

### Case 3

#### “DisenCHANTed?”

Charlie Chan is a fictional Chinese-Hawaiian detective, created by novelist Earl Derr Biggers. Biggers published six enormously successful Charlie Chan novels between 1925 and 1931. Two silent Charlie Chan movies were made in the 1920's, followed by about four dozen more films, several radio programs, two television shows, and numerous comic book series over the next decades.

While cleaning out old files at Warner Brothers-Seven Arts Studios, vice president Harvey Chertok discovered a forgotten 1968 Charlie Chan documentary. Controversy erupted when the documentary was screened at the New York Chapter of the National Academy of Television Arts and Sciences in February 2010. While some film aficionados consider Charlie Chan to be an international entertainment icon who challenged many negative perceptions about the Chinese, detractors charge that the depiction of the Chinese-American detective is offensive racial stereotyping.

Critics call the portrayal of Chan by non-Asian actors in yellowface degrading. Chan's mangled singsong English and kitschy pseudo-Confucian aphorisms provoked ridicule: some older Asian Americans report that growing up they were mocked by Charlie Chan-inspired racial taunts. Chan's sons' flippant attitude toward their father's methodical investigations undermined the traditional value of respect for elders. Critics charged that Chan's apparent subservience to whites and his failure to respond to racial slurs encouraged offensive treatment and the perception of inferiority of Asian Americans.

Supporters counter that the first Chan films using Asian actors were commercially unsuccessful, and only when popular Caucasian movie stars played the detective did the movies become commercially viable. It was not racial bias, but rather business interests that dictated the choice of actors. The novelist Earl Derr Biggers's sympathetic treatment of Charlie Chan had a positive impact on interracial relations, shattering an offensive ethnic stereotype. Charlie Chan was created during a time when federal miscegenation laws were still determinative, and the American Immigration Act of 1924 prohibited immigration of Asians as an “undesirable” race. There was widespread fear among Americans of the “Yellow Peril”: fear that Chinese overpopulation would lead to attempts to colonize and take over the world.

Biggers based his Charlie Chan character on the Chinese-Hawaiian detective, Chang Apana, after reading about Apana in a Honolulu newspaper. Apana joined the Honolulu Police Department in 1898. An astute and scrupulous investigator, fluent in several languages, with an intimate familiarity with the city and possessing a wide network of contacts, Apana was a respected and successful detective. His single-handed arrest of 70 criminals at one time is legendary. Biggers deliberately created the Apana-based character to counter the prevalent depiction of the Chinese as menacing and inscrutably evil. Charlie Chan was wise, shrewd, honorable, benevolent, and modest. He did not react to offensive stereotyping, but used these false perceptions to his advantage to thwart evildoers.

Nearly a century later, Charlie Chan remains a beloved hero to some, and an invidious stereotype to others.