



The Mr. Wong Pages

Boris Karloff, Chinese Detective

The Charlie Chan series had been going for several years, and had created a curious appetite for oriental sleuths. Chan was soon followed by Mr. Moto, who was played (in an inspired, or insane, piece of casting) by Peter Lorre. In 1938, little Monogram studios decided they wanted an oriental detective of their own. So they acquired the rights to Hugh Wiley's James Lee Wong character, then appearing in magazine serials. Since Peter Lorre was playing a Japanese detective, it might have seemed only natural for Monogram to seek out Boris Karloff for the role of Mr. Wong.



Although they were never more than simple potboilers, the series proved a commercial success for Monogram, and some of the scripts were even recycled as later Charlie Chan flicks. Karloff appeared in the first five Wong films; for the sixth and final film, Keye Luke assumed the role.

presented in chronological order

Mr WONG, DETECTIVE

(1938) dir: William Nigh; w/ Boris Karloff, Grant Withers, Maxine Jennings, Lucien Prival.

Some business tycoons who are shipping lethal gas to European armies are being slain by their own product in a series of seemingly untraceable murders. It's up to Mr. Wong to uncover the diabolical killer. Yes, Karloff is quite convincing in the role of a Chinese detective. No, Karloff doesn't actually look Chinese, but the most startling thing is seeing him with slicked down black hair. It's a typical "B" potboiler -- murky photography, small cast, short scenes, & clipped dialogue. The plot, however, is intelligent & creative, and the surprise identity of the murderer can be figured out by a careful watcher.



the MYSTERY OF Mr. WONG

(1939) dir: William Nigh; w/ Boris Karloff, Grant Withers, Dorothy Tree.

It wasn't bad enough that this rich guy cultivated an atmosphere of deceit and distrust in his own household, he had to bring home a stolen gem with a curse on it. When he turns up dead, Mr. Wong and his police pals have to sift through entirely too many suspects & motives. This is a much more polished production than the first Wong film, and Karloff's role is written with less self-conscious oriental flavor. It makes a right tight little mystery yarn, but as a whodunit, it falls short of the first flick. This one depends on information hidden from the audience, so we just have to wait for the dramatic Christie-style revelation scene. Still, it's a decent little flick.



Mr. WONG IN CHINATOWN

(1939) dir: William Nigh; w/ Boris Karloff, Marjorie Reynolds, Grant Withers.

A mysterious Chinese lady shows up at Wong's home -- and is promptly murdered with a poison dart. This draws Wong and the inspector into a double-ended scam involving Chinese warlords and crooked arms dealers. Meanwhile, Inspector Street is having troubles with his reporter



girlfriend, a hyperactive blond who easily steals the show. Not so much a murder mystery as a rather brainless little action/suspense plot, this one still manages to please. The script is lively, there's good dialogue, and the performers do their best to keep the audience entertained.

the FATAL HOUR

(1940) dir: William Nigh; w/ Boris Karloff, Marjorie Reynolds, Grant Withers.

Inspector Street's friend gets murdered while on an investigation. With Mr. Wong's help, he probes the shadowy network of waterfront smugglers. His reporter-girlfriend, Bobbi, is almost always ahead of them, however. This is a solid entry in the Mr. Wong series, even though it seems more like "A Captain Street Mystery, co-starring Mr. Wong." The tone moves a bit from straight mystery to noir crime thriller on this one, but Mr. Wong still gets to ferret out the clues that break the case. As a mystery yarn, it's not well constructed, but the budget is bigger, the script is tight, and there's a large cast of villains & victims to choose from.



DOOMED TO DIE

(1940 - aka *The Mystery of Wentworth Castle*) dir: William Nigh; w/ Boris Karloff, Marjorie Reynolds, Grant Withers.

When a shipping magnate is murdered, suspicion first falls on his rival's son -- so it's up to Mr. Wong to save the young man. This one is a distinct let-down from the previous entries in the series. The plot is nothing but an impenetrable string of red herrings, the photography is murky, and they even re-used some footage from the previous film. The cast is still on par, and it's only their performances that rescue the audience from complete boredom.



PHANTOM OF CHINATOWN

(1940) dir: Phil Rosen; w/ Keye Luke, Lotus Long, Grant Withers.

An archaeologist returns from China, only to be murdered before he can reveal the great secret he has uncovered. For the final entry in the Mr. Wong series, Karloff is replaced by Keye Luke, better known as Charlie Chan's Number One Son. This becomes what might have been intended as a



prequel, with Luke playing a young “Jimmy” Wong meeting inspector Street for the first time. Perhaps Monogram hoped to renew the series with Luke -- the production is polished and the script is quite good, with lively dialogue and a tricky jumble of suspects. But this was to be Mr. Wong’s last appearance -- at least it was one of his best.



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Icon Glossary:



Good Stinker -- These are the films where a good deal of the entertainment comes from filmmaking incompetence; fun to watch in spite of themselves.



Goopy Gore -- These films exhibit distinctly above-normal quantities of unpleasantly abused body parts.



Naughty Nudie -- Films with this flag feature frequent and/or explicit nudity (almost always female) beyond that normally found in your average T&A flick.



Butt Stompin' -- These films feature at least one superior violent fight or shootout scene that will get the testosterone pumping.



Gold Star -- These are the flicks that I felt reached above their expectations or at least pleasantly surprised me; they may not always be actually good flicks, but I did find something in them worthwhile.



Blue Max Medal of Really Goodness -- These are flicks that I not only enjoyed, but I think are actually quite good films (not always the same thing).



Lethal Cinema -- These wretched viewing experiences go beyond being merely bad to become genuine sources of pain and regret; they should be avoided by all but the most masochistic trash cinema veterans. Don't say I didn't warn you.