biggers' reputed thoughts on the matter were repeated in his obituary by the *Associated Press*: "I had seen movies depicting and read stories about Chinatown and wicked Chinese villains, and it struck me that a Chinese hero, trustworthy, benevolent, and philosophical, would come nearer to presenting a correct portrayal of the race" (43).

Before Chan debuted in 1925, Sax Rohmer's Dr. Fu Manchu undoubtedly ranked as the most famous fictional Chinese character in Western popular culture. As

¹⁸ Similarly, John Stone, the producer of the Chan films at Fox Studios, was quoted by Dorothy B. Jones in *The Portrayal of China and India on the American Screen, 1896-1955* as asserting that the cinematic portrayal of Charlie Chan "was deliberately decided upon as a refutation of the unfortunate Fu Manchu characterization of the Chinese, and partly as a demonstration of his own idea that any minority group could be sympathetically portrayed on the screen with the right story and the right approach" (33).

evidenced by Biggers' aforementioned statement, Charlie Chan was conceived in part as a kind of reparatory antidote for Rohmer's largely unflattering, if not outright offensive characterization of the Chinese.¹⁹ By the time of Charlie Chan's arrival on the scene, the sinister, power-mad archvillain had already appeared in three of Rohmer's eventual thirteen Fu Manchu novels as well as two silent film serials, *The Mystery of Dr. Fu Manchu* (1923) and *The Further Mysteries of Dr. Fu Manchu* (1924). The following description of Rohmer's so-called "Devil Doctor" in *The Insidious Doctor Fu Manchu* (1913), the inaugural novel of the British author's long-running series, makes the tenor of this racist portrayal absolutely clear:

Imagine a person, tall, lean and feline, high-shouldered, with a brow like Shakespeare and a face like Satan, a close-shaven skull, and long, magnetic eyes of the true cat-green. Invest him with all the cruel cunning of an entire Eastern race, accumulated in one giant intellect, with all the resources of science past and present, with all the resources, if you will, of a wealthy government—which, however, already has denied all knowledge of his existence. Imagine that awful being, and you have a mental picture of Dr. Fu-Manchu, the yellow peril incarnate in one man. (17)

By placing Chan in a law enforcement role, Biggers hoped to counter the negative image perpetuated not only by the demonic, catlike Fu Manchu but other Yellow Peril representations of the Chinese that dominated the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.²⁰ These depictions include everything from the "John Chinaman" stock

¹⁹ In a story for the *New York Times*, "Creating Charlie Chan," Biggers suggests his decision to have a Chinese hero might have more to do with avoiding cliché than any noble motives: "Sinister and wicked Chinese were old stuff in mystery stories, but an amiable Chinese acting on the side of law and order had never been used up to that time." (12)

²⁰ Curiously, Sam Spade, the detective hero of 1930's *The Maltese Falcon*, is described as a "blond Satan" on the very first page of Dashiell Hammett's seminal detective novel, suggesting that writers of hardboiled detective fiction had a very different conception about what constituted a proper "hero," especially when the protagonist is a white man.

caricatures of coolie labor in the mid-to-late 1800s to John Charles Beecham's "Ah Sing" in the 1920 novel, *The Yellow Spider*.

While Biggers may indeed have had the best of intentions, the concept of intentionality has largely been considered irrelevant to literary interpretation since New Critics W.K. Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley made a case against the supremacy of an author's aims in "The Intentional Fallacy" (1946), writing that "critical inquiries are not settled by consulting the oracle" (757). The text is the ultimate source of meaning; the author's wishes or desires – while interesting – remain irrelevant to textual analysis.

However, in light of the anti-Chinese sentiment that dominated the era, Charlie Chan apologists argue that the subsequent literary and cinematic portrayals of the character confirmed Biggers' intentions because they were overwhelmingly positive. According to this argument, even a cursory glance at the novels and subsequent films demonstrate that in comparison to the predominantly white cast of characters in these works, Charlie Chan is by far the smartest and most respected. As Ken Hanke writes, "Anyone familiar with the films knows that if anyone comes off badly in most Charlie Chan movies, it is invariably Charlie's white counterparts – those dimwitted, cigar chewing Hollywoodized upholders of law and order who get nothing right until Charlie solves things for them" (xv). While often privileged members of the idle rich, these white characters tend to fall into two categories – those who are skeptical, if not outright racially prejudiced against Chan (and are thus the targets of Biggers' cross-cultural joke) or those who fulfill the role of the

upstanding white, heterosexual hero, one who often yearns to earn the detective's respect and confidence. According to Charles J. Rzepka, the "white approval" Charlie Chan earns in the novels is not a literary example of "racist love," but a strategic appeal by Biggers for tolerance among his predominantly white readership: "All these endorsements come from *haoles* ('whites'), undeniably, but readers of the *Post* were unlikely to have been swayed by the opinions of nonwhites, and Biggers was aiming to change white minds, not those of Chinese Americans" (1473).

And to be fair, the very idea of a Chinese hero in U.S. popular culture during the 1920s and 1930s was both unique and groundbreaking, not only in respect to literary portrayals, but in light of how the Chinese fared in both the court of law and the court of public opinion. Charlie Chan is depicted in literature and film as a respected member of U.S. law enforcement. Considering both the litany of discriminatory immigration laws and the wave of anti-Chinese violence that dominated the latter part of the nineteenth century, the very idea of Charlie Chan would have been unthinkable only a few decades earlier. After all, the 1854 California Supreme Court case, *The People vs. Hall*, effectively ruled that testimony from a Chinese witness to a murder of a white man was inadmissible, based on the idea that the Chinese were a race "marked as inferior, and who are incapable of progress or intellectual development beyond a certain point" (4 Cal. 399). Some seventy-one years later, Earl Derr Biggers introduced a Chinese man who is not only

a paragon of virtue, but symbolizes an idealized notion of the American criminal justice system in action.²¹

Taken in sum, such arguments in favor of Charlie Chan can sound persuasive. But critics like William F. Wu finds fault with professed positive motives of Biggers and the filmmakers, calling Chan an “example of overcompensation in an author’s attempt to break away from the Yellow Peril stereotype” (174). According to this line of thinking, in making Charlie Chan more “appealing” than Fu Manchu, Biggers unintentionally created something that some would consider no less insidious. As Michael Cohen states, “A sympathetic minority character does not mean the colonizing stops, if the character is also rendered passionless, unthreatening sexually, or any other way, or otherwise ghettoized” (149). Even if one accepts the premises put forth by advocates of Charlie Chan that he is a hero both in conception and execution, a lingering problem remains. One who would attempt to argue that it is through Biggers’ novels and the subsequent film series that a Chinese man has finally been given agency and become culturally visible in a positive way should be reminded that both the literary and cinematic versions of Charlie Chan were racial impersonations. The simple fact remains that the filmic Charlie Chan – the most popular incarnation of the character – has been consistently portrayed by white actors, thus rendering, in a very real sense, the Chinese man invisible once more.

²¹ The only Chinese (or non-white, for that matter) murderer in the entire Charlie Chan filmography is Li Gung, the vaguely Fu Manchu-like villain of the lost film, *Charlie Chan’s Chance*. Li Gung was played by Edward Peil, Sr., a white actor.

A Specter of His Former Self – Masquerade, Ventriloquism, and Race

In his preface to Wing Young Huie's *Looking for Asian America: An Ethnocentric Tour* (2007), law professor Frank H. Wu asserts that "The Asian American condition is to lack control over one's identity" (x) and laments that Charlie Chan has become "a model of behavior for all Asian Americans" (xi). To explain Wu's assertions, I wish to read the fourth and fifth definitions of the term *specter* as "one whose appearance is suggestive of an apparition or ghost" and a "faint shadow or imitation of something" as suitable metaphors for the racial impersonation that is essential to Charlie Chan. Here, we must return to this chapter's opening quotation from Frank Chin's *Gunga Din Highway*: "If Charlie Chan uses first-person pronouns, does not walk in the fetal position, is not played by a white man, and looks and acts like a real Chinese, he's not Charlie Chan anymore" (355). Chin's assessment speaks volumes, for in truth, if one strips away every element of racial masquerade that has become inherent to the character, then Charlie Chan simply ceases to exist.

Although I wish to explore the implications of Hollywood Yellowface further, I should first emphasize that the practice of racial impersonation goes back to the very conception of the Charlie Chan books themselves. At the level of language, Earl Derr Biggers ventriloquized the Chinese man for his own purposes, but the impersonation cuts deeper than the accuracy of his prose. According to popular legend, the inspiration for Biggers' famous creation came in the fall of 1924, several years after a vacation in Honolulu. Trying to refresh his dimmed memories of Hawai'i for a

potential mystery novel, Biggers claimed to have stopped by the New York Public Library and obtained copies of several recent Honolulu newspapers. “In an obscure corner of an inside page,” Biggers claimed, “I found an item to the effect that a certain hapless Chinese, being too fond of opium, had been arrested by Sergeants Chang Apana and Lee Fook, of the Honolulu Police” (*Harvard College Class of 1907 Twenty-fifth Anniversary Report* 43).²²

Once Biggers’ novels gained in popularity, the perception grew that Chang Apana was the sole inspiration for Charlie Chan. “I have not met Chang until I had written three of the Chan stories,” Earl Derr Biggers asserted to the *New York Times* in 1931, “and when I did I found none of Charlie’s characteristics noticeable. The character of Charlie Chan, for better or worse, is entirely fictitious” (12). However, had Biggers known Chang Apana’s full story, he might have realized that the real-life detective had a story tailor-made for pulp fiction.

Numerous articles on Chang Apana in the Hawai‘i-based *Pacific Commercial Advertiser*, *Honolulu Advertiser*, and *Honolulu Star-Bulletin*, as well as subsequent research conducted by Gilbert Marines and Yunte Huang paint quite the portrait of the man who inspired Charlie Chan. Born “Chang Ah Ping” on December 26, 1871 on the island of Oahu, Chang Apana became a local celebrity thanks to his daring, often unconventional law enforcement tactics for the Honolulu Police Department. Despite his illiteracy, Chang’s familiarity with Hawaiian, pidgin (Hawai‘i Creole

²² Despite the popularity of this origin story, Yunte Huang’s research on Charlie Chan suggests that the New York Public Library did not subscribe to either of Hawai‘i’s papers prior to 1924, no such news item exists, and that the Honolulu Police Department can find no mention of an officer named Lee Fook in their records.(113-114).

English), and Chinese provided him with a diverse system of contacts within the various local ethnic communities of Hawai‘i, a talent which apparently proved beneficial in his crusade against opium smuggling and illegal gambling in Honolulu. Instead of carrying a standard issue revolver like his colleagues, the reputedly incorruptible detective was famous for brandishing a bullwhip while on duty, a distinctive holdover from his days as a stable master at the Wilder ranch in Nu‘uanu (Martines). An avid cigar smoker and a lover of Panama hats, the whip-wielding, one hundred and thirty pound Chang Apana cut quite the distinctive figure in-person. While working as one of the Honolulu Police Department’s first undercover officers, Chang reportedly made the largest single arrest, and even survived a fall from a second story window while on duty – landing, as legend would have it, on his feet (ibid). Although he passed away on December 8, 1933 less than a year after retirement, Chang Apana did live to see the books and films that he inspired. Chang even met Earl Derr Biggers in July of 1928 and Warner Oland in March of 1931 while the actor was filming *The Black Camel* in Honolulu (See Figure 3).



Figure 3. Chang Apana and Warner Oland.

Undoubtedly, the literature surrounding Chang Apana makes him sound more myth than man, but as critics would later point out, none of the more dynamic characteristics of this larger-than life figure were transferred to the character of Charlie Chan. Aside from a few coincidental biographical similarities (both had daughters named Rose, for example), Chan bears little resemblance to his real-life counterpart. In contrast to the perpetually skinny Chang Apana; however, the detective is described in *The House Without a Key* as having “a grotesque figure,” (74), a “pudgy hand” (75), “little eyes” (75), and a “fat face” (96). Chan’s physicality, does not, by any contemporary standard, resemble a dashing male lead in either the books or the film series.²³ Of course, the biggest difference in the films was not just questions of size or weight, but the fact that the Chinese detective was most famously played by an almost exclusive array of white actors. Both Twentieth Century Fox and Monogram indulged in the formerly commonplace practice known as Yellowface, which called for the preferential hiring of more marketable white actors to portray Asian characters. With few exceptions, actors of Asian descent in Hollywood were relegated to minor parts or left out altogether, presumably deemed unfit to portray themselves onscreen in major speaking roles. As Robert G. Lee states in *Orientalism: Asian Americans in Popular Culture* (1999), the invidious practice of Yellowface –

²³ Charles Rzepka theorizes that Biggers was “probably directly inspired by his fellow *Post* contributor Octavius Roy Cohen” (1475), but a letter from Biggers’ widow suggests he based Chan’s physicality on himself. Whatever the truth, Rzepka makes a persuasive case that Chan’s physique was a genre holdover from classical detective fiction, in which odd, heavy-set characters like Agatha Christie’s Hercule Poirot and Rex Stout’s Nero Wolfe flourished.

with its often garish makeup and performance styles – only further racializes the differences between whites and Asians:

Yellowface marks the Asian body as unmistakably Oriental; it sharply defines the Oriental in a racial opposition to whiteness. Yellowface exaggerates “racial” features that have been designated “Oriental,” such as “slanted” eyes, overbite, and mustard-yellow skin color. Only the racialized Oriental is yellow; Asians are not. Asia is not a biological fact, but a geographic designation. Asians come in the broadest range of skin color and hue. Yellowface marks the Oriental as indelibly alien. Constructed as a race of aliens, Orientals represent a present danger of pollution. (2)

While the onscreen performances of Warner Oland, Sidney Toler, and Roland Winters rank as the most recognizable portrayals of the character, I would argue that nearly any example drawn from the long history of the Charlie Chan franchise would suffice in illustrating the problematic nature of Yellowface performance.

For instance, nearly a decade after the Monogram series came to an end, a television show entitled *The New Adventures of Charlie Chan* emerged in 1957.²⁴ This syndicated crime drama consisted of a single season of thirty-nine, half-hour episodes starring white character actor J. Carrol Naish (1896-1973) as Charlie Chan and Chinese American James Hong as his blundering son, Barry. Although of Irish descent, Naish had made a career out of playing Native American, Latino, and even Chinese roles in numerous Hollywood films. Entitled “The Invalid,” the thirtieth episode of *The New Adventures of Charlie Chan* features a brief commercial starring

²⁴ Each episode of the television program begins with its opening titles in Chinese script, before dissolving into its English version:

陳查理
新血案

The first line of Chinese characters consists of the surname “Chan” plus “Cha” and “Li” to indicate Charlie Chan while the second line of pinyin reads “Xin Xue An,” – “New Blood Case” or “New Murder Case,” depending on how one wishes to translate it.

Naish, dressed in full Charlie Chan regalia, directly addressing the viewer. The following passage contains the full dialogue for the short thirty second spot along with my description of both the camerawork and Naish's performance in bolded italics (see Figure 4):

Everybody knows Chinese inscrutable. Never show emotion. For example, this is how I look when very sad. [*camera pushes in for a close-up of an expressionless Chan, camera dollies back*] This is how I look when very angry [*camera pushes in for a close-up for an equally expressionless Chan*]. This is how I look when you tune in again next week for another exciting story in *New Adventures of Charlie Chan* [*Chan mouth falls agape before breaking into weird smile, as the camera holds on him until an eventual fade-out*].

From the very first line of dialogue, this brief advertisement traffics in tired stereotypes of inscrutable, emotionless "Orientals." But it is not just what Naish says, but *how* he says it that caricatures Asian men, as he speaks in falsetto with a clipped stereotypically Orientalized accent, concluding his sales pitch to the audience with a ridiculous gaped mouth expression. In real life, Naish made for an unconvincing Chinese man, but the application of "yellow greasepaint" did him no favors either.



Figure 4. J. Carrol Naish in *The New Adventures of Charlie Chan* (1957).

With his pencil-thin moustache, exaggerated eyeliner, and taped back "slanted" eyes, Naish looks more like an alien than a remotely credible person of Chinese descent.

Thus, even in this one brief example drawn from a single episode of the *New Adventures of Charlie Chan*, we can see gross inequities of power on display, as this patently artificial racial masquerade not only disenfranchises Asian actors, but reemphasizes Asians as non-normative through gross caricature. Sharing such a view of Yellowface, scholar Irwin Paik decries the Charlie Chan films for making Asian Americans “the butt of jokes,” and offers that because Chan was played by a white man it “further reinforce[d] white supremacy,” particularly in the way that his sons – played by Chinese American actors Keye Luke, Victor Sen Yung, and Benson Fong in the movies – served purely as comic relief: “The implication in this type of casting is that a white man can depict an Asian as a normal or exceptional person, but Asians can only depict themselves as fools” (33). This brand of stereotyping subtly maintains the social and symbolic order, creating a clear dividing line between the normal and the abnormal – with Asians and Asian Americans condemned to occupy the latter category.

While Yellowface as a practice might often be thought of as a generally twentieth century cinematic (and occasionally theatrical and televisual) phenomenon, it actually has roots dating back to a time contemporaneous with blackface performance. First popularized in the United States in the 1830s, the racial masquerade of blackface involved the usage of theatrical makeup in minstrel shows and vaudeville to make white actors appear to be of African descent, largely caricatured in a racially demeaning fashion. White performers of blackface used burnt cork, grease paint, or shoe polish to blacken their skin and red or white lipstick to

exaggerate the size of their lips. The popularity of these minstrel shows contributed to the proliferation of numerous demeaning racist stereotypes of African Americans that would haunt the U.S. cultural imaginary for years to come. While blackface mostly fell out of favor in the United States during the Civil Rights era of the 1960s, the legacy of its imagery and stereotypes lingers even today.

In *Yellowface: Creating the Chinese in American Popular Music and Performance, 1850s to 1920s* (2004), Krystyn R. Moon meticulously documents the theatrical and musical history of white Yellowface performers, who played a crucial role in constructing and perpetuating stereotypes of the Chinese in American popular culture in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century:

[In the 1850s and 1860s] Performers, influenced by blackface minstrelsy, were well aware of the lyrical and musical devices as well as those of gesture, costuming, and makeup that could be used to mark Chinese immigrants as inferior. Yellowed-up actors became the norm on the stage, limiting the theatrical opportunities for the Chinese [...] Their songs, with some exceptions, helped to define and circulate anti-Chinese sentiments throughout the Far West. (31)

Capitalizing on these anti-Chinese sentiments in the larger popular culture of the late nineteenth century, Yellowface performance codifies the Chinese as a separate, alien species as a means to promote their legal and cultural exclusion from the national narrative. “By the latter part of the nineteenth century,” Moon asserts, “the practice of white actors in yellowface expanded and was codified into visual and auditory stereotypes that persist even to today” (114). As with their subsequent Hollywood enactments, these Yellowface portrayals of the minstrel and vaudeville era hinged on elaborate makeup; costuming that utilized Qing Dynasty robes, headpieces, and

hairstyles, not to mention pidginized English, composed of outright gibberish as well as loan words from other non-Asian languages.²⁵ These performative conventions of Yellowface created in the late 1800s have a lasting impact on the culture, especially when Earl Derr Biggers' famous creation entered the American popular imaginary in 1925.

Considering my earlier analysis of J. Carrol Naish's portrayal of Charlie Chan as well as the previously cited definition of specter as "one whose appearance is suggestive of an apparition or ghost," the curious fact that early Hollywood iterations of Yellowface typically involved a) the hiring of actors best known for playing monsters, murderers, and assorted heavies – Lon Chaney, Sr., Boris Karloff, Peter Lorre, and Bela Lugosi, for example – and b) the application of garish, otherworldly make-up lends a menacing, almost supernatural component to classic Hollywood Yellowface. But even in the less physically monstrous Yellowface portrayals by non-Asians – for instance, Katherine Hepburn in *Dragon Seed* (MGM, 1944), Marlon Brando in the *Teahouse of the August Moon* (MGM, 1956), and Henry Silva in *The Manchurian Candidate* (United Artists, 1962), the definition of a *specter* as "a faint shadow or imitation of something" proves increasingly relevant to this discussion. In truth, what the viewing audience is getting with these white actors masquerading as Asians is nothing more than a pale imitation of the real thing, an artificial

²⁵ For example, the term "shabee" and "savvy," often utilized in pidginized Chinese English in stage and screen performances at the turn of the century actually derives from the Spanish verb "saber," which means "to know" or "to understand." "This doubling of pidgin English with Spanish," Krystyn Moon notes, "demonstrated the complex notions of difference in the Far West and the fluidity of prejudice from one despised minority to another" (33).

impersonation that becomes all the more obvious when placed alongside actual Asian actors. Further, it subtly reinforces the concept of whiteness as the “default race.” As Karla Rae Fuller explains in *Hollywood Goes Oriental: CauAsian Performance in American Film* (2010), “Implicit in the practice of Asian impersonation by Caucasian actors in Hollywood is the assumption that the Caucasian face provides the physically normative standard unto which an ethnic inscription can take place” (1-2). While whites can play Asians; the reverse has never been seriously attempted in any Hollywood production to date.

To be clear, Yellowface was not a practical solution to compensate for a lack of suitable Asian actors in early Hollywood. Sessue Hayakawa (1889-1973) was the most prolific Asian actor of his time, appearing in a vast array of American, Japanese, French, German, and British productions, including *The Wrath of the Gods* (Mutual Film, 1914), *The Typhoon* (Paramount, 1914), and Cecil B. DeMille’s *The Cheat* (Paramount, 1915), the latter of this trio cementing the actor’s reputation as romantic idol to an adoring female public. Actress Anna May Wong also had a prolific film career in early Hollywood and has been long considered the first Chinese American film star. Still, most performers of Asian descent found themselves relegated to roles as villain, sidekicks, or minor parts, as was often the case for actors like Richard Loo, Philip Ahn, and their colleagues. Starring roles, however, remained elusive.

While such typecasting and discrimination certainly existed, I wish to clarify a common misconception about the Charlie Chan films. Although it is often thought that no Asian actor ever played Charlie Chan in an American film, this is not an

entirely accurate view. The first three Chan books were each adapted for the big screen during the 1920s by different movie studios, each starring different Asian actors as Charlie Chan. In *The House Without a Key* (1926), a silent, ten chapter serial released by Pathé, Japanese actor George Kuwa (Kuwahara Keichi, 1885-1931) took on the role of the detective.

In Universal Studios' silent film, *The Chinese Parrot* (1927), the tall, reed thin, Japanese actor and stage magician Sojin Kamiyama (1891-1954) played Chan. In Fox's *Behind That Curtain* (1929), the only surviving film of this Asian-led trio,

Charlie Chan is played by a bald, heavy-set actor named E.L. Park, who appears only in the last twelve minutes of the film (See Figure 5). Although he has been traditionally identified as British and Korean in critical discussions of this film, my research has



Figure 5. E.L. Park in *Behind That Curtain* (1929).

shown that E.L. “Ed” Park was, in fact, the first Chinese Charlie Chan.²⁶ According to an article entitled “Who Was Screen’s First Charlie Chan?” published in the *L.A. Mirror* on April 17, 1959, Fred

²⁶ Post-Warner Oland, only one Asian American actor has played Charlie Chan – albeit via voice. In 1972, Hanna Barbara created an animated series, *The Amazing Chan and the Chan Clan*, which ran for sixteen episodes on Saturday mornings on CBS. Although by no means a hit show, *The Amazing Chan and the Chan Clan* spawned a handful of ancillary “Chansploitation” items, including toys, a board game, a coloring book, a lunch box with a thermos, and a four issue tie-in comic by Gold Key published on a quarterly basis between 1973 and 1974 that adapted the events of the cartoon series.

W. Fox reports that Ed Park was a Chinese American entrepreneur who owned a theatrical costume company in downtown Los Angeles and occasionally served as an interpreter for Chinese in city, county, and federal courts. Reportedly, the actor worked behind the scenes at Fox studios, and *Behind That Curtain* was his only onscreen credit. During his incredibly brief appearance in the film, Park speaks both English and Cantonese, and his version of Charlie Chan – a San Francisco police detective – has no qualms about shooting a resisting murder suspect.

For whatever reason, none of these initial Charlie Chan films or actors made a distinct impression with critics or audiences at the time. But when Warner Oland starred in *Charlie Chan Carries On* (1931), a franchise was born. One must remember that George Kuwa, Sojin Kamiyama, and E.L. Park were replaced not by just any white actor who answered an open casting call. Long before Warner Oland became so closely identified with Charlie Chan, he did a veritable internship in Yellowface roles throughout Hollywood, appearing as Wu Fang in *The Lightning Raider* (1919), Li Hsun in *Mandarin's Gold* (1919), Charley Yong in *East is West* (1922), Okada in *The Pride of Palomar* (1922), Fu Shing in *The Fighting American* (1924), Shanghai Dan in *Curlytop* (1924), and Chris Buckwell, a Chinese man passing as white in *Old San Francisco* (1927). His seeming “talent” for portraying Asian characters onscreen eventually led to a starring role in *The Mysterious Dr. Fu*

The show is currently rerun on Cartoon Network’s sister station, Boomerang. For each episode, Charlie Chan and his ten children solve mysteries around the globe, bringing along their dog, Choo-Choo, along for the ride. Remarkably, this cartoon not only used a primarily Asian voice cast for the Chan offspring, but it was the first occasion since Ed Park’s brief role in *Behind that Curtain* in which Charlie Chan was played by an actor of Chinese descent—in this case Keye Luke, who previously played Charlie Chan’s “Number One Son,” Lee Chan.

Manchu (1929), the first installment of the Paramount financed “talkie” Fu Manchu series, which preceded and eventually overlapped with Oland’s tenure with the Chan series at Fox.

Why did Oland succeed, where others failed? Those who attempt to address this question often couch their argument in terms of post-racial discourses of colorblind “merit.” For example, Charles P. Mitchell suggests that the casting of white actors was not racially motivated: “Perhaps no performer of Oriental descent could have carried the series in the Thirties or Forties like Oland and Toler” (xxviii). Such arguments elide the existing white supremacist structures of power, citing the Hollywood “star system” as if it were drained of racist motives. I would dispute the idea that the continued casting of white actors in *Yellowface* was the result of an unpoliticized lack of Asian talent. It seems clear that systemic racism was a major factor, even if the studio and the filmmakers involved did not consciously set out to deny an Asian actor the chance to assume the role of Charlie Chan.

Even in the 1930s and 1940s, there were plenty of Asian actors in Hollywood who could have conceivably played the detective onscreen. Krystyn R. Moon’s historical recovery project revealed that there were many Chinese and Chinese American performers who sought to overcome the racism of their time to pursue their own dreams on stage and screen. One such vaudevillian was actor Lee Tung Foo (1875-1966), whose story Moon documents in *Yellowface*. Lee was born in Watsonville, California, and worked a number of odd jobs before embarking on a career as “the first Chinese baritone” in vaudeville (146). Lee subsequently set out on

a national tour, performing for white audiences around the country. His favorite routine, Moon asserts, was his dead-on impersonation of a Scotsman, which became “one of his signature numbers” (150). Perhaps more so than any of his acting contemporaries, Lee Tung Foo had the correct age, build, acting experience, and ethnicity to play Charlie Chan onscreen, but instead he was relegated to playing “broken English”-speaking gardeners, houseboys, and cooks throughout his career.

I find it fascinating, then, that actors of Asian descent were allowed to play Charlie Chan in two silent films and one in which the character had a minimal screen time and next to no dialogue at all, but when the time came for Chan to have an expanded role and speak onscreen, he was, from then onward, played exclusively by white actors. It seems logical to conclude that Yellowface performance presumes that when the role of an Asian character requires a major speaking part, only a white actor can best represent him or her.

But if Yellowface displaces Asian bodies and silences Asian voices, then it remains important to consider the quality and content of its replacement. In his essay “Confessions of a Chinatown Cowboy,” Frank Chin critiques Chan’s Orientalized, patently artificial speech patterns: “Charlie Chan never uses the first-person pronoun *I* or *we* but speaks in the passive voice and prefaces all his remarks with apologies—‘So sorry to disagree. . .,’ ‘Excuse, please...may make one small observation?’” (95). While there are admittedly some minor exceptions to Chin’s argument to be found in the Chan filmography, his basic premise proves true, as the actors who portrayed Chan often took great pains not to refer to themselves in the first person. Other

aspects of Chan's language remain major issues of contention. While Chan never reverses *r* and *l* sounds in his formal speech, as some critics mistakenly contend, he does speak an overly formalized, strangely alien English in the novels, mixing up plural and singular forms, past and present tense, and omitting words, specifically some articles. In *The Chinese Parrot*, Chan often substitutes "are" for "is" – i.e. "That are my work" (61), "That are not Chinese. It are Hawaiian talk" (67), and "Patience [...] are a very lovely virtue" (158). Whether Chan is written by Earl Derr Biggers or portrayed onscreen by Warner Oland, Sidney Toler, Roland Winters, J. Carrol Naish, Ross Martin, or Peter Ustinov, Charlie Chan speaks hyperbolically "foreign" form of English, as no Chinese immigrant does. Even today, portrayals of foreigners, specifically Asians, in cinema and television rely on the utilization of odd accents, fractured sentence structure, and malapropism-prone word choices, often bearing little to no resemblance to the actual linguistic particularities of non-native speakers of English

However, it is not just Chan's way of speaking that merits criticism, but also the things he says, most notably his "Chanisms" or "Chan-o-grams," as some writers have called the pithy sayings the character is known to utter in each novel and film.²⁷

It is these Chanisms that fans most remember from the films, so much so that Haim Chertok and Marge Torge published a collection entitled *Quotations from Charlie*

Chan in 1968 and Howard M. Berlin released the more extensive *Words of Wisdom of*

²⁷ Many of the radio adventures of Charlie Chan would begin and end with Charlie Chan directing an aphorism to the listening audience at home: "Before saying good night, Charlie Chan wishes to leave with you words of great philosopher who said, 'Christmas is the time for giving and the more we give to others, the more we are increased'" ("The Man Who Murdered Santa Claus").

Charlie Chan in 2003 that contain, according to its back cover, “a collection of 600 proverbs spoken by the cinema’s inscrutable Oriental detective.” Such notable examples of Chan’s so-called wisdom include: “Very old Chinese wise man once say, ‘madness twin brother of genius, because each live in world created by own ego—one sometime mistaken for the other’” (*Charlie Chan at the Opera*, 1936); “Ancient Chinese philosopher say, ‘hope is sunshine which illuminate darkest paths’” (*Charlie Chan at the Olympics*, 1937); and “Confucius has said, ‘A wise man question himself. A fool, others’” (*City in Darkness*, 1939). As evident in the quoted blurb for Howard Berlin’s book, these sayings make up only a tiny fraction of the total number of aphorisms uttered in the entire film series. Although the quotations drawn from the Chan films are the most famous, Chan’s propensity toward aphorism has origins in Biggers’ original novels. Throughout the series, Chan purports to quote from Confucius or some other reputable Chinese source to give each of his aphorisms a ring of ancient wisdom: “What is to be, will be. The words of the infinitely wise Kong Fu Tse” (*House Without a Key*, 246); “Old man in China who said, ‘The fool questions others, the wise man questions himself’” (*Behind That Curtain* 72); and “The Emperor Shi Hwang-ti, who built the Great Wall of China, once said: ‘He who squanders to-day talking of yesterday’s triumph, will have nothing to boast of tomorrow’” (*Charlie Chan Carries On* 333). Practically nothing of Charlie Chan’s repertoire could be construed as authentically “Chinese” in terms of philosophy. As the film franchise continues, Chan’s words seem to go from the esoteric to merely home-spun American homilies refashioned as ancient Chinese wisdom. Chan’s

aphorisms, then, amount to no less than the falsification and ultimate commodification of Chinese culture for white consumption.

The absurd conceit that Chan's speech patterns and propensity toward aphorisms somehow correspond to reality is tackled head-on in the Charlie Chan revival novellas of the early 1970s. Between November 1973 and August 1974, Leo Margulies, the publisher of Renown Books, released *The Charlie Chan Mystery Magazine*, which ran for only four issues. In the tradition of *Ellery Queen Mystery Magazine* and *Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine*, each edition was comprised of short stories written by mystery writers with a newly commissioned Charlie Chan novella headlining each issue, complete with illustrations. Although these stories were purportedly written by "Robert Hart Davis," the name has since been revealed as a "house brand" pseudonym in subsequent standalone reprints.²⁸

In all of these Charlie Chan pastiches, we can see how these writers had a difficult task deciding what exactly to do with Charlie Chan in the modern era, as they had to satisfy the demands of fans who wanted aphorisms, exoticism, and the

²⁸ The inaugural November 1973 edition of *The Charlie Chan Mystery Magazine* featured *Walk Softly, Strangler*, the first Charlie Chan story since *The Keeper of the Keys* in 1932, while the February 1974 issue featured *The Silent Corpse*. *Walk Softly, Strangler* was subsequently collected in Peter Haining's *Great Tales of Crime and Detection* in 1992, but never republished individually. *The Silent Corpse* was never republished in a collection or standalone format. Although the identity of the writers of these stories has never been revealed, certain key similarities suggest they were both written by the same author. The May 1974 issue featured *The Temple of the Golden Horde*, which was republished as a standalone text in 2002 by Wildside Press and reveals "Robert Hart Davis" as author Michael Collins. In August 1974, Bill Pronzini and Jeffrey M. Walmann, writing under the pseudonym "Robert Hart Davis," wrote *The Pawns of Death*, a novella that was published initially in the final issue of the short-lived *Charlie Chan Mystery Magazine*, before later being republished by Wildside Press in 2002. Two additional Charlie Chan continuation novels were released, although not as a part of *The Charlie Chan Mystery Magazine*. *Charlie Chan Returns* (1974) was written by Dennis Lynds (aka Michael Collins), based on an unproduced screenplay by Ed Spielman and Howard Friedlander. In 1981, Michael Avallone's novelization of *Charlie Chan and the Curse of The Dragon Queen* was released alongside the film.

Charlie Chan of yesteryear while readers less familiar with the character would perhaps want something more contemporary in flavor. For example, from the very beginning of both *Walk Softly, Strangler* (1973) and *The Silent Corpse* (1973), one can register a tension between an easy regurgitation of the same Orientalist pop fantasies of the 1930s and a careful reckoning with an emerging Asian American political identity in the early 1970s. In both novellas, Chan continually codeswitches from aphoristic, broken “Charlie Chan speak” to formal American English: “Chan masked a smile of amusement, said [sic], ‘Wise man watch self near poison oak or catch same.’ A pause, then, ‘Eric, you know I’m not in Hollywood for business, apart from the damnable business of my bridgework’” (*Walk Softly Strangler*, 126). In *The Silent Corpse*, the author includes a Chinese national named Hei Wei Chinn, an authority on antique Chinese artifacts, to challenge Chan’s propensity toward Orientalized speech:

“In Kingdom of Heaven,” said Chan, “cooperation not competition, law of land.”

Back in the antique dealer’s big car, Hei Wei said, “Why the fortune cookie motto, Charlie?”

“People expect it of me,” said Chan. “Cannot leave laughing, leave smiling. He gave Hei Wei a broad smile.

“Pardon me while I retch,” said Hei Wei. (166)

Even in 1973, the author of these tales seems to be aware that he cannot credibly portray a Chinese American as acting or talking like Charlie Chan, but is still burdened with trying to find a way to satisfy the readers’ expectations for the Orientalist conventions they know and love. In these examples of autocritique, the racial impersonation act has become increasingly complex, as we have a white author

ventriloquizing a Chinese character who himself performs his identity for white audiences in accordance with Orientalist expectations. The absurdity of this double masquerade only serves to foreground the artificiality of racial impersonation in the Charlie Chan series.

Exorcising the Specter

Although these battles for self-determined representations of Asian American masculinity through literature, film, and public protest would eventually cause the practice of Yellowface to mostly be abandoned by the twenty-first century, the Orientalist images it perpetuated continue to exist. As with the blackface and Yellowface performances of the 1800s, Charlie Chan's popularity in the early twentieth century infiltrated the culture, making him and other similar Yellowface icons de facto representatives of an entire ethnic community for at least the early part of the twentieth century, a racist legacy with lasting repercussions.

The metaphor of haunting, then, perhaps serves as an appropriate way to characterize how racial stereotypes work, that is— in many cases, racist terminology, imagery, and ideology are no longer attached to their originary forms, but nonetheless persist as phantoms that haunt the culture in a myriad of ways. To speak more generally, even though racial stereotypes are thought to be commonsensical knowledge that “everybody knows,” upon further pressing, members of the general public cannot necessarily point to an origin or logic for the existence of these racist

myths. Whether Asian Americans today are aware of Charlie Chan or not, his specter haunts through these pernicious associations.

After all, one of the fundamental fears of any minority group within a majority culture is that they will suffer both social, cultural, and legal consequences for being perceived as mere caricature, rather than as more complex, differentiated individuals. As I have argued throughout this chapter, the specter of Charlie Chan can have a powerful naturalizing effect, encouraging passive consumption of dangerous racist imagery. While I understand what advocates of Charlie Chan see in the character, my position is that Yellowface portrayals in the realms of cinema, literature, and television are not harmless, innocent pleasures, but are instead deeply significant political acts which touch the lives of actual, flesh-and-blood human beings.

Throughout this chapter, I have argued that the language of spectrality serves as an appropriate critical lens through which to view the cultural phenomenon of Charlie Chan, as it a) encapsulates the character's lingering haunting presence on Asian American discourse, b) illustrates how advocates of Charlie Chan view the charges of racism levied against the character, and c) best describes the root cause of the "unmanning" of the Asian American male – racial impersonation.

While I have taken the time in the introduction and in this chapter to discuss Charlie Chan's relationship with conceptions of Asian American masculinity in the U.S. popular imaginary, I have refrained from engaging in a systematic analysis of the textual evidence that has led critics to view him as a representative icon of Orientalized emasculation. I have done this for very specific reasons. Although many

valid criticisms of Charlie Chan's grotesque physicality, his lack of romantic drive, and his impassive nature have been offered in terms of characterizing his negative relationship to Asian American masculinity, I would offer that the practice of racial masquerade *in itself* actively denies alternative possibilities for masculine self-determination by Asian American writers and actors, rendering the Asian male as inherently alien and artificial.

To compensate, the specifics of Charlie Chan's alleged "emasculatation" are instead addressed both directly and indirectly by the Asian American detective films and novels I examine in the following chapters. In the years that followed the demise of the Yellowface icon, a number of Asian American artists attempted to regain "face" through specific cultural productions set within the detective genre that normalize the Asian male amidst a continuing history of racial discrimination. As reviled as Charlie Chan has become, he exists as the foil through which self-determined articulations of Asian American masculinity can flourish within the very genre Chan first gained popularity.

CHAPTER TWO

Asian American Noir

Haunted Spaces and the De-Orientalizing of Asian American Subjectivity

Hollywood's treatment of Chinatown and the Asian ghetto experience (e.g., Little Tokyo, Little Saigon, Koreatown, etc.) is of a mysterious world that can never be fathomed, a dark and corrupt corner of America that can never be part of the mainstream. (51)

– Gina Marchetti, "America's Asia" (2001).

As colossal as Charlie Chan may seem in respect to Hollywood portrayals of Asians in the first half of the twentieth century, a much more impressive, influential, and more generally well-regarded figure looms over the landscape of Asian America in the second half: martial arts superstar, Bruce Lee. Curiously enough, the respective paths of these two cultural icons – one fictional, one real – converged on more than one occasion in the 1960s. After Bruce Lee made an impressive martial arts demonstration at the Long Beach International Karate Tournament in 1964, television producer William Dozier cast the then-unknown actor in a television pilot entitled *Number One Son* (Clepper 66). In this planned update of the Charlie Chan series, Bruce Lee was slated to play the title role of the detective's first and most beloved offspring.

In a television interview with Pierre Berton in 1971, Lee revealed a few details about the project: "They were going to make it into a new Chinese James Bond type of thing. Now that, you know, 'old man Chan is dead, Charlie is dead, now his son is carrying on.'" In a print interview the following year, however, Lee

expressed a certain degree of comic cynicism about his casting: “Naturally, I was signed to play Charlie Chan’s Number One Son. I mean, that’s what Chinese actors do for a living in Hollywood, isn’t it? Charlie himself is always played by a round-eye wearing six pounds of make-up” (Moore 151-152). Whatever Lee’s true feelings regarding *Number One Son*, the series never saw the light of day, as the future action superstar became a sidekick for a hero very different from Charlie Chan.

When the Adam West-era *Batman* TV show became a hit in 1966, William Dozier scrapped the Charlie Chan spinoff in favor of casting Bruce Lee as Kato, the chauffeur-turned-masked sidekick for the title character in *The Green Hornet*. However, after the television show came to an abrupt end in 1967, Lee’s odd connection with Charlie Chan persisted when he was considered for a program in development called *Charlie and Chan* the very same year (Clopton 81). Meant as a variation on the successful interracial pairing of Bill Cosby and William Culp in NBC’s *I Spy* (1965-1967), *Charlie and Chan* was slated to feature Bruce Lee as Charlie, a kung fu master, who would team up with a white ski instructor named Chan – presumably short for “Chandler.” The comic wordplay intended by the show’s title suggests that the network felt that the only way to attract white viewers to a show with an Asian lead would be to invoke the memory of Charlie Chan once more. As was the case with *The Green Hornet*, the intended pairing of Bruce Lee with a white actor in *Charlie and Chan* only reemphasized the sad truth that mainstream American audiences would only accept an Asian actor as a white man’s sidekick.

Just like *Number One Son* before it, this proposed series never materialized, and Lee went on to play a henchman in *Marlowe* (1969) for Warner Bros as well as guest star on ABC's *Longstreet* (1971-1972) for a four episode stint.²⁹ Around this time, Lee began to develop a TV show about a Chinese immigrant travelling in the Old West called *The Warrior*, but when his idea failed to garner interest from execs at Warner Bros and Paramount, the actor left Hollywood for Hong Kong (Hardie 106, Moore 113). Lee had already made a splash overseas with Lo Wei's *The Big Boss* (1971), a low budget martial arts film for Golden Harvest that became a massive hit. Upon returning to Hong Kong, he filmed his second action film, *Fist of Fury* (1972), which helped catapult the struggling actor to international superstardom.

Even in this abbreviated discussion of Bruce Lee's early acting career one can see how the specter of Charlie Chan could touch even the biggest Chinese American icon of the twentieth century. Twenty years after the end of the Monogram Charlie Chan series, the "Oriental sleuth" still served as the dominant lens through which Hollywood viewed Asians and Asian Americans. With the benefit of hindsight, one cannot help see the brutal irony of Lee's offhand remark about "round-eye[s] wearing six pounds of make-up." After all, the actor's aborted project, *The Warrior*, was eventually turned into the ABC television show, *Kung Fu* (1972-1975), with white actor David Carradine playing the role that Lee had envisioned for himself. The

²⁹ *Marlowe* is a 1969 film adaptation of Raymond Chandler's *The Little Sister*. Bruce Lee plays Winslow Wong, a character not featured in the book, who destroys the office of Philip Marlowe (James Garner) in spectacular fashion. In respect to portrayals of Asian American masculinity, it is notable that the clearly overmatched Marlowe is able to defeat Winslow Wong by making a veiled gay slur, which causes him to blindly attack the detective, only to fall to his own death. This curious episode, in many ways, provides another corollary for reading my opening analysis of *The Big Sleep*'s contrasting of Philip Marlowe with the Orientalized Arthur Gwynn Geiger.

producers of the show bizarrely thought Lee was “too Chinese” to play the role and worried how audiences would react. Lee himself said, “They didn’t know if people were ready for Hopalong Wong” (Moore 152). If racism blinded Hollywood executives from seeing the potential in a man who was posthumously chosen as one of *Time*’s “100 Heroes and Icons of the Twentieth Century” alongside such figures as Che Guevara, Harvey Milk, and Mother Teresa, then what hope does the average Asian American actor have? The hiring of Carradine over Lee brings to the foreground a fundamental criticism of the Charlie Chan films – namely, the perception that Hollywood studios view Asian actors as somehow not “good enough” to play themselves in leading roles and are either replaced outright or forced to play second fiddle to more marketable white actors. However, as I will demonstrate in this chapter, this racially biased casting practice was not always the rule in Hollywood – even in the very genre popularized by Charlie Chan.

In this chapter, I examine a trio of detective films – *Phantom of Chinatown* (Monogram, 1940), *The Crimson Kimono* (Columbia Pictures, 1959), and *Chan Is Missing* (New Yorker Films, 1982) – that eschewed Yellowface casting in favor of spotlighting Asian American male actors in starring roles. Due to the all-reaching institutional racism that affected everything from race-based casting decisions to racially biased audience expectations, it is perhaps a minor miracle that the following films were ever made at all. The very presence of these Asian American leading men in these detective films tested the limits of racial tolerance and challenged

conventional expectations for what constitutes an appropriate protagonist in U.S. cinema, both immediately before and during the Cold War era.

However, ethnically appropriate casting is not the only significant feature of these films, as both *Phantom of Chinatown* and *The Crimson Kimono* share the formal qualities and the proper time frame (1940-1959) to qualify as first generation examples of American film noir. And based on its content and aims, *Chan Is Missing*, which was made much later, readily falls into the category of neo-noir. Although the Charlie Chan series itself preceded and eventually coincided with the classic noir cycle, aside from a few minor stylistic similarities in a handful of films, the franchise would by no means qualify as film noir. Still, scholars have long debated how to define noir, and such definitions are not always illuminating. Calling it a component of “worldwide mass memory [...] a dream image of bygone glamour,” James Naremore argues in *More Than Night: Film Noir in its Contexts* (1998/2008) that “film noir has no essential characteristics and that it is not a specifically American form” (5), occupying instead “a liminal space somewhere between Europe and America, between high modernism and ‘blood melodrama,’ and between low-budget crime movies and art cinema” (220). While Naremore’s definition may not settle on any distinct formal qualities, it does capture both the enduring allure of film noir and its strange illusiveness. Film noir, in its most rudimentary understanding, has been defined as a retrospectively created cinematic term first utilized by French critic Nino Frank in 1946. Although none of the filmmakers at the time thought they were creating something called “noir,” the term is used primarily to describe a certain type

of Hollywood film spanning from the early 1940s to the late 1950s. Critical scholarship cannot agree whether noir is a “genre,” “cycle,” or “mood,” but the type of films that usually fall under such categorizations are A- and B-budget Hollywood crime dramas, detective stories, gangster films, and thrillers that often feature private eyes, femme fatales, cops, crooks, and/or ordinary citizens caught in extraordinary circumstances. Of course, exceptions to such plot and character types exist throughout the noir canon. Rooted in German Expressionism and the American hardboiled school of crime fiction that emerged in the early part of the twentieth century, the term *noir* can be both limiting and expansive in scope depending on its usage. Perhaps the most succinct explication of the formal aspects of noir comes from author Nathaniel Rich, who writes in *San Francisco Noir* (2005) that the term comprises motion pictures from the aforementioned era that are “shot in black and white, lit for night, favor oblique camera angles and obsessive use of shadow, and, most importantly, take place in a city” (8).

Beyond aesthetics, Rich’s singling out of the typical noir setting holds crucial importance to the trio of films I wish to discuss in this chapter. In *Hollywood’s Dark Cinema: The American Film Noir* (1994), film scholar R. Barton Palmer adds that urban spaces exist in noir not as mere settings, but as a means to convey “a bleak vision of contemporary life in American cities, which are presented as populated by the amoral, the alienated, the criminally minded, and the helpless. Film noir, in brief, offers the obverse of the American dream” (6). Although I have given much weight to the importance of the particular ethnicities of the leading men featured in these Asian

American noir films, the relationship these characters possess with their respective cities holds special significance as well. After all, the hardboiled detective genre is not merely about men, but the milieu in which they operate. And for the time periods in question, what could the milieu of these Asian American detectives be, but ethnic urban spaces like Chinatown and Little Tokyo?

Each of these three films tries to rehabilitate the Asian ethnic ghetto and the communities that live there from the crass cultural stereotypes that have persisted in American popular culture by portraying Asian Americans as three dimensional characters at odds with the racist expectations of their respective eras. In differing ways, these depictions run counter to the often exotic, dangerous, and inscrutable representations of these Asian communities as they have existed not just in noir, but within the larger U.S. racial imaginary as well. In the following pages, I argue that these films operate as conscious revisions of the “Oriental sleuth” pictures popularized by the likes of Charlie Chan and his imitators in the 1930s and 1940s. Each seeks to adopt and adapt the conventions of the hardboiled detective genre to represent and re-present Asian men from a different perspective. While historicizing these movies within the context of the often Orientalist representations of Asians in classic Hollywood cinema, I demonstrate how each of these landmark films re-signifies Asian American masculinity, examining what it means to be an Asian American male in the shadow of Charlie Chan.

Revisoning Charlie Chan: Phil Rosen's *Phantom of Chinatown* (1940)

The success of Earl Derr Biggers' novels and Fox's Charlie Chan films inspired several competing knockoffs in the 1930s, one of which was a series of "Mr. Wong" short stories penned by writer Hugh Wiley (1884-1968). His fictional Chinese detective – named James Lee Wong – first appeared in the pages of *Collier's* magazine between 1934 and 1938, and the stories were later collected in *Murder by the Dozen* (1951).³⁰ Wiley's character was a Yale educated operative for the U.S. Department of Justice, who solved crimes while living in San Francisco's Chinatown. The success of Wiley's short stories, in turn, spawned a six-movie Mr. Wong series from Monogram Pictures, the same low budget studio that took over production of the Charlie Chan films in 1944.³¹ The inaugural movie in the



Figure 6. *The Fatal Hour* (1940).

³⁰ This collection includes, naturally, twelve Mr. Wong stories, including "Medium Well Done" (March 10, 1934), "The Thirty Thousand Dollar Bomb" (July 28, 1934), "Ten Bells" (August 4, 1934), "Long Chance" (December 15, 1934), "A Ray Of Light" (May 25, 1935), "Jaybird's Chance" (July 20, 1935), "Scorned Woman" (September 14, 1935), "Three Words" (November 2, 1935), "No Witnesses" (February 15, 1936), "Seven Of Spades" (September 5, 1936), "The Bell From China" (March 26, 1938), and "The Feast Of Kali" (June 25, 1938).

³¹ Prior to obtaining the rights to Hugh Wiley's series Monogram released its own "Mr. Wong" film in 1934 with Bela Lugosi in the title role. *The Mysterious Mr. Wong* was directed by William Nigh and adapted from the short story "The Twelve Coins of Confucius" by Henry Stephen Keeler. The plot involves the "Mad Manchurian" Fu Wong attempting to collect twelve coins that purportedly belonged

Mr. Wong franchise, William Nigh's *Mr. Wong, Detective*, was released on October 5, 1938.

Like the Fu Manchu, Charlie Chan, and Mr. Moto series that preceded it, the Mr. Wong films continued the tradition of Yellowface casting. Horror icon Boris Karloff (1887-1969) played Mr. Wong, a role which he would reprise in four sequels, all directed by William Nigh: *The Mystery of Mr. Wong* (March 8, 1939), *Mr. Wong in Chinatown* (August 1, 1939), *The Fatal Hour* (a.k.a. *Mr. Wong at Headquarters*, January 15, 1940), and *Doomed to Die* (a.k.a. *Mystery of the Wentworth Castle*, August 12, 1940). Born in London as William Henry Pratt, Karloff had already become one of the most famous actors in the horror genre during the early part of the twentieth century, perhaps best known for his memorable performances as Frankenstein's monster in Universal Pictures' *Frankenstein* (1931), *Bride of Frankenstein* (1935), and *Son of Frankenstein* (1938). Like Warner Oland before him, Karloff was no stranger to Yellowface roles, as he played the criminal Nikko in *The Miracle Man* (Paramount, 1932), the nefarious Fu Manchu in *The Mask of Fu Manchu* (MGM, 1932), and the villainous General Wu Yen Fang in *West of Shanghai* (Warner Bros, 1937). While these Yellowface roles fit squarely with Karloff's monster movie output for Universal, the part of Mr. Wong proved to be quite a different story. For Karloff, an actor long typecast as heavies, the Mr. Wong films posed a unique opportunity to play a hero. Perhaps intrigued by this prospect, Karloff agreed to a six picture deal with Monogram. With the completion of five Mr. Wong

to Confucius that can grant "extraordinary powers." Dressed in Qing Dynasty robes like a retread of Fu Manchu, Lugosi uses his own Hungarian accent to portray this Yellow Peril era villain.

films plus William Nigh's *The Ape* (1940), Karloff fulfilled his contractual obligations and vacated the role of Mr. Wong.³²

However, Monogram still owed its distributor, the Monarch Film Corporation, a sixth installment of the Mr. Wong series. With Karloff either unable or unwilling to return to the role, the studio was forced to find a replacement. The producers ultimately chose Chinese American actor Keye Luke (1904-1991) to fill Karloff's big shoes in *Phantom of Chinatown* (1940). Considering the racial discrimination endemic to the era, Luke's casting was a bold move on the part of Monogram, as it enabled one of the first cinematic portrayals of an Asian American detective by an Asian American actor.³³ In fact, Luke was even billed first in the opening credits – with his name featured above the title, no less – a first for an Asian male actor in Hollywood since the silent screen heyday of Sessue Hayakawa.

While director Phil Rosen's *Phantom of Chinatown* was the sixth and final installment of the Mr. Wong detective series, it was not designed as a series finale. In fact, it was quite the opposite, as the film operates instead like a self-conscious

³² In popular culture, James Lee Wong appeared in issues #40-46 of Dell's *Popular Comics* beginning in 1939. These comics did not contain original stories, but were instead multi-part adaptations of the first two Monogram films with Mr. Wong drawn to resemble Boris Karloff.

³³ There are two additional Hollywood-made detective films featuring Asian actors in leading roles that precede *Phantom of Chinatown*, but these movies will not be treated in this dissertation. Sessue Hayakawa made his sound debut playing Ah Kee, a Chinese detective working for Scotland Yard in Lloyd Corrigan's *Daughter of the Dragon* (1931), the third and final entry in Paramount's popular Fu Manchu series. Similarly, Philip Ahn played Kim Lee, perhaps the very first FBI agent of Asian descent in American cinema in *Daughter of Shanghai* (1937). Although both films feature Asian detectives, neither fit the category of a detective story, as the villains are known to both the viewer and the characters involved. Coincidentally, Anna May Wong (1905-1961) appeared in both of these films and later headlined her own ten episode television mystery, *The Gallery of Madame Liu-Tsong* (DuMont Television Network, 1951). Reportedly, she played a Chinese art dealer, who sidelined as a detective and global adventurer. However, no copies of the show or its teleplays are known to exist.

prequel to the five Karloff films. While *Phantom of Chinatown* recasts its lead with a much younger actor, the producers retained the services of series veterans Grant Withers as Wong's friend, Captain Street and Lee Tung Foo as Wong's servant, Foo (named "Tschin" and "Willie" in earlier installments). *Phantom of Chinatown* also adheres to established continuity by including a police detective named Grady (Paul McVey), a clear reference to the murdered detective Dan Grady in *The Fatal Hour* (1940). Considering *Phantom of Chinatown's* status as a B-movie from a Poverty Row studio, there exists a surprising attention to internal continuity.

Written by screenwriter Joseph West (aka George Waggoner) from an original story by Ralph Bettinson, the plot of *Phantom of Chinatown* involves the murder of Dr. John Benton (Charles Miller), a famed archaeologist just returned from an expedition to Mongolia. During a lecture at the fictional Southern University, Dr. Benton collapses. His last words – "eternal fire" – relate directly to his recent discovery of an ancient tomb belonging to a Ming Dynasty emperor and a scroll claiming to reveal "The Secret of Eternal Fire." During the subsequent investigation, Captain Street of the San Francisco homicide division rounds up a number of suspects, which include Dr. Benton's personal secretary Win Len (Lotus Long, aka Lotus Pearl Shibata), university president Norman Wilkes (Huntley Gordon), documentarian Charles Frasier (John Dilson), Benton's butler Jonas (Willy Castello), Benton's daughter Louise (Virginia Carpenter), and her beau, the pilot Tommy Dean (Robert Kellard). Much to Captain Street's initial confusion, a wildcard soon enters the fray – James "Jimmy" Wong, one of Benton's star pupils, who inserts himself into

the criminal investigation with the intention of bringing his mentor's killer to justice and unraveling the "Secret of Eternal Fire."

In the following pages, I argue that *Phantom of Chinatown* operates as a revisionist Charlie Chan film that challenges common stereotypes of "The Orient" in order to subvert those racist expectations and expose the casual racism that white privilege affords. Heavily influenced by the hardboiled detective genre, *Phantom of Chinatown* provides an Asian American detective who – through casting, appearance, wardrobe, language, and behavior – is a far cry from the caricatured, Orientalized figure of Charlie Chan. In fact, nearly every criticism leveled at Charlie Chan in post-1970s Asian American masculinist criticism is addressed in this little seen mystery film from 1940.

Recasting the Detective, Remasculinizing the Asian American Man

The choice of Keye Luke as the first self-representing Asian American detective in a mystery film is perhaps appropriate, considering some of the roles he played during his long acting career. Born in Guangzhou, China in 1904, Luke spent his formative years in Seattle, before pursuing a career in Hollywood. Trained as an artist, he became an actor purely by accident when an MGM producer chose him to play a supporting role in the 1934 adaptation of W. Somerset Maugham's novel, *The Painted Veil* (Flint). Afterwards, Luke went on to appear in over a hundred films, including John Huston's *Across the Pacific* (Warner Bros, 1942), Joe Dante's *Gremlins* (Warner Bros, 1984), and Woody Allen's *Alice* (Orion, 1990). Curiously,

Luke's career intersected with Bruce Lee's, albeit in largely indirect ways. Decades before Lee made the role of Kato his own, Luke played the character in the original movie serials, *The Green Hornet* (1940) and *The Green Hornet Strikes Again!* (1941). Luke also garnered renewed fame in his seventies when he took the role of Master Po on *Kung Fu* (1972-1975), and also provided the voice for Mr. Han in the Bruce Lee film, *Enter the Dragon* (Warner Bros, 1973). In terms of professional achievements, Luke was a founding member of the Screen Actors Guild, won the first Lifetime Achievement Award from the Association of Asian/Pacific American Artists, and was honored with a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame, before passing away of a stroke in 1991 (ibid).

Although Luke had a prolific career in film and television, his first real claim to fame was his participation in the Charlie Chan series as Lee Chan, the detective's most famous offspring and Number One Son. After six of the first Warner Oland films for Fox were released, the producers in



Figure 7. Key Luke in *Charlie Chan at the Olympics*.

charge of the Charlie Chan franchise decided that they needed to attract more viewers to keep interest in the series alive. The addition of Lee Chan to the franchise in *Charlie Chan in Paris* (1935) was meant to give younger filmgoers a character to whom they could easily relate and identify. Serving as the consummate sidekick, Lee

often helped his father solve mysteries while getting himself into trouble, as well as experiencing the occasional romantic entanglement with various Chinese women.³⁴

After Warner Oland died in 1938, there was some talk of Keye Luke taking over the Charlie Chan series. According to Victor Sen Yung (1915-1980), the actor who played Chan's Number Two Son, there were differing accounts as to why Luke did not continue in the role of Lee Chan:

Well, there were two reports. One of them was that he was going to be featured in [a film entitled] *The Son of Charlie Chan Carries On* and that his agent held out for too much money, and they decided to go with another Charlie Chan and another son. The other story—and the one that I think is probably more likely—is that he was negotiating for a part in the *Dr. Kildare* series with Lionel Barrymore. (Rothel 72)³⁵

In addition to these unsubstantiated rumors, other reports suggest that Fox simply wanted to avoid tampering with the popular formula and chose to cast another white actor – in this case, Sidney Toler – to follow in Oland's footsteps. Whatever the truth, Keye Luke reprised his role of Lee Chan once more in *Mr. Moto's Gamble* (1938), which was converted from Oland's last, unfinished film, *Charlie Chan at the Ringside*, before leaving the series altogether. For the next two years, Luke would appear in several small roles in Hollywood before his casting as Mr. Wong in *Phantom of Chinatown*. While Luke would eventually play the voice of Charlie Chan

³⁴ Examples of such romantic liaisons occur in *Charlie Chan in Shanghai* (1935), *Charlie Chan at the Circus* (1936), *Charlie Chan at the Opera* (1936), and *Charlie Chan on Broadway* (1937).

³⁵ Victor Sen Yung is actually referring to a *Dr. Kildare* spinoff series, starring Lionel Barrymore as Dr. Gillespie. This MGM series is composed of *Dr. Gillespie's New Assistant* (1942), *Dr. Gillespie's Criminal Case* (1943) *3 Men in White* (1944), *Between Two Women* (1945), and *Dark Delusion* (1947). As evidenced by the release date of the first film, Keye Luke could not have possibly passed on the role of Charlie Chan to star in this series, as *Charlie Chan in Honolulu*, the first non-Oland Charlie Chan film was released in 1938,

in the cartoon, *The Amazing Chan and the Chan Clan* in 1972, *Phantom of Chinatown* provides the closest example of what a Keye Luke-led Charlie Chan film would have been like.

While there are enough demonstrable differences between Warner Oland's Charlie Chan and Boris Karloff's Mr. Wong for Monogram to avoid a cease-and-desist letter from the Fox legal department, these two "Oriental Sleuths" are essentially two sides of the same Yellowface coin. With arched, sharply drawn eyebrows, a thin moustache, dark eyeliner, and taped back eyelids, Karloff's Mr. Wong exemplifies the kind of Yellowface makeup practices that were common during the era. From Orientalized costume choices to shadowy *mise en scène* to even the way Karloff holds his cigarette, director William Nigh consistently frames Mr. Wong as effete, odd, and otherworldly (see Figures 8 and 9), a trait that is exaggerated in the theatrical posters for the films, which make the detective appear literally yellow-skinned and alien in appearance. In numerous ways, Karloff's version of Mr. Wong exemplifies the Orientalist stereotypes that Chandler would draw upon in his characterization of Arthur Gwynn Geiger in *The Big Sleep*.



**Figure 8. Boris Karloff in
*The Mystery of Mr. Wong.***



**Figure 9. Boris Karloff in
*The Mystery of Mr. Wong.***

By contrast, Keye Luke's portrayal of James Lee Wong conveys a substantially different impression from that of his predecessor. Whereas the hiring of Boris Karloff seemed to necessitate the Orientalizing of a known white actor, it seems as if the filmmakers behind *Phantom of Chinatown* wanted to Americanize its legitimately Asian leading man in a number of key ways. While Karloff's Mr. Wong resembles both an Orientalized stereotype and the classical white detective of old in appearance and demeanor, Keye Luke looks and behaves like a hardboiled detective.

Apart from the use of Yellowface makeup and prostheses, the first identifiable difference between Keye Luke's version and Karloff's (not to mention Oland's Charlie Chan) resides in the costuming. While Karloff and Oland wore bowler hats and conservative attire that make their "Oriental Sleuths" look like English detectives, Luke dons a stylish fedora and sharply tailored suits, more in line with the hardboiled heroes of his day. This change in visual style is reflected in Luke's added physical presence. While by no means an intimidating figure, Jimmy Wong poses a much

more physical threat to his enemies than Karloff's version or even Charlie Chan, as he engages in an all-out brawl at the end of *Phantom of Chinatown*, something that neither Mr. Wong nor Charlie Chan ever did during their respective series. These traits put Jimmy in the same company as the two-fisted heroes that were leaping from the pages of pulp fiction to the silver screen at the contemporary moment.

It is not just Luke's appearance and actions that set him apart from prior Yellowface detectives, but also his language. Both Charlie Chan and Mr. Wong spoke in ways that marked them as foreign. While Boris Karloff's version of Mr. Wong differed from Charlie Chan in that he spoke impeccable English just as Wiley's original literary creation did, the actor utilized his own idiosyncratic vocal intonations to great dramatic effect. However, if Karloff played Wong as a droll English gentleman, Keye Luke plays the character as more of a plain spoken American. In fact, the name change in *Phantom of Chinatown* from "James" to the more casual "Jimmy" exemplifies the character's easygoing, all-American persona. And unlike Karloff's Mr. Wong, who seems consistently marked as a foreign presence allied with his "countrymen" throughout the character's five appearances in the series, Jimmy explicitly stakes a claim to his American identity. For example, when it is discovered that the Scroll of Eternal Fire pinpoints the exact location of the largest oil deposit in the world (somewhere in China), Jimmy parses out the complexities of his Chinese American identity for Win Len and Captain Street in a way that Karloff's Wong never did: "Naturally, my sympathies follow my heritage, but after all, I'm an American. The secret must not be used against either country." This claiming of an

American identity dramatically marks Jimmy Wong as an Asian American detective, rather than the Yellowface Oriental sleuth.

Jimmy's propensity for American slang is not the only key language difference, as *Phantom of Chinatown* further engages with Orientalist discourses within the Charlie Chan franchise by sending up those alleged Chinese aphorisms that Biggers' detective came to popularize. Just as the literary and cinematic Charlie Chan would use a "Confucius say" quotation to punctuate a scene, Hugh Wiley's Mr. Wong would rely on the same hoary clichés: "A man can dig his own grave with his tongue" ("The Bell from China," 48), "In China they say that a grain of sand can hide a mountain, and that only a dead snake is straight" ("No Witnesses," 90), and "The eyes of the blind need no ointment" ("Jaybird's Chance," 77). Not surprisingly, these kinds of Orientalized proverbs get repeated in the five Mr. Wong films featuring Boris Karloff. However, *Phantom of Chinatown* has Jimmy not only engage with this Orientalist convention, but ultimately demystify these aphorisms for a perplexed Captain Street: "My countryman dress ordinary things in fanciful language. Eternal fire may be something down-to-earth." This single line of dialogue operates as a recuperative gesture to debunk the so-called Chinese inscrutability popularized in both the Mr. Wong and Charlie Chan films, as well as the larger culture.

While Jimmy Wong differs from his predecessors in his appearance, behavior, and language, there remains an even bigger difference that strikes to the heart of the



Figure 10. Keye Luke and Lotus Long.

emasculated stereotypes these Oriental sleuths fostered in popular culture. By film's end, Jimmy achieves something that Mr. Wong, Charlie Chan, and Mr. Moto never even attempted – he gets the girl. In the previous five Karloff

films, the asexual Mr. Wong neither engages in love affairs of his own nor expresses any interest in women. Instead, Captain Street fulfills the role of de facto romantic lead through his comical relationships with Myra (Maxine Jennings), a secretary in *The Mystery of Mr. Wong*; and Bobbi Loman (Marjorie Reynolds), a nosy journalist who appears in *Mr. Wong in Chinatown*, *The Fatal Hour*, and *Doomed to Die*. In *Phantom of Chinatown*, however, Jimmy Wong – not Captain Street – is the one who engages in a romantic flirtation – in this case, with Win Len, who turns out to be a friendly undercover operative for the Chinese government. After Dr. Benton's murder is solved, the audience gets a reversal of not just the typical Mr. Wong romantic plot, but that of a Charlie Chan film as well. This time around, it is Captain Street that insures the heterosexual coupling of Jimmy Wong and Win Len, instructing his newfound friend to accompany her back to China to make certain that the Scroll of Eternal Fire is returned safely to its rightful owners. The film concludes with Win Len remarking, "It's a wise man who understands a nod," bringing the film series full

circle, as the allegedly Chinese aphorism had originally appeared in the short stories “Medium Well Done,” “Ten Bells,” and “Ray of Light.”

Considering all these factors, Jimmy Wong is consistently portrayed as a kind of anti-Charlie Chan. In fact, *Phantom of Chinatown* seems to actively comment on the popular franchise at different points in the film. Late in the narrative, Jimmy says, “Thank you so much” in a manner that mimics a known catchphrase of Warner Oland’s from the Charlie Chan series. The references do not end there, as Jimmy even gets into an altercation with Charlie Won (Victor Wong), a suspect whose given name could not be accidental. The man, who operates a front for the white villains in the film, speaks – like Charlie Chan occasionally does – in the third person. When coming face-to-face with Jimmy’s aggressive tactics, the man exclaims, “Charlie want no trouble.” However, like the hardboiled detectives of the era, it would seem that trouble is Jimmy Wong’s business. And yet, this tension between Jimmy’s self-determined articulation of his Chinese American identity and the racist expectations of the white characters that surround him speaks to the formal tension that exists within the work regarding the depth of the film’s re-inscription of Orientalist conventions, an issue that is not entirely resolved by film’s end.

Orientalist Hauntings – Unmasking the True “Phantom” of Chinatown

With its vaguely sinister overtones, the title *Phantom of Chinatown* is meant to conjure up a whole range of Orientalist imagery. In U.S. popular culture, Chinatowns have long been associated with criminality and vice. In characterizing

early literary portrayals of Chinatown, Elaine Kim writes, “Stock Chinese brutes and villains abound in a large body of short stories and novels set in the Chinatowns of the West from the latter part of the nineteenth century until the 1940s,” featuring tales filled with “tong wars, opium dens, and sinister hatchetmen lurking in dark alleyways where mysterious trapdoors and underground passages led to torture chambers and slave quarters.” (10-11). Subsequent to these literary fantasies, Hollywood history is rife with films about the so-called “Orient,” which for more than the first third of the twentieth century specifically meant China and its Chinese American microcosm, urban Chinatown. Even early silent films like *The Chinese Rubbernecks* (American Mutoscope & Biograph, 1903), *Heathen Chinese and the Sunday School Teachers* (American Mutoscope & Biograph, 1904), and *The Yellow Peril* (American Mutoscope & Biograph, 1908) demonstrated a fascination with the Chinese, as did subsequent full-length films from the 1910s to the 1930s like *Broken Blossoms* (United Artists, 1919), *Old San Francisco* (Warner Bros, 1927), *Mr. Wu* (MGM, 1927), *Son of the Gods* (First National Pictures, 1930), *Shanghai Express* (Paramount Pictures, 1932), *The Hatchet Man* (Warner Bros, 1932), *The Bitter Tea of General Yen* (Columbia Pictures, 1933), and numerous other Orientalist pictures. Curiously, the impact of such fictional depictions could be felt in real life, as the exotic tenor of many of these literary and cinematic portrayals even spilled over to the local tourist industry in Chinatown. For example, in *Strangers from a Different Shore*, Ronald Takaki provides a glimpse into how San Francisco’s Chinatown was perceived by outsiders in the mid-to-late thirties:

Tourists were shown a fantasy land, a strange place they had read about in Bret Harte's stories and had seen in Hollywood movies about Fu Manchu and Charlie Chan. Guided through the narrow alleys of this "wicked Orient," tourists were warned by white guides to stick together and not to stray from the group lest a hatchet man get them. (249)

Like many of the films of its era, Monogram's Mr. Wong series capitalized on these cultural stereotypes to entice its viewers. The plots for many of these Mr. Wong movies hinge on stolen Chinese artifacts and shadowy Orientalist threats. Each of these films takes great pains to cast suspicion on the Chinese supporting cast (sometimes unseen), quickly establishing them as a nefarious presence, whether or not they are truly guilty of the murders that Mr. Wong investigates throughout the series. However, *Phantom of Chinatown* does much to play upon and actively subvert these Orientalist expectations.

In Hugh Wiley's original short stories, Mr. Wong took on everything from official government-sanctioned investigations to personal favors, and his past caseload includes references to murder, human trafficking, opium smuggling, forgery, antique theft, and even white slavery. Almost all of these cases bear some "Oriental" connection, a thematic tactic borrowed in the films. For example in *The Fatal Hour* (1940), Wong voices his concern that he may be of no help to the investigation of a murdered officer, only to be corrected by Captain Street:

WONG: You know the only reason I've been useful in the past was because in each case the Orient was involved.

STREET: Smuggling and San Francisco means the Orient.

Prior to *Phantom of Chinatown*, Mr. Wong has been consistently presented in his respective literary and filmic incarnations as the domesticated "good" Asian working

within a white power structure, essentially collaborating with local authorities to police his own people – even if a white character is ultimately deemed the true culprit. A graduate of Oxford and Heidelberg, Karloff’s version of James Lee Wong maneuvers easily through the parties of the rich and powerful in white high society. Although Wong holds no official position within the San Francisco Police Department, his friendship with Captain Street affords him great latitude in a number of investigations. As a result, the bond between these two men becomes the central relationship of the series, as Street implicitly trusts Wong’s various hunches.

No such relationship exists in *Phantom of Chinatown*, as the film charts the very first encounter between Jimmy Wong and Captain Street. In contrast to Street’s behavior towards Wong in earlier films, the captain seems to actively distrust Jimmy and even sends one of his detectives over to his apartment to perform an illegal search of his home. For Street, Jimmy’s ethnicity makes him a prime suspect in Benton’s murder. In fact, the casting switch from Karloff to Luke as well as the narrative time shift only serves to amplify Captain Street’s casual racism. When Street notices that Jimmy and Win Len are both Chinese, he asks accusatorily, “You two work together?” To their mutual embarrassment, they retort in unison that they have never seen each other before. Street doesn’t trust their answers, and when he learns that Win Len didn’t eat the same prepared meal as Dr. Benton did on the day of his death, he jumps at the idea that she poisoned her employer. However, Street’s interrogation of Jonas, the butler, does not go as planned:

STREET: What’d she have? Chop suey?

JONAS: No sir, she had a cup of coffee and a piece of apple pie. She has had the same lunch every day for a month.

Jonas' revelation of the true contents of Win Len's regularly scheduled meal – American as apple pie, so to speak – silences Captain Street momentarily, although other racially tinged comments emerge from his mouth, a rarity in the Karloff-led Mr. Wong films. As a non-white interloper, Karloff's version of the character had already proven himself to Street, and thus was not the subject of the Captain's racist barbs.

In response to Street's active distrust in *Phantom of Chinatown*, it should be noted that Keye Luke's Jimmy Wong also has a very different agenda than his Yellowface predecessor. Throughout much of *Phantom of Chinatown*, there exists a lingering ambiguity surrounding his character, particularly in terms of his motives, loyalties, and even his mode of employment, secrets that the film will slowly, but not fully reveal as the narrative unwinds. Like the hardboiled detectives of his era, Jimmy Wong exists on the borderlands separating criminal and cop. As such, his relationship with existing white structures of power differentiates himself from both Karloff's Mr. Wong and Charlie Chan. When pressed by Captain Street to give information about his background, Jimmy simply says he works in "research" and proceeds to play things close to the vest throughout the film. Beyond his tendency toward secrecy, Jimmy acts much more mischievously in the face of police pressure than Karloff's version or Charlie Chan. At one point, Jimmy not only shakes off Captain Street who's tailing him by car, but even helps Win Len – at that point, the prime suspect in Dr. Benton's murder – escape police surveillance. When Captain Street catches up to Jimmy at a gas station and confronts him about his quick disappearing act, Jimmy

plays dumb: “Why Captain, have you been following me?” Rather than docilely give in to Street’s orders, Jimmy challenges him at every turn. Like his Karloffian predecessor, Jimmy takes liberties during the police investigation, asking more cogent questions of potential witnesses than Captain Street himself. But rather than be encouraged by Jimmy’s participation as he was with Mr. Wong’s in earlier films, Captain Street becomes increasingly annoyed and suspicious. Nevertheless, an unlikely friendship develops between the two, culminating in a raid on the villains’ secret waterfront hideout.

In truth, Jimmy’s successful challenge to white authority serves as but one example of the film’s attempt at cultural commentary. Sprinkled throughout the narrative is a direct critique of Western imperialism and American exceptionalism, a tactic which is perhaps best exemplified by a short, otherwise throwaway scene.³⁶ During the murder investigation, Captain Street and Jimmy Wong return to Dr. Benton’s house, only to be confronted by Jonas and some other men removing a Chinese artifact from the premises:

STREET: What’s all this?

JONAS: The sarcophagus from the Chinese tomb, sir, that once contained the body of a Ming Emperor.

WONG: They tell me a Chinese archaeological expedition is digging up the body of George Washington in exchange.

JONAH: Sir?

³⁶ When the predominantly white audience during Dr. Benton’s lecture laughs at the documentary footage of indigenous dancers, the scholar chides them: “As you laugh at these people, ladies and gentlemen, bear in mind that at one point in history, under Genghis Khan, they ruled the world” – to which Benton and Win Len share knowing smiles.

WONG: Well, it gives you a rough idea.

In response to Wong's remark, Jonas looks thoroughly embarrassed, while Captain Street laughs in approval. This moment might seem out of place in the Karloff films, but with Keye Luke in the role, the joke carries a real edge to it, as Jimmy openly questions the archaeology team's obviously unexamined "right" to loot the treasures of other nations to line their own museums. Jimmy's invocation of George Washington – a Founding Father, no less – makes an exceptionally vivid point of comparison to which Jonas can offer no suitable retort.

While written and directed by white filmmakers, *Phantom of Chinatown* attempts to provide sympathetic portrayals of Chinese characters while working within the formulaic Orientalist expectations viewers of the time have come to anticipate. By film's end, the so-called "phantom" in *Phantom of Chinatown* stands revealed as having no connection to Chinatown whatsoever – in fact, the title doesn't even reflect the contents of the film itself. There is no "Phantom of Chinatown," and, in truth, there's barely a Chinatown at all. Aside from the inside of Jimmy's Chinatown apartment, the only real glimpse into the community occurs when Jimmy and Street visit the local telephone company, the Chinatown Exchange. Once there, they meet a bevy of female telephone operators. One such employee is Rose Petal, who speaks casual American English and claims that, "Jimmy's brother and I went to high school together." Such a remark suggests that far from an insidious Yellow Peril, the Chinese Americans that occupy Chinatown are just like the average white Americans who are watching the film itself. Rather than a threat from within

Chinatown, the real villains of *Phantom of Chinatown* are a group of white men looking to capitalize on the ill-gotten gains of the archaeological expedition. Thus, in a sense, the actual “phantom” of Chinatown is the racist genre expectations that the title itself conjures up.

However, it would be erroneous to claim that *Phantom of Chinatown* doesn't tread in Orientalism. Although other instances throughout the film would suffice, perhaps the most illustrative example of the film's trafficking in Orientalist tropes occurs with the discovery of a Chinese figurine. Jimmy and Win Len explain to Captain Street that the figure represents Sun Yat, the God of Vengeance, “worshipped among the nomad tribes of the Gobi desert.” In fact, not only does no such Chinese god exist, but the figurine Jimmy holds in his hands is actually the God of Longevity, immediately recognizable due to his smiling, friendly features; his elongated bald head; and the peach he carries in his hand, which symbolizes immortality. While one could construct an interpretation to compensate for this glaring error – for instance, saying that Jimmy and Win Len are lying to Captain Street – the figurine's status as “The God of Vengeance” is itself a key plot point that cannot adequately be explained away within the context of the film. Despite the film's landmark casting of Asian American actors and its groundbreaking approach to Chinese American identity, the perspective on Chinese culture still relies on the Orientalist hokum of Hollywood fantasy to execute its mystery plot.

In light of these contradictory elements, I would argue that a key component to understanding *Phantom of Chinatown*'s mode of cultural address resides in its

opening framing device. While each of the previous installments in the Mr. Wong series began with an establishing shot of San Francisco, *Phantom of Chinatown* starts with a close-up of an article from *National Scientific*, presumably a fictional *National Geographic* analogue. Entitled “Temple of Eternal Fire,” the piece in question details the anthropological work of Dr. Benton – that is, a view of China as filtered through a white man’s perspective. Here, we can see a corollary with the film itself, as *Phantom of Chinatown* may indeed attempt to present a more positive view of both the Chinese and an emerging Chinese American identity, but ultimately it emerges from an outsider’s perspective, one that maintains an Orientalist gaze that hinges on hackneyed clichés about the Far East meant to entice and titillate its intended white viewers.

Although *Phantom of Chinatown* did not become a runaway success and spawn further sequels, interest in films with Chinese settings, characters, and themes would be sustained in the 1940s and 1950s in such films as *The Shanghai Gesture* (United Artists, 1941), *China Girl* (Universal, 1942), *China* (Paramount, 1943), *Dragon Seed* (MGM, 1944), and *Macau* (RKO, 1952), among numerous others. Despite the groundbreaking status of *Phantom of Chinatown*, the Asian American detective film would fall into dormancy. In fact, it would take nineteen years for another detective film with an actor of Asian descent in the lead, but this time both the Chinese and Chinatown itself would no longer figure into the picture.

Race, Romance, & the Specter of Racism: Samuel Fuller's *The Crimson Kimono*

While the success of the Charlie Chan franchise spawned a brief cycle of “Oriental” detective films, most featured Chinese characters, locales, and themes as evidenced by the six-part Mr. Wong series. However, a popular Japanese detective in U.S. literature and film deserves mention alongside Chan and Wong – Mr. Moto. Not long after Earl Derr Biggers passed away, *Saturday Evening Post* editor George Lorimer (1867-1937) suggested to future Pulitzer Prize-winning novelist, John P. Marquand (1893-1960) that he should write a series featuring an Asian sleuth.³⁷ To convince him of the project, Lorimer gave the Harvard-educated writer “a cash advance and per diem to go to the Orient to soak up some Asian ambiance” (Rothel 220). Marquand returned from his trip abroad with the idea for I.A. Moto, a fictional Japanese secret agent, whose stories would be serialized in the pages of the *Saturday Evening Post* before eventual publication as full-length spy novels, starting with *Your Turn, Mr. Moto* (1935, a.k.a. *No Hero*).³⁸

As was the case with Charlie Chan, the popularity of the first batch of Mr. Moto novels convinced 20th Century Fox to acquire the film rights and churn out a series of eight pictures in quick succession: *Think Fast, Mr. Moto* (1937); *Thank You, Mr. Moto* (1937); *Mr. Moto's Gamble* (1938); *Mr. Moto Takes a Chance* (1938); *Mysterious Mr. Moto* (1938); *Mr. Moto in Danger Island* (1938); *Mr. Moto's Last Warning* (1939); and *Mr. Moto Takes a Vacation* (1939). When Norman O. Foster

³⁷ He won the Pulitzer Prize for the novel *The Late George Apley* in 1938.

³⁸ Subsequent novels include *Thank You, Mr. Moto* (1936); *Think Fast, Mr. Moto* (1937); *Mr. Moto Is So Sorry* (1938); *Last Laugh, Mr. Moto* (1942); and *Right You Are, Mr. Moto* (1957).

was assigned directorial duties on the first film, he wanted to cast an Asian actor in the lead role, but the studio had already hired Peter Lorre to portray the Japanese detective (Soares). A consummate heavy known for playing a child murderer in Fritz Lang's *M* (Paramount, 1931), an assassin in Alfred Hitchcock's *The Man Who Knew Too Much* (Gaumont British Pictures, 1934), and other assorted criminals, Lorre brought a sinister appeal to Moto, much as Boris Karloff's casting did with Mr. Wong. Described in *Thank You, Mr. Moto* as an "adventurer, explorer, and soldier of fortune" who considers detective work "only a hobby," Mr. Moto projected a mild-mannered and polite demeanor in the tradition of Charlie Chan, but, in truth, something much more dangerous hid beneath his placid exterior. Unlike Charlie Chan, Mr. Moto was ruthless and prone to violence, often physically assaulting, stabbing, and shooting his enemies without hesitation.

To understand this odd duality, one must remember that the Moto films were made prior to the bombing of Pearl Harbor but during a period of rapid Japanese imperial aggression with the first film hitting theaters only

a few weeks after the outbreak of the Second Sino-Japanese War in 1937. In many ways, Lorre's portrayal of Moto emblemizes the United States' ambivalent feelings



Figure 9. Peter Lorre in *Think Fast, Mr. Moto*.

toward Japan and the Japanese people. With glasses, prosthetic buckteeth, and Lorre's unmistakable accent, Mr. Moto was indelibly marked as foreign and strange – in keeping with prior Yellowface portrayals of Asians onscreen. Like the Charlie Chan films, these pictures provided Depression era thrills taking audiences to faraway locales such as Shanghai, the Gobi Desert, and Angkor Wat. Although the films were a success, Lorre eventually grew tired of the role, and increasing negative sentiment towards Japan in the West spurred Fox to abandon the Mr. Moto franchise in 1939. For roughly twenty years, Mr. Moto was the sole literary and cinematic representative of a “heroic” detective of Japanese descent in American popular culture.³⁹

While Mr. Moto, Mr. Wong, and Charlie Chan may differ in temperament and physical action, all three were asexual stereotypes of Asian American males. Neither Moto nor Wong had any romantic interests, while Chan was characterized as a heteronormative father figure, successfully maintaining a (mostly unseen) Chinese wife and a household of numerous children – as many as fourteen late in the series. Jachinson Chan argues that Charlie Chan's status as a married family man does

³⁹ Although Mr. Moto did not have the same kind of afterlife as Charlie Chan, the character did return after World War II in at least three different incarnations. From May-October of 1951, NBC Radio aired a “Mr. I.A. Moto” radio series that ran twenty-three episodes, starring James Monk as the voice of Moto, whose background was changed to an American of Japanese descent fighting against communism (Rothel 259-273). In the film *Return of Mr. Moto* (1965), Henry Silva portrays I.A. Moto, who despite being misidentified in the trailer as a “hip Chinese cat” is actually a Japanese American Interpol operative working with Scotland Yard and British Intelligence to thwart a plot involving oil reserves in the Middle East. Curiously, Silva does not don an accent or elaborate makeup when portraying Moto, but when his character disguises himself as a Japanese ambassador, his masquerade comes complete with thick glasses, Orientalized goatee, and a stereotypical accent. It is implied that Silva's version is the son of Lorre's Kentaro Moto. Finally, in 2003, Moonstone Books released a three-issue comic book series entitled *Welcome Back Mr. Moto* by Rafael Nieves and Tim Hamilton, which re-imagined Moto as a Japanese American in the aftermath of the internment camps of World War II.

nothing to mediate his status as an emasculated stereotype. He writes, “Chan is drained of any form of sexuality, diminishing his threat of engaging in miscegenational relationships” (4). Played by almost exclusively by white men, Charlie Chan, Mr. Moto, and Mr. Wong operate as mostly “safe” Asians, who perform their genre function as detectives without raising the specter of an interracial taboo. Beyond solving each novel or film’s central mystery, these three “Oriental sleuths” are also tasked with insuring that a heterosexual romantic union between the primary two white leads can come to fruition. While *Phantom of Chinatown* reversed the formula by having the white detective ensure a union between Jimmy Wong and Win Len, the taboo of interracial romance between an Asian man and a white woman remained in effect for much of the early twentieth century.

However, the occupation of Japan by U.S. forces in the aftermath of World War II brought U.S.-Japanese relations, to the forefront of many Americans’ minds. These often mixed post-war feelings about Japan were explored and exploited in numerous Hollywood films, including Stuart Heisler’s *Tokyo Joe* (Columbia, 1949), King Vidor’s *Japanese War Bride* (20th Century Fox, 1952), Joshua Logan’s *Sayonara* (Warner Bros, 1957), and Samuel Fuller’s shot-in-Japan noir, *House of Bamboo* (20th Century Fox, 1959). But while many of the aforementioned films feature interracial relationships, onscreen depictions of romances between white men and Japanese women far outnumbered the number of films featuring romantic encounters between Asian males and white females.

Samuel Fuller's *The Crimson Kimono* (1959), however, attacks this taboo head-on by utilizing the conventional trappings of the hardboiled detective story to explore an interracial love plot between a Japanese American man and a white woman. Although a major studio might have balked at such a plot at the script stage of development, Samuel Fuller exerted total control of his films after creating Globe Enterprises in 1956. According to film scholar Lisa Dombrowski, Fuller's independent production company was able to secure financing and distribution deals with Columbia, Fox, and RKO with *The Crimson Kimono* being the fifth of six films the company produced (6). In addition to handling the directing and producing chores, Fuller penned this



Figure 12. James Shigeta, Victoria Shaw, and Glenn Corbett in *The Crimson Kimono* (1959).

noir detective tale himself, which featured Honolulu-born singer James Shigeta in his debut role, the very same year that Hawai'i was granted statehood.⁴⁰ Budgeted at less than a million dollars and shot in about a month in early 1959, *The Crimson Kimono* was groundbreaking, not just in its treatment of interracial romance, but its largely positive portrayal of Japanese Americans.

The plot of *The Crimson Kimono* centers on the murder of an exotic dancer named Sugar Torch (Gloria Pall), who is gunned down in the streets of Los Angeles

⁴⁰ While Keye Luke earned top billing for *Phantom of Chinatown*, James Shigeta – despite being the lead character – is billed third after co-stars Victoria Shaw and Glenn Corbett.

by an unidentified assailant. During the subsequent investigation, detectives Joe Kojaku (James Shigeta) and Charlie Bancroft (Glenn Corbett, also making his debut) discover that the victim was preparing a new burlesque act called “The Crimson Kimono,” which she was planning to unveil in Las Vegas. The routine involved a geisha house setting, in which Sugar Torch would find herself caught in a love triangle between a brick-breaking karate master and a samurai warrior. Sugar Torch planned to do a long, slow striptease dressed as a geisha until her jealous samurai boyfriend intervenes, and the karate master kills him out of jealousy. In a perverse takeoff on *Madama Butterfly*, Sugar Torch’s geisha character would throw herself on her fallen lover, only to be murdered herself. In the detectives’ attempt to make sense of this bizarre Orientalist fantasy, their only clue is a painting of Sugar Torch in a kimono, signed by an artist known only as “Chris.” While Joe journeys all over Little Tokyo to find the men slated to appear in Sugar Torch’s act, Charlie seeks out his artsy, hard-drinking spinster pal Mac (Anna Lee) to help track down the mysterious artist. Despite Charlie’s gendered assumptions, “Chris,” in fact, turns out to be Christine Downs (Victoria Shaw), an art student at the University of Southern California. While Charlie is the first to meet Christine and becomes instantly smitten with her, she ultimately gravitates towards his Japanese American partner, Joe.

And yet, despite all this elaborate narrative setup, the mystery surrounding the titular crimson kimono seems to be of secondary interest to Samuel Fuller, as the film’s interracial love plot dominates the bulk of the film’s running time. In his autobiography, Samuel Fuller recounts the following exchange with Sam Briskin, the

head of Columbia Pictures, which highlights the difficulties the director faced in respect to the movie's interracial content:

“Well, Sam, can't you make the white guy a sonuvabitch?” asked Briskin, a little worried. “We've got to market your movie all across the country, including the Midwest and the Bible Belt.”

“The girl chooses the Japanese guy because he's the man for her,” I said. “Not because the white guy's a sonofabitch. The whole idea of my picture is that both men are good cops and good citizens. The girl just happens to fall in love with the Nisei. They've got chemistry.”

“That's gonna be hard for average American audiences to swallow, Sam. We've got to sell 'em tickets. Look, can't you make the white guy a *little* bit of a sonofabitch?”

“No, I can't! A girl can't be a *little* pregnant! She is or she isn't. My white cop is a regular guy.” (*A Third Face*, 375)

Fuller's decision to not unfairly weight Christine's decision in Joe's favor speaks to the auteur's commitment to present these men on equal terms and to not be cowed by the racist expectations of mainstream audiences that Briskin seems to fear. In a press release accompanying the film's screening at the 24th San Francisco International Asian American Film Festival in 2006, festival official Taro Goto notes, “Fuller's exploration of race and racism was ahead of its time, and Christine's choice between the two men—and the ensuing kiss—made celluloid history.”

In the following section, I argue that *Crimson Kimono* seeks to exorcise the ghost of Orientalism by demystifying the urban spaces of Little Tokyo. Unlike *Phantom of Chinatown*, the film dispenses completely with the Orientalist tropes that typified earlier “Oriental Detective” pictures to provide a street level look at Little Tokyo and a more sensitive portrayal of its denizens. Samuel Fuller also attempts to

assimilate and remasculinize the figure of the Asian man through invocations of military service and male bonding while at the same time throwing into question the value of white hegemonic masculinity through Joe's more sensitive demeanor and the ultimate outcome of the film's interracial romance. Ultimately, I argue that while the film presents Joe's feelings of discrimination as a product of his own paranoid mind – an assertion shared by many film critics and even the director himself – I wish to offer a more complex interpretation of the film's ending. I regard *The Crimson Kimono*'s treatment of racism – not the resolution of its murder plot – as its central, ultimately unsolvable mystery. Utilizing the detective genre as a frame, *The Crimson Kimono* amounts to tragicomedy about male friendship, masculine identity, interracial love, and the specter of racism in 1950s Cold War America.

Exorcising the Specter of Orientalism

Unlike the Orientalized, criminalized depictions of Chinatown in early Hollywood cinema, Little Tokyo is sympathetically portrayed in *The Crimson Kimono*. As Lisa Dombrowski states, “*The Crimson Kimono* does not exoticize Japanese culture as much as present it as an ordinary facet of life in Los Angeles” (124). Throughout the initial portions of the film, *The Crimson Kimono* seems like a sincere exploration and demystification of Little Tokyo for mainstream white audiences – a kind of cultural tourism meant not to commodify a culture for the entertainment of the masses, but instead as a means to educate them about a minority group they perhaps know very little about. This ulterior motive is given voice in the

narrative when a surprised Chris sees the signs for the upcoming Nisei Week Festival: “I never knew police headquarters was right across the street from the Japanese section.” This single line of dialogue reflects Samuel Fuller’s possible intentions, as the film purports to show white audiences a minority culture that was right there all along – “hidden” in plain sight.

With the murder investigation driving the onscreen action, the film takes the viewer on a tour of Little Tokyo, and to a greater extent, a vision of then-contemporary Japanese American life. First, Joe’s investigation takes him to a karate dojo in Little Tokyo, where he meets the sensei (George Okamura, also the stunt coordinator) and Willie Hidaka (George Yoshinaga), who was slated to play the karate master in Sugar Torch’s burlesque show. Eager to help his friend find the man scheduled to play the samurai, a thoroughly embarrassed Willie points Joe towards a Korean man named Shuto (Fuji) who, according to Willie, speaks Japanese “almost as bad as mine.” The fact that Willie and his friends all speak American English to each other and Willie openly undercuts his own Japanese language skills demonstrates the first instance in which the film tries to “normalize” Japanese Americans for white audiences by presenting them as thoroughly assimilated members of white mainstream culture.



Figure 13. Joe Kojaku at the Dojo.



Figure 14. Joe Kojaku questions the nuns.

While searching for Shuto, Joe meets a Japanese American nun, Sister Gertrude (Aya Oyama), whose conspicuous presence indicates to white viewers – albeit in the most hyperbolic way possible – that the Japanese do not all practice Shintoism or Buddhism, but can even be Christians – just like the majority of Americans in the late 1950s. While *Phantom of Chinatown* had a handful of Chinese American characters who were presented as average citizens in a mostly nonexistent Chinatown, *The Crimson Kimono* takes great pains to demonstrate a vibrant and relatable Japanese American community within Little Tokyo. These and other similar encounters that Joe has with Japanese Americans throughout the community only serve to emphasize a non-exoticized portrayal of Japanese America.

However, the pivotal moment in this tour of Little Tokyo happens early on when Joe's investigation takes him to the real-life Evergreen Cemetery in Los Angeles. Throughout this sequence, Fuller takes great care to film the Japanese American War Memorial, complete with close-up shots of the words of President (then General) Dwight D. Eisenhower and General Mark W. Clark, emphasizing how valuable the Japanese American soldiers were to the American war effort during World War II. The film then transitions to Joe observing his contact, George

Yoshinaga (Bob Okazaki), as he mourns the recent loss of his son, Jun. The ensuing close-up of the headstone reveals that Jun Yoshinaga was a Medal of Honor winner who died in the Korean War (See Figures 15-18).

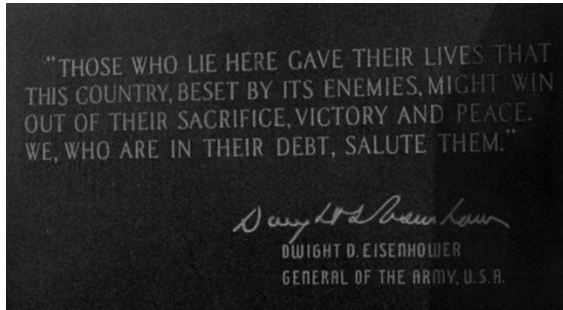


Figure 15. Inscription by Dwight D. Eisenhower.

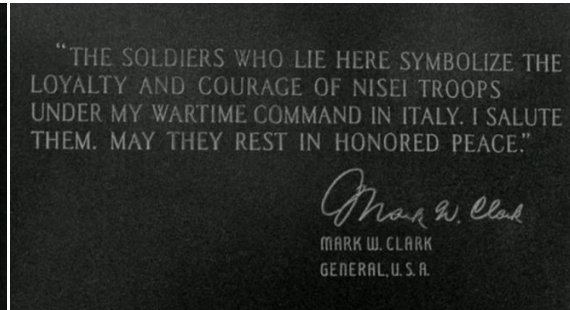


Figure 16. Inscription by Mark W. Clark.



17. George Yoshinaga mourns his son.



Figure 18. Detail on Jun Yoshinaga's grave.

Through this montage of images, these fallen Japanese Americans are no longer presented as merely average citizens, but are instead valorized as heroes who, according to the common clichés surrounding military service, sacrificed their lives for the U.S. cause of freedom in both World War II and the Korean War. In *Romance and "The Yellow Peril,"* Gina Marchetti interprets Fuller's use of symbolism and the conventional tropes of American manhood to recuperate Japanese American men and mythologize U.S. exceptionalism:

These memorials to World War II and the Korean War dead from the Japanese community, as well as Joe's military service during the Korean War,

stands as unquestioned and unquestionable symbols of America's ability to assimilate the racially and ethnically different in wartime. (154)

Thus, in order to assimilate Asian Americans – in this case, specifically Japanese Americans – into both hegemonic masculinity and the national body, the film elides and ultimately disavows the long, unpleasant history of struggle against white racism by Japanese Americans, including, but not limited to exclusionary immigration laws, dominant racist attitudes, and most notably, the Japanese internment during World War II. The film makes no mention of or allusion to Franklin D. Roosevelt's Executive Order 9066, which resulted in thousands of Japanese on the West Coast being relocated to internment camps in the wake of Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor. According to Caroline Chung Simpson, such a glaring omission was not uncommon after World War II. In her book, *An Absent Presence: Japanese Americans in Postwar American Culture, 1945-1960*, Simpson writes:

Throughout the postwar years, the potential of interned Japanese Americans' presence in the body politic to disturb the problems of American identity remained a perpetual threat, and irrepressible part of the negotiation between the needs of national history and the "incommensurabilities" of racial memory. (11)

Thus, *The Crimson Kimono*'s lack of engagement with the legacy of internment seems strategic, as it would distract from the film's insistence on the positive and recuperative power of the American war effort abroad. Nevertheless, this tortured history and its ultimate impact on the Japanese American community remains muted and ignored throughout the picture, a narrative choice that has major consequences on a key dramatic moment later in the film.

Deconstructing Masculinities: Male Bonding and Interracial Romance

The attempt to associate an Asian detective with American military might is nothing new in Hollywood cinema. Advocates of Charlie Chan would be correct in asserting that the filmic incarnation was consistently presented as one of the nation's greatest patriots. While his literary adventures were limited to Hawai'i and California, the cinematic Charlie Chan serves essentially as an American ambassador traversing any number of geographical locales across the globe. According to *City in Darkness* (1939), Charlie Chan even served in the United States Marine Corps during the First World War. Although the character does not reenlist for World War II, his efforts for the American cause abroad, his de facto role as U.S. representative, and his enlistment in the Secret Service in the postwar years, in many ways, reflects the real-life means through which Asians, particularly the Japanese Americans during World War II, were obligated to prove their loyalty to the United States through military service. As the series went on, Chan's complicity with U.S. Empire becomes increasingly clear, as his service abroad on behalf of the burgeoning global superpower trumps actual jurisdictional realities in the various countries he visits. Chan's universally recognized status as a "World's Policeman" as the United States itself has been called – only serves to aggrandize and naturalize U.S. military presence outside mainland shores.

This similar valorization of military service in *The Crimson Kimono* is inextricably tied to attitudes expressed within the film in regard to hegemonic masculinity, beliefs which are staunchly indicative of the Cold War era, where strict

demarcations of political alliances, gender roles, and sexuality are tied directly to popular notions of citizenship. The world of *The Crimson Kimono* is consistently gendered as a man's world, so much so that even the two primary female characters have masculine nicknames – “Mac” and “Chris.” The film proceeds to re-inscribe conventional masculinity by having the military backstory of its two protagonists serve as an indication of their personal character. Joe and Charlie claim to have met “in a foxhole”: “I was his C.O.,” Charlie says earlier in the film, “he was a rifleman.” But Joe is not merely a veteran of the Korean War, but was also the winner of the Silver Star. Although wounded, Joe left his hospital bed early and went right back into battle with the unit alongside Charlie. The men are not just brothers-in-arms, but nominal blood brothers, as Joe donated blood to save an injured Charlie. Through this careful invocation of exemplary military service and homosocial bonding, both Charlie and Joe are cast as All-American heroes.

This off-screen, military-approved partnership against an external Korean threat gets repeated onscreen during their pursuit of a murder suspect early in the



Figure 19. Shuto gets the third degree from Joe and Charlie in a typical film noir shot.

film. When Joe and Charlie catch up to Shuto in a pool hall, it takes their combined efforts to take down the Korean strongman. The sequence serves as a veritable replay of their service in the Korean War, as these two Americans – one

white, one Asian – must team-up to bring down a “foreign” menace. The resultant interrogation scene, lit by the bulb of an overhead lamp, utilizes a film noir convention that serves to emphasize Joe and Charlie’s control over the situation (See Figure 19).

Beyond this xenophobic yoking of militarism and masculinism, there exists a curious discrepancy regarding their Korean target. The fact that “Shuto” is a Japanese name, and that he speaks fluent Japanese is an unspoken legacy of Japanese imperialism. In 1910, Korea came under Imperial Japanese rule. As a result, the Japanese colonial government attempted to squelch Korean culture and ordered Koreans to adopt Japanese names and speak the Japanese language. A year after Korea was freed from Japanese control in 1945, the U.S. military government allowed Koreans to reclaim their Korean identities. Although Shuto’s backstory is left unexplained, the fact that he retained his Japanese name and he chooses to live in Little Tokyo suggest that he is possibly Zainichi Korean, perhaps descended from Korean migrants forced to come to Japan in the early 20th century. Whatever the truth, this seemingly “minor” detail indexes the imperial history of Japan that is often overlooked – much in the same way that the Japanese internment is side-stepped in *The Crimson Kimono* as a means to valorize both the U.S. military and Japanese American military service.

But as macho and violent as Joe and Charlie may have acted while serving in the Korean War and walking their beat on the streets of Los Angeles, their shared private life suggests a picture of tranquil, homosocial domesticity.

When Joe and Charlie returned to the States after the war, they pursued the same line of work to stay close to one another, eventually becoming partners



Figure 20. Domestic Bliss.

in the homicide division of the LAPD. Not content with merely seeing each other at work, the two men live together at the Gaylord Hotel, occupying separate rooms in an adjoining suite. Before Chris enters the picture, the two seem very much like a happy domestic couple. Later in the narrative, Charlie brags to Chris that he and Joe put “every buck [they] had into the place” as if they were building a life together like a conventional married pair. Further, Joe’s strident identification as an American and his loyalty to Charlie becomes further solidified through his blatant disinterest in “that babe from Gardenia,” as Charlie calls her – a *kibei* (U.S. born, Japan-educated) whom Joe dismisses as a viable romantic interest. Until Chris comes along, no woman, it seems, will break this inseparable duo apart.

If the de facto domestic partnership between Joe and Charlie weren’t enough, the film’s idealization of hegemonic masculinity becomes further complicated by not just the ensuing interracial relationship, but the marked contrast between Chris’s reactions to each of her respective “suitors.” Although the narrative seems to be

promoting a certain type of masculinity, these internal contradictions suggest the creation of a space where an alternative conception of masculinity can be explored – one that is either contrary to or simply a creative revision of the traditional forms of American manhood. The film’s engagement with the hardboiled detective genre is not merely a superficial mining of its conventions, but a more complex interrogation of what it means to be a man – Asian, white, or otherwise – in then-contemporary U.S. culture.

The Crimson Kimono benefitted from revisions to the Hollywood Production Code in 1956 that allowed for the onscreen depiction of interracial couples for the first time in decades. From March of 1930 to December of 1956, the Production Code had a provision that expressly forbade such relationships, albeit with a clear anti-black bias. To be clear, interracial relationships between whites and Asians were not merely a cultural taboo, as anti-miscegenation laws existed well into the twentieth century in numerous U.S. states, including California, many of which had specific or nominal prohibitions against white intermarriage with people of Asian descent. In an interview with Roger Garcia, James Shigeta explains that his upbringing in Hawai‘i, a U.S. territory where no such laws existed, affected his reaction to the film’s content:

Well, don’t forget, I come from Hawaii. Maybe I wasn’t as surprised as someone from here [the mainland]. And I liked the way it led up to that point. I guess I was surprised but it wasn’t a terrible shock...Looking back, I guess it came way before its time—the relationship between a white [person] and the Asian guy” (117).

What might get lost, however, in viewing *The Crimson Kimono*’s treatment of interracial relationships as a groundbreaking moment is a discussion that goes beyond

the mere fact that Chris chooses Joe over Charlie. Instead, the focus should be on *why* she falls in love with him and *how* the film characterizes her reasoning. Such a discussion hinges on the different kinds of masculinity that Joe and Charlie embody.

To say that Charlie comes on strong to Chris would be an understatement. Within only a few days of meeting her, Charlie claims to have fallen in love with Chris, even talking over the idea of marrying her. Despite Chris being a material witness in a murder case and the fact that she gives no signs of reciprocal feelings, Charlie breaks numerous legal and ethical obligations by actively hitting on the young woman, proceeding to ask her out on a date and even kissing her – the latter occurring the precise moment *after* she’s been visibly shaken by a failed attempt on her life.

While Charlie’s behavior paints the picture of the hyper-aggressive, All-American (white) young man, Chris gravitates toward the more sensitive, introspective Joe. While Charlie is elsewhere obtaining information from his stool pigeon, Ziggy (Walter Burke), Joe unintentionally begins to woo Chris – simply by talking about his father’s paintings and absently playing *Aka-tonbo* (“Red Dragonfly”) on the piano.⁴¹ As the two begin to connect, it is *Chris* who makes a pass at Joe, who – despite his own attraction to her – immediately resists her advances and buries his feelings out of respect for Charlie. Chris’s obvious romantic interest in Joe seems to suggest that his inherent sensitivity is a trait to be valued, one that makes him more desirable than the retrograde masculinity exemplified by his partner.

However, even though Chris’s decision seems to open the door for a portrayal of

⁴¹ This popular Japanese nursery song is based on a poem by Rofu Miki (1889-1964) and was set to music by Kosaku Yamada (1886-1965) in 1927.

Asian American masculinity that differs from the emasculated portrayals of the past, the way in which *The Crimson Kimono* deals with the resultant love triangle complicates such an easy reading of the text.

The Racist Look: The Unfathomable Mystery of *The Crimson Kimono*

While the mystery of Sugar Torch's death may be the initial engine that drives the narrative forward, a much more important and difficult mystery comes to the fore more than halfway through *The Crimson Kimono*. Unwilling to act on his feelings for Chris, Joe's buried emotions come to a head during an exhibition kendo match with Charlie in downtown Little Tokyo. During the match, Joe goes berserk and knocks Charlie unconscious. When Charlie awakens later on, Joe says, "I blew my stack" and ultimately confesses that not only does he love Chris, but that she feels the same way about him. Although Joe fully expects Charlie to be angry and perhaps even take a swing at him, Charlie's reaction shakes Joe to his core. After contemplating Joe's confession for a few moments, Charlie raises his head and asks, "You mean you want to marry her?" (see Figure 21).



Figure 21. The Ambiguity of a Look

In response, Joe loses his temper: “You wouldn’t have said it that way if I were white!” When Charlie expresses ignorance, Joe retorts with what he believes is the most damning piece of evidence: “Look at your face!” The dramatic outcome of this encounter resembles the kind of reversal of fortune (*peripetia*) that occurs in Greek drama; in one fell swoop, Joe a) ends his friendship with Charlie, b) decides to break things off with Chris, and c) makes plans to quit the police force. The homosocial domestic space Charlie and Joe had cultivated for years prior to the events of the movie seems irrevocably broken.

As indicated earlier, my reading of this scene and the ending of *The Crimson Kimono* goes directly against not only seeming critical consensus, but also the director’s professed intentions. In Samuel Fuller’s autobiography, *A Third Face: My Tale of Writing, Fighting, and Filmmaking* (2002), he makes his intentions clear: “I was trying to make an unconventionally triangular love story, laced with reverse racism, a kind of narrow-mindedness that’s just as deplorable as outright bigotry. I wanted to show that whites aren’t the only ones susceptible to racist thoughts. Joe is a racist because he transfers his fears to his friend” (376).⁴² In *Sam Fuller: Film is a Battleground* (1994), film scholar Lee Server agrees with Fuller’s estimation, couching his analysis in terms of the director’s larger oeuvre: “Typically, Fuller shows racism to be the product of an aberrant psychology – in this case, paranoia. Always looking for the unexpected twist, he makes his racist Joe Kojaku the

⁴² In an earlier interview Fuller makes a similar claim about *The Crimson Kimono* and Joe Kojaku: “That picture I made for one reason. I wanted to show how racism can come from anywhere” (Server 42).

ostensible victim of it” (84). In similar terms, Lisa Dombrowski characterizes Joe’s reaction as “a surprising case of reverse racism” (122) and concludes that Joe was “projecting onto Charlie his own fears of racial prejudice” (123).

I find it oddly fascinating that Samuel Fuller himself as well as these various film scholars would characterize Joe’s behavior as a case of reverse racism. The term *reverse racism*, which itself is deeply problematic, explicitly refers to situations in which the majority racial group becomes the target of prejudice or discrimination – for example, this word most often appears in criticisms of affirmative action programs. Under no circumstances could Joe’s behavior be understood as falling within this definition. For Samuel Fuller to call Joe Kojaku a racist also seems to suggest a fundamental misunderstanding of what that term means. After all, nowhere in the film does Joe express any racial prejudice toward Charlie. Even in anger, he fails to utter a single racial slur against his longtime friend nor is he presented with any opportunity to discriminate against Charlie either. Rather than see Joe’s outburst as the actions of a racist, his behavior is, if anything, the unsurprising byproduct of living in a world in which white racism clearly exists. Despite the seeming consensus on how viewers are meant to interpret Joe’s reaction, I would argue that the film provides no clear-cut answers, as the question of racial bias can be as ambiguous as the expression on Charlie’s face.

In the fallout of his confrontation with Charlie, Joe eventually seeks the counsel of Chris. Although sympathetic towards him, ultimately she refuses to believe his heated interpretation of events: “You only saw what you wanted to see.

It's what you think is behind every word, every look." For her, Joe's cries of racism are purely imagined. Although Joe still loves her, he responds by saying that as a white person, she could not possibly understand how he feels. "For the first time, I feel different," Joe claims, somewhat unbelievably, "I've never seen that look before, never felt it." He goes on to profess that he never had to endure anti-Japanese racism in the army or in the police force, a piece of dialogue Gina Marchetti rightly views with skepticism:

That a Japanese American man, in his twenties or early thirties, who must have grown up during World War II, with virulently racist anti-Japanese sentiments common throughout the United States, should be given a speech in which he claims to have never experienced racism before seems ludicrous.
(156)

As preposterous as it may sound, Joe's admission that he has never dealt with racism before seems right in line with the film's subtle disavowal of the kind of government sanctioned racism against Japanese Americans during World War II. However, if we accept Joe's statements as true within the confines of the text itself – that he was a fully assimilated Japanese American who was somehow shielded from racial slurs his entire life – we can see how quickly his world has shattered in response to this perceived act of racism, as he begins to question his once firm place within the American narrative: "I was born here. I'm American. I feel it, I live it, and love it. But down deep, what am I? Japanese American? American Japanese? Nisei? What label do I live under, Chris? Tell me!" Although hyperbolized and perhaps unconvincing, Joe's breakdown speaks to the fragile place of all racial minorities in U.S. culture, where even someone living an idealized "American Dream" existence such as Joe,

one in which he feels accepted and at ease between two cultures, can have everything he holds dear crash down upon him at the mere hint of racist hatred. His subsequent inability to define himself – the Asian American identity crisis *par excellence* – is itself the product of white racism in the larger culture. Ultimately, Joe cannot help but wonder if the racial hatred he perceived in Charlie’s reaction had always been there: “I’m wondering now, what was in his mind all these years? What kind of cracks he made when I wasn’t there.” However, the way in which the film characterizes Joe’s reaction as utterly paranoid – with white characters constantly assuring him that it is all in his mind – speaks directly to ways in which people even today attempt to silence those who raise the issue of racism as being too sensitive, too politically correct, or somehow “playing the race card.”

How does one determine whether or not Charlie’s look was racist? The film provides little evidence to confirm either interpretation. However, there is one telling scene that occurs prior to the heated confrontation between Joe and Charlie. After Joe realizes he is in love with Chris, he becomes frustrated that he has to hold his feelings back and starts giving Charlie the silent treatment. In turn, Charlie becomes concerned about his friend’s drastic change in behavior and asks Chris if something happened between them.

CHARLIE: Well, sometimes people drop a remark. Harmless one, you know?

CHRIS: No, I don’t know.

CHARLIE: Well, sometimes people forget, the word slips.

CHRIS: You mean a word about the Japanese?

The operative, unspoken word here is “Jap,” and when Chris expresses her outrage that Charlie would even suggest that she would say anything racist to Joe, he rushes to embrace her and kisses her on the mouth, just as he had done her before after her near death experience. This short scene carries a number of implications. First, the entirety of this exchange foregrounds not just Charlie’s aggressive heterosexuality, but his eagerness to use romance as a means to shut down Chris’s emotional reactions. Second, Charlie’s show of concern on Joe’s behalf here could suggest that perhaps Joe’s later accusation of racism against him is unfounded. However, Charlie’s characterization of the slur “Jap” as “harmless” would imply that he is not quite as anti-racist as this act of concern might initially signal. Not only does he preemptively excuse Chris for possibly making a racist remark against his best friend, but Charlie’s wording implies that he views such “slips” as simply insensitive breaches of decorum – they carry no real meaning, and therefore, are not racist.

The film reaches its climax with Charlie – on prodding from Chris – attempting to make amends with a despondent Joe. Charlie does not apologize, but tries to convince his friend that it was a look of jealousy not racism: “Maybe there was a look on my face. It was a look of hate. Normal, healthy, jealous hate. Look at me, Joe. You know me better than anybody else. I’m even carrying a pint of your blood in me, remember?” Joe, however, remains unconvinced. The tension between the two of them is broken when they spot their prime suspect, Paul Sand (Neyle Morrow). Charlie and Joe track him down, only to learn that it was Sand’s girlfriend who killed Sugar Torch out of jealousy. Suddenly, Roma Wilson (Jaclynn Greene), a

wigmaker who had appeared earlier in the film, stands revealed as the killer, stepping out of the shadows and firing her weapon at the detectives.

In the ensuing chase sequence that parallels the one that began the film, Joe chases Roma down on Main Street and shoots her, although not fatally. As Joe cradles Roma in her arms, she admits that she killed Sugar Torch because she thought the woman was having an affair with her boyfriend. In reality, Paul Sand was just a mousy librarian who only wanted to put his knowledge of “Oriental customs” to good use, but was too embarrassed about Sugar Torch’s act to tell anyone. “It was all in my mind,” Roma admits, “I thought I repulsed him.” Roma’s confession begins in a two-shot of the actors before pushing in on Shigeta’s face to suggest his character has experienced a kind of *anagnorisis*, that crucial moment of recognition in Greek drama when one’s ignorance gives way to a higher knowledge. Despite Fuller using a close-up to emphasize the importance of Joe’s seeming epiphany, the way the ensuing scene is staged suggests that this connection failed to resonate the first time, necessitating yet another moment of recognition for Fuller to capture onscreen. When Charlie arrives on the scene, Joe explains that Roma killed Sugar Torch because “she only saw in his face what she wanted to.” The instant Joe completes this sentence, the camera pushes in on his face once again to highlight a second moment of recognition.



Figure 22. The Moment of Truth.



Figure 23. The Moment of Recognition.



Figure 24. The Moment of Truth Redux.



Figure 25. The Moment of Recognition Redux.

Realizing his “mistake,” Joe immediately apologizes to Charlie, telling him it was all in *his* mind. As a result of Roma’s confession, he admits to being unsure of what possessed him to even accuse Charlie in the first place. Joe’s sensitivity – that defining aspect of his character which most appealed to Chris – also stands revealed as his *hamartia*, that fatal flaw or error of judgment that contributes to the tragic hero’s downfall. Whether one considers Joe’s actions a result of an intellectual error or some personal deficiency, his actions fit this convention of Greek tragedy.

In response to Joe’s apology, Charlie calls him “a meathead,” a comic term of masculine endearment that suggests the chance for forgiveness seems imminent. However, when Joe asks whether they are still partners, Charlie simply replies, “Nope,” before adding, “I’m just glad you wrapped up your own case.” Ultimately,

Joe's sensitive, reconstructed masculinity wins the girl, but at the steep price of his friendship with Charlie.

Detecting Racism

While critical discussions surrounding the film have largely focused on the implications of the look Charlie gave Joe after the kendo match, what happens immediately after the case has been solved seems just as, if not even more relevant for analysis. When Joe and Chris rush to be into each other's arms and kiss, Charlie gives them another look, an equally ambiguous one that Joe and Chris do *not* see. Is it a look of jealous hatred or racial hatred? Can the two be distinguished? Can it not be both?



Figure 26. The Look No One Sees.



Figure 27. The Climactic Kiss.

While the resolution of the film's ostensible mystery – the murder of Sugar Torch – may seem somewhat perfunctory, I contend that this inciting event merely serves as cover story for the real central enigma of *The Crimson Kimono* – what did the look on Charlie's face mean? The film seems to suggest that racism is all-encompassing – that

is, one must accept either Joe's view that Charlie's look was racist and that means he was *always* a racist or Charlie's explanation that his reaction was not racist in the least and was instead exactly what he claimed it to be: "Normal, healthy jealous hate." This false binary has haunted serious discussions of racism for decades. While treatments in the media and popular culture tend to towards a very Manichean reading of racist behavior, attitudes, and speech – as if racism were somehow only endemic to "bad people" – the truth is that racial prejudice works in more complex, subtle ways, and even so-called "good people" like Charlie can fall prey to it. In many ways, the mystery of Charlie's look speaks directly to the cultural legacy and ultimate impact of the racist stereotypes I have explored thus far in this dissertation. The idea that we live in a post-racial world in which racism largely exists in the minds of all-too-sensitive minorities has incredible resonance with the discourses surrounding Charlie Chan and other racist stereotypes of the past.

My previous analysis of the opening sequence of *Phantom of Chinatown* has some relevance here as well. To understand not only the larger themes of the film, but also its contradictory portrayal of race, one would do well to revisit the opening credits of *The Crimson Kimono*. During the title sequence, the viewer is presented with a blank canvas, which is gradually filled in with details by the artist who signs the painting as the sequence comes to an end (See Figure 28 and 29). From the very first frame, Samuel Fuller signals to the audience not only about the conventions of the mystery genre – that is, a "sketchy" case with missing details that need to be filled in by its detective protagonists, but also about L.A.'s Little Tokyo itself, viewing it as

a community that mainstream white audiences would likely have little knowledge about, an oversight which the filmmakers seek to remedy by providing that vital, missing cultural information. But on another level, this opening sequence also grapples with the specter of racism and artistic representation. Whether we are discussing Joe Kojaku's alleged paranoia or Samuel Fuller's professed intentions, we must ask ourselves, *who* is writing *what* onto this blank canvas and *why*? While the case of *The Crimson Kimono* may seem satisfactorily wrapped up for Fuller's Japanese American detective, for millions of Asian Americans, the specter of racism would lurk for many years to come.⁴³



Figure 28. Title card for *The Crimson Kimono*.



Figure 29. Director credit for *The Crimson Kimono*.

⁴³ Since *The Crimson Kimono*, Japanese American detectives have been few and far between in the mystery genre – on both television and in film. Notable examples both inside and outside of the genre include Jack Soo's wisecracking Detective Sergeant Nick Yemana on the sitcom *Barney Miller* (ABC, 1975-1979 seasons); Pat Morita's portrayal of the titular detective in ABC's short-lived television show *Ohara* (1987); and Brandon Lee's Japanese American cop in *Showdown in Little Tokyo* (Warner Brothers, 1994).

Chinatown Revisited: *Chan Is Missing* as Neo-Noir

Although the 1961 film adaptation of Rodgers and Hammerstein's musical *Flower Drum Song* featured a mostly Asian American cast, Wayne Wang's 1982 debut film, *Chan Is Missing* is considered by many as the definitive starting point for "Asian American Cinema." According to Jun Xing, *Chan Is Missing* "stands out indisputably as the first Asian American independent theatrical feature ever made in the United States" (46). But despite its more experimental origins and indie reputation, *Chan Is Missing* most closely resembles one of the most popular and oft-imitated of genres, the hardboiled detective story – more specifically, its American film noir variant.

Since the end of the classic film noir cycle in the early 1950s, numerous filmmakers have repeatedly hearkened back to movies of that period. The noir revival of the late 1960s and early 1970s ranks as perhaps the most active time in which the noir aesthetic was consistently evoked in modern American cinema. As Mark Bould, Kathrina Glitre, and Greg Tuck write in their introduction to *Neo-Noir* (2009), it was a time "when Hollywood, in financial crisis, turned to the possibilities of a genre that appeared to have died out a decade earlier" (4). Although Bould and company recommend a "transnational global approach [that] suggests a more continuous mode of production than that experienced in the US context alone" (5), they define neo-noir as a self-conscious attempt at replicating film noir, itself a retroactively decided "genre" unknown to the actual practitioners during those earlier decades. While films like Dick Richards's *Farewell, My Lovely* (Avco Embassy Pictures, 1975) were no-

nonsense tributes, this self-conscious revival is more often characterized by a certain revisionist impulse, sometimes seen as a product of the post-Watergate, Vietnam War era. Taking into consideration films like Robert Altman's *The Long Goodbye* (MGM, 1973), Roman Polanski's *Chinatown* (Paramount, 1974), and Arthur Penn's *Night Moves* (Warner Bros, 1975), one notices a concerted effort on the part of the filmmakers involved to not just pay homage to film noir and the hardboiled detective genre, but to tweak these recognizable forms to reflect their own contemporary moment. The noir revival – or neo-noir, as it has been called – became a kind of nostalgia-infused, multipurpose blueprint for future generations of filmmakers, authors, comic book creators, and even video game designers.

Without question, Wayne Wang's inaugural feature film, *Chan Is Missing*, owes a great deal to the revisionist neo-noirs of the 1970s. Although this connection may seem tenuous upon first glance due to its narrow categorization as an "Asian American film," upon closer inspection, Wang's debut successfully couples film noir aesthetics with the closely associated genre of the hardboiled detective story to undermine not only the generic expectations inherent to the traditional mystery plot, but also the frequently crass cultural stereotypes that pervade all three of these closely-related forms (film noir, the hardboiled detective story, and classical whodunits). Further, *Chan Is Missing* can be read as a revisionist Charlie Chan film that employs familiar tropes, characters, and situations from the once popular franchise and turns each of them on their respective heads. Further, I argue that the film actively engages with the Orientalist tropes that continue to haunt cinematic

portrayals of Chinatown through a sophisticated re-interpretation of typical noir conventions. Neither parody nor pastiche, *Chan Is Missing* attempts to recuperate the racialized space of Chinatown from the stereotypical depictions that have long pervaded not just film noir and Hollywood films in general, but American popular culture.

Production, Release, and Critical Reception

Although resembling a film noir in its final cut, the finished version of *Chan Is Missing* differs largely from its original proposed form. Initially conceived as an experimental film entitled *Fire Over Water*, Wayne Wang's written proposal to the American Film Institute in late 1978 centered on the adventures of two Chinese American cabbies and a young African American driver, a racial dynamic which sounds strongly reminiscent of the Monogram era Charlie Chan films, which featured Chan, his son, and their African American assistant, Birmingham Brown.⁴⁴ After receiving a \$10,000 grant from the AFI, Wang further tinkered with the story, realizing he needed to make a substantial change. "When I started doing the script,"

⁴⁴ In addition to the central mystery for each respective installment, Monogram-funded Charlie Chan films charted an emerging friendship between Birmingham Brown (Mantan Moreland) and Charlie Chan's Number Three Son, Tommy (Benson Fong). Moreland initially appeared as a chauffeur caught up in Chan's adventure in the first Monogram film *Charlie Chan and the Secret Service*, and he was brought back for fourteen additional films. In retrospect, Moreland's performances in these films have been almost as controversial as Charlie Chan himself, as his role in these films has been viewed by some critics as a racially demeaning caricature. Despite serving as comic relief, Birmingham and Tommy become crucial parts of the many investigations as Chan's "assistants" (as he calls them in *Dark Alibi*) rather than active impediments. In *The Jade Mask* (1945), Birmingham actually apprehends the killer himself, while in *The Chinese Ring* (1947), Birmingham and Jimmy rescue the kidnapped Chan and another potential victim.

he told Tony Chiu of the *New York Times* in 1982, “I felt extremely uncomfortable about the black character because I didn’t really know enough to write him. So I dropped him and decided to have these two Chinese guys look for another guy who’s an immigrant.” Wang proceeded to work on additional versions of the screenplay and even received a grant for \$12,500 from the National Endowment of the Arts before principal photography commenced. In an interview collected in 2001’s *Out of the Shadows: Asians in American Cinema*, Wayne Wang revealed to Roger Garcia additional details about his preliminary conception of the film: “The original version was very formalistic. [...] It was conceived as a film noir about two taxi drivers looking at a murder. The whole thing was structured on the evolution of the Chinese ideogram.” (179). What Wang meant by this latter claim, however, has never been fully explained.

Filmed over ten consecutive weekends between 1980 and 1981 in San Francisco, *Chan Is Missing* made its big screen debut in New York. Shot on 16mm black-and-white film with a gritty, often documentary-like visual style, *Chan Is Missing* opens with a scene which plays more like a domestic drama than a traditional mystery thriller, as it quickly thrusts the viewer into a cozy, teasing family scene involving an older, seemingly timid uncle and his more outspoken Chinese American niece and nephew. But that initial misapprehension is soon alleviated when the film’s titular “missing person” plot takes hold, drawing its viewers into the plight of two Chinatown taxi drivers for the locally owned Wing On cab company: the aforementioned uncle – a middle-aged Chinese American named Jo (Wood Moy) –

and his street-smart nephew, Steve (Marc Hayashi). The two of them want to go into business for themselves, but in order to obtain a license from an independent owner in Chinatown, they must pool their resources and hand over their accumulated wages to a trusted intermediary—the enigmatic title character, Chan Hung. However, Chan has disappeared, along with all of their hard-earned cash.

In true detective story fashion, Jo and Steve hit the streets of San Francisco on a quest that takes them to a variety of locations in and around Chinatown, including a popular Chinese restaurant, a Manila Town senior citizen center, and even the home of Chan’s ex-wife (Ellen Yeung) and teenage daughter, Jenny (Emily Woo Yamasaki). Along the way, these two would-be detectives meet a myriad of interesting, sometimes downright peculiar characters, including a lawyer with a specialty in cross-cultural misunderstandings (Judy Nihei); an eccentric cook and mutual friend of Chan Hung’s named Henry (Peter Chan); Chan Hung’s immigrant sponsor, Mr. Lee (Roy Chan); and the friendly neighborhood scholar, Mr. Fong (Leung Pui Chee), among many others. Each encounter highlights a different side of not only the people of Chinatown, but of Chan Hung himself. Thus, every time Jo and Steve think they have come closer to unraveling the mystery of Chan’s disappearance, a new clue takes them in a brand new direction. What really happened to Chan Hung? Did he callously abscond with their savings? Did he flee out of fear for his life? Or has something far more sinister taken place? In the end, the film yields more questions than answers. In his essay, “Invisible Cities: Wayne Wang,” film critic-turned-novelist Alvin Lu writes of the characters, “The ‘answers’ are

transparently metaphorical, ostensibly about Chan Hung, really about themselves and their take on Chinese American identity” (33). To be fair, the return of their lost savings gives the two men a measure of closure by story’s end, but the film denies both the characters and the viewer any definitive solution to its mystery, as the complete truth about Chan Hung forever remains in the shadows.

Upon its theatrical release in New York on April 24th, 1982 at the New Directors/New Films Festival at the Museum of Modern Art, *Chan Is Missing* became a surprise arthouse hit, garnering a limited theatrical run and more than recouping its scant \$22,500 production budget. In addition, the film was immediately met with much critical acclaim, as Vincent Canby of the *New York Times* called *Chan Is Missing* “a matchless delight,” while Roger Ebert and the late Gene Siskel effusively praised the film on their initial PBS television show, *Sneak Previews*, with Ebert himself hailing it as “a whimsical treasure of a film” in a print review for the *Chicago Sun-Times*. This overwhelmingly positive critical reception cemented *Chan Is Missing*’s reputation as landmark film for Asian American cinema, a distinction it has maintained ever since, especially after its selection for preservation by the National Film Registry in 1996.

In an interview with *Film Comment*, Wayne Wang admits that he was making a conscience reference to film noir with his 1982 debut: “The only aspect I thought about for the American audience was the aesthetics, the more formal aspect: the

structure of the film, how it was shot, and taking a *film noir* and reworking it” (25).⁴⁵ Much of the film criticism surrounding *Chan Is Missing* makes only passing references to film noir, leaving this important linkage a relatively unexplored topic. For example, in an uncredited piece entitled “Dialogue on Film: Wayne Wang” for the journal *American Film*, the author writes that Wang’s film “has an intriguing mix of a film noirish detective story set in the unfamiliar (to most U.S. viewers) environment of the Chinese community” (17). Similarly, in his article “Being Chinese American, Becoming Asian American: *Chan Is Missing*,” Peter X. Feng only briefly comments on the noir connection, mentioning how the film’s “claustrophobic visual style, combined with grainy black-and-white cinematography, suggests *film noir*” (89). However, in “‘Bad for the Glass’: Representation and Filmic Deconstruction in *Chinatown* and *Chan Is Missing*,” William Galperin takes issue with the comparison, calling the film “unnoirish, more broadly comic” (1157). For the most part, the film’s resemblance to film noir (or lack thereof) has yet to be given an in-depth analysis.

Other critics have even characterized *Chan Is Missing* as staging an intervention into our collective knowledge of the Charlie Chan franchise. Peter Feng even feels that *Chan Is Missing* not only resembles noir, but “can be interpreted as a revisionist Charlie Chan film” (101) while Ken Hanke says the film “comes across as part homage, part meditation on the old films, and restores (possibly unintentionally) something of the central Chinese/American conflict between the generations that had

⁴⁵ Wayne Wang’s interest in noir didn’t end with *Chan Is Missing*. After the release of the film, he was in talks to helm a remake of Nicholas Ray’s classic noir, *In a Lonely Place* (1950). The picture was never made, but Wang did go on to direct the neo-noir *Slam Dance* in 1987.

never fully made it from Biggers' novels to the screen" (261). Echoing these sentiments is Diane Lin Mark, who states in her introduction to the screenplay for *Chan Is Missing* that "The film is at once a spoof of the Charlie Chan genre and a statement on Chinese America in a diversity hitherto undepicted in theatrical film history" (1). As with the connections with noir, the correlation between Charlie Chan and *Chan Is Missing* seem neither coincidental nor unintended by the filmmaker. When asked about how he chose the name Chan for his missing character, Wang replied: "Because it's a common last name, and also because of Charlie Chan" (Mark 112). This juxtaposition of attempting a more humorous jab at the Charlie Chan series with the paranoia and dread that pervades classic film noir proves crucial to understanding just what is being "revised" in *Chan Is Missing*'s engagement with these two filmic discourses.

An Unconventional Detective

Chan Is Missing owes a clear debt to the detective tradition in its literary, cinematic, and televisual forms (*Dragnet*, *The Rockford Files*, and, of course, Charlie Chan are referenced in the film), but Wayne Wang does not seem to be interested in merely adhering to formulaic mystery conventions. Instead, the director utilizes the detective genre as a springboard to explore more complex cultural issues. Certainly, for all its twists, the film does generally follow the formula commonly presented by film noir detective movies (which, it should be noted not all noir are): "the pictures are arranged as a sequence of interviews between the private eye and witnesses and

potential suspects which lead, after a string of false clues and the investigator's mistaken judgments, to a final, surprising revelation" (Hirsch 168). In the case of *Chan Is Missing*, however, the film's last act surprise is anything but conventional.

The de facto "detectives" of the piece are ostensibly Jo and, to a lesser extent, his nephew Steve. The pairing of an older Chinese American with a member of the younger generation immediately calls to mind visions of Charlie Chan and his firstborn son. In fact, when Jo and Steve bump into Jenny on the street, Steve jokingly introduces Jo and himself as such: "That's Mr. Charlie Chan and I'm his number one son, The Fly." Late in the film, Chan's name resurfaces during Jo's conversation with George, the director of the Newcomer's Language Center. As the two discuss a forwarded letter meant for Chan Hung, George remarks: "Now that's what we call in the detective trade a good clue. Of course, you don't look like anybody's conception of Charlie Chan." In these separate invocations of Chan, the film is simultaneously conjuring up the notorious cultural icon in the same breath as it seeks to distance its characters from him. While the old-timer/young man pairing may suggest a modern reiteration of Chan and his Number One Son, the eventual fracturing of that relationship towards the end of the film belies the typical happy endings suggested by the normal travails of the Chan family. Clearly, Jo and Steve – both little more than amateur sleuths – are far from professional detectives, shown to be out of their depths and bearing no resemblance to Chan and Son in any substantive way. As Jo himself states midway through the film, as he finds himself home alone, dumbfounded by the dead-ends his amateur investigation has taken: "I guess I'm no gourmet Chinese cook

and I'm no Charlie Chan either, although I did start watching some of his reruns for cheap laughs. Charlie says, 'When superior man have no clue, be patient, maybe he become lucky.'" But Jo's luck, it seems, has run out.⁴⁶

Still, like the detectives in the hardboiled mode of Sam Spade and Philip Marlowe, the idea of being a self-employed independent operator appeals to these two men, and is, in fact, their very motivation for getting involved in this mess with Chan Hung in the first place. As Jo says in voiceover early in the film: "I decided to get a cab license so we can be our own boss. We had to sublease the license from an independent owner in Chinatown." The attempt, then, at self-employed independence by these native-born Asian Americans has been jeopardized by the "fresh off the boat" immigrant. What, then, is this film trying to say about this relationship in terms of Asian American identity, assimilation, and "making it" in U.S. culture? Is it more complex than this binary opposition would suggest?

In some ways, *Chan Is Missing* deals with this issue by borrowing from a type of noir that differs from one's traditional conceptions of it as a solely mystery-driven genre. In his book, *In a Lonely Street: Film Noir, Genre, Masculinity*, Frank Krutnik writes about this other type of film noir:

In the 1940s, thrillers featuring a personally implicated investigator far exceed in number the private-eye films, and they represent a further shift than the latter away from the "whodunit"/classical detective story and its narrative machinery of stabilization. They can be considered as "paranoid man" films, as melodrama specifically and overwhelmingly concerned with the problems besetting masculine identity and meaning. (131)

⁴⁶ Peter Feng sees a connection with a character other than Jo, suggesting that "to celebrate Steve as a deconstructed Charlie Chan is to privilege the notion of postmodern critique."

Chan Is Missing initially tries to carry over the paranoid quality of classic noir, via the fear of “commies” during the 1950s, this time transposed to the “New Chinese Money” that threatens the pro-Taiwan status quo of Chinatown. For example, the film’s opening conversation involves Chinatown politics, as Amy and Steve express a concern over the constant battle between these two factions. Steve remarks, perhaps cheekily, that he and his sister skipped out on a restaurant because of the clientele: “All the communists eat there, so we decided to eat at home.” They also express concern over the two candidates who exist somewhere outside the China vs. Taiwan binary: Paul, the Chinese American candidate whom Amy slips and calls “the neuter candidate” before correcting herself, and Bernie Lee, the so-called gay candidate, who elicits a kind of homophobic panic on the part Amy and Steve when mulling his chances for election. The conflation of being Chinese American with being “neutered” rather than neutral, as well as their fears over the gay candidate’s prospects seems a curious juxtaposition, considering what we know of stereotypes about Asian American masculinity. Whatever the case, *Chan Is Missing* goes on to exploit real-life, “ripped from the headlines” tensions between Communist and Taiwanese factions. One possible connection involves 87-year-old Sung Kim Lee, a supporter of the People’s Republic of China who shot 79-year-old Chun Wang, his anti-communist, pro-Taiwan neighbor, in the hallways of a Chinatown rooming house over differing politics. The film injects Chan Hung into this bizarre shooting, as he supposedly took pictures of the Taiwan faction beating up a PRC man during a parade or, alternatively, helped hide the gun Lee used to kill Chun Wang. This subplot

creates a sense of Red Scare intrigue, although no discernible narrative payoff occurs – which is itself a representative trait of the film.

Like the film noirs of yesteryear, *Chan Is Missing* explores the subjects of male camaraderie and masculine power, as the male duo of Jo and Steve prove to be the dominant “couple” of the film. Neither man is given a romantic love interest, although Steve worries that Jo’s feelings for his unseen ex-wife, herself an immigrant, may be clouding his judgment regarding Chan Hung. The film flirts with the idea of a femme fatale, as Chan Hung has allegedly become involved with another woman. Aside from a message from a mysterious female on Jo’s answering machine that instructs him to back off (“Jo, stop asking questions about Chan Hung.”), the film never fully develops this additional femme fatale subplot. At one point, we see a woman whom we believe may be Chan Hung’s mistress, but as the camera lingers on the street scene as other pedestrians wander into the shots, we realize that we are seeing things from Jo’s point of view, and that everyone on the streets of Chinatown has become a suspect in his own personal game of cat-and-mouse. The focus, then, turns inward to the pursuer rather than the pursued.⁴⁷

Just as in the noir era, the presence of traditional nuclear families is practically nonexistent, as Jo is divorced, the still-single Steve lives with his sister, and Chan Hung is estranged from his wife. While the days of Chinatown bachelor societies have long since passed, in some ways, the failed romantic relationships of these male

⁴⁷ Still, women tend to register as a kind of danger in the film, although not in any fatal way. Jo’s ex-wife, Chan Hung’s ex-wife, and Jenny all pose a kind of threat to Jo, Steve, and Chan Hung in varying ways, albeit simply because they are (with the exception of Jo’s unseen ex-wife) simply strong women with strong opinions that challenge the masculine authority of these two hapless amateur sleuths.

characters seem like a modern variant on this history. The nature of Jo and Steve's relationship plays directly into the film's implicit focus on the bonds between men, whether it manifests itself in the male camaraderie on display between the two protagonists or in the recollections of the various people who are friends with the very man that Jo and Steve are pursuing.

In a manner of speaking, aspects of the Philip Marlowe-style detective are resurrected in *Chan Is Missing*, although they take shape not in the form of a hard-drinking private eye, but in the unlikely guise of Jo, an aging cab driver. Although Jo is by no means a hardboiled detective in build or expertise, he does retain a striking similarity to this popular figure. Case in point: the impossible search for Chan Hung eventually takes its toll on the film's protagonists, and conflicting sympathies soon divide the men. The elder Jo looks only for the good in Chan Hung, whereas the more hotheaded Steve views their missing business associate as nothing more than a crass opportunist, as seen in a one-take, largely improvised scene late in the film:

JO: You know, it's hard enough for guys like us who's been here so long to find an identity. I can imagine Chan Hung. Somebody from China coming over here and trying to find himself.

STEVE: Aw, that's a bunch of bullshit, man. That identity shit, man, that's old news, man. It happened ten years ago.

When pressed further by Steve about his strange investment in Chan Hung's innocence, Jo becomes defensive, not only insisting that he considers Chan Hung a friend, but starting outright that, on some level, he can identify with the man's struggles in the United States. Steve, however, remains skeptical and makes a different kind of identification:

STEVE: The Chinese are all over this fucking city, man. What do you mean about identity? They got their own identity. I got my identity.

JO: Look, a guy who's had who had it all in another area, in China, he was almost upper class, and he comes over here and he can't find a job—how do you think it feels?

STEVE: That's tough shit, man. Eh, fuck. When I was in fucking 'Nam, man, and I was getting shot at by my own people—eh, the Chinese are all over the city, why are you tripping so heavy on this one dude for, man?

JO: Because he's a friend.

STEVE: Eh, is he really a friend?

Steve doesn't explain why he considers the North Vietnamese "his own people," but this global, pan-ethnic Asian identification trumps any allegiance to Chan Hung on ethnic terms. In her introduction to the *Chan Is Missing* screenplay, Diane Lin Mark characterizes this conflict as a generational divide:

If Chan is a metaphor for Chinatown, or the "Chinese" part of a Chinese American identity, then Jo's defense of Chan and his dogged attempt to find him is symbolic of the second generation's relative loyalty to Chinese culture, especially in discussions with the young. Likewise, Steve's distance from Chan, his feeling of having been cheated by him, his inability to understand why Jo trusts him, is representative of a Chinese American who has found little use for Chinese thought and culture for his survival in the United States (2)

When the argument comes down to money, an enraged Jo offers to repay Steve on behalf of Chan, as the two walk off in different directions, standing apart from one another on the pier – the personal gulf between them represented spatially in a single frame.

Jo's unflinching loyalty to Chan Hung, despite what Steve believes to be evidence to the contrary, bears a striking similarity to that of Philip Marlowe in both the novel and film versions of *The Long Goodbye* (1953, 1973). Like Marlowe's relationship with his missing and presumed dead pal, Terry Lennox, Jo dedicates himself to finding Chan Hung and demonstrates that he is more than willing to see this "case" to its end no matter the cost.⁴⁸ At every turn, Marlowe is told by the cops, the crooks, and pretty much anyone else he encounters that his faith in Lennox is misplaced, a phenomenon that is repeated in Steve's later outburst that concludes the conversation cited above.

Still, we are meant to sympathize with Jo, as the film is anchored by his limited perspective and voiceover narration, giving it the feel of a first-person detective novel at times. According to J.P. Telotte, the voiceover "is often seen as the most characteristic noir strategy" (14). The implementation of voiceover narration has become so commonplace in contemporary film and television that one almost forgets its literary origins. Not surprisingly, this narrative device arises directly from film noir's immediate cultural antecedent, the hardboiled detective novel, as popularized in the first half of the twentieth century. John Scaggs writes that voiceover "is a direct cinematic adaptation of the first-person narrative voice of the majority of hard-boiled texts, and both techniques emphasize the alienated individual and his or her position in a threatening urban environment" (69-70).

⁴⁸ Like 1973's *The Long Goodbye*, the returned missing money "resolves" the case, but while Marlowe learns the truth, Jo doesn't.

Usually depicted as part of a personal, film-long confession (as in Billy Wilder's 1944's film, *Double Indemnity*) or some other after-the-fact-testimony (see Edward Dymtryk's adaptation of Raymond Chandler's *Farewell, My Lovely*, entitled *Murder, My Sweet* from the same year), voiceover narration can be employed by filmmakers to clarify an often serpentine plot, make a character's complex motives more transparent, and/or generally make the film more palatable for mainstream audiences. In some sense, this is the case in *Chan Is Missing*, as it should be noted that Jo's continuous voiceover was not present in the initial cut of the film and was only later added during postproduction after Wang screened an early, largely experimental version (*Is Chan Still Missing?*). But making a film more "audience friendly" is not the only reason to include voiceover narration, as it can also serve as a counterpoint to any spoken dialogue or onscreen imagery presented to the viewer as "evidence." The latter ulterior motive seems to be most obviously at work in *Chan Is Missing*, as Jo's narration undercuts the so-called "facts" of the case presented by various members of the Chinatown community. For instance, after Steve expresses exasperation at Chan Hung's purported lack of sophistication, Jo reveals in voiceover, but not to Steve, that the joke is actually on his nephew, as "Chan Hung would sometimes play up being an FOB just to make Steve mad."

But Jo's often contrapuntal voiceover, which helps to clarify, to some degree, the morass of conflicting stories told about Chan Hung, takes an increasingly exasperated tone as his investigation wears on. As Paul Schrader remarks, "In such films as *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, *Laura*, *Double Indemnity*, *The Lady from*

Shanghai, Out of the Past, and Sunset Boulevard the narration creates a mood of *temps perdu*: an irretrievable past, a predetermined fate and an all-enveloping hopelessness” (57-58). By the end of the film, the voiceover narration of *Chan Is Missing* carries with it a tenor of despondency.

JO (V.O.): This mystery is appropriately Chinese. What’s not there seems to have just as much meaning as what is there. The murder article is not there. The photograph’s not there. The other woman’s not there. Chan Hung’s not there. Nothing is what it seems to be. I guess I’m not Chinese enough. I can’t accept a mystery without a solution.

This sense of haunted spaces that permeates the entirety of *Chan Is Missing* coupled with the overarching theme of “a mystery without a solution” greatly informs Wang’s revisionist take on the detective genre.

To return to the subject of masculinity for a moment, it remains important to recognize that the portrayal of men in film noir often intersects with narratives involving the return of the displaced World War II veteran. In *Noir Anxiety* (2003), Kelly Oliver and Benigo Trigo summarize the common view amongst critics that noir predominantly centers on a sense of masculinity in crisis:

These critics argue that upon returning home from the war, men, particularly white men, discovered that in their absence their authority in the home, in the factory, and in the city was being challenged on all sides [...] In general, these critics identify this breakdown of patriarchal authority as the source of the anxieties and fatalism of noir. They interpret the sense of fate or doom in film noir as a response to white men’s sense of a loss of control and authority, especially control and authority over women. (xiii)

In her essay, “How Hollywood Deals with the Deviant Male,” Deborah Thomas writes how film noir often centers on “the historical reality of the returning GI, so recently licensed to kill, who must now resume the incompatible role of the ‘normal’

family man” (64). With these statements in mind, it is safe to say that the “returning G.I.” ranks as a common feature in film noir, present in films like 1946’s *The Blue Dahlia* and 1947’s *Dead Reckoning*.

The oft-repeated concern over the plight of the returning veteran in classic film noir reappears in *Chan Is Missing*, albeit in a much different, significantly altered form tailored to the narrative at hand. This role is transferred to the figure of Chan Hung, the recent immigrant who was once an accomplished individual in his home country, but now finds himself alienated and isolated from the larger American culture. This type of cultural alienation, albeit transposed to the Chinese immigrant experience, is not only evident in the text itself, but was something Wayne Wang was thinking about when he began work on the film:

Chan Is Missing was shot after I had been in Hong Kong and was feeling guilty about the fact that I could no longer fit in my own culture. So when I came back to the United States. I submerged myself in Chinatown and went overboard in becoming Chinese. And that was the point when I realized that the Chinese and America worlds don’t necessarily blend that well together. You sort of bounce back and forth between the two. And coming to terms with that and expressing that collision of cultures inside myself were the emotional reasons for the birth of *Chan Is Missing*. (Garcia 18)

If, Raymond Borde and Etienne Chaumeton are correct, and “the aim of *film noir* was to create a *specific alienation*.” (25), then the immigrant story embedded in *Chan Is Missing* becomes an innovative new avenue in which to explore this particular aspect. The film constantly reminds us of Chan’s inability to fit into American society, summed up clearly in his ex-wife’s insistence that he is “too Chinese” to successfully assimilate. More interesting is the revelation presented by Chan’s old classmate, Henry (Peter Wang) a successful restaurateur in Chinatown, who also owns,

according to Amy, “eight restaurants and three of them are within two blocks of Clement Street.” He tells Jo that Chan was a top student in aeronautical engineering before he came to the States, and was disappointed that he could not attain the same level of employment he had in China:

HENRY (*in Mandarin*): After coming to America, what happened? He couldn't find a job, couldn't find a job—you know about that. When no one wants you, you don't have any way out. So what do these Americans want? They don't want to let you do any work in aeronautical engineering...they just need you to make all those egg rolls [...] sweet sour pork, won ton soup.

Henry then relates an embarrassing incident in which Chan Hung was bussing tables, only to see that four of his friends from Taiwan had entered the restaurant. Henry states, “The minute he saw those friends he rushed from the back door and never came back again.”

But what starts out as an investigation into the plight of Chan Hung, the hardworking immigrant trying, but ultimately failing to “make it big” in America, soon becomes a window into the lonely life of Jo, whose continual expressions of kinship with the missing man suggest they are, in fact, mirror images. This epiphany comes to the fore in Jo's second conversation with Henry, now dressed in a suit rather than a cooking apron:

HENRY [Mandarin dialogue italicized]: You're A.B.C *Do people consider you as an American?* They still consider you as a foreigner.

JO: Yeah, I know, but you know—here, right here, we have to do something. We have to fight.

HENRY: Fight, fight for what? Fight for recognition? You know how long we've been here? *We came here over one hundred years ago. Over one hundred years, and then we've increased to five hundred thousand*

Chinese here. Half million Chinese, one hundred years. If they don't recognize us, they don't want to recognize us, and they will not recognize us. You know what I mean? We will only live this life once. That's a great pity. One lives one life, and should do something more significant. You...you only live once. So we should do something more...more significant. How's that, eh?

The uncanny correlations between Chan Hung and Jo are also foreshadowed in his visit with Steve to the Manila Town Senior Center. They talk to the manager played by Presco Tabios, who in real life, according to Marc Hayashi on the documentary *Is Chan Still Missing?* (2006), had an idiosyncratic way of speaking. While talking with the two cabbies about Chan Hung, Presco begins telling them a story about one of Chan Hung's musician friends at the I-Hotel who woke up physically impaired. The disabled man would often be found staring at puddles in the street, claiming that the only person who could fix him was the man in the puddle. In an improvised line, Presco then tells the two men, "You guys are looking for Mr. Chan—why don't you look in the puddle?" This bit of dialogue resonates with the film's overall narrative arc, as Jo's search for Chan ostensibly reflects his personal journey of self-discovery.

The Noir Look

In terms of visual style, Wang and director of photography Michael Chin pull from eclectic sources in constructing of *Chan Is Missing*. While the film largely embraces the visual hallmarks of film noir, it does not adhere to the same classical Hollywood filmmaking techniques in terms of its editing and framing. Meant for the arthouse circuit, *Chan Is Missing* often utilizes a documentary filmmaking style to give its narrative an unpolished, "you-are-there" feel. The sequence at the

International Hotel in which Jo and Steve wander through a group of dancing Filipino senior citizens plays out like documentary footage. In fact, they freely look at the camera as it pans around the room – a definite taboo in classic Hollywood cinema. While one could presume the “seeing eye” of the camera operates as a stand-in for Jo and/or Steve, the film never makes an explicit connection in these sequences. Instead, one becomes conscious of the camera, as if it were naturally following Jo and Steve around during their investigation. Throughout the film, whenever Jo or Steve find someone willing to talk about Chan Hung, the ensuing interview proceeds in documentary style – a medium close-up of the subject as he looks just off the lens where the interviewer is located (See Figures 30-31). Unlike, say, later mockumentaries which pretend to have a film crew tracking the actions of the characters, *Chan Is Missing* instead resembles a straight-up documentary, but asks the viewer to accept the premise that no film crew exists. Wang’s occasional cuts to reaction shots helps the film resemble the typical shot-reverse shot expectations of classic Hollywood editing, but the documentary style remains evident. Although these visual cues persist throughout the film, *Chan Is Missing*’s stylistic debt to noir becomes more pronounced.



Figure 30. George (George Woo) answers Jo's questions.



Figure 31. Mr. Lee (Roy Chan) shares his opinion of Chan Hung.

A distinctive, oft-imitated visual style is perhaps the most immediate example of what distinguishes film noir from the rest of its Hollywood brethren. As Foster Hirsch points out in the *Dark Side of the Screen: Film Noir* (1981), “The films reserve their most bravura manipulation of light and shadow for climactic moments, for scenes of crime and passion, where chiaroscuro intensification is a signal of imminent and present catastrophe” (90). Although plenty of scenes in *Chan Is Missing* take place during the day to reflect the dayshifts of its taxi driver protagonists, there are even more sequences that involve night-for-night shooting, which feature incredibly black sequences, suggesting the same sort of pervasive darkness that saturates the frame in a typical film noir. Even in certain day scenes – like a shot in the fog of Jo’s taxi near the Golden Gate Bridge that recalls Alfred Hitchcock’s *Vertigo* (Warner Bros, 1958) – Wang employs these murky, stylized compositions in order to emphasize common visual metaphors of entrapment, claustrophobia, and even paranoia.



Figure 32. Still from *The Big Combo* (1955).



Figure 33. Jo's apartment in *Chan Is Missing* (1982).

In “Notes on Film Noir,” Paul Schrader explains the consequences of such a style: “Compositional tension is preferred to physical action. A typical *film noir* would rather move the scene cinematographically around the actor than have the actor control the scene by physical action” (57). This is especially true of *Chan Is Missing*, as the film consistently emphasizes the alienation of Jo in everything from Wang’s uses of shadows to the construction of the mise-en-scène. Jo is shown to live a solitary existence in a poorly-lit, terribly cramped living space with stereo equipment strewn around the house, as he uses his oven not for cooking but as a place to store the various discarded electronic gadgets he collects. Jo’s own creeping sense of paranoia is suggested in a scene which shows that he leaves a recording of a dog barking on all day while he is out collecting cab fares. Generally speaking, places in noir tend to reveal character. As Foster Hirsch points out, “The cramped tenements, the joyless middle-class apartments, the dingy furnished rooms that populate the genre carry the history of their inhabitants. Settings are chosen for thematic reinforcement” (85). Whether Jo is home alone or patrolling Chinatown, the film

consistently emphasizes his loneliness and isolation from meaningful human connections.



Figure 34. Jo at home.



Figure 35. Jo in Chinatown.

The film takes a turn midway through when Jo discovers a letter and a gun under the front seat of Chan Hung's car. Prior to this sequence, the only music in the film has been the diegetic sound of Cantonese pop songs filtering from the radio in Jo's taxi. However, the moment the gun is revealed, composer Robert Kikuchi-Yngonjo's non-diegetic score kicks in for the first time via a single music cue which gets progressively dissonant during the ensuing montage of paranoia and confusion. This chaotic stretch of the film then segues into a full-blown chase sequence, which bears a remarkable resemblance to similar scenes in films like *Kiss Me Deadly* (1955) and *The Big Sleep* (1946) (see Figures 36-39).



Figure 36. Still from *Kiss, Me Deadly* (1955).



Figure 37. Still from *Kiss Me Deadly* (1955).



Figure 38. Still from *Chan Is Missing* (1982).



Figure 39. Still from *Chan Is Missing* (1982).

This chase sequence is also intercut with a similar scene in which a visibly nervous Jo is driving in his taxi while constantly looking in his rearview mirror. The viewer can see a portion of the car riding Jo's bumper, but the driver's face remains obscured. In the ensuing chase on foot through Chinatown, Jo appears to have a pursuer, but his face remains unseen, so we cannot be entirely sure whether or not this man means Jo harm, if he is following him at all, or if he is merely a figment of Jo's imagination. Unlike Mike Hammer in *Kiss Me Deadly* and Philip Marlowe in *The Big Sleep*, Jo does not get the upper hand and surprise his pursuer. Instead, Jo flees without ever confronting him, if the enigmatic man even exists.

The question of the camera's eye view comes into play throughout the film as well. In the sequence in which Jo and Steve confront Chan's estranged wife and daughter on the street, we see their conversation through a window, but we cannot hear what they are saying. As Jo accompanies Chan's wife and daughter into the apartment as Steve stays behind, the camera dollies back to the living room, revealing that the "camera" is indeed a person, Jenny's unseen grandmother, as she slinks back to her favorite chair to watch television. This becomes clear when Jenny addresses her directly, and our "view" of the conversation between Jo and Mrs. Chan occurs from her perspective, as the camera/grandmother shifts from the conversation back to the television screen. Throughout the film, Wang makes the viewer question the subject positioning of the camera. Is it just an objective window into *Chan Is Missing*'s fictional world, one which we should take for granted? Or is the camera a character in the film? Wang's camerawork is strongly reminiscent of the groundbreaking "killer's eye view" perspective popularized by John Carpenter in *Halloween* (Compass International, 1978), in which the camera and the film's murderous antagonist, Michael Myers, are sometimes identical, sometimes separate, and still other times existing in an ambiguous space somewhere between the two. This technique puts the viewer off balance, and only further emphasizes the paranoia surrounding the all-seeing eye of the camera. In *Chan Is Missing*, sometimes the camera turns out to be from Jo's perspective, as he spies on others from his cab. Other times, it remains unanchored from a subjective perspective. Throughout the film, the camera moves from the hunted to the hunter and back again.



Figure 40. An “objective view” of the characters or a character waiting in the wings?



Figure 41. The unseen grandmother’s perspective.

Another stylistic convention of film noir involves the utilization of mirrors and windows in the frame to amplify certain thematic elements or psychological interiorities already present in the film. Hirsch explains that “reflections in mirrors and windows suggest doubleness, self-division, and thereby underline recurrent themes of loss or confusion of identity” (89). *Chan Is Missing* boasts an arresting opening scene that emphasizes the theme of duality which pervades the film. After the credit sequence, the movie opens on the windshield of a moving cab, but we do not see the driver. In fact, for the first forty seconds of screen time, actor Wood Moy’s face remains obscured entirely, until the “white” reflection of the San Francisco sky meets the “black” shadow of a nearby building, creating a *yin yang* symbol on the windshield. It lasts only for a moment before Jo’s face is revealed. Although Stephen Gong, executive director at the Center for Asian American Media, has pointed out the symbolic nature of this scene in the documentary *Is Chan Still Missing?*, no one seems to have publicly commented on the fact that it has a visual double at the end of the film (see Figures 42-44).



Figure 42. “Yin Yang symbol” reflected in Jo’s windshield.

During the finale of *Chan Is Missing*, Jo speaks in voiceover: “The problem with me is that I believe what I see and hear. If I did that with Chan Hung I’ll know nothing because everything is so contradictory. Here’s a picture of Chan Hung but I still can’t see him.” The film cuts to a Polaroid. In what is the only photo that Jo has of Chan Hung, the missing man’s face remains in the shadows. What is significant about this picture, beyond the once again deferred revelation of Chan’s identity, is the staging of the Polaroid photograph itself. On the left side of the frame, we see Jo standing in the sunlight and dressed entirely in white (or, at the very least, his wardrobe reads “white” due to the monochrome nature of the film stock), as the light takes a sweeping L-shape. On the right hand side of the frame is Chan Hung, dressed in black and draped in shadow. The placement of the figures in the scene (placed between a Laughing Buddha, no less) as well as the light/dark dichotomy suggest a purposefully staged *yin yang* symbol.



Figure 43. Jo and Chan Hung.

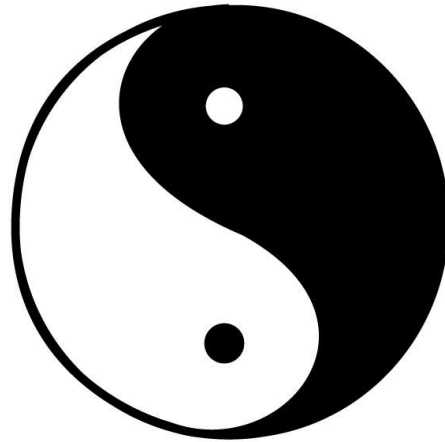


Figure 44. Yin and Yang Symbol.

In Chinese, specifically Taoist philosophy, the idea of *yin yang* is primarily utilized to illustrate the interrelationship and interdependency of opposing forces in the natural order of things. Symbolic of balance and change, *yin yang* posits that opposites exist only in relation to one another, co-existing within a larger, fluid system of being. To mix metaphors, Jo, the film’s aging “white knight” pursues Chan Hung, the proverbial “black sheep” of the community. Of course, Jo fails to find him in the flesh, instead discovering a twisted mirror image of himself, as his loyalties soon become divided between his allegiance to his nephew Steve and his unswerving faith in his missing friend, the titular Chan Hung.

De-Orientalizing Chinatown

The primarily urban spaces of Chinatown are given full representation in *Chan Is Missing*, as the film is composed entirely of on-location footage in San Francisco. Of course, Chinatown was by no means a new location for film noir, as it

was featured in a number of films, perhaps most famously in *The Lady from Shanghai* (Columbia Pictures, 1947).⁴⁹ In her essay on Orson Welles's film, E. Ann Kaplan writes of Chinatown's status as "the underground world of Chinese Otherness" where "faces and clothes are dark and figures are shadowed; the people seem part of a conspiracy that the viewer is excluded from" (195). Darrell Y. Hamamoto concurs with Kaplan, suggesting that *The Lady from Shanghai* "features sinister San Francisco Chinatown stock characters working in cahoots with the devious Elsa Bannister" (69), while Jennifer Fay and Justus Nieland explains the perceived inscrutability of the character: "For a non-Cantonese speaking audience, the untranslated language combined with the exoticism of the Chinese performance on stage reinforces Elsa's evil (because unknowable) character" (172).⁵⁰

This seemingly uniform reading of *Lady from Shanghai* is, in a sense, emblematic of the largely negative aspersions surrounding Chinatown, which I discussed at length in conjunction with *Phantom of Chinatown*. However, by the time of *Chan Is Missing's* release in 1982, another film had an impact on the cultural understanding of Chinatown as an urban space.

⁴⁹ In a nice bit of intertextuality, *The Lady from Shanghai* features in Wayne Wang's later film, *Eat a Bowl of Tea* (1989).

⁵⁰ In *Noir Anxiety*, Kelly Oliver and Benigo Trigo point out that audience members who understood Chinese would not view these scenes as incomprehensible and sinister, but would have a more complete understanding of the situation, as Elsa's standing in the Chinese community is not as conspiratorial as one might assume. In Fay and Nielund's terms, "Elsa is Other to these Others, as foreign to them as she is to us" (172).

The enigmatic, dangerous reputation that Chinatown had accrued has perhaps been cemented in contemporary U.S.

pop culture thanks to Roman

Polanski's 1974 film,

Chinatown. As Michael Eaton

writes in his book-length study

of the film: “‘Chinatown’ is

revealed not just as a place where no one knew what was going on, where it's best to do nothing but, much more dynamically, as a metaphorical site still mentally present where, if you do attempt to act, action will result in tragic, unforeseen consequences”

(55). This metaphor actually emerges directly from screenwriter Robert Towne's own research on Los Angeles's Chinatown, an anecdote which he shares in an interview on Paramount's initial DVD release of the film:

The title had come from a Hungarian vice cop. He had said that he'd worked vice and he'd worked in Chinatown. I asked him what he did, and he said, 'As little as possible.' I said, 'What kind of law enforcement is that?' He said, 'Hey man, when you're down there with the Tongs and the different dialects, you can't tell who's doing what to who and you can't tell whether you're being asked to prevent a crime or you're inadvertently lending the color of the law to help commit a crime. So, we've decided the best thing to do when you're in Chinatown is as little as possible.

The white law enforcement officer's Orientalist characterization and Robert Towne's subsequent extrapolation attributes a sinister logic to Chinatown that somehow exceeds its origins in mere language difference. Ironically, Chinatown itself barely appears in the film that bears its name, except for the tragic ending in which Jake Gittes is unable to save Evelyn Mulray (Faye Dunaway) and her daughter from the



Figure 45. “Forget it, Jake. It's Chinatown.”

clutches of the film's villain, her father Noah Cross (John Huston). Rather than a physical location, Chinatown instead manifests itself as a state of mind, a spectral haunting, and a harbinger of doom. As James Naremore writes, "By the end [of Chinatown], the Chinese ghetto has become the symbol of an epic corruption and irrationality—a disease that spreads as wide as the city and is about to spread into the surrounding valley" (207). According to this logic, one need not even visit Chinatown itself to suffer its inscrutable, all-corrupting power.

Considering this tortured history of Chinatown as an ethnic space and cultural metaphor, *Chan Is Missing* has little choice but to tackle this depiction head-on. As James Naremore writes, *Chan Is Missing* "employs an investigate plot structure and a style reminiscent of the early New Wave in order to depict a Chinese-American community from the 'inside'" (228). The Chinatown of *Chan Is Missing* is a far cry from the exotic hot bed of criminal activity shown in numerous Hollywood films, and is instead treated as just another location populated by regular joes, not by clichéd, stereotypically seedy Chinese gangsters. Picking up where *Phantom of Chinatown* and *The Crimson Kimono* left off, the Chinatown of *Chan Is Missing* exists as a place where the Chinese are depicted not as one homogeneous mass, but as a community of remarkable complexity, full of people with different languages, class backgrounds, and political ideologies. Jing Xun argues that this approach makes for a refreshing change of pace, a contrast to what had come before in Hollywood films and what would come only a couple of years later in Michael Cimino's controversial, NY Chinatown-set film, *The Year of the Dragon* (1984):

The everyday characters in the movie are emotional, political, and fallible. They laugh, cry, swear, and fight. They don't always keep their cool, stay on top of the situation, or succeed as do-no-wrong heroes. They are ordinary human beings. This portrayal serves an important corrective to the widely held stereotype of Asian Americans as the "model minority." (47)

Such an interpretation would sit well with Wayne Wang who claimed in an interview with Tony Chiu: "I wanted to demythicize the Chinese [...] to reverse all those stereotypes" that saw Chinese people as humorless, passive, sly, sneaky, mean-spirited, and sexless. In this respect, *Chan Is Missing* is a film that is as much about the community of Chinatown as it is about the mystery plot. By contrasting the image of the Chinese in *Chan Is Missing* with the way in which so-called "Oriental" culture is represented in Hollywood cinema, the film simultaneously evokes the noir aesthetic, while at the same time subverting a common caricature often located within that genre. Far from homogenous, the Chinese in San Francisco have long maintained an internal diversity in respect to dialect and regional differences.

In an interesting rejoinder to the inscrutability of the Chinese vis-à-vis Elsa Bannister and Robert Towne's conversation with the Chinatown vice cop, the theatrical cut and VHS release of *Chan Is Missing* lacked English subtitles for the scenes spoken in Mandarin and in Cantonese, which piqued the curiosity, if not outright baffled non-Chinese speaking audiences.⁵¹ Perhaps the most humorous moment that results from the decision to leave off English subtitles occurs late in the film when Jo says via voiceover: "If this were a TV mystery, an important clue would

⁵¹ The film boasts several Cantopop songs by singer/actor Sam Hui (star of *Swordsman*, the *Aces Go Places* series) like "Inflation Fever" (set to "Rock Around the Clock" made famous by Bill Haley and His Comets) and "Where is My Home?" which contain lyrics that, for the Cantonese speaker, will have some meaning in relation to the events depicted onscreen.

pop up at this time and clarify everything.” Immediately after this voiceover concludes, we see Jo bump into an acquaintance, a well-dressed Chinese scholar named Mr. Fong (Leung Pui-Chee). As they stand together at the edge of the park in Portsmouth Square, the two of them proceed to carry on an extensive conversation in Chinese. The non-Chinese speaker will either laugh or become frustrated at what seems to be a significant conversation involving Chan Hung’s whereabouts. Part of the joke, however, is that what is “hidden” by the Chinese dialogue is no great revelation, but rather enigmatic musings involving Jo’s methods. The recent DVD release adds English subtitles, which helps clarify the events for the viewer who does not understand Mandarin and/or Cantonese, transcending the film’s purposefully imposed cross-cultural gap in its first iteration with a more easily digestible narrative for mainstream U.S. cultural consumption.

While the Chinatown of San Francisco presents a vision of “Chinese America,” and, as some have argued, “Asian America,” it is a vision that must be rigorously interrogated. As Lisa Lowe writes in *Immigrant Acts*:

Chinatowns are at once the deviant space ghettoized by the dominant configurations of social space and the resistant locality that signifies the internalization of “others” within the national spaces [...] It marks the disunity and discontinuity of the racialized urban space with the national space. It is a space not spoken by or in the language of the nation. (122)

The missing photograph at Chan Hung’s apartment, its existence signified only by the visible remnants of the tape marks used to affix it to the wall, serves as a figurative stand-in for Chan himself, as his existence can only be traced by the lives he had touched in mostly small, seemingly insignificant ways. Pleased with the largely

positive reception of the film, Wayne Wang remains all too happy to entertain the idea of Chan Hung as floating signifier: “When people say Chan Hung is sort of a metaphor for Chinatown, in some ways it’s really true because Chan Hung is really a character who has a blank page that a lot of incidences or a lot of different parts of different people in Chinatown with similar experiences could be painted into” (105). In *The Crimson Kimono*, one must remember the conceit of the blank canvas. As the opening credits roll, an unseen white artist paints a beautiful Japanese figure, a device which mirrors the way in which Samuel Fuller himself attempts to paint an easily comprehensible portrait of Japanese American life in Los Angeles. By contrast, this Chinese American-created vision of San Francisco’s Chinatown in *Chan Is Missing* suggests that no one representation can encompass a larger, complex whole. At the end of the film, we are left with the reality that defining something as seemingly culturally contained as “Chinese American” becomes a very hard task indeed, and thus to try to define “Asian American” beyond a political formation becomes a near impossible undertaking in comparison.

The film ends with a montage of Chinatown life, set to Pat Suzuki’s rendition of “Grant Avenue” from the Broadway version of, appropriately enough, *Flower Drum Song*. The tune, with its back-and-forth between the first person plural lyrics of the singer and the second person address to the white interloper (“You travel there in a trolley, / In a trolley up you climb”), makes for a telling musical choice in what is ostensibly a contemporary cultural tour of 1980s Chinatown, albeit one that

dispatches with the sensationalized tales of the past in favor of a more fully-realized depiction of the place and its inhabitants.

Chan is Still Missing

After *Chan is Missing*, Wayne Wang would direct predominantly Asian and Asian American-themed films during the 1980s and early 1990s, including *Dim Sum: A Little Bit of Heart* (Orion Classics, 1985), *Eat a Bowl of Tea* (Columbia, 1989), and the most successful and well-known Asian American film of all time, the 1993 adaptation of Amy Tan's bestselling novel, *The Joy Luck Club*. After that film's critical and commercial success, Wang would concentrate on smaller independent films like *Smoke* (Miramax, 1995), *Blue in the Face* (Miramax, 1995), and *Chinese Box* (Trimark Pictures, 1997) before trying his hand at more commercial projects like the Natalie Portman/Susan Sarandon vehicle, *Anywhere But Here* (20th Century Fox, 1999), the Jennifer Lopez-led romantic comedy, *Maid in Manhattan* (Columbia Pictures, 2002), and the Queen Latifah-headlined comedy, *Last Holiday* (Paramount, 2006). Only in the last few years has Wang returned to Chinese-themed works with adaptations of Yiyun Li's *A Thousand Years of Good Prayers* (Match Factory, 2007) and *Princess of Nebraska* (Magnolia Pictures, 2008) as well as Lisa See's China-set 2005 novel, *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan* (Fox Searchlight, 2011). Despite Wang's eclectic and comparatively prolific output, *Chan Is Missing* perhaps remains his crowning cinematic achievement.

Vincent Chin's tragic death on June 23, 1982, only a week after the debut of Wang's film, has been viewed as a unifying event in forming a collective Asian American consciousness, and, in a different way, *Chan Is Missing* can be seen as a landmark cinematic articulation of Asian American identity as well. If Sandra Liu is right in viewing Wang's debut as a "politically committed social critique" (91), *Chan Is Missing* achieves this feat by utilizing the familiar film noir style in order to carry out a thoughtful meditation on the diversity of the Chinese American experience at a specific cultural moment in U.S. history.

Phantom of Chinatown, *The Crimson Kimono*, and *Chan Is Missing* all rank as groundbreaking films, which each dispensed with Yellowface casting in favor of spotlighting Asian American male actors in starring roles. Both directly and indirectly, they comment on the Orientalist tropes of the past and position themselves as revisionist "Oriental Sleuth" films. Within the limitations of their respective eras, *Phantom of Chinatown*, *The Crimson Kimono*, and *Chan Is Missing* utilize the hardboiled detective genre to remasculinize their Asian American male protagonists and subvert the often racist stereotypes of Asians in classic Hollywood cinema. However, while *Chan Is Missing* made great strides in the early 1980s for Asian Americans, it would not be until the end of the millennium that a self-determined literary articulation of an Asian American detective genre would finally come into being.

CHAPTER THREE

Asian American Detective Fiction Haunted Men and the Hardboiled Genre

It is awfully easy to be hard-boiled about everything in the daytime, but at night it is another thing. (42)

– Ernest Hemingway, *The Sun Also Rises* (1926).

Throughout the twentieth century, a number of Asian American writers have written detective novels, but until the turn of the millennium, most had avoided dealing directly with Asian American characters. The very first Asian American writer of detective fiction was Milton K. Ozaki (1913–1989). Born in Wisconsin, this biracial journalist turned to writing crime fiction after World War II. Based on the publishing realities of the time, Ozaki chose neither to imitate the style of the Charlie Chan novels nor to write about Asian American characters. Instead, he focused the bulk of his novels on the typical white gumshoe, à la the work of contemporaries like Mickey Spillane and Ross Macdonald. While Ozaki did write under the pen name “Robert O. Saber” on occasion, the majority of his hardboiled novels bore his actual Japanese surname on the front cover. In fact, Ozaki’s assumption of the pseudonym “Saber” had nothing to do with hiding his Japanese heritage, but was instead created with the expressed purpose of helping the

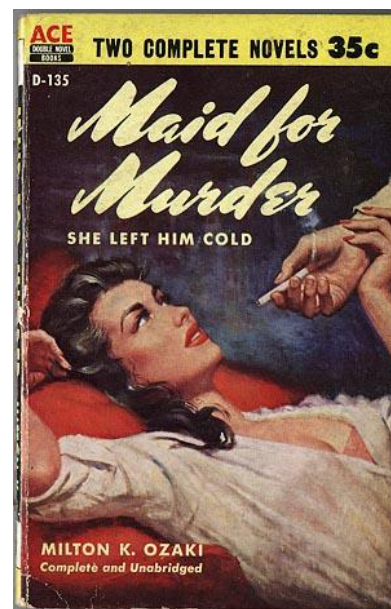


Figure 46. *Maid for Murder* (1955).

author publish a greater number of books per year.⁵² In those days, publishers did not wish to saturate the market with books from a single author, so writing under a pen name became a common industry practice – one perhaps best exemplified in the career of Donald E. Westlake (1933-2008), who wrote under several pseudonyms, including Richard Stark (*The Hunter, The Outfit*). During Ozaki’s remarkably prolific career as a writer of pulp fiction, he created several Chicago-based private eyes, including Max Keene and Rusty Forbes, all of whom were white male detectives. Aside from a reissue of *Dressed to Kill* in 2008, most of Ozaki’s books are still out of print.⁵³ Whether Milton Ozaki’s decision to focus on a white private eye in the majority of his novels was for commercial or artistic reasons, this particular approach in which an Asian American writer decides against writing detective fiction featuring Asian American characters gained traction many decades later in the 1990s.⁵⁴

⁵² In a e-mail communication, Ozaki’s daughter, Gaila Perran explained the origin of the surname to me: “Daddy was in his bedroom, on the phone with his agent, discussing the creation of a pen name...something less Japanese-sounding. Why he chose “Robert” as a first name, I don’t know. Middle initial “O” is obvious. But, as he was trying to come up with a last name, he noticed Mom’s big bottle of Woodhue Cologne, by Faberge, on her dresser. Daddy shortened ‘Faberge’ to ‘Faber.’ The agent misunderstood the pronunciation, believing Daddy had said ‘Saber’ instead of ‘Faber.’ So, Saber became the last name in Robert O. Saber. That’s the story I was told.”

⁵³ Ozaki’s novels include *The Cuckoo Clock* (1946), *A Fiend in Need* (1947), *The Black Dark Murders* (1949) [as Saber], *The Deadly Lover* (1951), *The Dove* (1951; AKA *Chicago Woman*), *The Scented Flesh* (1951) [as Saber], *Murder Doll* (1952), the aforementioned *Dressed to Kill* (1954), *Too Young To Die* (1954) [as Saber], *A Dame Called Murder* (1955) [as Saber], *Maid for Murder* (1955), *Sucker Bait* (1955), *Never Say Die* (1956), *A Time For Murder* (1956), *Case of the Deadly Kiss* (1957), *Case of the Cop’s Wife* (1958), *Wake Up and Scream* (1959), and *Inquest* (1960). Gaila Ozaki Perran rewrote her father’s novel, *The Cuckoo Clock*, as *Ticked Off!* (Authorhouse 2003), updating the time period and changing the setting from Chicago to Westport, Connecticut.

⁵⁴ Carlos Bulosan, the acclaimed writer of *America Is in the Heart* (1946), wrote *All the Conspirators*, a detective novel that was unearthed from his manuscripts and finally published by the University of Washington Press in 1998. Told in the first person, *All The Conspirators* revolves around an American named Gar Stanley, who heads back to his childhood home of the Philippines after World War II to assist his childhood sweetheart in her attempt to find her missing and possibly deceased spouse, Clem

As was the case with Milton Ozaki, the most successful tactic for Asian American mystery writers, at least from a financial standpoint, seems to be the avoidance of Asian American characters altogether. Beginning with *Shinju* (Random House, 1994), Laura Joh Rowland is the author of the bestselling Sano Ichiro Mystery Series, that currently spans fifteen books – with *The Ronin's Mistress* (St. Martin's Minotaur, 2012), being the latest. An American of Chinese/Korean descent, Rowland sets her novels in seventeenth century Japan, making her an Asian American mystery writer, albeit one who has found her own place within the genre without writing about Asian Americans. While Rowland deals with period Japan, bestselling Chinese American author Tess Gerritson writes contemporary mystery thrillers set in the United States. Her novels – which include *Harvest* (Atria 1996) and *The Silent Girl* (Ballantine Books 2011) – focus on protagonists that are exclusively – and quite consciously on her part – white. She has even gone so far to admit her motives in a blog post on her official website back in 2005: “As for why I write about mainstream characters, and not Asians, I must make a confession here: I’m a commercial writer. I support my family with my writing.” She goes on to say that “I’m not sure the American readership is ready for a thriller series with an Asian in the lead. A sad, but not shocking truth.”⁵⁵ Her calculated attempts to court mainstream success paid off

Mayo, who was also Gar's best friend. Although an intriguing text, it has been excluded from this study due to the fact that all three of the novel's main characters are white.

⁵⁵ In her December 17, 2005 blog entry, Gerritson elaborates on why she doesn't write for the Asian American market: "Logically speaking, if your books are aimed at only 4% of the American population, your sales are screwed. To make the bestseller list requires that your sales penetration of that 4% slice of the market must be huge."

when Gerritson's popular "Rizzoli & Isles" series was adapted into an ongoing TNT television drama, starring Angie Harmon and Sasha Alexander in the title roles.

Of course, Rowland, and Gerritson are under no obligation to write exclusively about Asian Americans, but their conscious decision *not* to pursue such routes speaks to the mainstream demands of genre works. Conventional logic dictates that white readers – consciously or not – want to read about white characters because they either cannot or simply do not want to identify with non-white characters. However, not all Asian American writers have bowed to such pressure. In this chapter, I examine how contemporary Asian American authors began to expand the parameters of what constitutes "Asian American literature" through an active engagement with the hardboiled detective genre.

At the turn of the twenty-first century, a group of Asian American male writers emerged who chose to address the specter of Charlie Chan through their own literary repudiations of racist stereotypes related to emasculation, exoticism, and perpetual foreignness. In *Hard-Boiled Masculinities* (2005), Christopher Breu has written extensively on this iconic form of manhood "that found approximations in both fiction and life – but which remained, beyond the confines of either, a collective fantasy" (2). In their own ways, each of the authors treated in this chapter has attempted to remasculinize the Asian American man through the mobilization of the familiar hardboiled tropes that make up our collective understanding of this masculine fantasy. However, even within the arena of the detective genre, these Asian American writers still find themselves saddled with the same hefty burden of cultural

representation shared by their peers in literary fiction, each employing various strategies to accommodate, adapt, or actively subvert those racially fraught expectations. In the following pages, I wish not only to document the ways in which these various authors have adapted the hardboiled form for literary, cultural, and political aims, but also to demonstrate how an uncritical valorization of this particular form of hegemonic masculinity as a means of cultural reparation can be just as problematic as the feminizing stereotypes these writers of Asian American detective fiction are seeking to overcome.

Playing Detective: Performing Identity in Dale Furutani's Ken Tanaka Novels

In 1996, St. Martin's Press published *Death in Little Tokyo*, the first detective novel that was not only written by an Asian American author, but also featured an Asian American protagonist. Written by Hawai'i-born, third-generation Japanese American Dale Furutani (*né* Flanagan), the novel follows the adventures of forty-two-year-old Ken Tanaka, an unemployed computer operator-turned-amateur sleuth, who finds himself a suspect in a brutal murder in Los Angeles. Eager to clear his name, Ken searches for the real killer and becomes entangled in an international gun-smuggling scheme and a second unsolved murder that has its roots in the Japanese internment camps of World War II. Published as a paperback original, *Death in Little Tokyo* went on to be translated into Japanese and German and was nominated for an Agatha Award for Best First Novel in 1997 before going on to win both the Anthony

Award for Best First Novel and the Macavity Award for Best First Mystery the same year, making Furutani the first Asian American to take home a major mystery prize.⁵⁶

The following year, a sequel emerged entitled *Toyotomi Blades* (St. Martin's Press, 1997), which picks up immediately after the events of Furutani's first novel. This direct follow-up details Ken Tanaka's exploits abroad when he is invited to appear on a Japanese television program to discuss the events depicted in *Death in Little Tokyo*. A samurai sword Ken purchased in the previous novel proves to be more valuable than he imagined, as it was crafted by a fabled seventeenth century swordsmith. Unfortunately, a mysterious assassin has been traveling the world in search of the other blades that make up the set and has murdered several of the owners to obtain them. Ken's amateur sleuthing skills are put to the test as he races to unearth the secrets of an ancient Japanese treasure before he becomes the next victim.

Although the obvious commercial quality of these brief synopses seem to fit with the typical sensationalized plots associated with mystery and adventure fiction, upon reading these two novels, one can intuit a larger set of concerns at work within Dale Furutani's novels. Unlike many earlier non-Asian writers of U.S. mystery fiction, whose observations on Asian Americans were either superficial or nonexistent, Furutani utilizes his Japanese American protagonist as a means to address those ignored cultural issues head-on, using his own personal experience to express his specific vision of Asian American life in the mid-1990s. Certainly, St.

⁵⁶ The Agatha Awards are presented by Malice Domestic, an annual Washington D.C.-based mystery convention. The Anthony Awards and the Macavity Awards are given by the Bouchercon World Mystery Convention and Mystery Readers International respectively.

Martin's Press viewed his books as commercially viable mysteries, marketing both titles under their own "Dead Letter Mystery" imprint. And yet, while Furutani's initial foray into the mystery genre seems to possess all the generic trappings readers might expect, much of the content of these novels deals directly with issues pertinent to Asian Americans. It is as if Furutani's work—his first novel, in particular—contains two competing narratives: each struggling for supremacy as the dominant mode of address. This formal, narrative tension between the novels' generic aims as mysteries and their political goals as "Asian American texts" parallel the thematic content, as the novels consistently foreground Ken Tanaka's struggle to reconcile his ethnic heritage with his sense of national belonging. In large part, Furutani's novels resurrect the classic concern with identity that typified early Asian American literary and cultural discourse, positing this concern as a "crisis" that can somehow be resolved through the mechanisms of the detective plot and an active engagement with the tropes of hardboiled masculinity. Whether or not the author himself wishes to remasculinize and assimilate his Japanese American hero (and by extension, all Asian Americans) into mainstream U.S. culture through the hardboiled mode remains largely a moot point, as the resultant texts only demonstrate the inherent perils, fissures, and aporias of such a literary aspiration.

Curiously, the first page of *Death in Little Tokyo* includes a note from Joe Veltre, associate editor of St. Martin's Press' "Dead Letter" paperback mysteries, which proudly announces the book's historical value: "Once again on the cutting edge of mysteries, DEAD LETTER is proud to present the very first Japanese-American

amateur sleuth series written by a Japanese American.” Veltre’s note – while somewhat self-congratulatory – seems entirely reasonable, considering not only the dearth of Asian American sleuths in mystery fiction written by Asian Americans, but also the rampant racial stereotyping of Asians in American detective fiction since the early twentieth century. As the first of its kind, *Death in Little Tokyo* merits special attention. The sequel, *The Toyotomi Blades*, includes an endorsement similar to Veltre’s, as Tess Gerritson provides a blurb that exclaims, “At last! Here’s a fictional sleuth with an authentic Asian-American voice,” further claiming that Dale Furutani presents a “uniquely Asian point of view.” If the racial masquerade of the Charlie Chan series has been seen as patently inauthentic, then Veltre’s and Gerritson’s praise suggest that they believe Furutani provides the kind of much needed cultural authenticity that had long been missing from the detective genre.

Thus, it is perhaps no surprise that the lurking specter of Charlie Chan that hovers over both Asian American masculinity and the detective genre becomes apparent in *Death in Little Tokyo* from even the first few pages, as Ken Tanaka muses on the dearth of Asians in the mystery genre:

The only Asian detectives I remember from old movies were Warner Olan [sic] doing his Charlie Chan bit or Peter Lorre doing an incredibly campy Mister Moto. At least Charlie Chan was from Honolulu, although nobody I’ve ever met from Hawaii actually looked and talked like Warner Olan [sic] did. (7-8)

This passage directly echoes Dale Furutani’s own comments in his short essay, “Why I Write Ken Tanaka Mysteries,” in which he also remarks on his childhood memories of Charlie Chan and Mr. Moto, and how they “looked, talked, and acted like no

Asians” he knew. “Both characters,” Furutani writes, “were written by non-Asians whose understanding of Asian culture was, to put it kindly, limited.” Furutani mentions his determination to write detective stories with “a distinctive Asian American viewpoint.” Instead of having his protagonist spout Japanese equivalents to Charlie Chan’s faux Confucian aphorisms, Furutani portrays characters who are, in his own words, “living breathing Asian Americans grappling with issues like alcoholism, corporate downsizing, and growing up Asian in America.” Still, since *Death in Little Tokyo* qualifies as a first in the mystery genre not only for a Japanese American author, but for Asian Americans in general, it is not entirely surprising that Furutani would want to dispel the ethnic stereotypes that have imbricated popular culture for more than a century – something he does throughout these novels in a myriad of ways. However, I would argue that while Furutani’s ethnicity, gender, family history, and/or personal experiences may lend themselves to a more technically accurate or historically informed portrayal of Japanese Americans, elements of performativity still exist within the narrative, both in terms of the character’s masquerade as a detective, and the author’s performance of his ethnicity for a white audience.

Authenticity and Appropriation: Hardboiled Asian American Masculinity

From the very start, *Death in Little Tokyo* operates as both a parody and an homage to the mystery genre. The opening scene of the novel works as a thinly-veiled parody of the clichéd “big reveal” that occurs at the end of most classical mysteries.

Like the finale of every Charlie Chan film, the “suspects” in *Death in Little Tokyo* are rounded up and brought together at the scene of the crime, and the “detective”—in this case, Ken Tanaka—reveals the identity of the murderer, but not without first engaging in long-winded exposition that lays out the facts of the crime and each suspect’s possible motives in meticulous detail. Although Furutani drops hints throughout this section of the novel that all is not what it seems, it is not until Ken Tanaka names the killer that the entire sequence stands revealed as an elaborate joke. In truth, Ken is not a detective at all, but a member of the Los Angeles Mystery Club, and the “murder” he solves is actually just another of the group’s weekly activities:

Every month the club members pool their money and talents and create a type of living theater: a murder mystery acted out during the course of a Saturday. The club members either try to solve the mystery or play parts in the drama. The idea is to figure out “who dunnit” before the awards banquet that night.
(5)

In many ways, this unique opening set piece defines the tone for this book and its sequel – that is, an overriding focus on masquerade and performativity, tropes that will have specific relevance to both Ken Tanaka and the construction of the narrative itself.

The premise of *Death in Little Tokyo* hinges on Ken Tanaka’s orchestration of the L.A. Mystery Club’s next weekend activity. Inspired by *The Maltese Falcon*, Ken designs a game that traffics in noir clichés, as he rents a cheap office in Little Tokyo to set up a fake private eye business he dubs “Kendo Detective Agency.” In a scene straight out of a pulp novel or a classic film noir, a blonde femme fatale named Rita Newly appears at Ken’s door and offers him five hundred dollars to pick up a

package on her behalf. Believing her offer to be an elaborate prank orchestrated by his fellow Mystery Club members, Ken agrees to help the woman. In truth, Rita Newly has actually mistaken Ken for a real private eye. Ken's unwitting participation in her scheme quickly gets him caught up in a gun-running scam and a brutal murder. The novel's second form of engagement with the grave difference between "playing a role" and "playing for keeps" coalesces around the portrayal of the detective hero himself.

Beyond the obvious racial differences, one major distinction between Dale Furutani's work and that of Earl Derr Biggers' is point of view narration, as the Charlie Chan novels were always written in the third-person, while Furutani employs the first person singular perspective common in the hardboiled mode. Considering Charlie Chan's seeming aversion to the first person pronoun through "Charlie Chan Say" ventriloquism, the switch to the "I" form of first person point of view suggests to the reader both a sense of individualism and narrative control on the part of the protagonist.

But perspective is not the only way in which the novels engage with the hardboiled tradition. Noir references abound throughout the novel, many of them in relation to the bogus Kendo Detective Agency: "Four pictures were hung on the walls: photos of Bogart, Alan Ladd, and Cagney, plus a poster for *The Maltese Falcon*"(8). Ken's genre preference demonstrates his allegiance not to the effete, puzzle-solving sleuth in the Charlie Chan mold, but to the hard-bitten private eyes of the pulp detective story. These figures represent a model of masculinity not seen in

the Orientalized detectives of the past, and Ken taps into that tradition as a kind of wish-fulfillment fantasy. And yet there exists a nagging sense that the hardboiled detective genre does not suit Ken at all. Furutani signals this discomfit when Ken attempts a Bogart imitation while alone in the office:

“Lissen, sweetheart,” I said in a passable Bogart imitation. “If you want anything, just whistle. You know how to whistle, don’t you? Just put your two lips together and blow.” Wait a minute. That was Lauren Bacall’s line [...] I sighed because I couldn’t recall what Bogart’s line was. It didn’t matter anyway. Let’s face it, physically I couldn’t muster the mass to imitate Bogart’s tough presence. I preferred Alan Ladd when playing a detective. The compact Ladd was much more my size. (7)

This bungled attempt at aping Bogart provides the first clue that the masquerade isn’t as convincing as Ken had hoped. But the problem goes beyond whether or not Ken can get the references right; it also extends to his appearance. As is perhaps customary in first person narratives written by first time writers, Furutani includes a scene early on in which Ken looks in the mirror and describes himself for the reader’s benefit, clearly longing to resemble the great hardboiled detectives of yesteryear:

I was dressed in a tan trench coat and a gray hat. The props helped to compensate for my small frame and delicate features. . . two curses for someone who secretly aspired to be a 1930s hardboiled detective. Of course, my being a Japanese-American from Hawaii is also an impediment to this aspiration. . . . The tan Burberry trench coat was a good fit, but somehow the felt fedora just didn’t look right. I pulled it low over my eyes, but that just blocked my vision. I pulled it off and tried placing it on my head at a rakish angle, but a shock of black hair peeked out and the effect was just goofy. (7)

In his essay “Samurai Sleuths and Detective Daughters,” critic Theo D’Haen reads the scene as Furutani’s attempt to invoke “the performative conventions of the hard-boiled genre to show how ill they fit a character like himself, and vice versa” (39). Though Japanese actor Toshiro Mifune, himself a symbol of manhood and rugged

individualism, does get mentioned late in the narrative as an alternate role model for Ken Tanaka, the character's obsession with noir iconography suggests that there is no distinctly Asian American detective tradition for him to draw upon, or at least not one that feels authentic, considering the aforementioned Yellowface caricatures of Charlie Chan and Mr. Moto.

Thus, the "whiteness" of Ken's idols seems unavoidable, considering his desire to place himself within the hardboiled tradition and claim an American identity. In *Traces, Codes, and Clues: Reading Race in Crime Fiction* (2002), Maureen T. Reddy elaborates on the perils of assimilation:

Because whites get to define who is white and because true Americanness has historically been limited to whites or those considered white enough by whites, the concepts of "fitting in" and being recognized as American have as an unstated precondition becoming white (or at least white enough not to be classed with blacks). (105)

While Ken grapples with these white models of masculinity as a means to fit into mainstream American culture, he seems to don the costume of the hardboiled detective without being critical of its deeper implications. For example, throughout both novels, Ken constantly measures his behavior against white film noir models, particularly Dashiell Hammett's most famous character. In *Death in Little Tokyo*, he remarks, "Even asking the critical question ('What would Sam Spade do now?') didn't bring about a brainstorm" (121), while in *The Toyotomi Blades*, he says, "Maybe Sam Spade would have considered it an evening's sport to duke it out with two thugs in a dark Tokyo alley, but it was no contest for me to choose between fight or flight. I turned and flew" (72). In the same novel, Ken muses, "I suppose a real

hard-boiled detective at this point would have made a crack about dames always having to look good on camera” (206). Time and again, Ken invokes these hardboiled models, but ends up chiding himself for his failure to measure up to these icons of yesteryear. What he never seems to consider, however, are the structures of racism inherent in the hegemonic forms of masculinity he so desperately wishes to resemble.

Even so, Furutani’s remasculinization project does not rely solely on nostalgic icons of film noir. Although not an actual lawman or private investigator, the forty-two-year-old Ken Tanaka served in the Vietnam War, earning a Bronze Star and a Purple Heart in the process. As was the case with Joe Kojaku’s exploits during the Korean War in *The Crimson Kimono*, Ken is also positioned as the consummate all-American hero, as military service in itself has become a marker of respect and heroism in contemporary U.S. culture. However, Furutani is careful to show that Ken’s actual experiences belie the hero’s welcome he might have previously expected as a war veteran. Due to the racist legacy of the Vietnam War, Ken’s racial background prevents him from finding a sense of belonging with other war veterans, as he reveals in *Death in Little Tokyo*:

And I never go to veteran reunions and similar events, because I felt that with my Asian face I’m looked at as the enemy, not a comrade. One positive effect of my being at these events is that the number of “slope” stories get curtailed, but this effect is not worth the discomfort. (92-93)

This sense of racial discomfort goes back to Ken’s own army experiences, as he reveals in *Toyotomi Blades* that he endured racist taunts by his superior officer: “Okay, you recruits, look at Tanaka. Take a good look, because this is what a gook looks like, and gooks are the enemy!” (52). So even as military service seems an

avenue for Asian American men like Ken to “prove” their American identity, they find themselves ostracized by their peers for having the face of “the enemy.” Within the realm of this male-dominated sphere, Ken can find neither camaraderie nor acceptance on equal terms.

However, Ken Tanaka is not the only one playing a role, as Furutani’s handling of his supporting characters falls into the same pattern of performativity. In *Death in Little Tokyo*, Ken’s fascination with Humphrey Bogart and Alan Ladd parallels the similar aspiration of the book’s murderer, Jiro “Fred” Yoshida, who wanted nothing more than to be the next Fred Astaire. However, the fallout of World War II put an end to Jiro’s dream, as he was interned at Manzanar and injured by a grenade during a routine exercise. Similarly, in *The Toyotomi Blades*, Ken’s constant invocation of noir idols parallels Buzz Sugimoto, the aging Japanese Yankī who embraces U.S. “delinquent” culture of the 1950s, encompassing everything from James Dean movies to motorcycle jackets. In both cases, Ken fails to see the parallels between himself and these other nostalgic characters.

However, the concept of “role playing” is given a much more concrete voice through the use of a recurring character whose very profession hinges on performance. In both novels, Ken maintains a steady romantic relationship with Mariko Kosaka, a struggling L.A. actress Ken met when she was “hired to play an exotic femme fatale for one of the mysteries” (6). While their matter-of-fact romance subtly undermines the stereotypes of emasculation that have dogged Asian males in U.S. popular culture, her inclusion in the narrative serves as a means to comment on

both the lack of roles for Asian American actors in Hollywood and the ways in which Western culture more generally exoticizes Asian women:

Mariko told me once that she was resigned to the obvious: as an Asian, she would be forever cast in “Asian” roles. She said, “It’s frustrating to realize that I’ll never get to play Desdemona or Lady Macbeth unless I’m cast as a novelty. And let’s face it, Ken, the number of Asian roles are few and far between. The number of good Asian roles are even fewer.” (34)

Here, we have a clear parallel with Ken Tanaka himself, as he, too, wishes to play a role, that of the hardboiled detective, but encounters his own practical and legal obstacles to such a dream at each and every turn. Early in *Death in Little Tokyo*, Ken muses on the cultural impact of Los Angeles’ real-life East West Players, the nation’s premier Asian American theatre organization: “One reason a place like East West Players thrived was that it allowed an outlet for the fermenting creativity of Asian actors, writers, and directors. Almost all the plays done by East West were written by Asians for Asians. Because of this, however, they have a limited audience and a limited commercial value” (34). Ironically though, by writing a detective novel, Dale Furutani himself has embarked on quite the opposite tactic: hoping to produce a commercially viable Asian American text meant for a much wider audience.

When taken in sum, Furutani’s novels suggest that Ken Tanaka remains insistent on adopting this hardboiled identity as his own, even declaring his intention to become a real private detective at the end of *Death in Little Tokyo* and *The Toyotomi Blades*. However, Ken’s performance as a hardboiled detective is not only role he asserts for himself. Throughout both novels, it becomes clear that Ken Tanaka

is conducting an investigation into Japanese and Japanese American culture, serving as a cultural tour guide for Furutani's predominantly white readership.

Investigating Culture – The Detective as Tour Guide

Due to population numbers alone, minority writers in the United States have long been put in the position of cultural translators. In much early Asian American literature, the narratives are written with the assumption that the reader is white. For example, in *Economic Citizens: A Narrative of Asian American Visibility* (2007), Christine So makes the following analysis of the Chinatown novels of C.Y. Lee and Jade Snow Wong: "The texts themselves all purport to bridge 'East' and 'West,' and their direct address of white audiences seem to confirm the narratives' primary purpose is to commodify and exoticize Chinese culture for U.S. consumption" (70). In many ways, a similar shadow looms large in the two Ken Tanaka novels, although Furutani himself refused to sacrifice cultural accuracy for mainstream acceptance. For example, in an interview I conducted with the author, he revealed that the only substantial change the publishers asked of him was in reference to the title, as the St. Martin's marketing department asked him to call the book *Japantown* instead, as a kind of call-back to Roman Polanski's *Chinatown* (1974). "I refused," Furutani stated, "because 'Japantown' is what San Francisco calls its JA section of downtown – Little Tokyo is peculiar to Los Angeles. I told them changing the title to 'Japantown' would show no knowledge of what the JA community calls its part of town." This incident brings into focus the unique pressures facing a writer of minority

descent who, unlike a white author of detective fiction, is preemptively marked as “other” and therefore must make difficult choices in terms of how he or she communicates with a largely white readership.

Early in *Death in Little Tokyo*, Furutani seems keen on making sure that his detective is racialized in the text in a way that goes beyond what could be signaled by Ken’s surname or cultural milieu:

My face is round with a slightly squared jaw. My eyes are more deeply set than the Asian stereotype, but many Asians, particularly in Japan or Southeast Asia, have deep set eyes. I have the epicanthic fold that characterizes Asians everywhere, and of course my eye color is deep brown and I have black hair.
(8)

Despite this elaborate physiognomic performance of racial difference for his readers, Furutani does try to play against the idea of the ethnic detective as a racial novelty by de-emphasizing Ken Tanaka’s own understanding of Japanese culture. Ken admits in the sequel, “Neither Mariko nor I speak or read Japanese” (21), and also remarks that as a third generation Japanese American, “I’ve forgotten a lot of my roots” (24). And yet, Furutani seems to want it both ways because not long after these revelations, Ken claims to have an encyclopedic knowledge of Japan, including a “lot of individual Japanese words and phrases” having “studied Japanese history” (25). Although a common phenomenon—one can be well-versed in the history and traditional customs of another country without knowing its language or the intricacies of its culture—the way in which Furutani depicts his protagonist raises a narrative red flag. One could argue that these inconsistencies are simply part and parcel of the internal contradictions facing many Asian Americans, but a closer look at Furutani’s writing

reveals that this is actually a question of style and—more pointedly – one of audience. In some cases, Ken will wax poetic about various components of Japanese culture, while in others, he will express unfamiliarity with seemingly basic information – an especially strange admission for a person claiming to have a deep knowledge of Japanese customs and behavior. At moments like these, the author’s hand becomes most obvious. Whether Ken Tanaka is explaining something directly to the reader or merely asking questions to allow another character to explain something to him, these sequences are clearly crafted for the benefit of the mystery-reading audience. Furutani is simply attempting to make these numerous “cultural asides” even more reader-friendly.

However, while Furutani spends a great many pages trying to cover the history of Asian immigration to the U.S. and provide critical commentary on everything from the Japanese internment during World War II to the current state of racism in America, the author’s focus on explicating about the “Asian American Experience” is not merely located in the realm of the political. Despite the demands of these novels’ respective mystery plots, Furutani spends an inordinate amount of time detailing Ken Tanaka’s interest in Japanese food, culture, and customs. Whether it is his favorite films by Akira Kurosawa and Yasujiro Ozu, his deep knowledge of Ukiyo-e woodblock prints and Ikebana flower arranging, his love of both the *O-bon* festival in Hawai‘i and Little Tokyo’s Nisei Week, his preferences for *mochi* and shave ice, or his interest in Japanese games like *Go* and *Hana-fuda*, Ken will narrate these “events” in great detail for the readers’ edification. In these instances, Ken

Tanaka becomes less a detective and more of a cultural tour guide, spending the majority of his time remarking on Japanese and Japanese American landmarks, cuisine, and customs rather than solving each novel's respective mystery. In the early part of *Toyotomi Blades*, for instance, Ken does little more than stroll in Pachinko parlors, muse on Tokyo street crime, and make cultural observations as the plot seemingly falls by the wayside. One need consider this excerpt from the beginning of *Death in Little Tokyo* as a prime example of this specific brand of cultural tourism:

I sat down behind the desk and placed a paper sack before me. I reached in, took out a pair of disposable chopsticks, and split them in two with a practiced hand. In good Japanese restaurants they give you polished disposable chopsticks, and you don't have to rub them together to get rid of the small splinters. You're supposed to know the difference, and not automatically rub chopsticks together. After glancing at these chopsticks, I rubbed them together vigorously. [...] I took a plate out of the sack and looked at it. Staring up at me was an assortment of sushi. The small mounds of rice were covered with raw fish, encircled by pieces of flavored seaweed. A tiny clump of pink ginger and a dab of green *wasabi* (horseradish) completed the plate. (10)

Three more paragraphs about sushi follow, detailing where Ken buys it and how he likes to eat it. This extended description concludes with the protagonist describing how to eat nigiri, "Bracing myself, I picked up a piece of sushi with my hashi (chopsticks) and dipped it into the small container of sauce" (10). Considering the exorbitant fascination with Ken's love of sushi, one cannot help but ask: to whom is Ken addressing these elaborate descriptions?

Frank Chin would call these prime examples of "food pornography" (*The Chickencoop Chinaman* 86), a literary phenomenon that Sau-Ling Cynthia Wong elaborates on in *Reading Asian American Literature: From Necessity to Extravagance* (1991):

In cultural terms it translates to reifying perceived cultural differences and exaggerating one's otherness in order to gain a foothold in a white-dominated social system. Like exchanging sexual services for food, food pornography is also a kind of prostitution, but with an important difference: superficially, food pornography appears to be a promotion, rather than vitiating or devaluation, of one's ethnic identity. (55)

Considering this definition, it is important to keep in mind that Furutani's work merges the first-person narration of a typical detective novel with what could be construed as the Asian American autobiographical form. Wong suggests that such instances in an Asian American writer's work could simply be "an exercise in authorial responsibility," as a certain degree of explication might be necessary if the material would be unfamiliar to readers.

Still, these textual clues in Furutani's work hint at a possible tourist guide motive in supplying white readers with tantalizing glimpses into Japanese American life. Perhaps more than any other aspect of the novel, these descriptions demonstrate the ways in which Ken (and by association, Furutani himself) perform and explicate their ethnicity for a predominantly white readership. Furutani's engagement with this discourse only illustrates the burden placed on Asian American authors to become cultural tour guides no matter what genre of fiction they choose to employ.

Furutani After Tanaka

After completing two books in the Ken Tanaka series, Dale Furutani went on to craft his own Kurosawa-influenced "Samurai Mystery Trilogy," which is comprised of *Death at the Crossroads* (1998), *Jade Palace Vendetta* (1999), and *Kill the Shogun* (2000), all published by William Morrow. The novels center on Kaze

Matsuyama, a Toshiro Mifune-like ronin who – like a knight errant of medieval legend – embarks on a quest to fulfill the dying wish of his Lord’s wife and gets entangled in various local mysteries in feudal Japan. Freed from the cultural realities facing Asian Americans in the contemporary period, Furutani instead focuses on a hero who is more straightforwardly masculine, noble, and self-assured in contrast to the eternally self-conscious Ken Tanaka.

In a 2000 interview with Ron Miller, Furutani revealed that he’d written a portion of a third Ken Tanaka book, but “only small, low-paying publishers have expressed interest so far.” When he spoke to interviewer Claire E. White, Furutani did drop some details about the book’s intended plot:

In book three, a 420-pound sumo wrestler walks into a small locked room at UCLA and disappears a few minutes before a bout. Gary Apia, the Hawaiian sumo wrestler Ken met in *The Toyotomi Blades*, becomes a suspect in what might be a case of foul play. Gary asks Ken for help. Also in this book, Ken’s first wife, who is not Japanese, shows up asking for Ken’s help. She causes all sorts of problems between Ken and his girlfriend, Mariko. Finally, to add to his woes, a Los Angeles street gang decides for some reason that it wants to take Ken out, and expresses that desire with an Uzi! The working title is *Blood on the Pacific Rim*.

My interview with Furutani elicited further details, as he told me that in the sequel, “Ken is working for a lawyer as an investigator, using his computer skills to trace people” and thus trying to obtain his private eye license. Furutani admitted that it was unlikely that this third novel would be published, although he wrote about one hundred pages. After suffering some health issues, Furutani eventually completed a new book, *The Curious Adventures of Sherlock Holmes in Japan* (2012), which is available on both the Kindle reader and in trade paperback.

Seemingly ending with *The Toyotomi Blades*, Dale Furutani's Ken Tanaka series ranks not only as the first Asian American mysteries written by an Asian American, but the first to address the specter of Charlie Chan through an engagement with the hardboiled genre. On one hand, Furutani ultimately succeeds with his literary experiment, as his protagonist solves the mystery, gets the girl, and becomes a hero in ways very different from the stereotypical Oriental sleuths of the past. However, the way in which the novel treats and ultimately deconstructs Ken Tanaka's obsession with nostalgic icons of hegemonic masculinity suggests that there are deeper issues to ponder within this proposed remasculinization project.

New Millennium, New Choice: Leonard Chang's Allen Choice Trilogy

While the mysteries of Dale Furutani broke new ground, the next example of Asian American detective fiction didn't appear until 2001 with the release of HarperCollins' *Over the Shoulder*, the first in what would become a series of detective novels by Leonard Chang. In a departure from Chang's previous award-winning works from Black Heron Press, *The Fruit 'N Food* (1996) and *Dispatches from the Cold* (1998), *Over the Shoulder* introduced readers to Allen Choice, a Korean American security specialist investigating his partner's death in San Francisco. With the assistance of *San Jose Sentinel* reporter Linda Maldonado, Allen not only solves the crime, but uncovers the secrets surrounding his immigrant father's accidental death some twenty years earlier. The second novel in the series, 2003's *Underkill*, takes place two years later with Allen travelling to Los Angeles to help

Linda look into her brother's suspicious death, delving into the drug scene while trying to salvage his disintegrating relationship. In the third and last novel to date, 2004's *Fade to Clear*, Allen – now a full-fledged private investigator – grudgingly agrees to help Linda find her niece, who was kidnapped by the child's father during a bitter custody bout. During the investigation, Linda is killed, motivating Allen to solve the case and bring her murderer to justice.⁵⁷

When asked by Bill Han about why he decided to focus on crime fiction after a critically successful stint writing less genre-specific work, Leonard Chang gave the following response: “I’ve been wanting to read some really well-written crime fiction with an Asian American protagonist. There’s not a lot out there (definitely nothing with a Korean American man as the investigator), so I decided to satisfy my needs” (“Follow-Up Interview with Bill Han”). While the Allen Choice series fulfills the promise of a standard mystery tale, Chang goes several steps further, delving into the complex web of racial and familial tensions that define his character's world. In the process, Chang's work deftly walks the line separating literary and commercial fiction. By crafting a character whose race is no mere novelty, but a fact of his existence, Chang turns the conventional image of Charlie Chan on its head, creating an ethnic detective grounded firmly in a sense of verisimilitude. While the author himself may possess a vested interest in issues and concerns related to the so-called “Asian American experience,” what separates his protagonist from many other Asian

⁵⁷ *Over the Shoulder* was translated into French (Editions de Seuil), Korean (Munhal Segyesa Publishing Company), and Japanese (Artist's House). *Underkill* was published in France and Japan, and *Fade to Clear* has been translated into French.

American characters in literature is that Allen Choice has a peculiar *disinterest* in all things ethnic, racial, or cultural. The Allen Choice series exemplifies Sau-Ling Cynthia Wong's characterization of certain Asian American writers who have been "formulating an 'interested disinterestedness' appropriate to their condition as minority artists with responsibilities to their community but also a need for room to exercise their creativity" (13). By crafting a fictional hero that reflects such a mindset, Chang strikes a clever balance, successfully attending to the formulaic needs of the genre, while still presenting readers with a fully-realized, altogether believable Asian American hero. But whereas the conventions of the hardboiled detective were worn by Dale Furutani's protagonist as if it were an ill-fitting costume, Allen Choice has a less self-conscious engagement with the genre, one that attempts to exorcise the specter of Charlie Chan while also interrogating the same hegemonic masculinity Leonard Chang mobilizes so successfully with this detective trilogy.

De-Orientalization and the Asian American Man

In many ways, Allen Choice has been crafted to serve as an Asian American hero for a new generation. Unlike Furutani's aging amateur sleuth, Allen is much younger – precisely thirty years old at the beginning of *Over the Shoulder*. While Leonard Chang himself was born in New York City and raised on Long Island, the Los Angeles-born Allen Choice grew up in South Bay and Oakland. His mother died in childbirth, while his father was allegedly killed in a warehouse accident when he was ten years old. His subsequent formative years were spent under the care of his

stern Aunt Insook, who – as the novel will reveal – harbored a few secrets of her own. Allen’s unique surname serves as a direct reflection of the American immigrant experience. In *Over the Shoulder*, he reveals the name’s origin:

My name, Allen Choice, throws people off, since it is distinctly un-Korean, un-Asian, and my middle name, Sung-Oh, appears only on my birth certificate and driver’s license. Upon immigrating here, my father Americanized his last name, Choi, by going through his English dictionary and looking for the word with the closest spelling. He would have chosen “choir” but had trouble pronouncing it. I’m used to the initial confusion my name causes when I speak to people over the phone and then meet them later. My appearance jars them. I see quick calculations, adjustments of expectations. (22)

While Chang does not elaborate on the implications of the surname Choice in the text, the name evokes any number of interpretations: the inherent freedom to choose a name embodied in the name itself as well as the difficult choice immigrants are often forced to make between cultures when leaving their native country and relocating elsewhere. But the idea of “choice” in this context remains most closely associated with prevailing notions about the so-called American dream, the idea of remaking (*choosing*) one’s own identity in a land of untold opportunity—as emblemized by the Horatio Alger story, the typical “rags to riches, small town boy makes good” narrative, and perhaps most famously, F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby*. As Chang explained to the *L.A. Daily News*, the Allen Choice stories are not designed to solely represent Korean Americans, but are instead “the experience of anyone who is different by color, size, speech—anything.”

Prior ethnic detectives in American literature like Charlie Chan, Mr. Moto, and Mr. Wong have been predominantly “faux exotic,” a kind of “stereotyped exploitation of the exotic rather than serious explorations of the Other” (Macdonald

60). Instead of the clichéd repository for “ancient Oriental wisdom,” Allen’s demonstrates an overt *lack* of knowledge about Korean culture. He cannot speak Korean and, for various reasons, knows very little about his ethnic heritage. In Allen Choice, we have a character more likely to quote Kierkegaard than Confucius, as he does in *Fade to Clear*. For example, “Part I” of that novel bears a heading entitled “Either/Or,” which would normally suggest some kind of a nod to the so-called “identity crisis” paradigm common in early Asian American discourse. Chang subverts expectations by never even delving into that issue – “Either/Or” is actually a reference to Kierkegaard’s work regarding stages of existence. Here, Chang subverts the racist assumption that an Asian American protagonist would only embrace beliefs and/or philosophies that are Asian in origin, as was the case with Charlie Chan’s constant reliance on fortune cookie-style homilies.

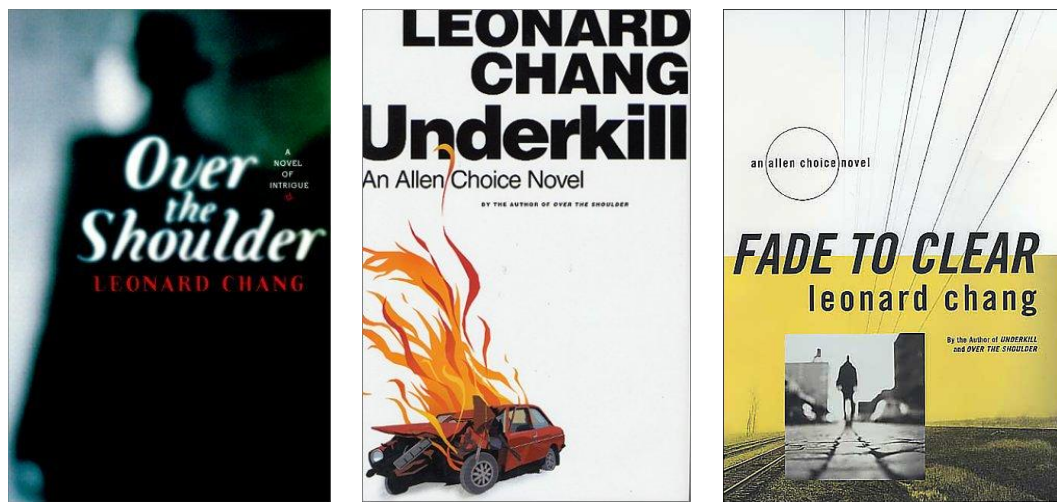


Figure 47. U.S. Covers to *Over the Shoulder*, *Underkill*, and *Fade to Clear*

The novels’ lack of overt exoticism was not lost on publishers, as Chang revealed to the *San Francisco Chronicle*: “We had to fight not having an Asian motif

on the cover, to exoticize it.” In fact, prospective publishers even told him in no uncertain terms to “play up the ethnic angle.” He elaborates on the ordeal to the *L.A. Daily News*: “They wanted more exoticism and otherness—they wanted, essentially, confirmation of their stereotypical perceptions of Korean America, and of course, I wouldn’t and couldn’t accommodate them.” Although what Chang dealt with in those instances relates to the usage of culture as marketable commodity, those attitudes are likely related to, as Patricia Chu terms it, the “deeply entrenched presumption that Asian Americans are not Americans” (4). On the level of cultural tourism, the closest Leonard Chang comes to “food pornography” is describing “sizzling fried vegetables” and “the smell of fried rice” when Allen eats lunch at a Vietnamese restaurant (*Fade to Clear* 269). Otherwise, Allen eats Korean, Chinese, American, and Italian food with little to no fanfare. Lovingly crafted descriptions that exoticize and eroticize Asian cuisine are left out entirely from Chang’s detective trilogy.

In his essay “Q-Zombies,” Leonard Chang explains his motives further: “I have strived to present Asian Americans as unexoticized and regular Americans, sometimes even using genres to camouflage my intentions” (9). As such, the seeming formulaic “constraints” of the detective novel instead create a framework from which Leonard Chang can construct his vision of a more credible Korean American protagonist. Race *is* an issue for Allen, but refreshingly— and rather realistically—it is not the *only* issue. The irony here is that, in *Allen Choice*, we have a protagonist who is wholly unconcerned with race and culture being forced to deal with these

issues by his creator, an author who most likely *does* hold these concerns. This “interested disinterestedness,” to borrow Sau-Ling Cynthia Wong’s term, seems to be the key to Chang’s work, in that it allows the more socially-conscious cultural aims of the texts to co-exist with the generic demands of the mystery genre.

For example, when a character in *Underkill* suggests that Allen does not seem to even think about being Asian, he responds: “I think about it. . . .when I have to” (153). Unlike some characters, whose sense of “Asian-ness” seems to dominate their very concept of identity, Allen’s relationship with race does not emerge as an overriding concern. His lack of connection with his Korean heritage is not due to an embrace of the dominant American culture. In truth, there is a sense of disconnect with *both* worlds because Allen, as Bernadette Murphy writes, “floats between and passes through both cultures, never able to settle in either one.” Like the hardboiled detective of old, whose relationship to the law and crime lay somewhere in between the two, Allen Choice exists as a liminal figure.

Allen’s inability to speak Korean stems from his mother’s early death and his father’s (and later, his aunt’s) enforcement of an English-only household under the belief that it was his best chance for success as an American. However, when his father passed away, his Aunt tried to get him to learn Korean:

I told [Serena] about going to a Korean church as a kid because my aunt had forced me to. Since I couldn’t speak any Korean, I was assigned to the kindergarten Korean-language class after the regular Bible study. I hated it and would slip out of the church before the language classes began. (*Underkill* 154)

Considering his intentional deprivation of the language coupled with a later attempted “force-feeding” of Korean culture, it is no surprise why the issue became such a sore subject for Allen.⁵⁸ Throughout the series, however, he finds himself confronted by the fact that he cannot speak Korean. When meeting Serena’s parents in *Fade to Clear*, Allen realizes “he will be overtly self-conscious of his lack of ethnic ties” since he is often made to feel like an “ethnic dunce” (16). Over the course of the books, he is constantly reminded that his status as a so-called “ethnic dunce” is simply unacceptable. One of the best passages that helps illustrate the character’s complex feelings toward this issue appears in the previous novel, *Underkill*, when he meets Linda’s stepfather, Luke, who greets him in Korean:

“*Ah nung ha seh yo.*”

I hesitated. “Excuse me?”

“*Ah nung ha seh yo.* Doesn’t that mean ‘hello’ in Korean?”

“Dad,” Linda said. “I told you not to do that.”

He said to me, “One of my partners in the firm is Korean. He taught me that.”

Linda gave me an apologetic look.

I said, “Actually Mr. Sherwin, I don’t speak Korean.”

⁵⁸ Chang has used this motif before, as in the short story “Clay Hats,” the main character, a Korean American boy named David who cannot speak Korean must endure an abusive father and the loss of his dead mother. In “Bonita Hills Day Trip,” the protagonist Robert Jhin also lacks Korean language skills: “Jhin couldn’t speak Korean, and had refused to learn” (8). And in *The Fruit ‘N Food*, Thomas Pak is unable to understand Korean and cannot speak it. His mother died slowly of cancer when he was five, his father sent him away to an aunt in California and a grandmother in Korea before returning to live with his father, who died eight years prior to the events of the story. And in *Dispatches from the Cold*, the narrator mentions an adoptive father who “was just a passing shadow in my life” (249) as well as a brief mention of a mother. According to his essay, “Q-Zombies,” Chang was raised by his mother, a Bible teacher at a Sunday school, after she divorced his alcoholic father, raising three children on her own.

He said it was too bad and asked that I call him Luke. (19)

The passage raises a number of questions. What does it say about Luke that not only was he told not to greet Allen in Korean, but was probably told that he did not speak the language? So why did Luke ask anyway? And when the facts were reaffirmed to him, what did he mean by “too bad”? The novel doesn’t provide any firm answers, but one can hypothesize that it has something to do with Luke’s stereotypical assumptions about ethnicity and language. When Luke later apologizes, Allen asks him about his surname, Sherwin. Luke reveals the name is Polish in origin (Czerwin, from Czerwinki), but shortened to be more “American-sounding.” Neither Luke nor his father speaks Polish, a fact which does not go unnoticed by Allen: “I smiled, deciding not to point out the inconsistency. He had expected me to speak Korean, whereas neither he nor his father spoke Polish” (33). Here, Leonard Chang highlights the double standard in contemporary American culture in which an Asian American who does not know his or her “native” language is made to feel like an ethnic dunce, whereas the white American who has lost touch with his linguistic roots does not even think twice about it. As Allen suggests, one’s Korean heritage should no more indicate fluency in Korean than one’s Polish ancestry should indicate adeptness with Polish.⁵⁹ From Chang’s very construction of the character, Allen Choice does not and cannot perform the role of a cultural tour guide for white readers wanting a “native informant” for Korean culture.

⁵⁹ It is perhaps all the more painful that the white villain of *Over the Shoulder* speaks fluent Korean, turning the knife in his side by saying, “I think it’s shameful that you can’t speak your mother tongue” (364).

Confronting Racism

It is not just mere racial misunderstandings or stereotypical assumptions that Allen Choice has to deal with throughout the series. In several instances, he must also face racism head-on in ways that Charlie Chan never did. In *Over the Shoulder*, an uncomfortable encounter with a racist precipitates his partner's murder: "The man looks me over, smirks, then bows. He says, 'Ah-so, do I go now? Do I reave? It velly velly good" (11); "'You gonna use chop-saki karate on me?' He holds up his hands and does a few fake knife strikes (ibid); and "'Confucius say, 'No call por-reese'"(ibid). In the same book, Allen is taunted as a "gook" (12), "Bruce Lee" (332), a "stupid chink son of a bitch" (370), and a "chinko" (371). Allen's prospects for avoiding racially charged encounters fail to improve as the series continues.

Charlie Chan, too, was often the victim of racism, but, over the years, he has gained a reputation for patiently dealing with these situations and gradually winning over his critics. William F. Wu perhaps best sums up this line of thinking: "Charlie Chan's calm, apologetic, and passive tolerance of racial insults and harassment is an obvious sop to those who would be threatened by an Asian American detective with normal assertiveness and temper" (181). Allen, however, does not passively tolerate racists, nor does he try to win their respect. In two major instances, the people hurling these vile epithets are the antagonists of their respective books. In both cases, Allen fatally shoots his assailants. Nevertheless, two specific racial incidents get extended attention in *Fade to Clear's* narrative.

At the beginning of the novel, Allen and his partner Larry get caught snooping around a warehouse and are soon held hostage by a gun-toting Jamaican gangster. The man repeatedly calls him “Chin,” prompting our hero to ask why. The Jamaican explains: “Chin. Chinese. Chinaman.” With a gun pointed at him and his life on the line, Allen deadpans, “Stop calling me Chin, for chrissakes. . . . I’m not Chinese. I’m actually Korean” (4). Considering the fact that he is being held at gunpoint, Choice’s insistence on clarifying the Jamaican character’s racial faux pas makes for a humorous, but purposeful message: if the man insists on being a racist, at least use the appropriate slur. Despite Allen’s exasperated explanation, the gangster does not stop calling him Chin until our hero is able to pull his spare gun, causing the man to flee. Later in the narrative, Allen tries to laugh off the events, and says “Chin” aloud: “Where did that come from? Maybe it’s a Jamaican thing. Maybe it’s supposed to be an insult, like ‘chink.’ Chin. Chink” (27). As with most things racial, Allen puzzles it out briefly, before promptly thinking about something else. Later in the novel, however, a man refers to him as a “Jap,” a comment that *does* seem to get to him:

Allen had let the “Jap” remark slide, but now it’s bothering him. There’s always something like that hovering near him, some remark or look or feeling. Sometimes he’ll actually forget about his race for a day or two until something like that reminds him—a well-meaning clerk asking where he’s “from,” a double take when he’s in Marin or even farther north and the only Asian around. (110)

In these moments, Allen must confront his own feelings about race and what it means for his identity. But as shown in both instances, he does not dwell on these experiences for long. Allen simply moves forward, as the plot and, to a larger extent, the demands of the genre require. There is, after all, a mystery to be solved.

Remasculinization and the Hardboiled Detective Genre

In each and every one of the male-centered Asian American detective works treated in this dissertation, there has been an attempt to recuperate Asian American masculinity from the stereotypes of the past. The first avenue in which Leonard Chang emphasizes Allen's manhood is through his physical description. Pegged as "the strong, silent type" by Serena Yew in *Underkill* (24), Allen's physicality is hinted at through his nickname "The Block." He explains in *Over the Shoulder*:⁶⁰

My nickname in high school was "the Block," given to me because of my once stocky build, the way my head seemed attached to a rectangular block of a body. I've slimmed down and have actually grown a couple of inches since then, but I earned this name as a fullback on the soccer team, barreling into opposing forwards. I still have my jersey somewhere, practically shredded with age, but it's my only proof of being part of a winning team. (7)

Not only is Allen's physicality emphasized here, but his participation and implied success at sports – not to mention his initial profession as a bodyguard and later a detective – give his character an edge of toughness not often associated with men of Asian descent in U.S. pop culture. In *Fade to Clear*, Chang goes so far as to list a litany of bruises accumulated by Allen over the course of the series: "He has had broken ribs, fractured tibias, sprained joints, and perilous concussions. In a couple of cases he has been hit so hard that he blacked out before he could truly feel the depth of pain of such a blow" (12-13). In book after book, college dropout Allen Choice takes a beating like the best private eyes in popular fiction. In no uncertain terms,

⁶⁰ The explanation is repeated and modified in *Underkill*, "The reason why I was called 'The Block' in high school was because of my build, which some kids thought looked like a square building block, and I played fullback on our soccer team, successfully defending and blocking our end" (29).

Allen is presented as a tough guy, and like many men in hardboiled fiction and film, his masculinity is linked not just an ability to endure pain, but to his own proclivity toward violence as well. Adept in taekwondo, Allen gets into several physical altercations in the trilogy, and even brandishes a SIG Sauer P-230 firearm, which he uses on more than one occasion to kill his enemies.

Probably one of the more significant aspects of Allen's masculine identity relates to his resemblance to the hardboiled detectives of old. To be sure, the entire premise of Chang's earlier book, *Over the Shoulder*, could be seen as an homage of sorts to Dashiell Hammett. Allen's unceasing search for his partner's killer recalls one of Sam Spade's most memorable lines in *The Maltese Falcon*: "When a man's partner is killed he's supposed to do something about it. It doesn't matter what you thought of him. He was your partner and you're supposed to do something about it" (Hammett 213). At the time of *Over the Shoulder*, he works for ProServ, a security firm that protects Silicon Valley executives. By the time of *Underkill*, Allen is working on his PI license and has become a conditional partner at Baxter Investigations after leaving ProServ. And in *Fade to Clear*, he converts B&C Investigations to Choice Investigations before wresting the firm away from his partner, who took money to feed information to illegal parties. As both a literary and realistic phenomenon, a bodyguard of Asian descent registers as an anomaly – or, as a character remarks in *Over the Shoulder*, "You don't see a lot of Asian Americans in your line of work" (182). Upon close inspection, he falls more into the hardboiled detective mold of Sam Spade, the Continental Op, and Philip Marlowe than into the

role of the traditional puzzle-solving sleuth typified by the likes of Charlie Chan. But unlike Ken Tanaka, Allen is not playing a role – in fact, by the second novel, he has already become a de facto private eye. As John T. Irwin points out in *Unless the Threat of Death is Behind Them* (2006), detectives like Spade and Marlowe came to embody the masculine ideal of self-employed, independent operators making their way in an increasingly bureaucratic and corrupt world. According to Irwin, “in urban twentieth-century America, North and South, many have felt that a man wasn’t a man until he was his own boss; until, in a country one of whose founding ideals was the personal freedom that comes with economic independence, he had achieved some form of self-employment” (38). By becoming his own boss at the end of the trilogy, Allen Choice follows in their footsteps. Unlike Charlie Chan who worked for law enforcement and the U.S. government, Allen is an independent operator, beholden to no one but the clients he chooses.

And yet even as it seems Leonard Chang is embracing the fistfighting and gunslinging ways of American cowboy culture as a means to remasculinize the Asian male body, Allen does not come across as a two-fisted John Wayne figure in these novels. Instead, we find a character who is self-conscious and self-critical about his own masculinity in a way very different from Ken Tanaka. In *Underkill*, he briefly meets Mack, a tall, athletically-built African American who becomes a kind of role model for the detective: “Maybe I should become a tough guy. I should be like Mack – cool, menacing, and decisive. The way he had subdued that drunken man at the party had been impressive. Why couldn’t I be like that? I should never let anyone else

take control. I should be Mack” (167). Later in the narrative, when experiencing a racist taunt, Allen’s mind goes back to Mack once more:

Papa-san? I was getting sick of this. I remembered Mack being called jungle bunny and wasn’t sure why people always resorted to race for a quick comeback. I stared hard at this man, who became more antsy, his eyes shifting, and I saw he was young, barely in his twenties. I thought, What would Mack do? Would he take this shit? (173).

By the time of *Fade to Clear*, the name “Mack Johnson” has become one of Allen’s aliases. Black masculinity becomes the model for Asian American masculinity, rather than any conscious emulation of film noir tropes on the part of Choice himself – in direct contrast with Ken Tanaka’s hardboiled aspirations. In both cases, these Asian American men look outside of their own racial and ethnic backgrounds as a means to rejuvenate their own personal sense of what manhood truly means. Despite the genre trappings, the aspirational mode of masculinity is not an identification with the hegemon, but with a minority articulation of manhood. In this sense, Chang creates a space for the consideration of alternative masculinities.

Allen Choice’s Greatest Case – The Feminine Mystique

Even if Allen solves all the murders that plague each of the novels in the trilogy, he remains somewhat clueless in other respects, particularly when it comes to women. A discussion of a character’s masculinity would be incomplete without examining his relationships with the opposite sex. On the surface, Chang’s remasculinization project seems to also come through a portrayal of romantic relationships to assuage asexual depictions of Asian American men. After all, Allen

enjoys his fair share of success in romance department, having little problem attracting women in the three novels. However, his sexual escapades are never of the bed-hopping, James Bond variety, as Allen's relationships are not written for erotic titillation. He sleeps with three women in the series – his partner's grieving wife Sonia Baumgartner, reporter Linda Maldonado, and computer programmer Serena Yew – two of whom become relatively long-term, serious girlfriends. By making Allen Choice a sexual being, Chang again defies stereotypes of emasculation. And in allowing these relationships to be both sexual and "serious," the author grants his character the kind of life that Charlie Chan, Mr. Wong, and Mr. Moto simply were not allowed to have. Although Chan apologists are quick to point out that the character had a wife and numerous children, which would connote a sense of virility, it remains clear that the detective was in no way a romantic leading man. That side of his life is, as William F. Wu states, "developed only to a small degree" (180). With Allen Choice, however, the character's sexuality is given a more realistic, if occasionally unflattering treatment.

In this attempt by Chang at a kind of verisimilitude, Allen's "success" with women is not the stuff of racy pulp fiction. In the novel, Allen's actions during his tryst with Sonia in *Over the Shoulder* seem downright virginal in comparison to other leading men in the same genre:

"It's been a while for me too," I say. I start to pull away, but she grabs my waist tightly and holds me there. We begin moving in rhythm as I bury my face in her neck, my disbelief of where I am and what I am doing almost making me giddy. I stifle a small laugh, and she stops.

"What?"

“Sorry,” I whisper. “I can’t believe we’re doing this.” (144)

Their affair comes to an abrupt conclusion soon after when Sonia informs him that she regrets sleeping with him. Allen laments: “I wish I were a Casanova. Instead I’m a mistake” (178). Sonia is by no means a femme fatale, and Allen is no Mickey Spillane-style detective either – each are given a more well-rounded treatment that speaks to the insecurities and uncertainties involved in an ill-advised one-night stand.

Allen’s ongoing relationship with Linda Maldonado further places *Over the Shoulder* and *Underkill* (books in which Allen and Linda were together) into the category of interracial romance narratives. Although the details of this affair occur mostly outside the text, their relationship seems, on the surface, to reflect how both white American and early Asian American authors traditionally treated such plots in their own stories. Considering films like *Love is a Many-Splendored Thing* (Twentieth Century Fox 1955) and theatrical productions like *Madama Butterfly* (1904), the conventional take on these types of narratives is perhaps best explained by Patricia Chu in her book, *Assimilating Asians: Gendered Strategies of Authorship* (2000):

For Asian American authors, interracial romance plots also function as sites for negotiating the formation of ethnic American identities, but the dystopian outcomes that tend to dominate interracial love in this literature suggest fundamental skepticism about the Asian Americans subject’s possibilities for assimilation, skepticism that seems rooted in the historic positioning of Asian Americans as racially marked outsiders. (20)

But unlike the negative outcomes Chu documents, Leonard Chang’s take on interracial romance does not follow this pattern. True, Allen’s relationship with Linda

Maldonado ends, but race was never a contributing factor to its demise. For the most part, race fails to even enter into the realm of conversation. It is treated as a complete non-issue—*old news*. But again, one must also recognize that Chang relegates the entirety of that two year relationship “off-book” as *Underkill* deals with the relationship on its last legs, as Linda has already begun an affair unbeknownst to Allen. Unlike Sam Spade who refused to “play the sap” for anyone, Allen frequently finds himself stuck in this role in relation to Linda, both in *Underkill* and *Fade to Clear*.

Serena Yew, introduced in *Underkill* and a returning character in *Fade to Clear*, becomes Allen’s steady girlfriend over the course of these two novels. By the final novel, Allen is thirty-three-years-old and has been dating Serena for almost a year-and-a-half. However, his decision to help his ex-girlfriend and continue on with the case, despite the fact that she lied to him and put his life in danger causes problems in his relationship with Serena. Curiously, Allen cannot fathom why she would object. Although Serena has been patient with Allen and allowed him to make his own choices, his behavior finally causes her to lose her temper: “If I were you, I would never have taken the case in the first place, because I know how hard it would be for my girlfriend” (221). Allen fails to understand this, but tries to make amends during the novel’s denouement.

Time and again, Allen proves to be absolutely clueless when dealing with women, as each novel seems to hinge on his management or mismanagement of these various relationships. As mentioned in *Fade to Clear*: “He has no models for

marriage, of relationships. He has no instruction manuals. All he has is a bastardized version of Kierkegaard, suited to his own needs” (294). While Allen is able to solve the various cases of his respective novels, he fails to detect much of anything when it comes to the women who populate his life. These women in Chang’s novels, it should be noted, are not one-dimensional femme fatales existing merely to fulfill a genre function. This difference is crucial, for in the hardboiled detective novels and the various film noirs of old, a protagonist’s inability to outwit the femme fatale would result in fatal consequences for himself or others. However, the consequences of Allen Choice’s failures are far less severe – hurt feelings and a broken heart.

The Choice is Clear

Due to the depth and complexity of his characters, Leonard Chang’s Allen Choice Trilogy amounts to a significant achievement in Asian American writing. Through a single series of books, Chang explores uncharted territory for both hardboiled detective novels and Asian American literature. Although Chang has not yet resumed the series, his sixth novel, *Crossings* (Black Heron Press, 2009), continues the noir theme. The novel centers on Sam, a single parent deeply in debt to a gangster who covered his wife’s hospital bills. Agreeing to become a henchman to pay off the loan, Sam falls for Unha, a woman forced into prostitution, and the two go on the run in this dark noir tale. After the publication of *Crossings*, Leonard Chang found work on the writing staff of Kyle Killen’s NBC drama, *Awake* (2012), starring Jason Isaacs, B.D. Wong, and Cherry Jones. After the critically acclaimed show’s

cancellation due to low ratings, Chang joined the writing staff of the FX Network's hit show, *Justified* (2010-), based on the works of Elmore Leonard. Chang's next book, *Triplines*, an autobiographical novel based on his childhood in Long Island, is scheduled to be released in 2013.

Although Leonard Chang has no current plans to revisit Allen Choice, actor Daniel Dae Kim, one of the stars of the hit ABC television drama *Lost* (2004-10) and now CBS's reboot of *Hawaii Five-0* (2010-), optioned the rights to a film version of *Over the Shoulder*. Leonard Chang himself has penned several drafts of the screenplay, as the film awaits production. With any luck, Allen Choice, like Philip Marlowe and Sam Spade before him, might someday make it to the big screen. If this cinematic project materializes, it would give further proof to just how far portrayals of Asian Americans have come since the days of Charlie Chan.



Figure 48. Daniel Dae Kim.

Masculinities in Crisis: The Crime Fiction of Henry Chang & Ed Lin

Historically, Chinatown has been depicted in American pop culture from two different perspectives – from the outside and from within. As documented in previous chapters, the outsider's perspective has largely come in the form of popular literature and Hollywood films, where Chinatown is portrayed as an exotic hotbed of criminal

activity, most prominently in genres of crime and detection. Like Wayne Wang's *Chan Is Missing* before them, the crime fiction of Chinese American writers Henry Chang and Ed Lin attempt to recuperate Chinatown from stereotypical outsider depictions. Both approaches constitute the latest iterations in ever-expanding catalogue of Asian American detective novels that remasculinize the Asian male through an invocation of the hardboiled mode, but while their respective experiments carry similar ingredients, they each diverge sharply in their results.

Born and raised in New York's Chinatown, Henry Chang garnered high praise for his debut novel, *Chinatown Beat* (Soho Press, 1996), from the *New York Times Book Review*, the *Boston Globe*, and the *Washington Post*. A graduate of City College of New York (CCNY), Chang works as a security director for major hotels, commercial properties, and retail business in Manhattan, but in his spare time, has written a trilogy of books anchored by a Chinese American detective named Jack Yu. *Entertainment Weekly* lauded the series as "an Asian-flavored *The Wire*," evoking David Simon's critically acclaimed HBO series in its praise.

Each of Chang's novels bear the subtitle "A Jack Yu Investigation," a descriptor that could be construed as either misleading or strategic depending on one's point of view when taking into account the actual content of the novels. First of all, Jack Yu does not figure as prominently in his investigation as one might expect. While Jack's presence may indeed connect all the novels, Henry Chang employs a third-person omniscient style focusing on a panoply of characters rather than solely his ostensible protagonist, as would be the case in a typical hardboiled novel that

employs first-person narration. *Chinatown Beat* and its sequels – *Year of the Dog* (Soho Press, 2008) and *Red Jade* (Soho Press, 2009)– do not even contain conventional chapters, but are instead organized in short vignettes (bearing titles like “Dogs,” “The City”), which run for as long as two pages and as short as two sentences. Stylistically, this organizing principle seems to mirror the ways in which film and, particularly, television dramas boasting large ensemble casts, are edited together for viewer consumption. Through this method, Chang goes to great lengths to establish a sordid criminal milieu in his version of New York’s Chinatown, spotlighting various “low life” denizens and their subjective points of view. For example, *Chinatown Beat* tracks the converging stories of Jack Yu, a gangster named Tat “Lucky” Louie, triad boss Uncle Four, his mistress Mona, and a limo driver named Johnny who has fallen for her. In terms of adhering to multiple character arcs of *Chinatown Beat*, the sequels *Year of the Dog* and *Red Jade* follow suit.⁶¹

The “Investigation” aspect promised in the subtitle “A Jack Yu Investigation” does not resemble the kind commonly found in traditional detective fiction. In fact, in these novels, there are no real mysteries per se – for example, the identity of the killer in *Chinatown Beat* is never in doubt, and the person brought in by Jack at the end is actually innocent of the crime. In a mock triumphant ending, Jack even receives a promotion to Detective Third Grade and is awarded a Combat Cross for his efforts, despite unknowingly pinning the crime on an innocent suspect. In this respect,

⁶¹ Henry Chang pays homage to the memory of Vincent Chin by naming a character after him in *Year of the Dog* and *Red Jade* – here, an editor of Chinatown’s oldest Chinese language newspaper, the *United National*.

Chinatown Beat serves as a prime example of anti-detective fiction – noir of the blackest kind in which happy resolutions, even morally compromised ones, are few and far between. The series’ lack of consideration for conventional narrative momentum or intellectually challenging mystery plots continues in *Year of the Dog* and *Red Jade*, which both begin with Jack called to gruesome murder scenes, each of which turns out to be open-and-shut cases that have no bearing on these books’ respective storylines: the real “mystery” in *Year of the Dog* is not introduced until halfway through the narrative when a delivery boy goes missing, and *Red Jade* only seeks to tie up the loose ends left over from *Chinatown Beat*, involving Johnny and the femme fatale Mona who remains on the lam as the novel begins.

The marketing of the novels themselves – from press releases to cover blurbs – attest to Henry Chang’s status as a “native New Yorker,” giving the impression that his specific vision of Chinatown will emerge from an insider’s view, one that will run contrary to the exoticized depictions in mainstream U.S. culture. Through free indirect discourse, Chang gives Jack Yu’s interpretation of how the Caucasian police officers view Chinatown: “They were able to dismiss it as a troublesome nightmare, half-remembered and unfathomable. These Chinese were creatures unlike themselves, existing in a world where the English language and white culture carried little significance” (8). Here, we get a sense that the protagonist is being set up as an antidote for these racist, outsider views of the Chinese community, but one cannot help but remark that Jack ultimately sees Chinatown in the same clichéd, exoticized terms by the end of the novel: “Chinatown was a paradox, a Chinese puzzle he’d

never been able to figure out” (209). Invoking the dark, enigmatic characterization of Chinatown popularized by Roman Polanski’s 1974 film, Chang performs the stereotype for his readers, albeit from a presumably “insider’s perspective.” This instance proves illustrative of the problematic aspects of assuming there is some kind of inherent authenticity or positive value related to ethnic self-representation, as Henry Chang’s text falls prey to the same stereotypical clichés that permeate the genre.⁶²

Set during the Clinton administration, the series evokes the specter of Charlie Chan on not one, but three occasions. In *Chinatown Beat* and *Year of the Dog*, Tat “Lucky” Louie – a childhood friend-turned-gangmember – essentially calls Jack a Chinese Uncle Tom, invoking the name Charlie Chan in substitution for Harriet Beecher Stowe’s now infamous character: “Lucky did a slow circle around Jack. ‘When the fuck did you become Charlie Chan?’ (*Chinatown Beat*, 170). In the sequel, Lucky repeats this taunt: “Shit, you mean to tell me you’d rather side with the *gwailos*, man? You choose them fuckin’ mooks who used to laugh at us and call us *chingchong wingwong*? Boy, you ain’t nothing but a Charlie Chan, hah.” (*Year of the Dog* 96). In addition to Lucky’s taunts, Jack himself believes his non-Chinese colleagues at the police department share the same view: “So they couldn’t figure him

⁶² Curiously, *Chinatown Beat* offers Hawai‘i as an alternative space to Chinatown, portraying the contested fiftieth state as a kind of Chinese American Eden. At the end of the novel, Jack goes on vacation in Hawai‘i to escape Chinatown, an ethnic enclave that is described in *Year of the Dog* as “pulling him back, back into the gutter” (199). However, Jack is not the only one taking a vacation there. Mona, the nominal femme fatale, flees with a hundred thousand dollars of triad money, taking a cruise around the islands of Hawai‘i, visiting Maui, Hilo, and Oahu. For Mona and Jack, Hawai‘i amounts to an Asian American paradise where they can blend in, free of the constraints of the past. But such a mainland Asian American-centered portrayal of Hawai‘i comes only with a disavowal and erasure of Native Hawaiians from the landscape.

out; the inscrutable Oriental, Detective Charlie Chan, they joked behind his back” (98). Even when reduced to mere epithet, Charlie Chan – as well as the network of racist stereotypes he has come to represent – weighs heavily on the mind of this particular Chinese American detective.

In clear and distinctive ways, Henry Chang’s particular remasculinization project for Jack Yu involves methods that differ greatly from the work of Dale Furutani and Leonard Chang. In the following pages, I explore Chang’s attempt to vanquish the specter of Charlie Chan and remasculinize the Asian American male through an invocation of the hardboiled mode; however, in so doing, I also wish to illustrate the ways in which this masculinist project comes at the expense of both women and other racial minorities, as each are subordinated as a means to normalize the Asian American male.

Masculinity as Misogyny

Like many noirs of the past, the Jack Yu Trilogy traffics in questionable attitudes toward women. Initially, the female characters are presented in somewhat abstract form, as foggy recollections from Jack’s distant past. Early in *Chinatown Beat*, we find Jack pining over the memory of Maylee, a Chinatown beauty queen who broke his heart by going off to Barnard and marrying a white man. In these passages, we get a glimpse of Jack’s understanding for why his subsequent relationships with women have failed:

After Maylee, there came a series of unrewarding, unsatisfying affairs, with Asian girls he’d figured he’d had something in common with, affairs

ultimately overshadowed by the differences in their cultural attitudes. The Japanese considered themselves superior to the Chinese. The Chinese never forgot the Japanese atrocities in World War Two. Koreans were clannish, rude, spiteful in the face of Eastern history, their occupation by the Japs. Vietnamese and Cambodians never got over China's part in their wars of liberation. Indians, Filipinos, Thais, their skin was too dark. Poverty and colonialism settled their place in the Asian pecking order. Later generations paying for the crimes and weaknesses of their ancestors. Attitudes steeped in centuries of struggle, prejudice and pride, too strong for Jack's brief Americanization to overcome. (90)

In each of these instances, Jack employs a racist logic, denying any personal responsibility for his botched relationships, and the discussion becomes increasingly abstract – more of a reductive history lesson on inter-Asian tensions than an honest discussion of his own failings as a romantic partner. Here, Jack asserts a Chinese American identity in place of a unitary Asian American one, suggesting that the racial tribalism that he believes to be responsible for the demise of these relationships undermines any solidarity that a pan-ethnic construction of Asian America might suggest.

As he reminisces, Jack proceeds to express further disappointment with non-Asian women: “Later there were Puerto Rican women, and artistic women of color from the Village, but never white women, to whom he was invisible, the Chinaman no man” (91). After this brief mention of emasculation at the hands of white females, the discussion rounds back to Jack's simmering disdain for Asian women once more: “He'd known that women had all the power. Asian women could sell out, cop to the plea, give up the struggle, because they were desired. Asian men had to live with their struggles for acceptance” (91) In Jack's mind, Asian women – compared here to sell-

outs, criminals, and cowards – can freely assimilate, while Asian men would be unable to gain that same acceptance even if they wanted it.

In light of Jack's misogyny, Henry Chang does not limit the novel's engagement with female characters to his protagonist's bitter memories, but instead supplies the narrative with a number of women to round out the supporting cast. In the first novel, Jack meets Alexandra Lee-Chow, a lawyer working for a fictional activist organization, the Asian American Justice Advocacy. During this initial encounter, the reader is immediately alerted to how Jack views Alexandra as a threat to his own fragile sense of manhood:

Jack began to think how uneasy women with hyphenated names made him feel. Ambitious women. The ones who wanted the fab careers, the motherhood, the perfect marriage, strung tight and fully charged [...] *Lee-Chow*. Taking her husband's name but refusing to give up her own, trying to impose the past upon the future. Or maybe it was a gender power thing that came with the white collar. (103)

If Jack is indeed a hardboiled throwback to an older form of masculinity, his knee-jerk response to even the slightest hint of feminism exposes the perils of returning to this more traditional form of manhood as ideal models of behavior. Although Jack associates Alexandra with Maylee and the "type of woman" she had become, by the end of the novel, she is effectively redeemed in his eyes: "He'd figured Alexandra wrong. Beneath her tough, pushy lawyer exterior, there was a woman who cared deeply for her people" (211). But even with this eventual reversal of opinion, Jack's grudging respect for Alexandra comes just at the moment in which she becomes a viable love interest.

Aside from Alexandra Lee-Chow, the women in *Chinatown Beat* are largely one-dimensional. While the first novel features the femme fatale Mona and various helpless female victims in need of protection (children, the elderly), the remaining women in the series are, by and large, prostitutes. In fact, every single novel in the Jack Yu series features at least one lengthy pornographic scene. Chang includes erotically charged interludes that leave little to the imagination, each featuring women of color, often underage, who have been sexually trafficked from Southeast Asia to service men in positions of power within the criminal underworld. Despite the disturbing nature of these sexual encounters and the type of characters involved, these scenes are written for erotic titillation – the first two books involve Lucky’s rendezvous with a “dust-colored Malay girl with large brown nipples that cried out to be sucked” (*Chinatown Beat* 45) and “a half-Cuban half-Chinese *ho* who performed something called a ‘yingyang’ or blackout blowjob” (*Year of the Dog* 29). *Red Jade* depicts a ménage a trois involving an older criminal and a waifish, light-skinned teen and a “darker, ethnic Chinese from Southeast Asia” (139). Like its predecessors, this scene is explicit in nature,⁶³ as the following example should demonstrate: “He was mesmerized by the hairless vulva, *yum bo*, fleshy labia, *yum soon*, cutaneous folds spreading toward *soon hut*, the hooded little pearl. Devouring the glistening

⁶³ By comparison to his oversexed adversaries, Jack Yu seems chaste by comparison. In the first two books, the closest Jack and Alex come to one another is this: “They had traded cheek kisses and awkward looks afterward, finally shaking hands before she tiptoed through the snow and faded into the lobby of the high-rise” (*Year of the Dog*, 194). For the majority of the three novels, Jack has no sex life and seemingly no sexual desires whatsoever. The closest thing to an articulation of romantic passion is this single sentence: “He wants to pull Alex close, to bring her heart to heart, to kiss her eyes lightly and find out what she’s thinking” (*Red Jade* 2). At the end of the third novel, a romantic scene between the two formerly platonic friends plays out in the tradition of a classic Hollywood fade-out – in this case, the book simply comes to an end.

pudendum with his lustful eyes” (40). If women are not “dangerous” feminists or helpless creatures in need of rescue, then they are degraded sexual objects. Thus, instead of engaging in food pornography, the practice of exoticizing one’s ethnic cuisine for white consumption, Henry Chang’s novels are instead *literally* pornographic, in a way that has much more disturbing implications than a mere restaurant tour of Chinatown could ever be.

Further, Mona, who suffers multiple rapes at the hands of a crime boss, may at first seem to resemble the kind of character to whom the reader should perhaps feel some sympathy, but she is instead more or less depicted as the femme fatale of classic noir, especially when placed against the limo driver, Johnny Wong. Unlike Sam Spade in *The Maltese Falcon*, Johnny ends up “playing the sap” for Mona, as he falls victim to a noir set-up straight out of a James M. Cain novel. In contrast to Mona, Johnny is more sympathetically portrayed, a man whose “grand dreams” – his American dream, if you will – of saving up to one day own “a take-out counter, a Wah Wah bakery franchise, [and] the coin Laundromat” are dashed by Mona’s frame-up. (*Red Jade* 50) While Johnny Wong is allowed to plead to illegal possession of a weapon and reckless endangerment with time served, Mona’s neglect of him seems callous. Despite the novel’s multiple foci, Mona only exists as a femme fatale throughout her appearances in the series, rather than a fully realized character. Aside from Alexandra Lee-Chow, the women in Henry Chang’s novels seem to exist purely to fulfill their genre function.

Normalcy At the Expense of Others – Masculinity as Racism

While women fare poorly in the novels, non-Chinese characters are perhaps treated worse. Most white characters in the trilogy are depicted as either open or closet racists, while Latinos and African Americans are portrayed as more or less subhuman. The inaugural novel in the series, *Chinatown Beat*, firmly establishes Jack's personal views on the black community, which he describes as a faceless mass preying on an otherwise innocent Chinese population:

Chinese people never enslaved Black people, never robbed or lynched them. The Black Rage angle had nothing to do with the Chinese, who suffered under the same weight of discrimination as the Blacks did. The Black-on-Yellow crime was blind racist hate, straight up and simple. (emphasis Chang's 86)

When Jamal Josephs, an African American police officer, openly wonders why an old Chinese woman keeps flashing him the peace sign at him, saying, "Hock-kwee, hock-kwee!," which he knows to mean "black devil," Jack responds: "It wasn't the peace sign, man, it was two, like in two black *African American soul brothers* from the Smith Houses mugging a seventy-year-old Chinese grandmother, busting out her dentures, but all you can hear is *nigger*, right?" (98) When Jamal grumbles that his remark sounds racist, Jack retorts, "Cause half the fuckin crime in the Projects is committed against Asians by blacks, and what's *racist* about it that you can't face up to it, how badly you're fucking up as a people" (98).

Although Jack clearly harbors some heated viewpoints on African Americans in *Chinatown Beat*, this simmering anti-black sentiment comes to a head in the sequel

Year of the Dog when a Chinese American delivery boy disappears.⁶⁴ Jack investigates, noticing the boy's bike outside a warehouse. When the detective enters the building, he is confronted with blaring hip hop music, and a trio of do-rag wearing, drug addled black youths described as being high on marijuana, wearing their hair in cornrows, and possessing gold-capped teeth. They are further described as owning a "frenzied pit bull" that attacks Jack. After killing the dog and wounding these men in an ensuing gunfight, Jack discovers a cassette tape in a boombox. He hits "PLAY" and is shocked by the lyrics of an amateur rap song called "Whup Dat Chinee."⁶⁵ Although the youths are identified by name (Jamal Bryant, DaShawn Miller, and Tyrone Walker), the boys are largely ciphers. At it turns out, the Chinese delivery boy was lured to the building and beaten to death with a hammer, stabbed, and beaten again with a baseball bat until his face was crushed. During the ensuing police interrogation, the text characterizes this trio of black eighteen-year-olds as cruel, inarticulate, and ignorant, as one of the perpetrators describes the murder: "Tyrone saying 'Lookit all the blood. Red, too.' He thought Chinese blood was yellow. They was laughing" (170).

Ultimately, the murdered delivery boy stands in stark contrast to these practically demonic black youths, whose race, it seems, is viewed as no coincidence

⁶⁴ The sequel continues its negative portrayal of non-Asian minorities with a quick news blurb: "A *trio of black and Latino teenagers had shot and killed a Chinese woman in a botched robbery of a 99-cent store*" (*Year of the Dog* 20).

⁶⁵ One of the boys even calls Jack a "Chinee", which seems to be more a reference to Bret Harte's "Heathen Chinee" than actual street vernacular from 1994.

in Jack's mind. Consider how the text portrays these black youths against the murder victim and his family:

The parents, who hadn't slept in two days, were racked with grief, in stunned disbelief at their loss, their only son, their joy and their hope, the A-student who was going to *be* someone in [...] America, gone, forever lost to brutal, senseless violence. Gone, their American dreams all gone. The murderers, *hok-kwee* black devils, teenagers too lazy or stupid to succeed in school, their brains dulled from drugs and alcohol, their hearts hardened by racism and hate, animal souls consumed by lust and violence. (174).

If there were any lingering confusion on how to read these "black devils," Jack Yu's internal monologue provides a clear view on the matter: "*Sociopathic* was a word not found in the Chinese language, an idea the parents could not comprehend. *How could human beings have no regard for the evil they do? Unless, of course, they weren't human beings but m'hai yun, a lower species of animal*" (ibid).⁶⁶ In contrast to the "norm" of the Chinese Americans in Chinatown, African Americans are racialized as an abnormal and morally abhorrent "lower species."

Although the novels certainly do not shy away from portraying the Chinese criminal element in Chinatown, the resultant depictions seems slightly more flattering by comparison. The African American killers are portrayed as downright animalistic in contrast to the Chinese triads, who are shown to be an organized, transnational criminal empire, several steps removed from these low-level street thugs. While *The Year of the Dog* initially attempts to demythologize the rituals of the Chinese gang through Lucky's skepticism, it ultimately emphasizes their professionalism above

⁶⁶ If African Americans are depicted as animals in Chang's novels, Latinos are portrayed as equally insensitive bigots for at the somber prayer service for the delivery boy, a group of teenagers mercilessly mock the proceedings: "A group of Puerto Rican schoolgirls passed by and cracked jokes, goofing on the bald heads and saffron robes of the monks. *Chino Viejo! Oh snap, like kong foo*, their giggling cutting through the dirge" (175).

everything else: “In reality though, Lucky knew the triads were huge, sophisticated Chinese gangs that were major criminal players in Europe, and in Central and South America. More recently, they’d made inroads into North America by way of Canada” (74). Even within the realm of criminality, the Chinese triads are presented as superior to the black and Latino gangs that populate New York City.

Taking all these elements into account, one can see that while Chang’s novels may not reproduce the kind of hardboiled narrative in which the protagonist’s masculinity is defined by the completion of his quest or through a test of his physical courage, the so-called “normalcy” of the male detective and the Chinese American community is understood only through the alleged “abnormality” or “inferiority” of those who surround him. Little interested in the conventional trappings of the hardboiled hero, Henry Chang attempts to normalize his “representative” Chinese American protagonist against a bevy of largely unflattering portrayals of women and non-Asians, revealing an uncritical re-articulation of the sexist and racist tenor that often permeates classic noir.

Deconstructing the Hardboiled Detective

Unlike the approach to hegemonic masculinity on display in Chang’s trilogy of books, Ed Lin’s work offers a direct interrogation of the very assumptions about manhood that encompass the hardboiled genre. Born in New York City and raised in New Jersey and Pennsylvania, Ed Lin made a splash with his first novel, *Waylaid* (2002) which was awarded the 2002 Booklist’s Editor’s Choice and Top Ten First

Novel and the 2003 Member's Choice Award from the Asian American Writers Workshop. This profane coming-of-age story focuses on an unnamed twelve-year-old son of Taiwanese immigrants who works the front desk at his parents' sleazy motel in New Jersey. Although *Waylaid* is by no stretch of the imagination a detective novel, it ranks as yet another example of the way in which the specter of Charlie Chan shadows the lives of Asian American males. In this case, he reemerges when the young protagonist finds himself attacked by a white student at the school water fountain: "Fucking Charlie Chan, don't you even know how to get a drink? You need a pair of chopsticks or something?" (115). The usage of Charlie Chan as a racial epithet will be repeated in Ed Lin's following two novels, which focus, appropriately enough, on a Chinese American police detective.

A self-proclaimed fan of old pulps, *Black Mask* and *Dime Detective*, Ed Lin gives *This Is a Bust* all the trappings of the hardboiled detective genre, but there seems to be some conscious resistance on the author's part to make the narrative a full-fledged mystery. Like Henry Chang's work, there is indeed a murder committed, but there exists no narrative momentum suggesting that either the case will be solved or that the resolution of the mystery is even a primary aim of the text or its protagonist. The mystery is simple: an arthritic, elderly waitress at a Chinatown restaurant in New York dies of food poisoning, and after an on-again, off-again investigation, the detective determines the culprit. In some ways, the real case is the detective himself, whose traumatic past and self-destructive behavior serve instead as the central mystery in desperate need of a solution.

Notably, Lin does not trade in stereotypes of triad criminal activity or exotic Orientalism in constructing his vision of Chinatown. Although a certain criminal element is necessarily a part of the genre, the novel's first-person narrative crisscrosses the lives of police officers, community leaders, restaurateurs, and the average folk who populate the streets of New York's Chinatown, much in the tradition of Wayne Wang's *Chan Is Missing*. Rather than view Chinatown as a homogenous mass, Ed Lin – inspired by Chester Himes' vision of Harlem – represents the community's demographics with a degree of complexity: there are Kuomintang supporters and Communists, Fukienese immigrants and American-born Chinese, Cantonese and Mandarin language speakers. Such a varied portrayal pushes back against any kind of suggestion of an essentialized Chinese American or Asian American identity.

The novel begins on January 20, 1976, the day after Jimmy Carter won the Iowa Democratic Caucus and focuses on Robert Chow, a withdrawn, hard-drinking twenty-five-year-old Vietnam Vet and former Chinatown gangmember turned cop. Although Robert's father wanted to name him "Humphrey" after Humphrey Bogart, his mother's wishes won out, and he was named after a different Hollywood tough guy, Robert Mitchum instead. Considering this very brief character sketch of Robert Chow, one might suspect that Ed Lin is uncritically using noir trappings as a kind of cultural shorthand to remasculinize the figure of the Chinese American male. But a closer look at the text itself suggests otherwise.

As has been discussed at length in this dissertation, military service has demanded and traditionally been accorded with respect, perhaps grudgingly so at times, in the sphere of popular culture. Of course, there are exceptions. Heated critiques of U.S. militarism occur regularly, but not without consequence. Military service – and we can see this with the rhetoric of political candidates, on bumper stickers, and the like – has become an easy signifier in popular culture for unquestionable heroism and the defense of essential freedoms. But while the character of Robert Chow in *This Is a Bust* served in the U.S. military, the novel makes it clear that he is by no means “a real American hero” of the G.I. Joe variety. Suffering from a bad case of post-traumatic stress disorder, the character is haunted by the memories of fighting in an unjust war. At one point, he charts his own reversal on American patriotism in a scene that recalls a similar moment of clarity in Dale Furutani’s *Death in Little Tokyo*:

Fuck them, I thought. If you’re not willing to fight for the freedoms of this country, you shouldn’t be allowed to live in it. Hell, your parents shouldn’t have been allowed to come over. [...] I was real stupid and innocent back then. That was before we were in basic training and the instructor pulled me out of line, faced to the company, and said, “This is what a gook looks like. He’s the complete opposite of you, and he’s out to kill you. What are you going to do about it? (55)

While serving in the Vietnam War, Robert went from village to village, interrogating locals and burning down their homes. His experience abroad causes a bizarre anti-Asian sentiment⁶⁷ to fester, effectively alienating himself from his own racial background: “Being in Nam made me learn to hate Asians. Seeing another Asian face

⁶⁷ In the sequel, Robert shoots an unarmed Chinese human trafficker: “I pointed at Ng’s crumpled body and said, “Mere Gook Rule, Vandyne.” That was how we used to justify killings. (271).

made me want to reach for my gun. Especially when I heard Vietnamese. It sounds like that mint, “Tic Tac.” (44) Here, we see that the price of citizenship – in this case symbolic, rather than legal – involves an initiation rite of killing others in “defense” of one’s country. In a pivotal flashback, it is revealed that Robert fatally shot a Vietnamese child, an event which haunts his dreams and waking life: “Sometimes I dream about that little boy I killed. He still runs in at me, only I don’t have my gun anymore. If he gets close enough before I wake up, he explodes in my face” (45). As is typical of the era Lin portrays, Robert returns not as the conquering hero, but the “loser” of the Vietnam War. This reversal gets spelled out most clearly in a confrontation the character has with a Chinese American veteran of World War II. The man disparages Vietnam vets, asking Robert how he and his compatriots could have possibly lost the war. When Robert fumbles for an answer, this particular member of “The Greatest Generation” exclaims, “You guys didn’t have it in you to fight. You were coddled too much when you were kids. Color TV. Rock music. Your generation doesn’t have any real men in it. You guys are a bunch of pussies” (94-95). Even within the military, Robert finds himself feminized in a disparaging way by fellow veterans.

Thus, Lin’s appropriation of noir tropes maintains a certain degree of complexity, as classic film noir can present an image of masculinity that is both salutatory and self-critiquing. As discussed in the *Chan Is Missing* section of Chapter Two, the “plight of the alienated G.I.” is actually a common facet of classic film noir, considering the prevalence of narratives that deal with the return of the displaced

World War II veteran and the breakdown of patriarchal authority that ensues when these predominantly white men return home from the frontlines. According to Benito Trigo, men “discovered that in their absence their authority in the home, in the factory, and in the city was being challenged on all sides” (xiii). Transposed to the post-Vietnam War era, this convention takes on an amplified meaning, as the disillusionment and disaffection of Vietnam Veterans was far more pronounced than after the second World War.

Although holding a steady job, Robert is being used by the NYPD as a public relations tool. Claiming that he possesses the “right look” (i.e. Chinese) for the job, they employ him for any number of public appearances, as his superior officer details: “In fact, from time to time, I’d like to ask you to represent us at community functions and other gatherings. Just talk to people. Smile. Show them you care.” (18). In addition to events like the Asian-American Patrolmen’s Association and the Chinatown Democrats fundraiser, Robert spends his time going “to graduation ceremonies, new restaurant openings, and Chinese New Year celebrations” (19). As a result, he becomes the joke of the precinct, incurring the ire of his fellow officers. When he applies for a detective position, his superior officer scoffs at his aspirations for promotion: “If anything you have the stereotype in your favor. Charlie Chan and his Chan Clan⁶⁸ were pretty good oriental detectives” (230).

⁶⁸ This Charlie Chan reference is repeated in *Snakes Can’t Run* when a Chinese American cop suggests that the antagonist’s name could come from anywhere: “Maybe it comes from *The Amazing Chan and the Chan Clan*” (254). The character is also briefly referenced, alongside Fu Manchu, in the latest installment of the series, *One Red Bastard*.

Robert's professional reputation within the Chinatown community fares little better. Shocked at being called a "pig" by protestors during a sit-in, Robert later realizes that a group of passing children view him as living proof that they should go to college and make something of themselves rather than be stuck in a "dumb, low-paying job" like his (15). Even his father, who passed away before the events of the first novel, believed his son threw everything away to become a policeman. The absolute lowest point in Robert's career occurs when his superior officer compels him to enforce the law against a local Chinatown man who helps elderly residents properly address their letters to China. The results are a personal and a public relations nightmare for both Robert and the police department as he alienates the Chinatown community by arresting an old man in public for a victimless, penny ante "crime."

If Robert's war experience and employment are up for scrutiny in the novel, so are his drinking habits. The image of the hard-drinking hero may be an American cliché, but in *This Is a Bust*, the imbibing of alcohol on a regular basis registers here not as a sign of masculine fortitude but instead as a crippling disease. Shown to be a barely functioning alcoholic scarred by his wartime experience, Robert stumbles through the early portions of the narrative in an alcohol-induced stupor, culminating in an intervention by his friends. They force him to quit cold turkey, a process which results in terrifying hallucinations for the Vietnam Vet reminiscent of a similar detox sequence in Raymond Chandler's 1940 novel, *Farewell, My Lovely*.

If these formerly automatic designations of masculine identity no longer hold any currency or meaning (if they ever did), Robert's interactions with other characters reveal that the novel does not define masculinity against women or minorities as Henry Chang's novels do. Although Robert Chow engages in heterosexual relationships, which undermine stereotypes of emasculation, Ed Lin is careful to show these romantic encounters with a degree of complexity and candor. Robert himself is depicted as sexually inexperienced:

Like a lot of guys, I hadn't had sex until I got to Nam. Some of the girls didn't know what to make of me, but they took my money and let me go at it. It was five minutes of humping and 10 minutes of shame. I haven't had sex since I came back to the world in 1972. I haven't killed anyone since 1972, either. I kind of associate the two. (24)

Robert's subsequent relationships with women are not typical of the genre, as instead of aggressively matching wits with a femme fatale, the detective clumsily reunites with Barbara, a former high school crush, before being rejected. He then embarks on a relationship with Lonnie, a twenty-year-old girl who works at a local bakery. Through a series of events, Lonnie's troubled stepbrother, Paul, ends up living with Robert.

This establishment of this unconventional family unit forms the basis for the sequel, 2010's *Snakes Can't Run*. In the second installment in the series, Lin crafts a narrative that more closely resembles a straightforward mystery than its predecessor, but without sacrificing his earlier emphasis on character and milieu. When two Asian men are shot and dumped under the Brooklyn Bridge underpass, Robert finds himself embroiled in a ring of human traffickers known as Snakeheads. Perhaps in keeping

with this more genre-savvy transition, the novel even boasts an exoticized cover, which features an androgynous Asian figure – in this case, with tattooing on his/her back – facing away from the viewer, a peculiar convention appearing with increasing frequency in the publishing world when it comes to works featuring Asian or Asian American characters (see Figure 49-52).

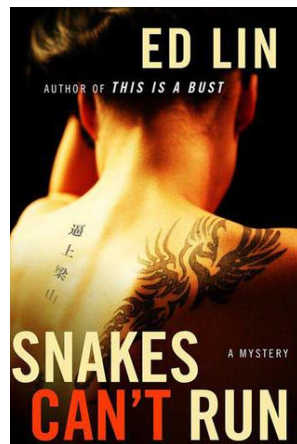


Figure 49. Ed Lin's *Snakes Can't Run* (2010).

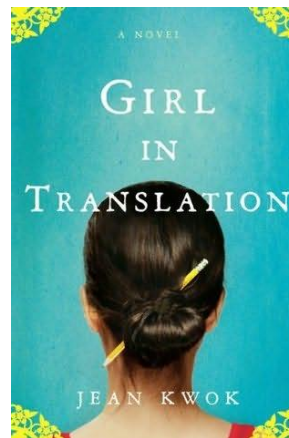


Figure 50. Jean Kwok's *Girl in Translation* (2011).

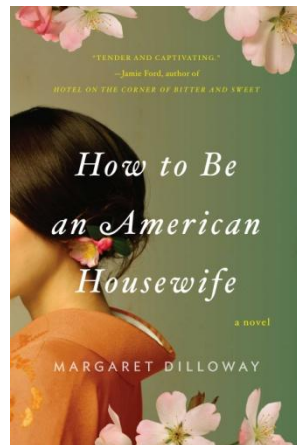


Figure 51. Margaret Dilloway's *How to Be an American Housewife* (2010).

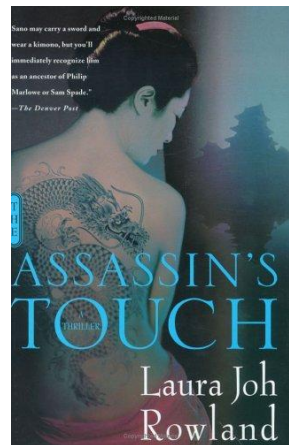


Figure 52. Laura Joh Rowland's *Assassin's Touch* (2005).

Although Ed Lin was able to choose the cover for *This Is a Bust*, he was not involved in the selection of the image for the sequel. Here, we can see that the Orientalist expectations put upon ethnic writers and their potential readership is a struggle that continues even to this day.

Still, despite being marketed more overtly as a genre work than its predecessor, *Snakes Can't Run* does not contain the requisite amount of “detecting” one might expect from mainstream mystery novels, but even so, the central enigma of the novel serves as a stepping stone for the author to explore issues of illegal immigration, as Robert Chow uncovers a hidden family secret buried deep in his own past. In the end, the central mystery is solved, but a lingering ambiguity about Robert’s own family history remains unsettled.

In 2012, Minotaur Books released the third installment in the Robert Chow series. When a representative of Mao Zedong’s daughter turns up dead in New York City, suspicion is cast on the last person who saw him alive – Robert’s journalist girlfriend, Lonnie. Now a detective in training, Robert must launch an investigation of his own to clear his girlfriend’s name, only to find himself caught in the middle of the simmering Communist-KMT tensions of New York City’s Chinatown. But again, despite the more sensational possibilities afforded by this plot description, Ed Lin continues his modus operandi from previous novels, emphasizing character over shootouts or plot twists.

This inability or unwillingness on the part of Lin to fully embrace the conventions of the genre can ultimately be traced back to his depiction of Robert

Chow in his first novel in the series, as the detective is made to don the performative garb of the heteronormative, hyper-masculine hero of hardboiled detective fiction and film noir, only for Lin to show how ill-fitting and anachronistic these uncritically accepted conventions are in the modern age, a demythologizing gesture in regard to subjects like military service, war, and alcoholism. Instead, this deeply haunted protagonist finds solace and a sense of renewed *humanity*, rather than *manhood*, within a tight-knit, but unconventional domestic sphere.

In many ways, Ed Lin's novels address Jachinson Chan's claim that "a Chinese American masculinist discourse needs to play an active role in re-defining normative hegemonic models of masculinity and not fall into the discursive trap set forth by controlling images"(10). The work of both Henry Chang and Ed Lin constitute the latest attempts at rehabilitating Asian American – or in this case, Chinese American – masculinity through the hardboiled mode, but they also, in differing ways, demonstrate the dangers of re-inscribing the dominant heterosexist and racist structure through which the Chinese American male has been historically marginalized in the first place.

Asian American Masculinities and the Detective Genre

Despite the focus on masculinity throughout this chapter and the larger dissertation, it should be noted that contemporary feelings of unease about changing conceptions of manhood in the United States are not limited to a particular racial or ethnic group. In the last three years, a growing spate of news articles, op-ed pieces,

and investigative reports have catalogued a growing “crisis in masculinity” that is seemingly plaguing the United States. Various books like *Manning Up* and *Man Down*, as well as news organizations like *Time*, CNN, and *The Atlantic* have all attempted to trace the growing economic clout of women in the United States and the resultant changes in domestic roles for men. In truth, public outcries over potential crises in masculinity are nothing new – such talk emerged in U.S. discourse in the wake of the Columbine school shootings in 1999, during the Vietnam War, the post-World War II era, and, one would presume, at other periods of uncertainty in the nation’s history.

Implicit in many of these conversations is a kind of hazy nostalgia for a time when “men were men” – the bygone days of Humphrey Bogart and Robert Mitchum, one can presume. But as I have demonstrated in the preceding pages, viewing such icons of masculinity with an uncritical eye as models for easy appropriation can be a problematic, if not dangerous proposition. Due to the feminizing tenor of anti-Asian racism, the Asian American writers I have covered in this dissertation find themselves in a particularly difficult position. In order to address the inequities of the past – the Charlie Chans, the Mr. Motos, and Mr. Wongs of yesteryear – they have each sought to remasculinize their Asian American protagonists, drawing on models of hegemonic masculinity made available to them within the detective genre. However, the latent sexism, racism, and/or homophobia of these models make such innovative adaptations an exciting, if perilously fraught path of literary resistance.

CONCLUSION

Charlie Chan Returns?

The Future of the Asian American Detective

The history of Asians in the United States has been a continuous struggle against racial exclusion and subordination as Orientals. Asian Americans have waged fierce battles on the railroads, in the mining camps, in the courts, in the fields, in the factories, and in the university, to assert their claim to be American and define what American means. (xi)

—Robert G. Lee, *Orientalism: Asian Americans in Popular Culture* (1999)

Despite the best efforts of Asian American writers, filmmakers, scholars, and activists to finally bury Charlie Chan once and for all, he remains a powerfully haunting figure, a specter that seemingly refuses to stay in the grave. But Charlie Chan, we must remember, is only a fictional character; he possesses neither sentience nor agency. In reality, it takes the concerted efforts of interested parties to conjure him back to “life” each time, as if the character were some vanquished Hollywood monster poised to return for the inevitable sequel. In popular folklore, such a practice is called *necromancy*, a type of black magic that involves the summoning of the dead in spirit or corporeal form. And in the last thirty years, there has been no single more successful necromancer of Charlie Chan than literary scholar, Yunte Huang.

During the three decades prior to the publication of Huang’s 2010 book, *Charlie Chan: The Untold Story of the Honorable Detective and His Rendezvous with American History*, Charlie Chan has mostly lay dormant in his figurative grave. Since the critical and box office failure of *Charlie Chan and the Curse of the Dragon*

Queen in 1981, the character has yet to return to the silver screen – although it has not been for a lack of trying. Numerous producers have attempted to get their respective Charlie Chan revivals off the ground, but to no avail. In 1990, Ron Howard’s Imagine Films Entertainment hired Pulitzer Prize-winning writer David Mamet to write and direct a Charlie Chan film only to abort the project after the script was delivered in 1992.⁶⁹ Titled *Charlie Chan in Horse and Rider*, this period-set, espionage film picks up where the Fox and Monogram films left off and involves the unexpected repercussions of Charlie Chan’s successful first-act rescue of the missing Russian Grand Duchess Anastasia Romanova. Dispensing with the expected “Confucius Say” homilies as well as the Yellowface casting of the past, Mamet’s aborted film – based on the content of the 1991 script – positions itself as both a nostalgic tribute and a modern deconstruction of the famous character.

Perhaps the most widely reported instance of Charlie Chan’s planned return occurred five years later. In a January 5, 1997 article for the *New York Times*, journalist Somini Sengupta reported that “Miramax has bought the rights to the franchise and hopes to produce several films based on the popular 1930’s and 40’s series” with the intention of casting actor Russell Wong as “a Chan for the 90’s — hip, slim, cerebral, sexy and (what else?) a martial-arts master.” Steven Soderbergh was slated to direct the project, which was intended to tap into an emerging U.S. interest in Hong Kong cinema. With the 1997 Handover looming, Hong Kong stars

⁶⁹ Mamet subsequently sued and brought a breach of contract suit against Imagine, contending that he was still owed \$1 million under terms of a “play or pay” provision in his directorial contract. Imagine alleged in its countersuit that Mamet acted in bad faith, providing a script they deemed to be unfilmable (MacMinn).

like Jackie Chan, Jet Li, and Chow Yun-Fat had already begun to break into the Hollywood market, and “the new Chan film would send Mr. Wong’s character to Hong Kong as part of the murder investigation” (Sengupta). The projected film never materialized at Miramax, although Lucy Liu has been subsequently attached to another version – the simply titled *Charlie Chan* – in which she would play the detective’s granddaughter. However, that film has languished in development since 2005 (Downey).⁷⁰

For decades, Jessica Hagedorn’s famous proclamation of Chan’s demise seemed to have been finally proven true. But then something curious happened. First, the films came out on home video during the DVD revolution. MGM released the *Charlie Chan Chanthology*, a box set of six of the Monogram films in 2004, while Twentieth Century Fox began selling *Charlie Chan* collections of their own, eventually releasing five volumes between 2006 and 2008. In the realm of literature, Chicago Academy Publishers brought all six of Earl Derr Biggers’ *Charlie Chan* novels back into print in 2008 after a decades-long hiatus. Considering this burgeoning *Charlie Chan* revival, the time was right, it seemed, for Yunte Huang to attempt to salvage *Charlie Chan*’s public reputation from the dustbin of history.

Where various A-list Hollywood filmmakers have failed, Yunte Huang has triumphed. In 2010, W.W. Norton & Company released *Charlie Chan: The Untold Story of the Honorable Detective and His Rendezvous with American History*. Written

⁷⁰ One rumored project involved Tony Award winning playwright David Henry Hwang’s alleged screenplay in which *Charlie Chan*’s son discovers his father’s true identity – a white man in Yellowface. However, the official existence of such a project has never been publically confirmed (Sengupta).

for a popular audience in a pulp prose style, Huang's book approaches its titular subject through unconventional means. Although classified and marketed as a biography, the book does not merely cover the rich personal histories of Chang Apana and Earl Derr Biggers, but also gives an overview of the Charlie Chan franchise, its popular reception, and occasional digressions involving Huang's own life. "My goal in writing this book, then," Huang says in his introductory remarks, "is to demonstrate that Charlie Chan, America's most identifiable Chinaman epitomizes both the racist heritage and the creative genius of this nation's culture" (xx).

As evidenced by his thesis statement, Huang embraces contradiction, often positioning himself as an objective observer of history, remaining coy about where his opinion falls on certain polarizing issues. For example, he gives the following noncommittal assessment of the detective's speech patterns: "Chan's ungrammatical speech, reminiscent of fortune-cookie witticisms, sounds hilariously funny to many but racially parodic to others" (118).⁷¹ Despite these declarations of neutrality, Huang's ardor for Charlie Chan becomes increasingly obvious.⁷² Early in the text, he dismisses the view of Chan as a racist icon as an "ideologically reductive conclusion" (xvi) and later favorably compares the character to "the creative genius" and "cultural miscegenation" of blackface minstrelsy (283). While Huang concedes that "Charlie Chan is an American stereotype of the Chinaman," he immediately asserts that the

⁷¹ In his earlier published text written for an academic audience, *Transpacific Displacement* (2002), Yunte Huang offers the converse of his mostly laudatory appraisal of Charlie Chan, consistently emphasizing the inherent racism of the character: "It should be evident that this creation epitomizes a racist conception of the Chinese language and its speakers" (118).

⁷² Huang seems to see himself as a Charlie Chan-like figure, even creating a personal blog entitled *Charlie Chan Say*.

character “is as American as Jack Kerouac, that stalwart of the American hipster who was born French Canadian and spoke the dialect of *joual* as his first language” (xix). Huang’s striking comparison of Charlie Chan to the author of *On the Road* (1957), a text that was not only the defining work of the Beat Generation, but has been considered by many readers to be one of the best American novels of the twentieth century,⁷³ only serves to canonize Charlie Chan within the realm of American culture and ultimately elides an obvious discrepancy: Jack Kerouac was a living, breathing human being and not the fictional invention of white authors, filmmakers, and actors as Charlie Chan was.

To be clear, Yunte Huang was not the first to write a positive re-estimation of the Charlie Chan series. Aforementioned books such as Charles P. Mitchell’s *A Guide to Charlie Chan Films* (1999); Ken Hanke’s *Charlie Chan at the Movies: History, Filmography, and Criticism* (2004); and Howard Berlin’s *Charlie Chan’s Words of Wisdom* (2003) and *The Charlie Chan Film Encyclopedia* (2005) had already been released within the last decade.⁷⁴ Beyond its historical breadth and critical engagement with the material, what truly sets Huang’s book apart from the rest is it was the first to be written not only by a serious academic, but by a person of Chinese descent. Huang seems all-too-aware of his positioning as a “native informant” in the debate over Charlie Chan and seems to embrace it, by concluding

⁷³ In October of 2005, *Time* magazine chose *On the Road* as one of the one hundred best English-language novels from 1923 to 2005. And on *Modern Library*’s list of the one hundred best English language novels of the twentieth century, *On the Road* was ranked 55th.

⁷⁴ The latest of these – David Rothel’s *The Case Files of the Oriental Sleuths: Charlie Chan, Mr. Moto, and Mr. Wong* (2011) – came out a year after Yunte Huang’s book.

his book with a rousing proclamation: “As a man from China, a Chinese man come to America, I say: Chan is dead! Long live Charlie Chan!” (288). Performing his “Chineseness” for his readers, Huang tacitly suggests that as a “real” Chinese man, his appraisal of the character is somehow representative. This distressing element to Huang’s approach becomes evident in several print reviews, including one written for *Booklist*, which states, “This is a beautifully written analysis of racism and an appreciation of Charlie Chan and Chang Apana, *made credible by Huang’s background*” (emphasis mine). Due to his academic credentials and ethnic background, Yunte Huang successfully recuperates Charlie Chan as a nostalgic icon of the past, once again made safe for consumption by predominantly white audiences.

The ensuing critical and commercial success of Huang’s book cannot be overstated, as it received largely positive reviews from writers at *Time*, *Newsweek*, *The New York Times*, *Publishers Weekly*, and various other media outlets. In addition, it went on to be shortlisted for the 2010 National Book Critics Circle Award in Biography and won several prizes, including the 2011 Mystery Writers of America Edgar Award for Best Critical/Biographical Book, the California Book Award, the *New York Times* Top 100 Notable Books of 2010, *Kirkus Reviews* Best of 2010, and *Amazon.com* Best of 2010. Released in paperback in 2011, Huang’s bestseller can be credited with singlehandedly reviving interest in the Charlie Chan franchise, having untold impact on the sales of the novels and DVDs since its publication. In sharp contrast to “The Great Chan Ban” of past decades, as Ken Hanke termed it, the 2011 San Francisco International Asian American Film Festival screened *Charlie Chan at*

the Olympics “in conversation with Yunte Huang” based primarily on the popularity of his book.

Within the realm of academia, Huang even participated on a Charlie Chan-centric panel at the 127th MLA Annual Convention in Seattle in January of 2012. Bearing the title “Charlie Chan is Undead: Reopening the Case of America’s First Mainstream Minority Detective,” the panel was organized by Charles J. Rzepka and featured several guest speakers.⁷⁵ Huang’s talk, “Why Charlie Chan Now?” served as a reflection on how his book was received by both the media and the Asian American community. According to Huang, he “delivered the short paper in the form of ventriloquism, posing as the detective himself.”

While Huang’s book ultimately translated to positive buzz, renewed popular and academic interest in the character, and increased sales of preexisting material, there remained one last obstacle for Charlie Chan to overcome – the cinema. In November of 2011, Huang announced his intention to bring Charlie Chan back to the big screen with none other than Wayne Wang at the helm. “Wayne and I are co-writing the script,” Huang told Jeff Yang of *The Wall Street Journal*, “We’ve been back and forth with a few drafts already. And what we want to do is tell the story of something that actually happened: The meeting between Chang Apana and Warner Oland, the Swedish-born actor who played Charlie Chan on the big screen.” In terms of casting, they hope to hire Jack Nicholson to play Warner Oland, although no actor

⁷⁵ Charles J. Rzepka of Boston University contributed a piece on “Mocking Modernity: Signifyin’ and Simulation in *The Chinese Parrot*” while R. John Williams of Yale University gave a talk entitled “The Death of the Oriental Detective: Charlie Chan at the End of Genre.” University of Houston professor Karen Fang served as a respondent.

has been mentioned for the part of Chang Apana. Reflecting on the arc of Wayne Wang's career since his feature film debut, *Chan Is Missing*, Yunte Huang makes an ominous claim to the *Washington Post*: "doing this movie is really a full circle for him. Forty years later, he wants to say, Chan Is Back" [sic].

But does the public actually *want* Charlie Chan to come back? For many Asian Americans, the answer would be an emphatic "no." With respect to the works discussed in this dissertation, one wonders why Charlie Chan's return would be necessary at all, as the very existence of these Asian American detective novels and films I have treated thus far have created a space for future artists to occupy and adapt, giving them an opportunity to take what these authors and filmmakers have accomplished even further.

The Undiscovered Country: Race, Nation, & Death in *Country of Origin*

One such example would be Don Lee's *Country of Origin* (W.W. Norton, 2004), which has taken the familiar concerns with Asian American masculinity and cultural nationalism and employed a more transracial and transnational lens to these complex issues. While Lee's 2004 novel won an American Book Award and a Mixed Media Watch Image Award for Outstanding Fiction and may indeed be shelved in the literature section of bookstores around the nation, critics and readers have not simply received it as a literary novel, but as a "mystery," a "detective story," and even a "police procedural." When I asked Lee, a former editor of the literary journal *Ploughshares*, about these genre designations, he expressed a reluctance to embrace

them: “It’s true that it sort of irks me when people call *Country of Origin* a ‘mystery’ novel, because I’m a snob and I think the novel’s better than a mere genre book, but I did fool around with the conventions.” Considering Lee’s position that such labels are “reductive” and “dismissive,” it is not surprising, then, that the author was more than a little taken aback when the Mystery Writers of America gave him an Edgar Award for Best First Novel.⁷⁶

Whatever Lee may profess about his literary intentions, the plot of *Country of Origin* undeniably relies on the familiar trappings of the mystery genre, as it hinges on the whereabouts of Lisa Countryman, an American who disappears while visiting Tokyo and the subsequent investigations to uncover her whereabouts by Japanese detective Kenzo Ota, and Tom Hurley, a mixed race Foreign Service Officer at the American embassy. Set in 1980 amidst the cultural backdrop of the Iranian hostage crisis, the novel was partially inspired by the real-life case of Lucie Blackman, a twenty-one-year-old Englishwoman who worked illegally as a hostess in Tokyo. She went missing in 2000, and her body was found a year later – cut into eight pieces.⁷⁷

⁷⁶ *Country of Origin* was not Don Lee’s first engagement with noir. His first short story collection, *Yellow* (W.W. Norton 2001), contains a series of seemingly standalone, but subtly interwoven stories of Korean, Japanese, and Chinese American characters living in the fictional seaside town of Rosarita Bay. The collection’s first piece, “The Price of Eggs in China,” which won a Pushcart Prize, operates as a kind of revisionist detective story in which an otherwise sane man of some artistic and financial success, uses his knowledge of the mystery genre to commit a series of crimes in order to protect the woman he loves from a seemingly dangerous rival. However, the story ends with unanswered questions about whether his beloved’s claims were even true in the first place. The collection won the Sue Kaufman Prize for First Fiction from the American Academy of Letters and the Members Choice Award from the Asian American Writers’ Workshop.

⁷⁷ A once wealthy property developer turned Yakuza money launderer named Joji Obara (born Kim Sung Jong), was charged with drugging, raping and murdering Blackman, as well as raping of six other women and murdering another hostess. On April 24, 2007, Obara was sentenced to life in prison for manslaughter and multiple rape charges, but was acquitted of Blackman’s rape and death (Kingston).

Country of Origin presents Blackman analogue Lisa Countryman as a seemingly vapid white American in search of cheap thrills and easy money in Japan, but as the story progresses, her mixed racial background, academic credentials, and true reason for coming abroad are gradually revealed. However, Lisa's quest for self-illumination ultimately leads to tragedy.

In respect to the general argument of this dissertation, the novel engages with the specter of Charlie Chan through its two male protagonists, albeit in innovative and unexpected ways. Thirty-eight-year-old Kenzo Ota, Assistant Inspector in Criminal Investigations at the Azabu Police Station is presented as a cuckolded, sexless divorcee ostracized by his male peers. Both personally and professionally, Kenzo registers as a weak, emasculated figure. The overall impression the character gives is perhaps best summed up by his ex-wife Yumiko, who "had said Kenzo epitomized all that was wrong with the country, calling him a humorless, passionless, sexist wimp" (49). In contrast with the more figurative use of the detective genre to explore Asian American manhood by authors like Dale Furutani, Leonard Chang, and Ed Lin, Don Lee *literally* begins with a stereotype and then suggests that the genre itself – with its promise of adventure, mystery, and romance – serves as the formal mechanism through which Kenzo will become remasculinized.

The more fascinating engagement with Asian American identity formation among men comes with the novel's second protagonist, Tom Hurley, and the way Lee transposes the practice of racial masquerade as seen in prior Yellowface performances. Although Tom is half-white and half-Korean, he tells people – despite

having no ties to the islands – that he is Hawaiian, “a declaration of racial neutrality that more often than not, let him avoid further inquest” (12). Tom even constructs a detailed backstory, claiming that he grew up on Oahu and has been a lifelong surfer. When forced to confess the truth, Tom reveals the impetus for his elaborate deception:

He told her he had passed through Hawaii on vacation in his early teens, and it had been the one place he'd ever visited where he hadn't had to explain himself, where it had seemed possible to be both Asian and American at the same time. When people asked what he was, he found it simpler, and more appealing, to say that he was Hawaiian, and then a personal mythology, one that included surfing, had evolved. (115)⁷⁸

For Tom Hurley, claiming a Hawaiian identity is equivalent to making a declaration of “racial neutrality,” as he views Hawai‘i itself as a kind of Asian American paradise. However, his conception of heaven naturalizes the majority Asian population in Hawai‘i without considering the implications of such a belief. As Rob Wilson and Arif Dirlik write in *Asia/Pacific as Space of Cultural Production* (1996): “The Pacific, or Hawaii as it were, becomes a place where East and West meet, never mind the local inhabitants” (1). Tom’s similar view of Hawai‘i as a cultural Eden for Asian Americans effectively displaces Native Hawaiians from the cultural landscape altogether. In *Ethnicity and Inequality in Hawai‘i*, Jonathan Okamura points out that viewing Hawai‘i as an ethnically harmonious paradise “only perpetuate[s] the ethnic status order and thus the power and privilege of the dominant groups – Chinese

⁷⁸ Curiously, this is almost word-for-word Don Lee’s own feelings on Hawai‘i. In an interview with Nathaniel Leslie, he states: “It’s the one place in the US where I don’t get those annoying questions: Where are you from? What are you? What’s your nationality? How come you speak English so well? In other words, I can be Asian and American at the same time: it’s not assumed I’m fresh off the boat.”

Americans, White, and Japanese Americans – and conversely the subjugation of Native Hawaiians, Filipino Americans, Samoans, and other ethnic minorities” (5-6). Not surprisingly, Tom Hurley’s subtle re-appropriation of Hawai‘i from Hawaiians has a precedent in the Charlie Chan franchise, as Chan himself was often referred to as Hawaiian, despite his lack of native roots.

Late in *Country of Origin*, the action moves ahead twenty years in the future, as the reader finds Tom in the lobby of the Royal Hawaiian Hotel in Waikiki. Once again, Tom has reinvented himself. No longer the well-groomed prima donna of before, he has become overweight due to “too many plate lunches, not enough exercise” (306). Ironically, Tom has settled in the very place he has long imagined as his home:

He had been in Hawaii for the past decade and a half, “Mr. Hurley-Burly” to students at Kailua High School, home of the Surfriders. He taught French and Spanish and coached swimming. He lived nearby in Waimanalo and was married to a fellow teacher, a local Filipina-Portuguese-Korean-Scottish woman. They had three boys, aged twelve, ten, and seven. (308)

For all intents and purposes, the now tanned, heavy set Tom Hurley has become “Hawaiian” or, at the very least, deceptively “local.” As discussed in the introduction to this dissertation, such transformative possibilities serves as only the latest variation on a quintessentially American theme – the idea of remaking yourself, the notion that who you are in the past no longer matters, and that one must go west to seek fame and fortune. However, while such a path was denied to early Asian immigrants to the U.S. mainland, they are available to Tom, but in this case, at the expense of others. As one can see in these short examples, in *Country of Origin*, the mystery plot drives the

narrative forward, allowing the author to tease out many of novel's major and minor themes – namely, the dilemma of racial, national, and cultural dislocation in the modern, multi-ethnic world.⁷⁹ However, Lee's experimentation with the detective genre was only the beginning, as a growing number of Asian American writers would explore issues of race, gender, and national belonging from a distinctively female perspective.

Women and Asian American Detective Fiction

While this dissertation has expressly focused on self-determined representations of Asian American men in detective fiction and film, the most recent wave of Asian American mysteries have been written by women.⁸⁰ Some authors choose to deal exclusively with female protagonists. For example, in 2003, Suki Kim published her first novel, *The Interpreter*, which focuses on Suzy Park, a twenty-nine-

⁷⁹ Don Lee's *Wrack and Ruin* (2008) once again utilizes Rosarita Bay for its setting and even includes cameos from characters previously featured in *Yellow*. Rather than a detective story, this rollicking satire about the eternal conflict between art and commerce, centers on two estranged brothers, Lyndon and Woody Song. The former is a renowned sculptor who fled New York City to become a Brussels sprouts farmer in Rosarita Bay and refuses to be bought out. Lyndon has a brother, Woody, a disgraced financier-turned-hack movie producer, strolls into on Lyndon's property with Yi Ling Ling, a washed up Hong Kong action star prone to drunken violence. At one point in the novel, Dalton Lee, an Asian American filmmaker complaining about his options in Hollywood and worried about being pigeonholed as an "ethnic director" of ethnic films, says that he even received a treatment for a remake of Charlie Chan: "Brilliant, Woody thought. Why hadn't he come up with that himself?" (266). Don Lee's latest novel, *The Collective*, is scheduled for publication in July of 2012.

⁸⁰ Technically, the first Asian American detective novel written by an Asian American woman would be *Murder on the Air*, although it is self-published and co-authored. In 1984, attorney Toni Ihara co-wrote *Murder on the Air* with her husband, Ralph Warner. Published through their company Nolo Press, the novel features the first female Asian American detective, Sara Tamura. According to the story, Tamura, a Los Angeles-born, third-generation Japanese American, is the first Japanese woman to work as a violent crimes investigator in Berkeley, and she is paired with the chauvinistic Lt. James Rivers, to investigate the death of an outspoken environmentalist. In the novel's end note, the co-authors admit that "any similarity between themselves and James Rivers and Sara Tamura is purely intentional" (231).

year-old Korean American working as an interpreter for the New York court system. Through pure coincidence, she discovers a new lead in the five-year-old unsolved murder of her immigrant parents, both of whom were brutally killed in an apparent robbery of their grocery store. Upon learning of this new piece of evidence, Suzy seeks out her estranged sister, Grace, only to discover the shocking truth behind the killings and the high cost of her parents' American dream. *The Interpreter* received positive reviews and was a runner-up for the PEN Hemingway Prize and won the PEN Beyond Margins Award and the Gustavus Myers Outstanding Book Award.

Similarly, Nina Revoyr, the Japanese/Polish American author of *The Necessary Hunger* (1997), *The Age of Dreaming* (2008), and *Wingshooters* (2011), also tried her hand at a female-led mystery with her second novel, *Southland* (2003). The story centers on Jackie Ishida, a twenty-five-year-old Japanese American law student who discovers long-buried secrets pertaining to an unsolved murder during the Watts Riots of 1965. When her grandfather dies of a heart attack, she tries to track down a beloved ex-employee named Curtis Martindale. However, Jackie learns that Curtis died many years ago after being locked in the freezer at her grandfather's store. Crisscrossing the decades, *Southland* traces Jackie's investigation to uncover the truth and bring the real killer to justice. *Southland* was a BookSense 76 pick, Edgar Award finalist, winner of the Lambda Literary Award, and a *Los Angeles Times* "Best Book" of 2003.

While Kim and Revoyr focused on female detectives, other women writers chose to utilize male protagonists, albeit ones who would perhaps best be defined as

anything but hardboiled. Francine Lin's 2008 Edgar Award-winning novel, *The Foreigner*, is a noir-like tale set amidst the Taiwanese criminal underworld. The novel focuses on Emerson Chang, a timid forty-year-old virgin who cannot speak a syllable of Chinese who flies to Taipei to scatter his late mother's ashes. During the trip, he gets caught up in his little brother's illicit dealings with the Taiwanese mafia. Francine Lin, a former editor at *The Threepenny Review*, repositions the Asian American lead as a "foreigner" and focuses on a stereotypical emasculated Asian male, not to remasculinize him, but perhaps as a means to examine the social and familial pressures that might cause such a person to exist in the first place.

Last, but not least, the most prolific female writer of Asian American detective fiction would have to be Naomi Hirahara. To date, the Southern Californian has published four novels in her "Mas Arai Mystery" series: *The Summer of the Big Bachi* (2004), *Gasa-Gasa Girl* (2005), the Edgar Award-winning *Snakeskin Shamisen* (2006), and *Blood Hina* (2010). Set in 1999, the first novel in the series centers on Mas Arai, a seventy-year-old Kibei gardener, and his involvement in a murder mystery with roots dating back to the dropping of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima. The novel was nominated for a Macavity Award for Best First Mystery Novel and was named one of "The Ten Best Mysteries and Thrillers of 2004" by *The Chicago Tribune* and a "Best Books of 2004" pick by Publishers Weekly. While the idea of an elderly, denture-wearing curmudgeon with no detective credentials becoming actively involved in so many murder mysteries stretches the limits of plausibility with each

new installment, to her credit, Naomi Hirahara effectively uses the genre to explore the Japanese American experience as understood by an older generation.

Perhaps one of Hirahara's more intriguing efforts outside the Mas Arai series is her short story, "Number 19," published in *Los Angeles Noir* (Akashic Books, 2007), in which a white waitress named Ann attempts to intervene on the behalf of her masseuse, known only as "19," at a Koreatown day spa. Convinced "19" is an illegal immigrant, trafficked into the country and exploited by her employers, Ann takes steps in the name of American civil rights to save her – with disastrous results, as the prospective Good Samaritan ends up committing murder on Number 19's behalf. A gendered riff on *Chinatown*, in which L.A.'s Koreatown passes as an unknowable and foreign world to the doomed liberal white woman who only meant to help. Hirahara takes the familiar cliché of the white American "saving" an abject Asian female from a sinister, inscrutable Asian underworld and subverts Orientalists expectations while still attending to the themes and moods of noir.⁸¹

The Future of the Asian American Detective?

This burgeoning Asian American detective genre has mutated even further with the release of Andrew Xia Fukuda's young adult mystery, *Crossing* (Amazon Encore, 2010). The novel centers on high school freshman Kris Xing Xu. As one of

⁸¹ In *Los Angeles Noir 2* (Akashic 2010), Naomi Hirahara also contributed "The Chirashi Covenant," a short story involving an adulterous young Japanese American and a deadly interracial love triangle. It should be noted Brian Ascalon Roley, Filipino American author of *American Son*, contributes the story "Kinship" to the first installment of *Los Angeles Noir*, while Alvin Lu, Chinese American author of *The Hell Screens*, offers "Le Rouge et Noir" in *San Francisco Noir*. While they may have noir connections, none of these are detective tales, and hence, are not included in this study.

only two Asian students at school, Kris endures racist bullying on a daily basis, but eventually finds an outlet when he auditions for the high school musical. When a series of child abductions begin to plague the community, Kris's outcast status makes him a potential suspect. Midway through the novel, Charlie Chan returns, as Fukuda's young Chinese American protagonist expresses embarrassment at the memory of his late father, whom Kris considered just another in a long line of "Charlie Chan kowtow specialists who spoke in choppy, sloppy chinglish" (60). However, for Kris Xing Xu the specter of Charlie Chan is far eclipsed by Cho Seung-Hui, the Virginia Tech killer whose infamous legacy impacts how others perceive him – with horrific consequences. After its release, *Crossing* was chosen by Booklist as a Top Ten First Novel, Editor's Choice, and Top Ten First Crime Novel.

With the emergence of these works onto the detective fiction scene, one might be encouraged by the prospect that the ghost of Charlie Chan may yet be exorcized once and for all. After all, Asian Americans are no longer confined to the ethnic ghetto in literature. Whether through the science fiction writing of William F. Wu, Ted Chiang, and Cynthia Kadohata, the Harlequin romance novels of Jeanie Lin, and even the "Christian Suspense Romances" of Camy Tang, Asian American literary production has expanded to include a multiplicity of genres, perspectives, and intended reading audiences. In the realm of film and television, Asian American actors have started to appear onscreen with increasing frequency. As a result, one might comfortably assume that in our post-Civil Rights, purportedly post-race era, Yellowface has become a thing of the past.

However, one must take into consideration films like *Balls of Fury* (2007), which featured Christopher Walken as the Orientalized Master Feng, as well as both *Tropic Thunder* (2008) and *Sherlock Holmes: A Game of Shadows* (2011) in which Robert Downey, Jr. briefly donned Yellowface not as a means to adequately portray Asian men, but for cheap laughs based on the sheer absurdity of the makeup and Orientalist costuming choices.

Perhaps more fascinating is the advent of films like *21* (Sony, 2008) and *Extraordinary Measures* (CBS Films, 2010). Both were inspired by true stories, but the real-life Asian American characters were changed into white men at the script level. Further, the recent controversy surrounding the so-called “color-blind” casting of predominantly white actors in M. Night Shyamalan’s live action adaptation of the Asian-inspired cartoon, *The Last Airbender* (Paramount, 2011) suggests that the practice of Yellowface has not entirely disappeared, but simply evolved.

The planned Charlie Chan film co-authored by Wayne Wang and Yunte Huang, seems to eschew controversies surrounding Yellowface performance by focusing on a behind-the-scenes, non-fiction approach to the Charlie Chan franchise and will presumably cast a Chinese actor as Chang Apana. But even if Charlie Chan were to return in a feature film and was played by a Chinese or Chinese American actor, what difference would it make? “Charlie Chan will always be a symbol of white racism, no matter who plays him,” Frank Chin once remarked to the *New York Times*, “if you put a black man in a hood, does that make the Ku Klux Klan a civil rights organization?”

In conclusion, this critical inquiry into the uncanny specter of Charlie Chan exposes the conflicts and contradictions of the character's strangely pervasive influence on Asian American literary and filmic production, especially among men. As the first and, to date, only substantial critical examination of mysteries created by Asian Americans, this dissertation has attempted to shed light on the historical, ethnographic, and cultural realities that these works reflect, resignify, and critique. These works comprise a collective attempt to rehabilitate Asian American men from the Orientalized caricatures of the past through the mobilization of the hardboiled mode. In differing ways, they each deconstruct the nostalgic icon of the hardboiled detective, demonstrating the inherent risks of reinforcing the dominant heterosexist and racist structures through which Asian American males have been historically marginalized for the better part of a century. By studying these various attempts to write back against the specter of Charlie Chan, we can re-examine the ongoing relationship between this infamous cultural icon and Asian American cultural production. In light of the tortuous history alluded to in the opening quotation from Robert G. Lee, I see little philosophical difference between these earlier day-to-day political struggles by Asian Americans, and what the filmmakers, actors, and writers I have discussed have attempted to achieve within the realm of a popular genre. In the words of Raymond Chandler, down these mean streets a man must go.

AFTERWORD

Charlie Chan on Maui

Agon (Gk ‘contest’) – In Greek drama a verbal conflict between two characters, each one aided by half the chorus.

– *The Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms & Literary Theory* (2000)

While doing promotion for his book on Charlie Chan, Yunte Huang sat down for an on-air interview with Tom Ashbrook of NPR’s *On Point* on August 27, 2010. During their nearly hour-long talk, Huang claimed that he viewed Charlie Chan as a “powerful antidote” to Bruce Lee and Jackie Chan, as if these internationally renowned Chinese icons were somehow diseases in need of a cure. Huang’s strident defense of Charlie Chan sparked the palpable shock and ire of fellow guest Frank Chin, who proceeded to lambast the author on air. Of course, Chin’s reaction should not be a surprise to anyone familiar with his copious body of work. Chin’s critique of the character is not limited to the passages from his writings that I have quoted thus far in this dissertation. Not only does the author make frequent mention of Earl Derr Biggers’ infamous character in his literary and cultural criticism, but also in his plays, *The Chickencoop Chinaman* (1972) and *The Year of the Dragon* (1974); his short story “The Sons of Chan” (*The Chinaman Pacific & R.R. Co.*, 1988); and his novels, *Donald Duk* (1991) and *Gunga Din Highway* (1994). Frank Chin’s unyielding war of words against Charlie Chan has perhaps made him the most outspoken and prolific critic of the character in the last forty years. However, one of Chin’s most extensive engagements with the racist legacy of Charlie Chan has yet to see the light of day.

While conducting research for this dissertation, I made a remarkable literary discovery – in the early 1970s, Frank Chin wrote a novel with the working title, *Charlie Chan on Maui*. For reasons that were unclear to me at the time, the book was never published. Although I never even heard of Chin writing such a book, the evidence of the novel’s existence had been hidden in plain sight for decades. In the first edition of *Aiiieeee!: An Anthology of Asian-American Writers* (1974), the head-note for Chin’s contribution to the collection makes a direct reference to this unseen text: “At this writing, he is finishing a novel, *Charlie Chan on Maui*, for Harper and Row and is working on a new play, tentatively entitled *The Year of the Dragon*”(49). But as I said, the novel was never released. What happened?

In response to an article in a March 1973 issue of *Ramparts* magazine that mentioned *Charlie Chan on Maui*, a law firm representing the Charlie Chan rights holders sent Frank Chin a cease-and-desist letter. Although Chin argued that names cannot be copyrighted, he ultimately decided to transform his inchoate novel into the play, *Gee Pop!* Due to a variety of mitigating reasons, Chin ended up abandoning the project altogether. However, through a diligent investigation worthy of Philip Marlowe himself, I discovered that a handful of original manuscripts still existed, albeit spread over two archives on opposite coasts of the United States. Through the generous assistance of these libraries, I was able to gain access to the texts and sift through the different extant drafts. Although excited by this groundbreaking find, I had no idea what I would discover within the text itself. Was it an unsanctioned

Charlie Chan novel? A send-up of the series? Or something else? The answer proved far more satisfying than I could have possibly imagined.

Neither a pastiche nor parody of the franchise, *Charlie Chan on Maui* serves instead as a sequel to Frank Chin's *The Chickencoop Chinaman* and follows the further misadventures of Tam Lum, the original play's Chinese American protagonist. Haunted by the memories of a failed marriage, he leaves California behind for a self-imposed exile on the island of Maui. After burning his manuscript for what he believed would become "The Great Chinese American Novel," Tam forms an unusual friendship with a Jerome Thorpe, a retired Hollywood actor famous for portraying Charlie Chan on the big screen.

Predating Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* (1975) by at least two years, *Charlie Chan on Maui* quite possibly could have changed the face of Asian American cultural production had it been published at the time. Written at the height of Frank Chin's creative powers, the novel ranks as the author's funniest, most poignant work to date. Further, this landmark text reveals, for lack of a better term, the "missing link" between the Charlie Chan series of yesteryear and the Asian American-created detective fiction that rose to prominence at the turn of the twenty-first century.

While working on this dissertation, I meticulously reassembled the various manuscripts into a single master text and presented them to Frank Chin. In January of 2012, the author graciously gave me the authority to serve as editor for *Charlie Chan on Maui*, and I have subsequently entered into preliminary talks with a university

press. With any luck, this long hidden text will finally be published. After all, with Charlie Chan's cinematic and cultural return imminent, if not already accomplished, perhaps it is time for a literary voice from the past to re-emerge and challenge the detective's haunting specter once more. The agonistic duel, it seems, remains far from over.

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