

**Humanizing the Other**  
**Goldsmith's Friend Abroad Again: Mark Twain 1870 to 1871**  
**By Philip Chin**

Galaxy Magazine would again feature Mark Twain in a series of three satirical articles that would appear in October and November of 1870 and January 1871 entitled, "Goldsmith's Friend Abroad Again." Many of the incidents described were factually true as Samuel Clemens had written seriously about them at the time as a reporter in San Francisco. At the beginning of each of the three articles he wrote, "[NOTE.--No experience is set down in the following letters which had to be invented. Fancy is not needed to give variety to a Chinaman's sojourn in America. Plain fact is amply sufficient.]"

Mark Twain chose to expand on the literary vehicle originally created by Oliver Goldsmith, an English writer, who had commented on English society in the 1760s in a famous series of articles under the title of, "The Citizen of the World." The narrative was delivered in the form of letters sent back to China by a fictional Chinese man, a sophisticated philosopher, who writes about what he observes in England among the English people. As an educated foreigner, the fictional Chinese narrator was free to make witty observations about the contradictions and foibles of English society and customs. Mark Twain's fictional Chinese, Ah Song Hi, isn't a philosopher, but a low-class laborer. He sends his first letter from Shanghai as he is about to embark for the United States. His views about the United States and of Americans are idealistic and echo what many Americans believed about themselves. Significantly, Twain never delivers the narration in the exaggerated pidgin English that other American writers used when they wrote fictional Chinese speeches in English at the time. Twain's Chinese narrator is as fully human and as intelligent as any white American.

It is all settled, and I am to leave my oppressed and overburdened native land and cross the sea to that noble realm where all are free and all equal, and none reviled or abused--America! America, whose precious privilege it is to call herself the Land of the Free and the Home of the Brave. We and all that are about us here look over the waves longingly, contrasting the privations of this our birthplace with the opulent comfort of that happy refuge. We know how America has welcomed the Germans and the Frenchmen and the stricken and sorrowing Irish, and we know how she has given them bread and work and liberty, and how grateful they are. And we know that America stands ready to welcome all other oppressed peoples and offer her abundance to all that come, without asking what their nationality is, or their creed or color. And, without being told it, we know that the foreign sufferers she has rescued from oppression and starvation are the most eager of her children to welcome us, because, having suffered themselves, they know what suffering is, and having been generously succored, they long to be generous to other unfortunates and thus show that magnanimity is not wasted upon them.

Ah Song Hi is obligated to put his wife, son, and two daughters into debt bondage to the partner of the man paying for his voyage. He is reassured that they won't be sold into slavery. His sponsor promises to pay him the princely sum of \$12 a month, twenty times what he would make in China, but unbeknownst to the narrator, starvation wages in America. The American consul then forces every Chinese on board to pay \$2 for a certificate to verify that they are on board the steamer. A single certificate is supposed to be issued for the entire ship covering every Chinese passenger

aboard under American law. By charging 1,300 Chinese for their own individual certificates, the consul could pocket the difference for himself. "My employer tells me that the Government at Washington know of this fraud, and are so bitterly opposed to the existence of such a wrong that they tried hard to have the extor--the fee, I mean, legalized by the last Congress; but as the bill did not pass, the Consul will have to take the fee dishonestly until next Congress makes it legitimate. It is a great and good and noble country, and hates all forms of vice and chicanery."

Ah Song Hi arrives in America and says, "I stepped ashore jubilant! I wanted to dance, shout, sing, worship the generous Land of the Free and Home of the Brave." As soon as he steps ashore he is immediately kicked by a San Francisco police officer. As he turned around, he's hit from behind by the club of another police officer. When he goes to pick up his possessions, a third police officer hits him. Two officials then search his possessions and that of his neighboring traveler, tossing everything together as they search. The neighbor is discovered to be carrying opium and is arrested. All of his belongings are confiscated. Since the officers took no care in differentiating what belonged to each person, they take all of Ah Song Hi's possessions as well. When he offers to separate out what he owns, another officer kicks him and then ignores him. The Chinese is left without any possessions except the clothes on his back and \$10 in his pocket.

When Ah Song Hi tries to leave the dock, he's stopped and told he has to be vaccinated against the smallpox. Pointing to his scars he says he's already had smallpox and doesn't need any vaccination. He is told he has to be vaccinated anyway. "The doctor would never let me pass, for the law obliged him to vaccinate all Chinamen and charge them ten dollars apiece for it, and I might be sure that no doctor who would be the servant of that law would let a fee slip through his fingers to accommodate any absurd fool who had seen fit to have the disease in some other country. And presently the doctor came and did his work and took my last penny--my ten dollars which were the hard savings of nearly a year and a half of labor and privation. Ah, if the law-makers had only known there were plenty of doctors in the city glad of a chance to vaccinate people for a dollar or two, they would never have put the price up so high against a poor friendless Irish, or Italian, or Chinese pauper fleeing to the good land to escape hunger and hard times." Later, he is told he owes his employer \$60 for having paid for his passage.

His belief in America remains unshaken in his next letter. He says, "I reflected that I had one prodigious advantage over paupers in other lands--I was in America! I was in the heaven-provided refuge of the oppressed and the forsaken!" Just at that moment a group of whites set their dogs on him. As he's being bitten he yells for help. Two police officers look on placidly then walk away without a word. A horrified white bystander then brings the police back and says it is a shame to leave the Chinese in distress. The officers then beat the dogs off with their clubs. The Samaritan then asks the young men why they set their dogs on the Chinese and one replies (in what readers at the time would have obviously recognized as an Irish accent), "This Ching divil comes till Ameriky to take the bread out o' dacent intelligent white men's mouths, and whin they try to defend their rights there's a dale o' fuss made about it."

The young toughs then threaten the Samaritan until he goes away, whereupon the police arrest the bloody and tattered Chinese. When he asks what he is being arrested for, they hit him and tell him to shut up. At the station he is charged with being disorderly and disturbing the peace. They then search him and are disappointed that he has no money. One police officer, another Irishman, says to him, "Now look here, Johnny, it's no use you playing softy wid us. We mane business, ye know; and the sooner ye put us on the scent of a V, the asier ye'll save yerself from a dale of trouble. Ye can't get out o' this for anny less. Who's your frinds?" Ah Song Hi swears he has no friends in America or money and begs the police to let him go. He's then shoved, hauled, and kicked into a

cell and told, "Rot there, ye furrin spawn, till ye lairn that there's no room in America for the likes of ye or your nation." Inside the cell he's beaten again by the other prisoners because he's Chinese.

As he tends to his bruises on the stone floor he reflects, "I had long had an idea that Americans, being free, had no need of prisons, which are a contrivance of despots for keeping restless patriots out of mischief. So I was considerably surprised to find out my mistake."

Two of the women inmates in the adjoining cell are habitual inhabitants of jail cells due to drunkenness and petty larceny, one has had nine years in the county jail and the other has had four or five. They too are Irish by their accents. Ah Song Hi said, "...both these creatures fell upon me while I was dozing with my head against their grating, and battered me considerably, because they discovered that I was a Chinaman, and they said I was 'a bloody interlopin' loafer come from the devil's own country to take the bread out of dacent people's mouths and put down the wages for work whin it was all a Christian could do to kape body and sowl together as it was.' 'Loafer' means one who will not work."

Samuel Clemens then included an incidence of police brutality that he'd reported on from San Francisco in 1864.

About two or two and a half hours after midnight, of that first experience of mine in the city prison, such of us as were dozing were awakened by a noise of beating and dragging and groaning, and in a little while a man was pushed into our den with a "There, d—n you, soak there a spell!"--and then the gate was closed and the officers went away again. The man who was thrust among us fell limp and helpless by the grating, but as nobody could reach him with a kick without the trouble of hitching along toward him or getting fairly up to deliver it, our people only grumbled at him, and cursed him, and called him insulting names--for misery and hardship do not make their victims gentle or charitable toward each other. But as he neither tried humbly to conciliate our people nor swore back at them, his unnatural conduct created surprise, and several of the party crawled to him where he lay in the dim light that came through the grating, and examined into his case. His head was very bloody and his wits were gone. After about an hour, he sat up and stared around; then his eyes grew more natural and he began to tell how that he was going along with a bag on his shoulder and a brace of policemen ordered him to stop, which he did not do--was chased and caught, beaten ferociously about the head on the way to the prison and after arrival there, and finally thrown into our den like a dog. And in a few seconds he sank down again and grew flighty of speech. One of our people was at last penetrated with something vaguely akin to compassion, maybe, for he looked out through the gratings at the guardian officer pacing to and fro, and said: "Say, Mickey, this shrimp's goin' to die."

An officer tells the prisoner to shut up. When the prisoner again tries to attract attention to the unconscious man on the floor and get him a doctor, an officer beats his knuckles with a club as half a dozen other officers laugh. Eventually, a doctor is summoned and tells them, "If you'd called me an hour ago I might have saved this man, may be--too late now." The prisoner dies by morning.

Ah Song Hi continues, "The court opened. Pretty soon I was compelled to notice that a culprit's nationality made for or against him in this court. Overwhelming proofs were necessary to convict an Irishman of crime, and even then his punishment amounted to little; Frenchmen, Spaniards, and Italians had strict and unprejudiced justice meted out to them, in exact accordance with the

evidence; negroes were promptly punished, when there was the slightest preponderance of testimony against them; but Chinamen were punished always, apparently. Now this gave me some uneasiness, I confess. I knew that this state of things must of necessity be accidental, because in this country all men were free and equal, and one person could not take to himself an advantage not accorded to all other individuals. I knew that, and yet in spite of it I was uneasy."

Nevertheless, the narrator's belief in American justice and values remains. He worries about the ruffians that set their dogs on him and are presently glaring at him in the courtroom, "There in full view stood the ruffians who had misused me, and I began to fear that in the first burst of generous anger occasioned by the revelation of what they had done, they might be harshly handled, and possibly even banished the country as having dishonored her and being no longer worthy to remain upon her sacred soil."

He calls on four Chinese that witnessed the incident to testify, but is told by his interpreter, a Spaniard speaking in Chinese that, "In this country white men can testify against Chinamen all they want to, but Chinamen ain't allowed to testify against white men!"

Ah Song Hi becomes incensed, not at American injustice, but at the interpreter for lying to him, "What a chill went through me! And then I felt the indignant blood rise to my cheek at this libel upon the Home of the Oppressed, where all men are free and equal--perfectly equal--perfectly free and perfectly equal. I despised this Chinese-speaking Spaniard for his mean slander of the land that was sheltering and feeding him. I sorely wanted to sear his eyes with that sentence from the great and good American Declaration of Independence which we have copied in letters of gold in China and keep hung up over our family altars and in our temples--I mean the one about all men being created free and equal."

He soon finds out to his horror that the interpreter was telling the truth. Chinese weren't allowed to testify in California courts. The California Supreme Court decision in the 1854 case of *People v. Hall* had banned the testimony of all Chinese from California courts under the terms of the 1850 California Constitution. That document had banned the testimony of Indians and Negroes against whites in California. The California Supreme Court ruled that Chinese were Negroes under California law. The decision said that the term "negro" should be read as a generic term for non-whites because the California State Legislature had meant to ban the testimony of all non-whites, not just African Americans and Indians. The legislative intent was obvious the court said. That twisted logic of a ruling was still operative in 1870 and would be for several more years. This essentially legalized the murder of any non-white person in California. Any murder investigation would be contingent on finding a white witness to testify on behalf of a non-white victim often against the weight of public pressure. The 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment of the United States Constitution, ratified in 1868, had promised that no state should deprive, "any person of life, liberty, or property, without due process of law; nor deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws." California had refused to ratify this amendment because it would have opened the way towards Chinese civil rights. They would only finally sign on to the amendment in 1959.

Ah Song Hi's hopes are raised when the white man that came to his rescue appears in court and promises to testify on his behalf. The Samaritan is intimidated though by the ruffians making threatening noises and delivering deadly stares at him while the two police officers that arrested Ah Song Hi also stare at him. Officers O'Flannigan and O'Flaherty testify that the Chinese was arrested for causing a disturbance on Kearny Street. When defense witnesses are called, the white Samaritan gets up and leaves without saying a word. Ah Song Hi is sentenced to pay a five dollar fine or serve ten days in the city jail.

"There were twelve or fifteen Chinamen in our crowd of prisoners, charged with all manner of little thefts and misdemeanors, and their cases were quickly disposed of, as a general thing. When the charge came from a policeman or other white man, he made his statement and that was the end of it, unless the Chinaman's lawyer could find some white person to testify in his client's behalf; for, neither the accused China man nor his countrymen being allowed to say anything, the statement of the officers or other white person was amply sufficient to convict."

The letters end on a sarcastic note that the San Francisco newspaper reporter attending court, "...would praise all the policemen indiscriminately and abuse the Chinamen and dead people."

Mark Twain powerfully highlighted the official and unofficial racism and indiscriminate violence that the Chinese faced in America in his writings in 1870. Something about the incident he'd witnessed in 1864 had shaken the world view of the young Samuel Clemens so severely and powerfully that he was still repeating the story over forty years later in 1906, just four years from his death. Over the course of that forty years, he would become increasingly strident in speaking out and writing on behalf of Chinese and non-whites against the overwhelming weight of American public opinion. The poor Chinese laundryman laying helpless on Brannan Street in San Francisco in 1864, ravaged by the dogs, with his teeth knocked out by a white butcher wielding a brick, may have led to Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn and the enrichment of world literature.

<http://www.concentric-literature.url.tw/issues/M/3.pdf>  
<http://twain.lib.virginia.edu/onstage/playscripts/galaxy02.html>

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