

Charlie Chan: A Chinese Character Unrecognizable by the Chinese

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Abstract

Detective Charlie Chan is a Chinese image imagined and created by Earl Derr Biggers with a sense of racial superiority, which does not really reflect the cultural and personality characteristics of Chinese, reflects the supremacy of white and their racial discrimination, and seriously misleads the public to have a fair and objective understanding of Chinese.

Keywords: Charlie Chan, Chinese image, racial prejudice

From 1925 to 1932, Earl Derr Biggers told the story of a Chinese detective called Charlie Chan through his six novels. Since then, his novels have been made into many movies. After Chan's rise to fame, Biggers said in an interview that the sinister and evil image of a Chinese person had become history, while a gentle Chinese who stands on the side of law and justice had not (Michael J. Brodhead). Obviously, Biggers thinks his Chan is an Oriental detective with good character and a representative of the Chinese people. But the fact that Chan is still a Chinese person created in the United States with deep racial slurs means that he does not really reflect the characteristics of the Chinese people.

Charlie Chan had a very cool Chinese prototype, a Chinese police officer named Ping Chang in the Honolulu Police Department. Historical records show that Chang was a short man with a thin, hard face, firm eyes, and a scar on his right forehead from fighting with criminals. He was good at dealing with criminals by swinging a whip. The prototype was an impressive, macho eastern tough guy. But Biggers's Chan is seen with "his amber eyes slanting", a stereotype about the East entirely in keeping with Arthur Conan Doyle's "a Chinese addict" in "The Man with the Twisted Lip" (1891) and Sax Rohmer's Dr. Fu Manchu (1913). Biggers also downplays Chan's manliness and feminizes him ("the light Dainty step of a woman"). The masculinity of the prototype Chang completely disappeared from the chubby Chan, who looked more like a clown. This only shows that in the heart of the author, the Chinese are not put at an equal level with the author. Instead of creating Chan with genuine equality and friendly understanding, the author seems to enjoy imagining and creating the Chinese according to his own needs with a sense of racial superiority.

In Biggers' Charlie Chan Mystery, Chan speaks broken English, often referring to the Chinese aphorisms. The "Chinese aphorisms" Biggers created for Chan are actually made-up, pseudo-Chinese aphorisms. Broken English and pseudo-Chinese aphorisms strengthen Chan's Chinese identity. No matter how smart and intelligent Chan is, and he repeatedly emphasizes that he is an American, Chinese immigrants are always "others," belonging to the mysterious East in the eyes of racial discriminators. Not only did Biggers speak standard English that Chan couldn't, but he also make up Chinese aphorisms. The arrogant white person once again enjoyed a sense of racial superiority, beyond characterization of "slant," through language.

Biggers' Charlie Chan is humble, meek and deferential to whites. Such characterization of Charlie Chan is not only due to the immigrants' perceived cultural deficit, such as not knowing English, but also due to the long-standing racial discrimination of the Chinese exclusion movement, and more importantly, due to the

expectations of the white supremacists towards the Chinese. In the era of white supremacy, in order to maintain the hegemony and dominant position of white people, the mainstream society hoped that the Chinese people like Chan would not pose a threat to white people and could serve white people obediently.

Xun Lu, one of Biggers' contemporaries as a famous Chinese writer, wrote in his essay that Chan fits the American imagination of the Chinese—he speaks “Confucius” and “Pidgin English,” and he is grammatically confused, always mysterious, and has a kind of stereotyped, distancing respect for white people. This Charlie Chan with the mark of racial slurs is obviously unacceptable to the Chinese. In 2003, news that Fox was going to restore the Chan films and hold a film festival rebroadcast drew an immediate outcry from Chinese Americans, and the network quickly canceled the plan.

At the beginning of the last century, the population of Chinese immigrants in the United States was very small, and the vast majority of Americans had no interaction with real Chinese people. With the help of novels and films, the stereotypical Oriental image from the perspective of racial prejudice is widely spread, which has greatly misled the whole American society. This kind of misleading promotes the racial prejudice and racial discrimination, and demeans and hurts the majority of Chinese people, especially male Chinese people.

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