

Charlie Chan Encyclopedia Article

Charlie Chan

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Charlie Chan

The Chinese detective Charlie Chan remains author Earl Derr Biggers' (1884-1933) greatest legacy. Biggers based his fictional Asian sleuth on Chang Apana, a Chinese American police detective who lived in Honolulu. Biggers' introduced Chan in *The House without a Key* in 1925, the first of six Chan novels. Beginning in 1926, the Chan character hit the silver screen and was eventually featured in more than thirty films. Three different actors portrayed Chan in films: Warner Oland, Sidney Toler, and Roland Winters. While Chan's character was based on an Asian person, his resemblance to Chinese Americans was remote. White actors played Chan as a rotund, slow-moving detective who spoke pithy sentences made to sound like Confucian proverbs. In contrast to the evil Fu Manchu (another film character), Chan was a hero. But ultimately, his depiction created a new stereotype of Asian Americans as smart, yet inscrutable and inassimilable.