

What goes around, comes around

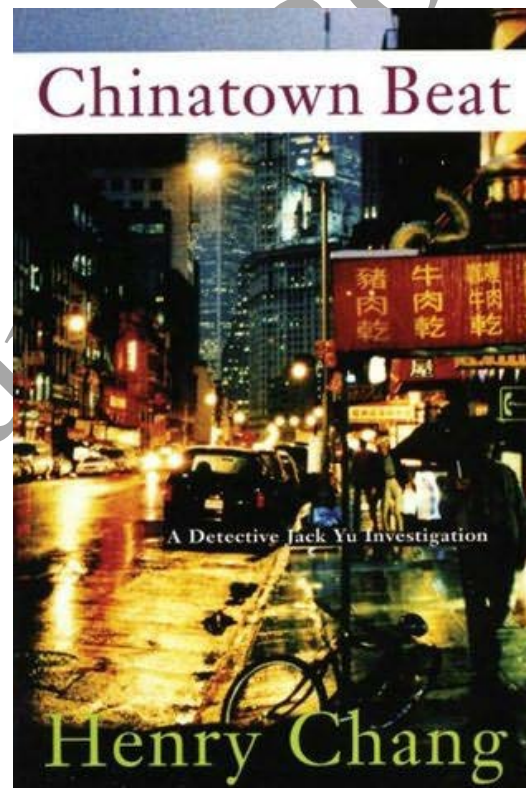
Noir returns to its roots

Suspended Sentences

by Jim Napier

Noir: the very word connotes darkness, evil, violence. Noir crime fiction arose in the 1940's as a reaction to the idealized and sanitized crime writing coming out of Britain during the Golden Age of mysteries. At the hands of such legendary authors as Dorothy Sayers and Agatha Christie, crime writing had come to be dominated by stories set almost exclusively among the upper classes, and taking place in elegant country houses—what one writer has dubbed “snobbery with violence.” In contrast, on this side of the Pond writers such as Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler, and James M. Cain, whose own life experiences were forged in the cauldron of Depression-era and postwar America, began to explore the soft underbelly of the big city: shady settings populated by even shadier figures, where no one is entirely innocent and everyone, in one way or another, is a victim. In their calloused hands the protagonist was transformed from hero to antihero, flawed by knowing the wrong women and preferring cheap booze to a more stylish martini. And unlike its British cousin, American crime fiction came with no guarantee of justice; when it occurred (which was seldom), it was cosmic, rather than due to the workings of the law, carried out by men in dark alleys or seedy hotel rooms, following their own private code of ethics. Later brought to the silver screen in such

classics as *The Maltese Falcon*, *The Big Sleep*, and *Double Indemnity*, American Noir dominated crime writing for two glorious decades.



Tapping into a cynicism shared by world-weary readers, the genre spread from L.A. to Chicago and New York, before going global. Today you can find noir novels set round the world, from Scotland to France to Italy. It has even surfaced in tales set in the Middle East.

This week's pick brings noir full circle, back to American shores, but with a twist: it is set in the dark subculture of

New York City's Chinatown, and before it is over, the edgy tale returns to California, where noir was born.

Henry Chang

A native New Yorker, Henry Chang is a lifelong resident of Chinatown and Manhattan's Lower Eastside. He majored in Industrial Design at the Pratt Institute, and went on to graduate from the City College of New York with a Bachelor's Degree in Liberal Arts and Sciences. His work has been published in various magazines, and his debut novel, *Chinatown Beat*, was hailed in several "Best of" 2006 lists. The second mystery in his Jack Yu series, *Year of the Dog*, is slated for publication in November 2008.

***Chinatown Beat* (Soho Crime, 2006)**

Jun Yee Wong, "Johnny" to his friends, is a limo driver for one of the most powerful men in New York City's Chinatown. Wah Yee Tom, or "Uncle Four" as he is known, presides over the *Hip Ching*, the second-most powerful tong in America; it stretches from coast to coast, and has thousands of members and a huge bankroll, stretching into the many millions of dollars. It can trace its roots to Chinese secret societies dominated by ancient warlords, and today has supporters and agents through-out the Chinese world. From his secure position near the top of this empire Uncle Four daily makes decisions that determine the destinies of those around him; his favour can alleviate the plight of an impoverished widow; his scorn can condemn a man to death, or send him back to China.

As with most powerful men, Uncle Four enjoys the privileges of office, including the company of a beautiful Chinese-American woman from Hong Kong

known simply as Mona. Uncle Four provides Mona with a comfortable apartment, fashionable clothing, fine meals in expensive restaurants, and a limousine at her disposal. Mona returns the favour by being Uncle Four's trophy escort and satisfying the aging patriarch's sexual needs.

Life in Chinatown is proscribed, settled, and generally placid. But, as in any community, there are aberrations, exceptions to the rule that threaten the tranquility of the insular community. In Uncle Four's domain there is a child-rapist on the prowl, rival gangs looking to displace the *Hip Ching* are at work, and most ominously of all, Mona is unhappy. Before these forces have played themselves out the young limo driver's world will be turned upside down, and Chinatown will be rocked to its very foundations.

The son of a Chinese immigrant, Jack Yu is a detective with the Fifth Precinct, housed in a four-storey red-brick walkup located on the edge of Chinatown. His commanding officer is an Italian, and almost all of his fellow officers are white. Daily Jack faces the suspicions of his white co-workers and the scorn of Chinese-Americans, distrusted by both. He sorts through the detritus of his own father's recent death, replaying bitter memories in an effort to make sense of his own existence; and even as he explores a personal relationship with an Asian-American defense lawyer, Jack labours to keep a childhood friend from ending up in a gutter, face down. Ever the loner, Jack charts his own course, attempting to do his job while bringing order to the chaos that is his life.

An insightful, atmospheric tale

In *Chinatown Beat* the folks at Soho Press have turned out another winner.

Author Henry Chang deftly employs all the familiar formulae of classic noir fiction: there is the corrupt world of organized crime, played against a solitary figure determined to do right, and there is a police hierarchy all too eager to believe that one of their own is on the make. There are complacent targets, smug in their belief that they are untouchable, set against ambitious upstarts, certain that they can take on those in power and prevail. And there are victims as well, who realize only too late that innocence is not enough, that naiveté can get a person killed. Above all, there is the brooding, almost tangible atmosphere of a world in which power is everything, and concepts like Good and Bad and Right and Wrong are mere curiosities, irrelevant to the real world. Finally, the story is wrapped in the spare prose style that is the hallmark of good noir writing.

But *Chinatown Beat* also extends its genre: it is an insightful look at second-generation Asian-Americans caught between two worlds, trying to carve out a life that respects both what they were and what they wish to be. It is a well-crafted, compelling read, and a fine addition to noir fiction.

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