



# Charlie Chan: The Untold Story of the Honorable Detective and His Rendezvous with American History

*Yunte Huang*

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**Winner of the 2011 Edgar Award for Best Critical/Biographical Book and Shortlisted for the 2010 National Book Critics Circle Award in Biography: "An ingenious and absorbing book...It will permanently change the way we tell this troubled yet gripping story." ?Jonathan Spence**

On a balmy July night in 1904, a wiry figure sauntered alone through the dim alleys of Honolulu's Chinatown. He strolled up a set of rickety steps and into a smoky gambling den ringing with jeers of card sharks and crapshooters. By the time anyone recognized the infamous bullwhip dangling from his hand, it was too late. Single-handedly, the feared, five-foot-tall Hawaiian cop, Chang Apana, had lined up forty gamblers and marched them down to the police station.

So begins Charlie Chan, Yunte Huang's absorbing history of the legendary Cantonese detective, born in Hawaii around 1871, who inspired a series of fiction and movie doubles that long defined America's distorted perceptions of Asians and Asian Americans. In chronicling the real-life story and the fraught narrative of one of Hollywood's most iconic detectives, Huang has fashioned a historical drama where none was known to exist, creating a work that will, in the words of Jonathan Spence, "permanently change the way we tell this troubled yet gripping story."

Himself a literary sleuth, Huang has traced Charlie Chan's evolution from island legend to pop culture icon to vilified, postmodern symbol, ingeniously juxtaposing Apana's rough-and-tumble career against the larger backdrop of a territorial Hawaii torn apart by virulent racism. Apana's bravado prompted not only Earl Derr Biggers, a Harvard graduate turned author, to write six Charlie Chan mysteries but also Hollywood to manufacture over forty movies starring a grammatically challenged detective with a knack for turning Oriental wisdom into singsong Chinatown blues.

Examining hundreds of biographical, literary, and cinematic sources, in English and in his native Chinese, Huang has pursued the trail of Charlie Chan since the mid-1990s, searching for clues in places as improbable as Harvard Yard, an Ohio cornfield, a weathered Hawaiian cemetery, and the Shanghai Bund. His efforts to refashion the Charlie Chan legend became a personal mission, as if the answers he sought would reshape his own identity?no longer a top Chinese student but an immigrant American eager to absorb the bewildering history of his adopted homeland.

"With rare personal intensity and capacious intelligence," Huang has ascribed a starring role to "the honorable detective," one far more enduring than any of his wisecracking movie parts. Huang presents American history in a way that it has never been told before. 35 black-and-white photographs and illustrations

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