



Name in English: Chang Apana
Name in Chinese: 阿平 [鄭阿平]
Name in Pinyin: Zhèng Ahpíng
Gender: Male
Birth Year: 1864 or 1871 - 1933
Birth Place: Waipio, Oahu, Hawaii

"The Real Charlie Chan"

Profession (s): Police Detective

Education: None known

Awards: 2008, Hall of Fame, Honolulu Police Department

Contribution (s): Chang Apana (birth name - Chang Ah Ping) was born in Hawaii, various sources listing his birth year as either 1864 or 1871. His mother had also been born in Hawaii but his father had immigrated from China for a five year contract to work on the sugar plantations. When his father's contract expired the family moved to his father's native village just outside of Guangzhou when Chang was just 3 years old. However the area was still suffering from the aftereffects of the clan wars that had afflicted the area from 1855 to 1867 and famine. Chang was returned to Hawaii to live with an uncle when he was 10 and never saw China again.

In 1891, Chang was hired by the family of Samuel Gardner Wilder, an American businessman and politician in Hawaii who'd developed a close personal friendship with the Hawaiian monarchy. Chang's superlative skills with horses gave him great proficiency in using bullwhips, a weapon he used instead of a gun throughout his law enforcement career. In 1897, the Hawaiian Humane Society was formed under the auspices of Wilder's youngest daughter, Helen Kinau Wilder. Chang Apana was hired as the first investigator for the society to stop the abuse of animals mainly in Honolulu's Chinatown. He became known to native Hawaiians as "Kanaka Pung" because with his short hair not worn in the contemporary Chinese queue and wearing a cowboy hat he looked more like a Hawaiian than a Chinese. Chang blended in easily with the native Hawaiians as he both spoke and wrote in that language in addition to speaking Cantonese and the pidgin English used across Hawaii, but he never learned how to read or speak standard English.

In 1898, Hawaii was annexed by the United States and Chang Apana became the first Chinese officer in the Honolulu Police Department which was otherwise completely white or native Hawaiian. Far from being the sophisticated international tourist destination that it is today, Hawaii was a crossroads of the Pacific trade, vitally important as a safe harbor where ships could take on coal or oil for fuel. This strategic

position in the Pacific was one of the reasons why the United States had been so keen to seize the islands from the Hawaiian monarchy. Honolulu was a harbor city where the roughest characters from across the world, criminals, gamblers, roughnecks, drunks, and adventurers could all be found haunting the docks. It certainly wasn't a job for the faint hearted, and the thin and austere looking Chinese man who stood just 5'3 seemed an unlikely law enforcer.

Chang found his calling as an undercover officer working to bust opium dens and gambling rings. The frail looking Chang would climb up two and three story buildings barehanded and leap from roof to roof and then enter buildings from their upper floor windows. As Fred Kramer, a retired Captain of the Guards at Oahu Prison and Halawa Jail recalled, "Apana, though fragile in appearance, was in reality a very tough man. Once while attempting to raid a gambling game, he was hurled from a second story window, but like the proverbial cat, he landed miraculously, on his feet unhurt. Another time when arresting a dangerous Filipino suspect, he was slashed across the stomach with a knife. Again he emerged unscathed as the knife landed on a broad belt that he was wearing."

Another story told about him was that, "Once, patrolling a pier at dawn, disguised as a poor merchant—wearing a straw hat and stained clothes and carrying baskets of coconuts, tied to a bamboo shoulder pole—he raised the alarm on a shipment of contraband even while he was being run over by a horse and buggy, and breaking his legs." He became so feared by the Honolulu criminals for his two fisted ways that he once singlehandedly arrested forty gamblers and escorted them to jail by himself after his backup failed to show up. As usual he was armed only with his trusty bullwhip.

Chang survived many a beating and knifing, and was shot at often during his law enforcement career. The prominent scar over his right eye came from a Japanese man who'd unsuccessfully resisted with a sickle when Chang came to enforce the Hawaiian law that forced all lepers to be sent to the island of Molokai.

In 1924, Earl Derr Biggers was paging through a copy of the Honolulu Star-Bulletin in the New York Public Library and came upon an article, "In an obscure corner of an inside page, I found an item to the effect that a certain hapless Chinese, being too fond of opium, had been arrested by Sergeants Chang Apana and Lee Fook, of the Honolulu Police. So Sergeant Charlie Chan entered the story of *The House Without a Key*." As Biggers recalled in a 1931 interview, "Sinister and wicked Chinese were old stuff in mystery stories, but an amiable Chinese acting on the side of law and order had never been used up to that time." The first Charlie Chan novel was published in 1925 and was an immediate hit.

The Charlie Chan novels and, starting in 1928, the Hollywood films, presented a far different face for the Chinese from the evil animals portrayed in the then contemporary media and in the halls of the US Congress which in 1924 had banned all Asian immigration altogether. Nowadays Charlie Chan is seen as a racist stereotype spouting fortune cookie words of wisdom. It has to be remembered though that the rotund, supernaturally calm, intelligent, and above all absolutely trustworthy Chinese detective

who was treated as an equal by whites were seen as quite positive by much of the Chinese American community at the time. Chang Apana certainly had no objections to being known as the origin of the famous detective and by 1928 when he met Earl Derr Biggers in Hawaii was often being referred to as Chang Charlie Chan and even signed autographs as Charlie Chan. His nephew, Walter Chang, remembered going to the police station and being taken by his uncle to different movies, especially to the Charlie Chan movies which his uncle particularly enjoyed. In 1931 Chang was invited onto the set of "The Black Camel" the only one of the Charlie Chan movies filmed in Hawaii.

Detective First Grade Chang Apana was seriously injured in a car accident in 1932 and was retired after 34 years of service in the Honolulu Police Department, the longest serving veteran of the force. He was briefly employed as a watchman for the Hawaiian Trust building until he became seriously ill in 1933. His infected left leg was amputated and several police officers volunteered to donate their blood for his treatment but he passed away within a week. His funeral procession was described as one of the largest in Honolulu's history.

The Honolulu Police Department's Museum has a section entirely dedicated to Chang Apana's memory featuring mementoes and his famous bullwhip. A plaque on the wall commemorates "The Real Charlie Chan."



Chang Apana, left, with Warner Oland portraying Charlie Chan at Kailua Beach on the set of the 1931 film, "The Black Camel"

External Links:

http://www.newyorker.com/arts/critics/books/2010/08/09/100809crbo_books_lepore?currentPage=all

<http://charliechanfamily.tripod.com/id258.html>

<http://charliechanfamily.tripod.com/id98.html>

<http://www.charliechanshawaii.com/>

<http://charliechanfamily.tripod.com/id78.html>

Distinguished Asian Americans: A Biographical Dictionary, edited by Hyung-Chan Kim, Greenwood Press, 1999