

Paul Arras

“Am I an American? No. Am I, then, a Chinese...?”

Portrayals of Chinese Americans in Earl Derr Biggers’ Charlie Chan Novels

Today the Chinese detective Charlie Chan is most often remembered as a film character, but he first appeared in six mystery novels by Earl Derr Biggers. The film character Chan is often criticized as an offensive portrayal of a Chinese. Researchers and reviewers of Biggers’ work tend to spring to the defense of the literary version of Chan against criticism of the character’s offensive stereotypes. The essay on Biggers in the *Dictionary of Literary Biography* is typical when it accuses Chan’s attackers of failing to consider the book version of Chan who was “wise, courageous, modest, patient, devoted to his family, and loyal to his friends.”¹ In fact, the film version of Chan shows the same qualities. Biggers himself, though initially disappointed in the film version of his character, declared by 1931 that Chan was “done right” in the films.²

Certainly the demeaning portrayal of Chan in the popular films had a lasting cultural resonance in Chinese-American stereotypes. But the films have been widely examined. So this paper sets the film character aside, and instead considers the character in the popular novels as readers first encountered him. The characterization of Chan throughout the six novels is deeper than the films. (Of course, that’s typical in most comparisons between books and film adaptations.) But the depth of character in the novels comes NOT from an elaborate depiction of Chan’s exoticized Chinese characteristics, but rather from a tension more familiar to American readers – the stresses Chan faces as a first-generation immigrant. The more success Chan finds in his career in America, the more stress his Chinese-ness is put under. And he certainly isn’t American; the novels position him as anything but normal. Chan, then, is a hybrid. As we will see, this hybridity is critical to his character development from the first novel through the sixth

¹ Marvin S. Lachman, “Earl Derr Biggers,” *Dictionary of Literary Biography, Volume 306: American Mystery and Detective Writers*. A Bruccoli Clark Layman Book. Edited by George Parker Anderson, University of South Carolina. Gale, 2005. 16-24. Also, Jon L. Breen, “Murder Number One: Earl Derr Biggers,” *The New Republic*, July 30, 1977, 38-39. Breen’s essay provides a deeper analysis of the literary character, but still presents a favorable position towards the character’s merits, arguing that Chan’s only fault was his ironic bigotry towards Japanese. The creation of Chan came at a time of increasing favor towards China by Americans and a corresponding decrease in opinion towards Japan. Chan’s anti-Japanese sentiment thus illustrates the oft-observed see-saw relationship between China and Japan in the perception of Americans.

² Earl Derr Biggers to Willoughby Speyers (Fox Studios), Feb. 13, 1931. MS. Bobbs-Merrill Papers, Indiana University.

and final book. [Rather than offer an overview of Biggers' characterization of Chan, I'm going to trace the character development chronologically through the novels.]

First though, here is an excerpt from one of many letters written by journalists and literary critics which were collected by Biggers' publisher after his death in 1933.

*"Mr. Biggers...rendered a conspicuous service in creating the character of Charlie Chan. Too much fiction and too many moving pictures have depicted the unworthy and criminal Chinaman. [Note: Biggers – didn't use 'Chinaman' after 1st book] Our estimate of the Chinese, based on these representations, has been far too low. We needed to be told, as Mr. Biggers told us, that both humor and honor may be found under a yellow skin as well as under one that is white."*³

This exemplifies the consensus of contemporary literary critics reflecting on the six Charlie Chan novels written by Earl Derr Biggers. After his death Biggers was remembered for his contribution to American readers' understanding of the Chinese. While Biggers' Chan may have helped humanize the Chinese for readers, the critics give him too much credit as a cultural informant. In fact, the closest Biggers came to China was Hawaii. The author did minimal research on China, and admitted to knowing only one Chinese.⁴ Biggers once claimed that he asked his Chinese cook to write him frequent letters, from which he gleaned Charlie Chan's idiosyncratic speech patterns. Here's a couple examples of Chan's dialogue..

- "Chinese funny people... They say no, no is what they mean. They say yes, and they are glued to same."⁵
- "Chinese knows he is one minute grain of sand on seashore of eternity."⁶

For his inventiveness if not his research, Biggers was considered an authority on Chinese. Indeed, "Charlie Chan's poppa,"⁷ as Biggers once referred to himself, refers to China with an assuredness of his own knowledge.

However, within the novels Biggers does not write of China with any overwhelming frequency. China remains a distant place where Chan originated from but will never return to. Biggers introduced Chan in his 1925 novel, *The House without a Key*. Chan is merely a secondary character, one of the many local peculiarities of the exotic Hawaiian setting through which the main protagonist, an unworldly New Englander, must navigate to solve a murder

³ Osman C. Hooper to Bobbs-Merrill, April 12, 1933. MS, Bobbs-Merrill Papers, Indiana University.

⁴ "Obituary: Earl Derr Biggers," *Buffalo Courier Express*, April 16, 1933, np.

⁵ *Behind that Curtain*, 34.

⁶ *Chinese Parrot*, 228.

⁷ Earl Derr Biggers, "Earl Derr Biggers," *Harvard College Class of 1907 Twenty-fifth Anniversary Report*, June 1932, 43-44.

mystery. Unwittingly, Biggers had created in Chan a character readers found appealing. He was compelled to write more adventures for Chan, the character growing in depth and importance with each installment.

When he is introduced in *The House without a Key* (1925) Chan has lived in Hawaii for twenty-five years.⁸ Because he is Chinese, he is better able to relate to and understand other Asians – both Chinese and Japanese – with which he interacts as he solves the case. And because he has embraced America, its language and clothing, Chan can interact with Americans just as ably. He has achieved a firm, if idiosyncratic, grasp on English, and his syntax improves over the course of the books. As he becomes renowned in the world of the novels for his investigating skills, Chan is increasingly presented not merely as an ideal Chinese person, but as an ideal human being. The blending of China and America embodied by Chan is the key to his success as a detective and his appeal as a character.

Sales of *The House without a Key* were immediately brisk. Biggers quickly wrote and published the second Chan book the following year. *The Chinese Parrot* brings Chan to the mainland, first to San Francisco and then to the primary setting of the California desert. Chan spends much of the novel in disguise as a Chinese servant, thus taking advantage of American stereotypes, as well as the tendency of Americans to underestimate Chinese. The two elements of Chan's disguise are clothing and language. He becomes the Chinese servant, Ah Kim, by donning worn clothes, slippers, and a Chinese style jacket.⁹ He speaks broken English, calling people "boss" and mispronouncing his "Rs" as "Ls." Biggers thus undermines existing stereotypes by having the Chinese detective rely on them to get the better of his adversaries.

Interestingly, this is a reversal of the way Chan "dresses up" for his job as a detective in America. A visit to Chan's home in the first book found Chan dressed in Chinese attire, his house "clothed" in Chinese furniture and decoration. When it was time to leave the house he changed into American-style clothing. Also, Chan's wife's grasp of English is much weaker than her husband's, implying Chan speaks Chinese at home. Though Chan's flowery English is humorously presented in the series, he takes great pride in his English and detests the role he must play in going undercover as Ah Kim in the second book. "All my life," Chan complains, "I

⁸ Biggers emphasized the exotic location for this first mystery, and Chan was created as an embodiment of the Hawaiian setting. Biggers never saw Chan as the featured character of the book and didn't fully grasp Chan's popularity until after the second novel.

⁹ Earl Derr Biggers, *Celebrated Cases of Charlie Chan* (omnibus), (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1930), *The Chinese Parrot*, 67.

study to speak fine English words. Now I must strangle all such in my throat, lest suspicion rouse up. Not a happy situation for me.”¹⁰ Later when he is able to remove his disguise briefly and put his normal clothes back on, Chan admits, “Feel respected again.”¹¹ After more than a quarter century in Hawaii, Chan has found comfort and respect among Americans by adapting their language and appearance.

In other ways Chan remains Chinese. Of course, he can never hide his physical features that mark him as Chinese, such as his “round fat cheeks” and his “ivory skin.” His eyes are also frequently emphasized; Biggers’ once describes the “look of keen brightness that made the pupils gleam like black buttons in the yellow light.”¹²

Charlie Chan’s hybridity is further emphasized when Chan visits his cousin in San Francisco’s Chinatown. Chan Kee Lim is suspicious of everything American; he even distrusts an alarm clock, the only non-Chinese item in his home, calling it a “foreign devil clock.”¹³ He is bitter towards both Chan’s profession alongside “the foreign devil police” and his own daughter’s “white devil profession” as a telephone switch board operator.¹⁴ Speaking with his cousin in Cantonese, Charlie Chan admits some doubt about his place in life. Chan Kee Lim, maintains his distrust, sheltered in an artificial version of the China he left behind. Chan, as we have seen, also maintains an artificial version of China in his own home, but dresses and speaks as an American as he works in public.

Charlie Chan’s popularity continued to grow, and by 1927 Biggers was in negotiation with Universal Studios over the movie rights to *The Chinese Parrot*. The following year he published the third Chan story, *Behind that Curtain*. Two years later, *The Black Camel* has Chan back in Hawaii. There is no other protagonist central to the plot, and the romantic side story that existed in the first three books is marginalized.

A chapter called “Breakfast with the Chans” begins to reveal the problems associated with Chan’s state as a multicultural hybrid. Chan observes his children have been “Americanized to a rather painful extent.”¹⁵ Unlike during his brief appearance in the first novel, Chan’s oldest son now speaks English without an accent, as do the rest of Chan’s children. So conscious of his own linguistic skills, it seems Chan should be pleased with his children’s language. In fact, he is

¹⁰ Biggers, *The Chinese Parrot*, 70.

¹¹ Biggers, *The Chinese Parrot*, 252.

¹² Biggers, *The Chinese Parrot*, 22.

¹³ Biggers, *The Chinese Parrot*, 35.

¹⁴ Biggers, *The Chinese Parrot*, 34.

¹⁵ Biggers, *The Black Camel*, 166.

unhappy with some of their phrases; his son asks, “What’s the dope?” and one of his daughters repeatedly uses the word “swell.”¹⁶ Chan tells them with frustration, “Vast English language is spread out before you, and you select for your use the lowliest words.”¹⁷ Pondering his frustration with his family, he feels pride that they are American citizens, while at the same time sensing “they seemed to be growing away from him...”¹⁸ Such generational tension is, of course, typical of the American immigrant story, in history and fiction.

The other side of Chan’s anxiety is his own identity crisis. At the outset of the fifth novel, *Charlie Chan Carries On* (1931), Chan writes to a detective friend, “Can it be that Oriental character is slipping from me owing to fact I live so many years among restless Americans?”¹⁹ In the first book Chan had boasted that in “my country” people only need food and shelter to be happy, in contrast to the ambitious drive so common to Americans. “What is ambition?” asks Chan. “A canker that eats at the heart of the white man, denying him the joys of contentment.”²⁰ Though he adopted the appearance and language of Americans, Chan struggled to resist their negative characteristics, clinging to the positives of his Chinese heritage. Having lived in America so long though, Chan is beginning to worry that he has become too American.

Chan’s identity crisis resumes in *Keeper of the Keys* (1932), the final book before Biggers’ death at age 48 the following year. Chan encounters another first generation Chinese-American who becomes the prime suspect in the murder mystery. Like Chan, Ah Sing is well-liked by those who have known him for a long time. Like Chan, Ah Sing has remained in the same line of employment his whole life as a faithful servant. Both, therefore, serve white Americans. The similarities end there, because Ah Sing did not adopt the clothes of Americans. Rather than embrace English as Chan does, Ah Sing speaks just enough to get by. Thus, Chan finds he has trouble connecting with Ah Sing:

“*You and I, honorable Sing, are of the same race, the same people. Why, then, should a thousand hills rise between us when we talk?*”

“*They are hills you place there with your white devil ways,*” *Sing suggested.*

“*I am so sorry. They are imaginary. Let us sweep them away.*”²¹

Criticizing Chan’s assimilation, Ah Sing confirms Chan’s problematic identity. Chan claims they are imaginary, but he cannot simply sweep them away, as he himself understands:

¹⁶ Biggers, *The Black Camel*, 166-168.

¹⁷ Biggers, *The Black Camel*, 168.

¹⁸ Biggers, *The Black Camel*, 169.

¹⁹ Biggers, *Charlie Chan Carries On*, 169.

²⁰ Biggers, *Behind That Curtain*, 22.

²¹ Earl Derr Biggers, *Keeper of the Keys* (New York: Dell Publishing, 1944), 187.

“...when I look into his [Ah Sing’s] eyes I discover that a gulf like the heaving Pacific lies between us. Why? Because he, though among Caucasians many more years than I, still remains Chinese. As Chinese today as in the first moon of his existence. While I – I bear the brand, the label – Americanized... I traveled with the current... I was ambitious. I sought success. For what I have won, I paid the price. Am I an American? No. Am I, then a Chinese? Not in the eyes of Ah Sing.... But I have chosen my path, and I must follow it.”²²

Even though Ah Sing has been a nuisance obstructing the investigation, Chan allows him to go free. With the local police getting ready to arrest the old Chinese servant, Chan puts him on a train for the coast, where Ah Sing will take a boat back to the homeland he misses so much. Chan wraps up the mystery and heads home as well. But his home is Hawaii, an ocean away from both China and America.

Critics have attacked Charlie Chan for exemplifying a simplistic model of behavior for ethnic minorities, “someone who assimilates into mainstream American culture by moving from a working class-status to a middle-class professional one.”²³ However, eventually Biggers’ Chan was questioning his own assimilation. He can change his clothes and try to hide his speech, but his Chinese has grown rusty and he has adapted American ambition. Anyway, his children are Americans now, and he would never abandon them. Despite his grumbling about their Americanization, the later stories reveal Chan’s deepest pride comes from their success. So in their broad mythology, the Chan novels tell the classic American myth; an immigrant comes to America and overcomes adversity through assimilation to find fame and success for himself and a better life for his children.

Therein lays the fundamental problem with Biggers’ portrayal of Chinese. The novels offer only two possible paths for Chinese immigrants. They can cling to their culture, isolating themselves in America to the detriment of their success, or they can compromise and compartmentalize their heritage, as Chan has done. The books acknowledge the pain associated with the latter path, but ultimately celebrate it. Chan’s identity crisis is just another obstacle the hero must overcome before he catches the villain and goes home to Hawaii.

There is one more piece of the mystery to understand Charlie Chan, and that is the career of “Charlie Chan’s poppa,” Earl Derr Biggers. Even as he fought over Chan’s portrayal in the movies, Biggers was pondering his own trail in life. After decades of scraping by in his writing

²² Biggers, *Keeper of the Keys*, 97.

²³ Jachinson Chan, *Chinese American Masculinities: From Fu Manchu to Bruce Lee* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 51.

career, Charlie Chan had finally given him fame and financial stability, but he yearned to stretch himself artistically with other projects. As early as 1927, Biggers worried, “Above all I don’t want to find myself in the position where the public won’t accept anything but a Chan story from me. That would be deadly, and suicide would be the only way out.”²⁴ The following year, *Behind That Curtain* was proving to be another hit; “God help me” wrote Biggers, after receiving another round of fan mail asking for more Charlie Chan stories.²⁵ Another letter quoted mail he had received: “I don’t insist on more Charlie Chan, but more Biggers is imperative!’ If only they all felt that way!”²⁶ Biggers hoped to follow *The Black Camel* with a non-Chan story, but he never got the chance. The 1929 stock market crash affected him enough that he had to ask for an advance on his next book, *Charlie Chan Carries On*. The title reflects Biggers’ own sentiments at that moment. His health had been poor most of his life, and a heart attack in November 1930 might have served warning to Biggers that he would not be living to an old age. Sixteen months later after sending one more Chan story to the presses, Biggers considered the value of a Chan radio program and a syndicated Chan comic strip might offer for his family. “Something tells me that I will never be finished with Charlie in my life-time,” he remarked wistfully.²⁷ A year later he would be dead from a heart attack.

Charlie Chan embodied Biggers’ own identity struggles as a writer who, after finding little success as a playwright and novelist, stumbled onto a successful formula for popular mysteries. Biggers was proud of Chan, and yet the Harvard graduate was ambivalent toward the idea he had built his career off of the character. Biggers shared Chan’s ambition to provide financial stability for his family. But that ambition led both men to worry they had compromised their own identity – Chan as a Chinese, Biggers as a writer of great literature.

The depth of the literary character Chan did not come from any particular expertise Biggers had of China, nor did it come from an exploration of racial issues. While Chan’s identity crisis may have been particularly familiar to American immigrants, in a broader sense, his experience reflected the anxieties of America’s rising professional class in the 1920s. Chan’s identity crisis was, consciously or unconsciously, a reflection of Biggers’ own crisis of self-worth. The two had sacrificed a bit of themselves on their way to success in modern America.

²⁴ Earl Derr Biggers to David Lawrence Chambers, Sep. 26, 1927. MS. Bobbs-Merrill Papers, Indiana University.

²⁵ Earl Derr Biggers to David Lawrence Chambers, May. 15, 1928. MS. Bobbs-Merrill Papers, Indiana University.

²⁶ Earl Derr Biggers to David Lawrence Chambers, Jun. 6, 1928. MS. Bobbs-Merrill Papers, Indiana University.

²⁷ Earl Derr Biggers to David Lawrence Chambers, May. 30, 1932. MS. Bobbs-Merrill Papers, Indiana University.

Chan was an evocative character because as Biggers told the story of the hybrid Chinese-American immigrant, he was also telling his own.