Race, Region, Rule: Genre and the Case of Charlie Chan

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My fight as a writer and a Chinaman is against extinction and the white western civilization that demands my extinction and the traitors, the yellows who stooge and goon the work of the church of white supremacy.
—Frank Chin ("This" 110)

Within the present context, it is not for white writers to define Asian humanity.
—Elaine H. Kim (22)

IT IS NOT FOR WHITE WRITERS TO DEFINE ASIAN HUMANITY IN ANY context. Speaking for his fellow "Chinamen"—spiritual descendants of the Chinese immigrant laborers who helped build the United States in the nineteenth century—Frank Chin, like Elaine Kim, has denounced all such attempts.[1] So far only Asian Americans are listening. From *The Mikado* to *Memoirs of a Geisha*, occidental writers of "oriental" operas, plays, and fiction continue to prove the truth of Kim's observation that "Anglo-American literature does not tell us about Asians. It tells us about Anglos' opinions of themselves, in relation to their opinion about Asians" (20). Insofar as the literary expression of these opinions can seriously affect Asians, however, the means by which they shape, and are shaped by, literary conventions merit study.

By now, the West's othering of foreign, colonized, and resident alien races in consolidating a dominant European American group identity is almost a cliché of cultural and postcolonial studies.[2] The precise manner in which othering, imposed or experienced, engages with genre, however, has only recently been examined with the care it demands.[3] This essay analyzes genre's impact on racial representation in a body of popular fiction that has shaped European Americans' definition of Asian American identity for more than three-quarters of a century: the six Charlie Chan novels of Earl Derr

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Biggers. Serialized in the *Saturday Evening Post* from January 1925 to July 1932, Biggers's stories introduced to the world Chin's most notorious fictional specimen of "the yellows who stooge and goon the work of the church of white supremacy."

Biggers's representations of race were conventional but complex. To advance his reiterated goal of undermining stereotypes of both "Chinatown and wicked Chinese villains" (Gregorich 11–12), Biggers experimented particularly with genres of locale and of criminality. The geographic setting of his first Chan story, *The House without a Key* (1925), directly challenged the generic topography of what I call Chinatown regionalism by invoking a radically counterintuitive regionalist prototype, while the book's plot followed the conventions of classical detective fiction, a highly formulaic subgenre of crime fiction that perpetuated racist stereotypes while dominating best-seller lists in England and America throughout the 1920s and 1930s (Symons 124; Watson 96, 129–36). One unique feature of the detective formula, however, enabled Biggers to enlist its very tendencies toward racism to question racial stereotyping, even as he played the game of detection according to the genre's own rules. To better elucidate the combined impact of these generic choices on Chan's initial reception, I focus my discussion on *The House without a Key*, giving peripheral attention to Biggers's later Chan books and the highly influential Charlie Chan movies.

The Detective Who Refused to Die

Until the academy began to turn its attention to popular culture and media studies in the 1970s and 1980s, Charlie Chan eluded the critical gaze of literary and ethnic historiographers. Spurred by the obvious symbolic importance of Chan as a mass-mediated figure of racial identity, Asian American writers and scholars in particular began to assess his long-term impact on their peoples' struggles for equality and cultural autonomy. Nearly all agreed that Chan was a denigrating caricature of obsequiousness and self-effacement, "a non-threatening, non-competitive, asexual ally of the white man" (Kim 18) with "a personality reduced to a Chinese takeout menu" (Prasso 113) and speech that "epitomize[d] a racist conception of the Chinese language and its speakers" (Huang 118). Viewed as effeminate, apologetic, and deferential to his white masters, both police officials and clients, Chan seemed the very model of a complacent "model minority," personifying the status assigned Asian American citizens by the dominant white culture in its attempt to delegitimize, by contrast, the angry militancy of the African American and Latino equal rights movements of the 1960s.[4] As Chin put it, Chan was an Asian Uncle Tom, the bastard offspring of "racist love," which offered white approval in exchange for Asian American self-abasement ("Confessions" 71–77; Chin et al., Preface xvi and "Introduction" xxv).

More powerfully than any other Chinese American writer, Chin has conveyed the psychological damage caused by Biggers's creation. His first two plays, *The Chickencoop Chinaman* (1972) and *The Year of the Dragon* (1974), rely heavily on the popular iconography and thematics of the cinematic Chan, and his *Gunga Din Highway* (1994) is propelled largely by the complex workings of this archetypal figure of racial abjection in the popular American and Chinese American imaginary, a subject addressed explicitly in Chin's essay "The Sons of Chan." *Gunga Din Highway* tells the story of Longman Kwan, a fictional movie actor famous for playing "Charlie Chan's Number Four Son" (7), and of Kwan's own son, Ulysses, who must bear the suffocating burden of his father's Hollywood legacy. As the book nears its conclusion, a new "big studio, big budget" (354) Charlie Chan movie is in the works, starring, for the first time, a Chinese actor in the title role. Pressed for his opinion by his friend Diego Chang ("I mean,

Charlie Chan is like your grandfather, man"), Ulysses responds:

> "If Charlie Chan uses first-person pronouns, does not walk in the fetal position, is not played by a white man, and looks and acts like a real Chinese, he's not Charlie Chan anymore."
>
> "Isn't that progress for the Chinese?" asks one of the women.
>
> "Yeah, sure it is. And putting a black man in a white sheet makes the Ku Klux Klan a civil rights organization." (355)

As Chin's work suggests, by the end of the last century Chan had become a salient figure for Asian American writers and filmmakers. He is an allusive and elusive presence in Wayne Wang's detective film parody *Chan Is Missing* (1982) and a prominent one in John Yau's "Ghengis Chan: Private Eye" series of poems in *Edificio Sayonara* and *Forbidden Entries*. To judge from ongoing protests against Chan's cinematic revival (Breen 26–27), the announcement of his cultural demise in the titles of Jessica Hagedorn's 1993 and 2004 anthologies of new Asian American writing, *Charlie Chan Is Dead*, looks premature.

Asian Americans' hostility toward this parade-balloon version of Charlie Chan is entirely justified, given the enormous racial shadow it has cast. Historically, however, their animus is often as tenuously moored as its target. Especially during the early years of activism and mobilization that saw the staging of Chin's plays, scholars tended to ignore the constraints on racial representation experienced by authors, Asian as well as European American, who wrote on so-called oriental subjects before mid-century. The urgency of post-Vietnam-era debates over ethnic and racial identity, often complicated by engagements over gender, class, generation, and education, typically precluded anything more than a perfunctory nod in the direction of such limitations. There were exceptions, however, and they have increased in recent years, preparing the way for a more historically embedded reassessment of the literary portrayal of Chinese and other Asian Americans from the first half of the twentieth century, in literature by nonwhites as well as whites (see, e.g., Chung; T. Chen, "Dissecting"; and, most recently, Cheung).

The historical constraints against which Biggers worked to advance what he considered a positive version of Chinese Americanism were formidable. They included the intensification of long-standing exclusion laws prohibiting Chinese immigration and naturalization, culminating in the passage of the Johnson-Reed Act of 1924;[5] the perpetuation of endemic anti-Chinese stereotypes through new mass media such as cinema, radio, and the phonograph;[6] and increasing racist hysteria marked by the resurgence of the Ku Klux Klan and the new respectability of eugenicist or putatively scientific racism (Roediger 59–60, 139–56). Against these odds, Biggers created what is arguably the first nonwhite popular detective hero in literary history.[7] The question of course is whether in doing so he compromised the personal dignity and racial integrity of his Chinese American sleuth to the point where the literary equivalent of cosmetic surgery on a racist stereotype began to resemble the construction of a grotesque Frankenstein's monster out of the stereotype's dismembered bits and pieces.

White academic critics generally agree with their Asian American colleagues that Chan is a humiliating racialist, if not racist, caricature.[8] Nonacademics, however, and especially writers on cinema are less certain.[9] Jon Breen, a detective writer, has found the controversy over Chan not just disconcerting but offensive. In 2003, he criticized Fox Movie Channel for "knuckl[ing] under" to demands from the National Asian American Telecommunications Association and the National Asian Pacific American Legal Consortium that it cancel a proposed series of new Charlie Chan adventures (26). Acknowledging that members of a majority group like him ("I am a straight

white male," he confessed) may find it difficult to "understand the sensitivities of ethnic minorities or other groups who feel repressed or devalued," he nonetheless went on to assert that, despite his best efforts "to comprehend the animus toward Charlie Chan," he had "never found a reasoned explanation" (27).

Breen's attention to formal detail in his defense of the book and movie versions of Charlie Chan is useful and necessary. As in similar reassessments by Sandra M. Hawley and by Sue Fawn Chung, Breen corrects several decontextualized misreadings of both text and film. But his search for a "reasoned explanation" of the anti-Chan animus among Asian Americans does not extend very far into the arenas of genre, reception, or medium—which is to say, he is not interested in how, despite a writer's or filmmaker's or actor's best (or worst) intentions, the cultural work that books and movies do can be shaped differently by different audiences' expectations of the genre or medium through which these products are conveyed.

In general, Charlie Chan's defenders focus on authorial good intentions as conveyed by formal effects, while his Asian American detractors focus on the deleterious impact of his reception by the larger white as well as nonwhite population, especially on-screen. Neither group addresses genre, the historical bridge between intention and reception. Genre can help explain how representations of race intended for consumption within one "horizon of expectation" (Jauss xv, 22–23, 88–89) can take on unexpected, often contradictory meanings when that horizon disappears. Genre can also help us better understand the balance of gain and loss that results when an author like Biggers pours old wine into new generic wineskins, and vice versa.

Genre, Race, and Region

One of the most important determinants of a text's historical context is the genre to which it belongs, that literary type it is intended by its author and taken by its original readers to exemplify. As Ralph Cohen has shown, genre and reception are reciprocal and historically processual. They arise at specific moments to satisfy specific needs and expectations, whether authorial or readerly or critical (and we may as well add mercantile). In the debate over Charlie Chan, the expectations raised by Biggers's generic choices have disappeared from view. "We often feel the practical and theoretical need to deny the constitutive power of genre in literary explanation," writes Adena Rosmarin. "The critic may explain a text as if its writing had proceeded without generic constraints" (8), but genre is always operative, and leaves its traces. Like the "schema" that in E. H. Gombrich's analysis of the visual arts mediates between an "original" object in the world and a "purpose" that the artist directs toward his or her audience, genre "has tremendous and finally ineradicable constitutive power," says Rosmarin, and "even the most 'realistic' art remains 'wedded to types'" (12).

This statement is as true of racial as of literary types, and there is no denying that, on his first appearance in *The House without a Key*, Charlie Chan bristles with the racialist tags that were de rigueur in the popular genres of his place and time, mingled with other dubious features:

> He was very fat indeed, yet he walked with the light dainty step of a woman. His cheeks were as chubby as a baby's, his skin ivory tinted, his black hair close-cropped, his amber eyes slanting. As he passed Miss Minerva he bowed with a courtesy encountered all too rarely in a work-a-day world, then moved on after [Captain] Hallet. (37)

Overweight, infantile, effeminate, and excessively courteous, with slanting eyes and ivory-tinted skin—all that are missing are the flowery, aphoristic rhetoric and maladroit English of the stereotypical "Oriental," and these surface on Chan's very next entrance (40).

However, the literary typology of the detective genre, a schema of representation that white, middle-class readers of the *Saturday Evening Post* knew well, is pushing hard against that of race (and gender) almost from the outset.[10] It begins its work with this, our first glimpse of Chan, conveyed from the point of view of Miss Minerva Winterslip, a proper, prejudiced Bostonian vacationing in Honolulu. Biggers takes care to establish this perspective in the first sentence of the paragraph describing Chan: "As they went out, the third man stepped farther into the room, and Miss Minerva gave a little gasp of astonishment as she looked at him." After noting every detail of Chan's physique, she turns to her cousin, Amos, a *kamaʻaina*, or longtime resident of the islands, and sputters, "That man—why he—."

> "Charlie Chan," Amos explained. "I'm glad they brought him. He's the best detective on the force."
>
> "But—he's Chinese!"
>
> "Of course." (*House* 37)

Biggers accentuates Chan's unprepossessing, racialized appearance in the eyes of Minerva Winterslip only to neutralize it with Amos's insider endorsement. This move is typical in the genre of classical detection.[11] Agatha Christie's *The Body in the Library* (1941), for example, performs the same maneuver with its spinster sleuth, Miss Jane Marple, when Marple's nemesis, Inspector Slack, gets wind of her involvement in the case: "[S]he'll be out of her depth here," an irritated Slack tells his superior, Colonel Melchett (14). Later, Sir Henry Clithering, a former head of CID who has worked on cases with Marple, gives his authoritative verdict: "[T]here sits an old lady with a sweet, placid spinsterish face and a mind that has plumbed the depths of human iniquity. . . . [W]here crime is concerned, she's the goods" (101).

In Rosmarin's terms, the schema of Chan's race is invoked by Biggers's deployment of stereotypical markers but then overwritten by that of detection, although it would be more accurate to say, as will soon become clear, that the schema of race is invoked precisely in order to be overwritten by that of detection. But it was not just by manipulating the generic expectations raised by classical detective fiction that Biggers hoped to transmute Chan's unpromising appearance and manner into what readers would consider twenty-four-carat substance; it was also by challenging the assumptions underlying the emergence of a newly racialized, urban American regionalism. In short, Biggers invigorated his exploitation of the generic schema of detection by overturning that of place.

Regionalism was one of the most influential generic forces at work in America by the end of the nineteenth century. Coupled with a craze for dialect literature (Jones 1–3, 30, 164–66, 210–11) and ethnic and racial minstrelsy (R. Lee 32–43), the regionalist vogue enabled America's dominant classes, newly empowered by the rise of industrialism, to manage the threat posed to their sense of national identity by industrialization and immigration (Brodhead 125–36). In the face of postbellum developments such as mass advertising and production, railroad distribution networks, and metropolitan growth, which were pushing the nation toward homogenization and corporatism, regionalism reaffirmed the "natural," preindustrial traits of a geographically diverse national character on which America's identity was supposedly founded. At the same time, this regionalist reaffirmation promised to consolidate a largely Anglo-American hereditary identity threatened with dilution, or "pollution," by waves of immigrants from southern and eastern Europe as well as from Asia who were seeking the new jobs created by America's industrial machine.[12] As Richard Brodhead observes, the elegiac tone of regional writing, reinforced by dialect, had "the habit while purporting to grasp an alien cultural system of covertly lifting it out of history,

constituting it as a self-contained form belonging to the past rather than an interactive force still adapting to the present" (121).

While racialized characters appeared throughout regional fiction—Chinese miners and cooks, for instance, in stories of the Old West, African American sharecroppers in stories of the South—it was not until metropolitan and immigration growth reached a combined critical mass that regionalism began making inroads into the city, not only in the industrialized North but also in the industrializing South, transforming immigrant and African American ghettos into the equivalent of geographically defined cultural regions. According to Brodhead, the process began with Abraham Cahan's *Yekl: A Tale of the New York Ghetto* (1898), set in New York's Jewish Lower East Side (117). But it could be argued that the tales set in the Chinese ghetto of San Francisco following the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 mark the first move toward an urban, ethnic-American regional literature, lifting this particular "alien cultural system" out of history while denying its "interactive force" in the present.

The Exclusion Act gave legal sanction to a process of discrimination and persecution that, for more than a decade, had been driving Chinese laborers throughout the West into urban bachelor enclaves along the Pacific coast, which soon came to be known as Chinatowns.[13] William Wu identifies two stages in the literary response to this process (78–79, 128). In the first, roughly from 1882 to 1908, a modicum of realism tempered the blatant racism of writers like Frank Norris and Jack London. The second stage began after the 1906 San Francisco earthquake leveled the Chinese district, leading to the reconstruction of Chinatown as what amounted to a modern tourist attraction under the auspices of the merchant-dominated Six Companies. In this period, from 1908 to the late 1920s, Wu detects a taste among white writers for sensationalistic images of Chinese secrecy, cunning, and depravity, fed by nostalgia for a Chinatown that existed nowhere but in white imaginations. During this phase of Chinatown writing, the white author Hugh Wiley published *Jade* (1921), a collection of horror stories set in San Francisco's Chinatown, as well as tales featuring the African American confidence man Vitus Marsden ("The Wildcat") and his Frisco associates, while Octavus Roy Cohen began his Florian Slappey series, set in the "Darktown" of Birmingham, Alabama, and in New York City's Harlem.

With one exception, the new race-based regionalism was not confined to writings by whites. In fact, as Brodhead points out, regionalism originally provided access to the literary marketplace for citizens typically excluded from the life of American letters by their regional—usually rural—upbringing (116–17). The new mass media offered still-wider access to the next generation of urban regional writers, as attested by the rise of black "race" genres in phonography and film during the 1920s (see, e.g., Cripps), a trend abetted by the northern urban black migration fueling the New Negro movement and the Harlem Renaissance. The only marginalized ethnic or racial group almost entirely excluded from the benefits of this new urban regionalism were Chinese Americans. Few of Chinatown's residents in 1925 had the requisite command of English or familiarity with an American readership to undertake the task, and few upper-class Chinese living outside the ghetto, despite their English fluency, had any interest in their working-class compatriots' regional experience.[14] Indeed, the writing of fiction was traditionally considered vulgar by these "cultured Chinese" (Yin 77). This situation left the genre of Chinatown regionalism largely in the hands of white racists. In response, Biggers made Charlie Chan a resident of a dramatically different American landscape, both geographically and culturally: Hawai'i.

Brodhead notes that the rise of regionalism both fed and was in turn fed by a boom

in middle-class vacation tourism at the turn of the century, and Biggers, who liked to set his novels in tourist locales such as the Adirondacks (*Seven Keys to Baldpate*) and Florida (*Love Insurance*), was perfectly positioned to take advantage of this new literary-recreational symbiosis. In 1920 he visited Honolulu and was enchanted by its egalitarian "aloha" spirit. While much of that spirit was manufactured for purposes of promoting tourism (Farrell) and ugly incidents of racist violence still occurred (Stannard), there was no denying the reality of Hawaiian exceptionalism with respect to its Asian immigrant population. Exclusion legislation banning Chinese wives from immigrating to join their husbands, which had had a genocidal impact on mainland family life since 1882, did not begin to affect Hawai'i until 1900, following formal annexation and several decades of female immigration. As a result, the growth of Chinese American families and their economic, political, and social integration were well advanced by the time of Biggers's initial visit.[15] Honolulu's Chinatown, destroyed by fire in 1900, survived as an ethnic enclave, but some forty percent of its former residents had resettled in racially mixed neighborhoods (Carter 16; Mohr 193). These included Punchbowl Hill, Charlie Chan's neighborhood. The career of the Honolulu police detective Chang Apana, often taken to be the real-life original of Chan, not to mention those of Apana's fellow Asian American police officers, also attests to the relatively advanced integration of the races in Hawaiian society—if never to the point of perfect equality, then well beyond any degree achieved stateside.[16]

By choosing Honolulu as his inaugural mise-en-scène, Biggers decisively rejected Chinatown regionalism as a generic context for the debut of his Chinese American detective, replacing the "architectural uncanny" (Teng 55) of its dark alleys, tunnels, and opium dens with sunshine, fresh air, and broad, sandy beaches. In the process he invoked another regional genre dating from the early nineteenth century: the South Seas tale. As depicted by Herman Melville's *Typee* (1846) and *Omoo* (1847), James Jarves's *Kiana* (1857), and the later Pacific stories of Jack London, the South Seas represented to the Anglo-American imagination a pastoral, prelapsarian haven from the restraints of Western class and race prejudice, a tolerant Erewhon where birth did not count and the races could coexist, and even intermix, peacefully. In *The House without a Key*, Biggers adopts a narrative tone similar to that of Melville's "gentleman beachcomber" (Herbert 155, 181), whose tolerant attitudes are shared by the murder victim, Dan Winterslip, a former Pacific sea trader long estranged from his puritanical Boston relatives. Much of the opening chapter, entitled "Kona Weather," dwells on Honolulu's "semi-barbaric beauty" (1), and the Waikiki beach house where Winterslip's body is found is "without a key" because the islanders are so trusting. Winterslip anticipates the "Golden Man" of James Michener's *Hawaii* (1959), who "embodies the idea of a racial paradise" based on "Hawaii's 'cross-fertilization' of cultures" (Sumida 82–83).[17] His Honolulu is a utopian prototype of assimilationist multiculturalism, which readers can glimpse as they ride the morning trolley from Waikiki to Honolulu with his nephew, John Quincey Winterslip, watching as "Japanese, Chinese, Hawaiians, Portuguese, Philippinos [sic], Koreans, all colors and all creeds" climb aboard (57). Here Biggers offers a modest symbol of what the United States could become once rid of Exclusion: a land of opportunity open to people of every race and nation. It is no accident that the races and nations are all on their way to work.

Biggers's remapping of Chinatown regionalism onto the cultural grid of urban Honolulu went hand in hand with his exploitation of the traditional detective formula in an attempt to undermine prevailing Chinese American stereotypes. To understand this process of mutual reinforcement, we must

examine more closely how the detective formula evolved historically and how it works to the present day.

Detection, Authority, and the Rule of Rule Subversion

In detective fiction, at least since the appearance of Sherlock Holmes, genre and reception have been more intensely reciprocal than in related or overlapping popular genres like spy, mystery, and crime, not to mention race and regional genres. Never was this truer than in the period between the two world wars known as the Golden Age of classical detection.[18] During this time, detective fiction became so formulaic that by the latter half of the 1920s, just as Biggers's Charlie Chan was catching on, writers and fans began quarreling over generic correctness. Popular detective writers like Dorothy Sayers, Willard Huntington Wright, and Monsignor Ronald Knox even formulated lists of "rules" that were supposed to govern the "game" of fictional detection. Certain characteristics of the genre became all but set in stone at this time, and fans came to depend on them with a nearly religious faith.

One of the most important formulaic elements of classical detection was the absolute authority, moral if not always legal, accorded the detective hero. As Heta Pyrhönen observes, the classical detective is the intellectual and moral center of his or her world, "the one declaring judgment and explaining the solution to the crime" (165). Next in importance among the genre's formulaic features was the puzzle element, by which the inductive abilities of the reader were to be challenged in competition with those of the detective. The cognitive dynamics set in motion by the puzzle element involved a degree of internal contradiction that, in turn, had important consequences for classical detection's depiction of race and for Biggers's depiction of his Chinese American detective hero in particular.

Racialism and even outright racism were endemic to detective fiction in the 1920s, as to most other popular genres of the day. Even the works of well-educated authors like Sayers were blemished by the casual use of epithets like "dago" and "nigger" (see, e.g., Sayers 100–01, 112), and Knox made the fifth commandment of his "Detective Story Decalogue" the generic equivalent of legal Exclusion: "No Chinaman must figure in the story" (195). So ubiquitous and unremarkable was racism that the advertising department of the *Saturday Evening Post* seeded the pages of its so-called race fiction with ads exploiting corresponding stereotypes. Its 8 January 1927 issue, for instance, included an ad for Fisk Tires (motto: "Time to Re-tire") opposite page 186 of Cohen's Florian Slappey story "Mate in America," with two young black crapshooters about to be ambushed by a white cop (see the next p.).

Detective fiction was generically susceptible to this kind of racism because its puzzle element, while inciting the reader to make inferences from concrete evidence or clues, also required the use of generalizations in order to make sense of these clues. To identify the brand of cigar from which ash of a particular color and texture came, for instance, one had to recognize the common traits of different types of cigar ash. This process was applied to criminal suspects as well as to clues. Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes stories, for instance, feature virtuoso set pieces in which, from the cut of someone's mustache or his gait, Holmes can determine his class or profession. As for race, religion, and gender, in the first three Holmes stories alone we encounter stereotypical Mormons, "savages," Hindus, and women. In fact, Holmes's misogyny proves his undoing in "A Scandal in Bohemia," where it leads him to underestimate his female nemesis, Irene Adler.

The Adler case demonstrates one of the most important features working against an invariable reliance on stereotyping in works of fictional detection, something that


Time to Re-tire
Get a
FISK

Kathleen Belin Owen calls "rule subversion" (78). Rule subversion enhances the challenge of the puzzle element by occasionally defeating the reader's formulaic expectations: having reached the point of cliché, for instance, the formulaic assumption that "the butler did it" eventually becomes ripe for subversion, until the subversion itself outlives its usefulness, at which point, of course, the butler does it. Literary detection seems to incite in its readers generic expectations that paradoxically include the possibility of their own disappointment, a self-contradictory impulse largely foreign to other forms of popular literature. Historically, one of the most important of these expectations concerns the figure of the detective: his looks, class, race, nation, and whether or not he is a he at all.

Almost from the start, the fictional detective was distinguished by his eccentricity. This is apparent, as John Cawelti notes, in the effete aestheticism and schizoid personality of Edgar Allan Poe's prototypical C. Auguste Dupin, who first appeared in "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" in 1841 (93). Dupin's brand of eccentricity, in turn, was intended to confound his readers' generic expectations, for the typical hero of the crime narrative as it had evolved to this point conformed instead to the personality of Dupin's professional rival in "Murders," the energetic but doggedly methodical Prefect G———. G——— was patterned on a famous real-life French detective of lower-class origins, Eugene-François Vidocq, former convict and recently retired chief of the Paris Sûreté, the first official police detective bureau.

Poe's challenge to detective types became typical of the genre of detection during the next half century. Even the great Sherlock Holmes was not without his unprofessional and potentially disabling eccentricities—not to say vices—such as cocaine addiction. The astounding popularity achieved by Holmes in the early 1890s, which set in motion the modern consolidation of classical detection as a distinct popular genre, spurred many of Doyle's competitors to exploit this newly successful detective type. Some of their attempts, like Jacques Futrelle's S. F. X. van Dusen ("The Thinking Machine") and R. Austin Freeman's Dr. John Thorndyke, were little more than brainier knockoffs of the great "calculating machine" of 221b Baker Street (Doyle, *Sign* 117). Others, however, were conceived as anti-Holmes novelties, with one or more features distinctly at odds with Doyle's keen-eyed, sinewy, and slightly Bohemian sleuth. These departures from the Holmes template included Arthur Morrison's Everyman sleuth Martin Hewitt, Ernest Bramah's Max Carrados ("The Blind Detective"), Melville Davisson Post's Virginian backwoodsman Uncle Abner, and the amateur painter and investigator Philip Trent of E. C. Bentley's *Trent's Last Case* (1913), a story designed to show how easily even the most intelligent detective can go wrong. Nor was the detective's gender any longer a foregone conclusion. While female detectives had made their appearance as early as 1864, their numbers multiplied dramatically in response to the success of the woman-hating Holmes (see Slung; Klein, *Woman Detective*; and Craig and Cadogan).

Clearly, rule subversion was pushing back barriers of class, disability, region, and gender in portrayals of the detective hero well before classical detection's Golden Age. Just as clearly, these apparently subversive tendencies were (and still are) driven in large part by the public's demand for novelty, and there remained, in the interwar period, territories forbidding entry, among them positive portrayals of miscegenation or socialism. In any case, until the appearance of Charlie Chan in 1925, only one barrier, besides sexual preference, remained unassailed by white writers of detective fiction: race.

Biggers began his challenge to Asian American stereotypes by taking specific aim at the most notorious embodiment of the "Oriental" in the history of popular literature

and film, the espionage writer Sax Rohmer's Fu Manchu ("Charlie Chan"). A "sinister genius of the Yellow movement" (Rohmer 22), according to his fictional antagonist, the British secret agent Nayland Smith, Fu Manchu was evil personified, "the incarnate essence of Eastern subtlety, with the most stupendous genius that the modern Orient has produced" (32) and "all the cruel cunning of an entire Eastern race, accumulated in one giant intellect" (15). Biggers targeted the Fu Manchu stereotype by creating an exact physical and psychological antitype: in contrast to his treacherous predecessor's "tall, lean and feline" physique (15), Chan is fat; in place of violence and hatred toward the white race, Chan offers patience, politeness, and helpfulness; for fluent, articulate English, the broken grammar of a first-generation immigrant; and for sinister, oriental cunning, Confucian-sounding wisdom and the "psychic" abilities of the "Chinese people" (*House* 60).

According to Wu, however, Charlie Chan is not so much an antitype of Fu Manchu as the overcompensatory flip side of the same racist coin, "with Fu Manchu embodying yellow power and Charlie Chan supporting white supremacy" (164). Chan's "investigative technique mirrors his appearance, with totally submissive, apologetic speech and manners" (175) that make him "the model minority American, who is willing to be put through certain paces by white Americans in order to prove himself to them" (181). Thus "domesticated and trained" (182), he is ready to do the work of legitimizing white racism.

Wu's dispassionate and informed approach to some of the most humiliating Asian stereotypes perpetuated by white authors vanishes when he turns to Charlie Chan, in part, I suspect, because he does not recognize the generic markers of Hawaiian pastoralism and rule subversion with which Biggers invested his classical detective hero. Describing Chan's first appearance in *House without a Key*, for instance, Wu ignores Biggers's characterization of *malahinis* (newcomers) like Minerva Winterslip as ignorant outsiders requiring reeducation in the tolerant multiculturalism of Honolulu society. He is particularly incensed by Chan's "submissive" and "apologetic" rejoinder to Miss Winterslip's unmistakable repugnance: "Humbly asking pardon to mention it. I detect in your eyes slight flame of hostility. Quench it, if you will be so kind. Friendly cooperation are essential between us" (41). "Charlie Chan is initially faced with direct racism, to which he responds politely," says Wu. "He does his job and is rewarded with acceptance—bestowed by a Bostonian woman of Puritan stock upon a Chinese American man, a fact that establishes in whose hands the power of acceptance lies" (176).

But facts are never simply facts in fiction. They always serve a purpose, and that purpose is always influenced by genre. Not only does Wu leave out Amos Winterslip's *kama'aina* endorsement of Chan's superlative abilities, he also misses its reiteration four pages further on (41) and a later scene where Miss Winterslip is forced to eat her unspoken words (69). As for winning approval and acceptance, even before this point the newcomer John Quincey Winterslip, who initially shared his aunt's racial bias, has "asked for the privilege of working with Chan" and jumps at an "opportunity to win *his* respect" (emphasis mine) by contributing to the investigation (63). Similarly, Chan's superior officer, Captain Hallet, expresses nothing but confidence in his subordinate and sheer admiration when Chan arrives at the solution (130).

All these endorsements come from *haoles* ("whites"), undeniably, but readers of the *Post* were unlikely to have been swayed by the opinions of nonwhites, and Biggers was aiming to change white minds, not those of Chinese Americans. That Asian Americans, and Chinese Americans in particular, tend to see such European American praise as a species of racist love is no cause for wonder. Given the history of discrimination and violence

directed against Asian Americans by whites, a Chinese American character occupying a position of authority who does not use that authority to retaliate against his white detractors must, as a matter of course, seem unworthy of respect. Accordingly, Wu expresses contempt for Chan's passivity (178) in encounters with racist police officials like Captain Bliss and Sheriff Cox in *The Chinese Parrot* (224–25) or Captain Flannery in *Behind That Curtain* (413, 419–23), who toss off the crudest stereotypes of "tong wars" and "Chinks" without receiving a direct rejoinder, as though Chan needed to prove himself to these white officers.

But aside from the fact that Chan is out of his jurisdiction in Barstow and San Francisco, overt rejoinders would have been generically out of place. Literary detection is replete with similarly skeptical, even insulting, foils to the detective hero, who are typically spared any direct challenge: Dupin must suffer his Prefect G———, Holmes his Lestrade and Athelney Jones, Miss Marple her Inspector Slack, and Chan his equally misnamed Captain Bliss, at least until the solution to the crime proves them right. Deeds speak louder than words in classical detective fiction. Like the rule-subversive assignation of superficially unflattering or demeaning traits, the figure of the contemptuous rival arose in the service of enhancing, not diminishing, the moral authority of the detective figure.

Biggers's generic inversions of white America's stereotypical expectations appear throughout the Charlie Chan series. Here is an exchange from the aptly titled *The Chinese Parrot*, in which Chan, against his visceral disinclinations, goes undercover as a pidgin-speaking Chinese houseboy named Ah Kim. In response to the belligerent racism of Bliss, who wants to arrest him for murder, Chan resorts to a verbal tactic closely resembling African American "signifyin'," in which aggressive self-stereotyping ironically targets the oppressor "through parody" (Gates 94). Two knowledgeable white allies of Chan's look on with dawning appreciation, again providing readers with an evaluative point of view as Chan reminds Bliss that he has no grounds for an arrest, while pretending to agree that he does:

> Bliss's face hardened. . . . "Better tell me the whole story now. It'll go a lot easier with you if you do."
>
> "What stoahy, Boss?"
>
> "How you sneaked out and put a knife in Louie last night."
>
> "Maybe you catch 'um knife, hey, boss?"
>
> "Never mind about that!"
>
> "Poah old Ah Kim's fingah plints on knife, hey, boss?"
>
> "Oh, shut up," said Bliss.
>
> "Maybe you takee look-see, find velvet slippah plints in sand, hey, boss?" Bliss glared at him in silence. "What I tell you—you clazy cop, hey, boss?"
>
> Holley and Eden looked at each other with keen enjoyment. (224–25)

Readers of the *Post* would have had little difficulty identifying the winner of this confrontation. Using his disguise, Chan will eventually entrap the real criminal and prevent his escape by shooting a pistol out of his hand—hardly effeminate behavior.

Charlie Chan's unpromising, often comic, appearance and demeanor fit the pattern of nearly every classical detective narrative of the interwar years. G. K. Chesterton's Father Brown is weak, pale, and as timid as a church mouse, but having heard thousands of confessions as a priest, he understands the nature of sin, and that wisdom invariably enables him to get his man or woman. Agatha Christie's Hercule Poirot is "in name and plump fussy person clearly the reverse of the masculine and English Holmes," notes Stephen Knight, and "passive but clever" (90)—not unlike Chan. According to the narrator of *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, the egg-headed, toupee-topped, mustachioed Poirot resembles "a retired hairdresser" (19–21). Like Chan, Poirot (who is Belgian) speaks comically frac-

tured English but studded with French rather than Cantonese solecisms: "I demand of you a thousand pardons, monsieur. I am without defense. For some months now I cultivate the marrows. This morning suddenly I enrage myself with these marrows. . . . I seize the biggest. I hurl him over the wall . . ." (20).

Fat, out-of-shape detective figures of the Chan type include Sherlock Holmes's "smarter" brother Mycroft, Rex Stout's Nero Wolfe, and Dashiell Hammett's Continental Op. But Biggers was probably directly inspired by his fellow *Post* contributor Octavus Roy Cohen. Cohen's soft-hearted Jim Hanvey, a southern white insurance investigator, made his inauspicious debut in 1922 wearing loud, cheap clothes and offering a "limp and clammy" handshake to the two slick investigators, Barton and Jamieson, who seek his help in a bank embezzlement case. Like Chan and Poirot, Hanvey speaks ungrammatical English (26), and he is even fatter than Chan: "[A]bove a thick, red neck rose the head—huge, fat, shapeless. Three floppy chins, an apoplectic expression, a wide, loose-lipped mouth. And eyes . . . large eyes, round like a baby's," "fish-like," and blinking "like an ocular yawn" (24–25). In marked contrast to Hanvey, Barton and Jamieson appear "efficient, dynamic, with blazing eyes and a competent manner" (25). Nonetheless, we soon witness them "hanging worshipfully upon Hanvey's words" (27).

Detractors of Charlie Chan often evaluate him by the hard-boiled standards of tough detective writers like Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler and, not surprisingly, find him lacking. "Of the many detectives in serious crime fiction," writes Wu, "[n]ot one is less hard-boiled or less imposing a figure than Charlie Chan" (175). In *Gunga Din Highway*, Chin points to the opportunities that Biggers missed in the real-life Chang Apana, who started out as a plantation cowboy and hostler and made a name for himself on the Honolulu police force by packing an intimidating relic of his former life, a bullwhip (still on exhibit at the official museum of the Honolulu Police Department).[19] "The real Charlie Chan did that," says one of Chin's characters, regarding Apana's exploits. "He charged into a whorehouse and saved the working girls from a gang of loonies gone berserk with his bullwhip and six-gun. Four men shot dead. One with his own gun. Chang was shot in the belly" (41).

Undeniably, a smart writer could have made Apana into a magnificent tough-guy detective. But not in 1925.

Hard-boiled detection did not emerge as a distinct, middle-class subgenre until the late 1920s, and tough Asian American detectives, such as Raoul Whitfield's Filipino sleuth Jo Gar and Hugh Wiley's Federal Agent James Lee Wong, did not appear until the next decade. *Black Mask*, the premiere venue of hard-boiled writing up to World War II, was founded only in 1920 and did not become a force for standardizing the tough-guy detective persona until 1926, when Joseph T. Shaw took over as editor. Hammett himself, largely unknown outside the readership of the magazine, had been contributing to *Black Mask* only since 1923, barely two years before Chan's debut. There was, for all practical purposes, no tough-guy alternative to classical literary detection at that time, and certainly none with as large and well-defined an audience demographic. To borrow a simile from Chandler, Chang Apana toting his bullwhip would have been as out of place in the company of Brown, Poirot, and Marple "as a tarantula on a slice of angel food" (767).

Nor would he have been welcome in the pages of *Black Mask*, where "Orientals," especially armed with whips and guns, generally assumed the role of thug, gangster, or tong overlord, as in Hammett's "Dead Yellow Women" (1925). Predisposed to admire the violent masculinity of such Chinese American bad guys, Wu strains to exonerate Hammett from the taint of racism he finds in Biggers, but in the end he seems to acknowledge the slipperiness of his position. "If yet another

Asian villain in the United States has to appear in American fiction," he says, "at least this kind of role offers the realistic human traits so often lacking before 1940" (186). Biggers's response would have been, Why does yet another Asian villain have to appear at all? The trail of tolerance opening the way for tough Asian American gumshoes like Gar and Wong had been blazed for them by Earl Derr Biggers, not by Hammett and his cohorts.

The Apprentice

It is unlikely that attention to genre and reception will settle the dispute between Chan's detractors and defenders anytime soon, but it can help us understand more precisely how such disputes arise in the first place, by highlighting the genre-specific mechanisms through which historical and cultural forces shape literary representation. Some of these forces are mythopoeic. According to Xiaohuang Yin, Chan's "keen intelligence and the ability to outwit and ridicule dull-minded white policemen" align him with "other popular American folk heroes" (138). In a footnote Yin adds that his "African American students and colleagues" enjoy "the Charlie Chan films because they are pleased to see how a Chinese, albeit played by a Caucasian, fools and ridicules white police officers on screen" (154n69).

Yin does not report the reaction of his Asian American students, but I suspect they are not as enthusiastic as their black counterparts. While Twentieth Century–Fox incorporated many of the rule-subversive devices first deployed by Biggers, there is no denying that the cinematic Chan popularized in the 1930s by Warner Oland, first of the three white actors to play the detective on-screen, is a diminished figure, increasingly deracinated from his native Hawaiian—indeed, his specifically American—context and transplanted to exotic locations like Paris, Egypt, and Rio, where he appears even more exotic himself. Twentieth Century–Fox's deliberate exaggeration of Chan's aphoristic tendencies contributed to his derealization, while its insistence on yellow-face casting visually conveyed the message that Asian Americans could not be entrusted with what had become a self-congratulatory icon of white America's still largely unrealized claims of racial tolerance—the very incarnation of Chin's "racist love."

It can be argued that self-congratulation had, at least in part, motivated white acceptance of the Chan novels from the start. Nonviolent reform rarely occurs unless those in power are encouraged to feel virtuous for ceding it. In any case, Biggers did what he could with what he had: an inherent understanding of the appeal of the underdog and the trickster in "popular American culture" (Yin 138) and an acquired knowledge of America's regional genres and the generic possibilities of classical detective fiction, the most widely read white literature of his day. He perfected this knowledge through deliberate practice.

Most of Biggers's pre-Chan work, like that of Damon Runyon, incorporates a mildly comic criminal plot, but not until 1916 did he try his hand at a formal detective story, *The Agony Column*. Five years later, soon after his visit to Hawai'i, he published *Fifty Candles*, which is set in the wealthy San Francisco neighborhood of Russian Hill, just above Chinatown. Unlike his Charlie Chan books, where the villains are always white, *Fifty Candles* features a Chinese culprit. After the body of the millionaire Henry Drew is discovered in his dining room and the usual parade of clues and witnesses has filed past, it turns out that Drew's Chinese manservant, Hung Ching-chun, whose given name means "completely loyal" (91), has murdered his employer. At first glance, this outcome simply affirms Chinatown regionalism's familiar stereotype of oriental cunning and treachery, particularly in the light of Drew's having once saved "completely loyal" Hung's life (118). But if as a rule, at least this far in the development

of detective fiction, a Chinese "butler" could always be counted on to have "done it," Biggers subverts the rule with a plot twist that, like jujitsu, allows him to use white racism's massive cultural and generic momentum to throw prejudiced readers off balance.

Fifty Candles has gone unnoticed in the Chan debate, which is not surprising, since even Biggers's most knowledgeable biographer, Barbara Gregorich, does not mention it.[20] It is, however, a significant precursor to the works for which Biggers is best known. It was inspired by a tragic event in the history of China's struggle to overthrow the Manchu dynasty and establish a democratic government, the failure of the One Hundred Day Reform of 1898, when students and intellectuals tried to convert the young Qing emperor, a virtual prisoner of the dowager empress, to the cause of democracy. While the bulk of the story takes place in 1918 San Francisco, Biggers begins in Honolulu, with an account by the narrator, young Winthrop, of the 1898 deportation trial of a certain Chang See, who has just returned from China as a fugitive of the reform attempt. Although he grew up in China, Chang See claims United States citizenship on the basis of his birth in Hawai'i in 1868. Lacking his birth certificate, however, he faces deportation as an illegal immigrant and summary execution on arriving back in China.

Biggers did his homework to supply the detail of Chang See's case, which resembles the real-life situation of the reformist intellectual Yung Wing. Yung was allowed to stay in the United States, where he became an organizer for Chinese American rights (Yung 239–42; Cheung 93). Chang is not so fortunate. Defended by the white lawyer Harry Childs, an incompetent drunk, he is soon enmeshed in a court system run by "masters of indirection, of saying one thing and meaning another, of arriving at their goal by way of a devious, irrelevant maze"—in short, adds Winthrop facetiously, legal officials conforming to American stereotypes of the Chinese (10). Leaving the courthouse after being sentenced to deportation and certain death, Chang encounters Drew and his son, then in Honolulu on business. With the connivance of Childs, Drew hires Chang as his personal servant, gives him an alias, and smuggles him out of Hawai'i, swearing him to absolute loyalty in return. Chang goes along, but on one condition: that after twenty years—that is, in 1918—he will be released. Only after his arrest for Drew's murder do we learn that Hung Ching-chun is really Chang See.

Biggers's title refers to Drew's purchase of fifty candles, at Post and Grant Streets, just two blocks from Chinatown (42), to celebrate what turns out to be Chang's fiftieth birthday, exactly twenty years since he agreed to Drew's terms. Drew refuses to free Chang, however, and threatens to turn him over to the immigration authorities unless he continues in abject servitude. Chang, a victim not only of legal Exclusion but now also of white treachery, has no choice but to kill his employer in order to obtain his freedom. Biggers heightens our sense of the injustice and humiliation Chang has suffered for twenty years by calling attention to his education and intelligence; his "precise perfect English" (92); the "dignity that was ever a part of him" (91), even in the face of coarse racist insults to which he could not possibly respond; and his employer's coercing him to participate in illegal activities. Worst of all, ten years previously Drew had prevented Chang's marriage to the woman Chang loved in order to keep him in service, a miniature reflection of America's legislated imposition of bachelorhood on male Chinese laborers in general. As one white character puts it, Chang has been in "slavery—there is no other word," for two decades (127). Faced with imminent arrest and trial for murder, Chang refuses to subject himself again to the humiliation and vagaries of the white man's court and takes his own life.

The ultimate crime awaiting solution in *Fifty Candles* is not the murder of Henry

Drew but the de facto enslavement of Chang See, whose craven loyalty has been coerced from the outset by the threat of deportation and death. Whatever public humiliations Chang has suffered, he is, in the end, accorded a private dignity, even nobility. His suicide is a tragic testimony to the hopeless situation of America's most oppressed class of immigrants under the law of Exclusion. The later achievements of his near namesake testify to the hope that transformations in race relations already taking place in America's mid-Pacific territory might eventually set an example for the rest of the country.

Biggers said that he conceived the character of Charlie Chan on his first visit to Hawai'i in 1920, although the resemblance between Chang and Chan seems hardly to extend beyond their names: one is a criminal, the other a detective; one speaks fluent English, the other a language that "probably never was spoken outside the pages of a book" ("Earl Derr Biggers"); the one is tall and lean, the other short and fat. But both are distinguished by their quiet intelligence, both must cope on a day-to-day basis with white racism, and both are characterized by means of the generic device of rule subversion. In this last respect especially, *Fifty Candles* represents a trial run for the Chan novels, where Biggers reinforced the rule-subversive impact of his detective antitype by substituting the interracial geography of the South Seas idyll for the racist street mazes of Chinatown regionalism.

Of course, Charlie Chan never achieved the tragic stature of Chang See. His tactical deference in the face of public insult, strategically redeemed by his brilliant investigative abilities, belongs instead to the comedy of manners, of duped masters and wily servants. But a private dignity, allied to cultural and racial integrity, was not denied him, whatever the assimilationist demands of his job. That dignity is registered (not without a residual touch of exoticism) in a brief scene from *The House without a Key* set in Chan's bungalow on Punchbowl Hill. Playing chess with his "eldest son" (Biggers's Chan never numbered his children), the detective rises "with dignity," in a long robe and trousers of silk, to welcome his *haole* visitor. "[S]uave and ingratiating but remote," Chan makes the young John Quincey Winterslip "for the first time . . . really conscious of the great gulf across which he and Chan shook hands" (115).

Notes

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1. Chin distinguishes his use of the term *Chinaman* from that of white racists, much as some African Americans do with respect to the abusive epithet *nigger* ("This" 110–11, "Confessions" 68–71).

2. See, e.g., Said (esp. 158–64) and Spivak, who still shape present-day discussions of orientalist othering.

3. See, e.g., Tompkins on *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (122–46), Davis on Lois-Ann Yanamaka and the bildungsroman, and Cheung on Yung Wing and autobiography. In the field of crime and detection, see Boeckmann on Mark Twain's *Pudd'nhead Wilson* and T. Chen ("Recasting") on Chang-Rae Lee and the spy genre.

4. On the "model minority" controversy, see Kim 59–72; Tanaki 474–82; and Li 9–17, who argues that the concept reflects a transition for Asian Americans from an alien, "object" position in white culture to that of "abject" citizen (5–8).

5. On Exclusion and its effects on Chinese American identity, see S. Chen; Tsai; J. Chen 127–207; and, for first-person accounts, Char; Nee and Bary.

6. Robert Lee's book, covering everything from minstrelsy to movies, has nothing to say, surprisingly, about Charlie Chan.

7. Soitos cites two African American claimants (31–35), but neither appears in a subsequent work of fiction. The first of these, Venus Johnson, is a minor character in Pauline Hopkins's *Hagar's Daughter* (1901–03) whose undercover work comprises less than a dozen of the novel's nearly three hundred pages. The second, Sadipe Okekenu, appears in John Edward Bruce's *The Black Sleuth* (1907–09), whose slapdash plot is mired in contradictions and abruptly broken off.

8. For negative views of Chan among European American academics, see Macdonald and Macdonald

60; M. Cohen 148–49; and Freese 10. On the distinction between racist prejudice and its morally neutral racialist underpinnings, see Appiah 13.

9. Hanke typifies opinion among white film critics (xv–xvi), while Tuska seems oblivious to the controversy (105–57).

10. On Biggers's middlebrow readership, see West; Ohmann; and Radway 127–53, 161–62.

11. On the structure and taxonomy of detective fiction, see Cawelti 80–134; Rzepka 10–31.

12. Roediger describes how European newcomers effected their transformation from nonwhite to white at the expense of immigrants of color (8–9).

13. On Exclusion's impact on Chinatowns, see Tanaki 230–69; Tchen; and A. Lee.

14. Edith Eaton, born of English and Chinese parents and publishing at the turn of the century as Sui Sin Far, constitutes the outstanding exception that proves this rule. See, e.g., Yin 85–116.

[15] On Hawaiian exceptionalism, see McKeown 23–59, 224–70; Okamura; and Tanaki 17, 170–76, 230. See also Chan 104–05.

16. On Apana and his colleagues, see Martines.

17. On the "simple" and "complex" versions of this Hawaiian idyll, see Sumida 5–6, 20–109. On Melville, see Herbert 149–91; on London, see recent essays by Furer; Slagel; and Walsh.

18. For a succinct history of Golden Age detection, see Rzepka 137–75.

19. In Chin's *Donald Duk*, Apana appears as "Sgt. Bullwhip" (120).

20. For biographical material, see also Kratz; Martines.

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