

Playing With Place: Ambiguities of Geography and Citizenship in *The Great Charlie Chan Detective Mystery Game*

Elizabeth Rawitsch

University of North Carolina at Wilmington

Abstract

Charlie Chan, the Honolulu police department's best detective, made his debut in Earl Derr Biggers' novel *The House Without a Key* (1925). At the time, Hawaii was a U.S. territory, located a several-day steamship journey from the U.S. mainland. Simultaneously American and exotic, Hawaii's cultural positioning in the 1920s and 1930s was a source of fascination for Biggers, one that he explored in the subsequent series of Chan novels. Following Biggers' death in 1933, Hollywood, which had been adapting the detective stories since 1926, sent Chan globetrotting to London (1934), Paris (1935), Egypt (1935), Shanghai (1935), Monte Carlo (1937) and more. Consequently, the representation of his citizenship began to change, shifting between Chinese, Hawaiian, and American over the course of three decades and 47 films.

The Great Charlie Chan Detective Mystery Game (Milton Bradley, 1937) participated in a coordinated attempt to transform Chan from a Honolulu detective to a citizen of the world. The board game, now housed in the Beinecke Library's Cabinet of Curiosities, was set in an unidentified city, one where ethnic businesses – Long Wun Chop Suey House, Foo Lee's Turkish Bath, etc. – were dispersed across the board rather than condensed into a Chinatown. Using historical research and Kaja Silverman's reworking of Jacques Rancière's concept of 'the dominant fiction' of America's racial unity (1992), I will consider whether the game represents the idealized melting pot of Biggers' Honolulu, or whether it constructs a city that could exist anywhere within – and possibly outside – America's borders. Does the game disconnect Chan from a sense of place in order to make him unambiguously American, detached from his problematic Hawaiian heritage? 'When money talk, few are deaf', Chan tells us, and this paper will consider what this merchandising states.

Keywords: Transmedia, Paratexts, Board Games, The Great Charlie Chan Detective Mystery Game, Charlie Chan, Earl Derr Biggers, Detective Stories, Citizenship, Merchandising, Franchising, Milton Bradley.

Created by Earl Derr Biggers in 1925 and originally serialised in the *Saturday Evening Post*, the fictional Hawaiian detective Charlie Chan has appeared in a variety of media, including books, films, radio programs, comics, and television shows. Both the character and the resulting franchise have also generated a steady wave of critical analysis. From Eugene Franklin Wong's (1978) landmark study of Asian stereotypes in American media to Jessica Hagedorn's (1993) literary anthology that infamously declared *Chan Is Dead*, to Yunte Huang's (2010) biographical investigation of the real Honolulu detective behind the character, academic debate about the representation of Chan's Chinese heritage on page and on screen has remained both abundant and animated.

It has also repeatedly fallen victim to two

traps. First, limiting an analysis of Chan's representation to just the page and screen ignores the full scope of the character's transmedia reach. For example, as Jonathan Gray argues, merchandising not only diversifies a franchise's markets—and, therefore, potential profits—it also expands the world of the franchise into the home (2010). Historical analyses of classical Hollywood paratexts that extend beyond an examination of posters, credit sequences, and other publicity materials are rare, but merchandising—and, particularly toy merchandising such as action figures, costumes, and board games—is particularly deserving of further critical attention, because it supplemented audiences' cultural understanding of the cinema between the 1920s and 1950s. Second, while the representation of Chan's Chinese heritage

has been scrutinised in depth, the representation of his nationality has not. When considering a period in which the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 and the Quota Act of 1924 had barred Chinese nationals from naturalisation, it is necessary to examine racial heritage and national identity collectively. Indeed, when examined over the course of several decades, the representation of Chan's citizenship appears to shift between Chinese, Hawaiian, and/or American in response to America's changing attitudes toward race and international relations.

This case study explores the role that *The Great Charlie Chan Detective Mystery Game* (Milton Bradley, 1937)¹ played in cementing just one transition between Chan's perceived nationalities. In conjunction with the series of movies that followed Biggers' death—and the end of Hollywood's ready-made source material—in 1933, the board game attempted to transform Chan from a Honolulu detective to a citizen of the world. Setting the action in an indeterminate locale scattered with ethnic businesses, the game created a multicultural city that challenged the 'dominant fiction' of America's racial unity. In doing so, it also potentially re-imagined America as an international and cosmopolitan haven during a period of profound political isolationism.

Race, Place, and the 'Dominant Fiction' of 1930s America

During an interview at the 1977 Edinburgh Film Festival, French theorist Jacques Rancière proposed that a society's ideological 'reality' is its 'dominant fiction' (1977: 28). In America's case, Rancière contended that the dominant fiction is 'the birth of the nation', which manifests itself as a series of binaries: 'whites versus Indians; North versus South; Law versus outlaw, etc.' (1977: 30). In the case of national identity, the particular binary at work is 'American versus foreign'. Further developing Rancière's concept, Kaja Silverman contends that America's 'dominant fiction' asserts hegemony by 'the images and stories through which a society figures consensus; images and stories which cinema, fiction, popular culture, and other forms of mass representation presumably both draw upon and hope to shape' (1998: 30).² In other words, while the political parameters for citizenship are determined by law, there is

a degree to which national identity is also culturally constructed. Spanning across multiple media, the Charlie Chan franchise could both draw upon and shape mythologies of nationality.

While America's national boundaries were stable during the run of the Chan franchise, the parameters of citizenship were often perplexing, particularly given Chan's residency in Honolulu. From 1898 until 1959, the Hawaiian Islands were a U.S. territory. Citizens of Hawaii became American citizens, and people born in Hawaii became citizens, but the rights that were afforded to a territory versus a state often resulted in confusion.³ In *The House Without a Key*, the debut Chan novel, Boston native John Quincy Winterslip is jokingly asked if he will convert his money into foreign currency before departing for Honolulu: 'Only about one person out of a thousand in this country knows that Hawaii is a part of the United States, and the fact annoys us deeply over in the islands' (Biggers 1925: 38). To the *haole* (resident, non-indigenous) population of Hawaii, mid-1920s Honolulu was 'an eighth carbon copy of Babbittville, U.S.A.' rather than an exotic paradise (Biggers 1925: 38). In the mainland imagination, however, Territorial Hawaii remained at least partially 'other' in spite of its annexation.⁴ Located a multiple-day steamship journey away from the mainland, Hawaii could be both American and not-American, both familiar and exotic.

In addition to its geographic distance, part of what differentiated Territorial Hawaii from the rest of the United States was its racial diversity. In comparison to mainland America, which was 88.7% white, Hawaii's population was 21.8% white, 13.8% Native Hawaiian, 37.9% Japanese, 7.4% Chinese, 17.1% Filipino, and 1.9% Korean according to the 1930 U.S. Census (U.S. Census Bureau). In other words, while America claimed to be a 'melting pot' where, to quote Israel Zangwill's eponymous play, 'all the races of Europe are melting and re-forming' into a unified body of American citizens (1909: 33), it bears emphasising that mainland America was far from racially diverse in comparison to its territories. Furthermore, while the 'races of Europe' were successfully intermixing, the races of Asia were often perceived as being incapable of assimilation. In fact, it was purportedly Hawaii's racial diversity that kept the territory

from achieving statehood for decades. Given Japan's increasing militarism throughout the 1920s and 1930s, the idea of a state in which people of Asian descent would be in the majority and Caucasians would be in the minority made many white Americans nervous (Whitehead 2004: 30). America's melting pot, in other words, only comfortably applied to select racial heritages.

However, it is also important to note that Biggers' Chan never claimed to be 'American'. Throughout all six novels, Chan consistently refers to himself as 'Chinese' despite having lived in the United States for more than a decade. Indeed, because Biggers' Chan was born in China (not Hawaii), he was never eligible for American citizenship. As a U.S. territory, Hawaii was subject to federal immigration law, and the Chinese Exclusion Act and Quota Act had barred entry to the United States on racial grounds; alien Chinese resident in Honolulu could not be naturalised until the quota was lifted in 1943. Regardless of precisely when Biggers' Chan immigrated, he remained a Chinese citizen and was therefore politically foreign.

Most of the early franchise texts take pains to remind us at least once that Chan is a famous 'Honolulu detective', and, precisely because it was part of a territory—not part of a state—Honolulu provided a space in which the national identity of the Chan character could be far from clear-cut. Indeed, Chan is initially so tied to Honolulu and its police force that he is almost always seen at work, whether at the police station, on its business elsewhere on the islands, or serving as its representative on the American mainland. It takes five books into the series before Chan's home is visited, and, even then, the narrator's description is cursory, providing a brief catalogue of objects:

A rare old rug on the floor, crimson and gold Chinese lanterns hanging from the ceiling, many carved teakwood tables bearing Swatow bowls, porcelain wine jars, dwarfed trees. On the wall was a single picture, a bird on an apple bough, painted on silk (Biggers 1930: 206).⁵

Chan's home contains reminders of his homeland, but it is unclear if they are genuine Chinese artefacts

or *chinoiserie* (American imitations of Chinese material goods). Is Chan's heritage 'authentically' Chinese or Americanised Chinese?

The very location of Chan's home differentiates him from the rest of Honolulu's Chinese population. The largest Chinese settlement, Chinatown, 'occupied thirty-seven acres, with claptrap restaurants, grocery stores, laundries, bakeries, pharmacies, slaughterhouses, warehouses, whorehouses, gambling parlours, and opium dens in littered, claustrophobically congested streets' between River Street, Nu'uaniu Avenue, Queen Street, and Beretania Street (Huang 2010: 55). Located to the west of Chinatown, Chan's residence on the slopes of Punchbowl Hill was set apart from and elevated above the ethnic enclave. Walking Chinatown's streets only while on patrol, the franchise's early Chan is simultaneously Chinese and not-Chinese. He is also distinctly Hawaiian. These multiple cultural positions serve to expose the tension within America's 'dominant fiction' of nationality.

As the 1930s progressed and the isolationist stance that America had adopted at the end of World War I began to be called into question, the tension would shift again. Chan would shift from a representative of Hawaii to a representative of America, this time drawing upon a new medium.

The Great Charlie Chan Detective Mystery Game and Ambiguities of National Identity

By the mid-1930s Charlie Chan spent more time away from the Hawaiian Islands than he spent on them. The character was also sent further afield than just the American mainland: Hollywood, for example, dispatched Chan to London in 1934; to Paris, Cairo, and Shanghai in 1935; and to Berlin and Monte Carlo in 1937. At a time when America was steadfastly isolationist—focusing on the domestic problems caused by the Great Depression rather than becoming involved in conflicts overseas—Chan's globetrotting took on added ideological significance. By emphasising the 'dominant fiction' of 'us' versus 'them', Hollywood relocated Chan from Territorial Hawaii's uncertain national positioning (sometimes 'us' and sometimes 'them') to cultural, if not political, citizenship ('us').⁶ While still identified as the 'Honolulu detective', Chan shifted from a small-town figure

to an international icon.

Released in 1937, *The Great Charlie Chan Detective Mystery Game* participated in this effort to transform Chan into a citizen of the world. The board game's relationship to the franchise was announced on the box's cover by the phrase 'trade mark [sic]' which appears immediately below 'Charlie Chan' in the game's title. Indeed, following Biggers' death in 1933, the rights to the Chan character were held by the author's estate, and the *Mystery Game* is just one example of the merchandising it greenlighted in 1937. For example, as a promotional tie-in for Twentieth-Century Fox's *Charlie Chan at Monte Carlo* (Dir. Eugene Forde, 1937), Chrysler ran a full-page, full-colour print advertisement in *Life* magazine featuring Warner Oland, the actor who had played Charlie Chan in fifteen films. Illustrated dressed in full Chan regalia—moustache, goatee, white suit, and panama hat—'Oland was quick to "detect" the Extra Value' in the De Soto, the text asserted (Chrysler 1937: 85).⁷ While the advertisement makes a distinction between the fictional character and the actor, preferring to leave the endorsement to Oland rather than Chan, it marks a tentative foray into linking the Chinese detective to an all-American product. Further merchandising of unambiguously American Chan products would follow, including *The Charlie Chan Card Game* (Whitman Publishing, 1939) and the Charlie Chan halloween costume (J. Halpern Company, 1959).

The *Mystery Game* was not the first board game based around a detective, nor was it the only game of its kind within that year. *Mr. Ree! The Fireside Detective Game* (Selchow & Richter), the acknowledged forerunner to *Cluedo/Clue* (Waddingtons, 1949), and S.S. Van Dine's *Philo Vance Detective Game* (Parker Brothers)—also based on a literary sleuth—were released in 1937, and the goal of all three board games was to solve cases. In the *Mystery Game*, each player began at the centre of the board, on a square that was marked 'Offices of Charlie Chan, Inspector of Police'. One red 'Crime' card was chosen from ten possibilities, revealing that a murder, robbery, stabbing, or shooting had occurred at one of the businesses surrounding Chan's offices. Dice were rolled to move around the board on yellow squares that connected a grid of businesses and, upon reading the target location, players collected one of 64 green 'Evidence'

cards containing both a classic Chan aphorism and a specified number of 'links' of evidence. They also received (and could discard) one of 35 yellow 'Go' cards, which told them their next destination. The game was won by collecting exactly one hundred links of evidence. In other words, the objective of the game was not to solve 'what' or 'where' but to assemble the correct combination of Chan wisdom to explain 'how'.

The board was designed like a city. Players traveled along the paths or streets of yellow squares to reach the businesses that surrounded Chan's offices: clockwise from the top left corner, was the Black Dog Tavern, Clancy's Pool Room, Nick's Hide-Out, Old Mill, Rosewood Dance Hall, Morocco Night Club, Foo Lee's Turkish Bath, Long Wun Chop Suey House, Muggin's Garage, Sung Foo's Shop, and Golden Ball Pawn Shop. All players began with 50 tokens, which served as currency and could be redeemed (when required by a 'Go' card) for bus or taxi fare. In other words, the *Mystery Game* took place in a consumer economy, and the emphasis on a capitalist system and the expenditure of money to travel between businesses was appropriate for a game that was itself a piece of merchandising and required the expenditure of funds to acquire in the first place. It is unclear, however, if the game encouraged its players to spend money as Charlie Chan or merely on Charlie Chan's behalf. Indeed, up to four players could play the game at a time, each controlling a circular, wooden token with a square hole in the middle—a shape that suggested Chinese currency—but the *Mystery Game* instructions give no indication if each player is assuming the role of Charlie Chan or merely that of one of his associates.

Furthermore, while the franchise had firmly established that Charlie Chan was based in Honolulu by the mid-1930s, neither the *Mystery Game* board nor its instruction booklet provide any indication of which city the game is supposed to represent. The illustrations for the local businesses depict 1930s fashion and automobiles—again, products that required money to own—but the storefronts displaying them contained little detail by which they could be geographically pinpointed. The game's city could easily pass for anywhere. In fact, 'Offices of Charlie Chan' suggests that the detective had multiple bases

of operation rather than working from Honolulu exclusively. The game may be set in Hawaii, but it could also be set in any American locale.

The board's most intriguing feature is that the ethnic businesses are dispersed rather than condensed. For example, Foo Lee's Turkish Bath and Long Wun Chop Suey House share a square in the bottom centre of the board, but so do Sung Foo's Shop and the Golden Ball Pawn Shop on far left of the middle row. While Sung Foo's has a vaguely Asian canopy over its door, the Golden Ball has no ethnically distinguishing features. It may or may not be Chinese. The offices that border them on either side belong to Chan (and are therefore presumably part of a police station) and to Muggin's Garage, which also has no discernibly ethnic features. In other words, there is no Chinatown in the *Mystery Game's* city. The game therefore represents an idealised melting pot, one that seeks to conceal America's 'dominant fiction', creating a fictional Anytown, USA. It potentially represents America at its best or America as the country wished it was: a cosmopolitan world city.⁸

At the same time, the lack of a Chinatown problematises the idea that the *Mystery Game's* mystery city is even in America. Mainland America's Chinese communities tended to congregate in ethnic enclaves just as in Honolulu's Chinatown, so the absence of a Chinatown in the board game may suggest that the represented city is not, in fact, located in America. Given Chan's frequent travels abroad, it may be based overseas. Within the context of isolationist America, it may represent the dream of a global location that was not only involved in the world's affairs but was also a vibrant part of the global community where cultures could intersect and peacefully intermingle. In other words, the lack of distinguishing features allows the game to represent multiple geographies at once: a Hawaiian utopia, an idealised Anytown, and a multiethnic overseas metropolis.

While Charlie Chan is not usually discussed as a transmedia character, looking beyond his books and films reveals previously ignored tensions between ideologies of race and nationality in 1930s America. The *Mystery Game* applies the shift in Chan's perceived nationality that began in Hollywood to a new medium, helping Chan transition

from a resident of Hawaii to a global citizen. The ambiguity of the *Mystery Game's* board allows the detective to live and work anywhere: Honolulu, yes, but also mainland America and/or overseas. By potentially detaching Chan from his problematic Hawaiian heritage, the board game globalises the fictional detective, providing him with cultural access to nationalities that were legally beyond his reach.

Notes

¹ *The Great Charlie Chan Detective Mystery Game* is out of print, but a copy is housed in the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Yale University. The game has sold for \$200–\$400 among collectors.

² Robert Burgoyne also expands on the idea of the 'dominant fiction' in (2010) *Film Nation: Hollywood Looks at U.S. Film History*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

³ 'Persons Born in Hawaii', U.S. Code, Title 8, Chapter 12, Subchapter III, Part I, §1405 stated that 'A person born in Hawaii on or after August 12, 1898, and before April 30, 1900, is declared to be a citizen of the United States as of April 30, 1900. A person born in Hawaii on or after April 30, 1900, is a citizen of the United States at birth. A person who was a citizen of the Republic of Hawaii on August 12, 1898, is declared to be a citizen of the United States as of April 30, 1900'.

⁴ For more on how mainland America viewed Hawaii from 1920 to 1950, see: Desmond, J. (1999) *Staging Tourism: Bodies on Display from Waikiki to Sea World*, Chicago: University Press of Chicago; Geiger, J. (2007) *Facing the Pacific: Polynesia and the U.S. Imperial Imagination*, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.

⁵ It would take until *Charlie Chan in Honolulu* (1938) for Hollywood to depict the Chan residence.

⁶ Implied political citizenship would follow in World War II.

⁷ The advertisement was part of a campaign that had already featured Gary Cooper and Janet Gaynor.

⁸ For more on the geographical implications of cosmopolitanism and 'world cities', see: Massey, D. (2007) *World City*, Cambridge: Polity.

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