

Humanizing the Other
Mark Twain and the Chinese in 1870
By Philip Chin

By 1870, Samuel Clemens had developed far from the angry young man he'd been in the 1850s when he'd written to his mother from New York City and spoke of the Chinese and African Americans, among other racial groups, as a "mass of human vermin."

Galaxy Magazine published a article in its May 1870 edition by Mark Twain entitled, "Disgraceful Persecution of a Boy." It begins thusly, "In San Francisco, the other day, 'a well-dressed boy, on his way to Sunday school, was arrested and thrown into the city prison for stoning Chinamen.'" Twain took on the role of an outraged citizen, sarcastically lamenting the fact that anyone could see it as wrong for such a model white boy to stone Chinese. After all, he'd learned his hatred and violence from his parents and his peers and nothing in his environment could have taught him any differently. Twain set forth a whole list of injustices committed against the Chinese that proved such violence and prejudice had official and societal approval. His continuing prejudices against the Irish (the whiskey-sodden Celt in the below passage) also appeared. Many Irish immigrants were playing prominent roles in the anti-Chinese movement across the American West, which probably contributed greatly to Clemens' continued prejudice against them.

He was a "well-dressed" boy, and a Sunday-school scholar, and, therefore, the chances are that his parents were intelligent, well-to-do people, with just enough natural villany in their compositions to make them yearn after the daily papers, and enjoy them; and so this boy had opportunities to learn all through the week how to do right, as well as on Sunday. It was in this way that he found out that the great commonwealth of California imposes an unlawful mining tax upon John the foreigner, and allows Patrick the foreigner to dig gold for nothing--probably because the degraded Mongol is at no expense for whiskey, and the refined Celt cannot exist without it. It was in this way that he found out that a respectable number of the tax-gatherers--it would be unkind to say all of them--collect the tax twice, instead of once; and that, inasmuch as they do it solely to discourage Chinese immigration into the mines, it is a thing that is much applauded, and likewise regarded as being singularly facetious. It was in this way that he found out that when a white man robs a sluice-box (by the term white man is meant Spaniards, Mexicans, Portuguese, Irish, Hondurans, Peruvians, Chileans, etc.), they make him leave the camp; and when a Chinaman does that thing, they hang him. It was in this way that he found out that in many districts of the vast Pacific coast, so strong is the wild, free love of justice in the hearts of the people, that whenever any secret and mysterious crime is committed, they say, "Let justice be done, though the heavens fall," and go straightway and swing a Chinaman.

Twain returned to his recurring theme of the corruption of the San Francisco police and their practice of persecuting Chinese for minor offenses while ignoring major villainies committed by whites and the collusion of the local newspapers for lauding, "... how one officer performed this prodigious thing, and another officer that, and another the other--and pretty much every one of these performances having for a dazzling central incident a Chinaman guilty of a shilling's worth of crime, an unfortunate whose misdemeanor must be hurrahed into something enormous in

order to keep the public from noticing how many really important rascals went uncaptured in the mean time, and how overrated those glorified policemen actually are."

He then touched on the hypocrisy of the government of the state of California, "...the Legislature, being aware that the Constitution has made America an asylum for the poor and the oppressed of all nations, and that therefore the poor and oppressed who fly to our shelter must not be charged a disabling admission fee, made a law that every Chinaman, upon landing, must be vaccinated upon the wharf, and pay to the State's appointed officer ten dollars for the service, when there are plenty of doctors in San Francisco who would be glad enough to do it for him for fifty cents."

Twain continued with a telling phrase, "It was in this way that the boy found out that a Chinaman had no rights that any man was bound to respect; that he had no sorrows that any man was bound to pity; that neither his life nor his liberty was worth the purchase of a penny when a white man needed a scapegoat; that nobody loved Chinamen, nobody befriended them, nobody spared them suffering when it was convenient to inflict it; everybody, individuals, communities, the majesty of the State itself, joined in hating, abusing, and persecuting these humble strangers."

The phrase, "...a Chinaman had no rights that any man was bound to respect," might have struck recognition among many people living in 1870. It echoes the words of Chief Justice of the United States, Roger Taney, in his 1857 Supreme Court decision in *Dred Scott v. Sanford*. *Dred Scott* contended in the federal courts that, as a slave he'd become free after having been taken to a free state by his master. The Supreme Court savaged this idea saying that African Americans, had been brought over as slaves and the descendants of slaves could never become a citizen of any state or of the United States. They therefore had no right to bring cases in federal courts to address their grievances. The court went even further by nullifying the distinction between slave and free states, declaring slavery legal anywhere in the country regardless of individual state laws or acts of Congress. In the most notorious paragraph and phrase ever uttered in American jurisprudence, Taney said about African Americans, "They had for more than a century before been regarded as beings of an inferior order, and altogether unfit to associate with the white race either in social or political relations, and so far inferior that **they had no rights which the white man was bound to respect**, and that the negro might justly and lawfully be reduced to slavery for his benefit. He was bought and sold, and treated as an ordinary article of merchandise and traffic whenever a profit could be made by it. This opinion was at that time fixed and universal in the civilized portion of the white race. It was regarded as an axiom in morals as well as in politics which no one thought of disputing or supposed to be open to dispute, and men in every grade and position in society daily and habitually acted upon it in their private pursuits, as well as in matters of public concern, without doubting for a moment the correctness of this opinion."

Twain's use of the phrase could have been deliberately used for shock value. The *Dred Scott* decision was condemned then, and ever since, as probably the worst decision the United States Supreme Court has ever made. It played a pivotal role in hastening the start of the Civil War. Outraged Northerners, many of whom cared not a jot for African Americans or slaves, saw this decision as an attack against their very right to rule themselves as they saw fit within their own states. Northern public opinion would not only turn more hostile towards the South, but also increasingly anti-slavery. Southerners on the opposite extreme were reinforced in their belief that slavery was not only right, but morally and legally justified across the United States, regardless of individual state anti-slavery laws. They became increasingly resentful of Northern attempts to limit what they saw as their property rights; their ability to own slaves and take them and the institution of slavery wherever they pleased. This conflict between irreconcilable beliefs would lead to increasing violence, secession, and then civil war. Today, the trauma inflicted by the Civil War on the American psyche can only be imagined. For us the war is a sepia-toned photograph

and continued passionate arguments about symbols. One way of conveying the sheer psychological horror of what was inflicted in the Civil War is the sobering statistic by modern historians extrapolating from census data. If the Civil War were fought today it would have killed six million Americans. Many Americans alive in 1870 had served in the war, knew people who'd served, or had some relation to those that had died in the conflict. This was still a fresh and very emotional wound.

Twain then remarked about the boy, "Everything conspired to teach him that it was a high and holy thing to stone a Chinaman, and yet he no sooner attempts to do his duty than he is punished for it--he, poor chap, who has been aware all his life that one of the principal recreations of the police, out toward the Gold Refinery, was to look on with tranquil enjoyment while the butchers of Brannan street set their dogs on unoffending Chinamen, and make them flee for their lives." A horrified Samuel Clemens' had witnessed such an attack in 1864. White butchers on Brannan Street had incited their dogs to attack an innocent Chinese laundryman. As the Chinese lay wounded and helpless in the street, a butcher knocked his teeth out with a brick, all while a San Francisco police officer and other whites laughed at the scene.

He then sarcastically said, "Keeping in mind the tuition in the humanities which the entire 'Pacific coast' gives its youth, there is a very sublimity of grotesqueness in the virtuous flourish with which the good city fathers of San Francisco proclaim (as they have lately done) that 'The police are positively ordered to arrest all boys, of every description and wherever found, who engage in assaulting Chinamen.'"

Mark Twain concluded his article with a parody of a standard San Francisco newspaper article praising the new policy and saying the police heartily approved of it since, " ...there is no personal peril in arresting boys, provided they be of the small kind, and the reporters will have to laud their performances just as loyally as ever, or go without items. The new form for local items in San Francisco will now be: 'The ever vigilant and efficient officer So-and-So succeeded, yesterday afternoon, in arresting Master Tommy Jones, after a determined resistance,' etc., etc., followed by the customary statistics and final hurrah, with its unconscious sarcasm: 'We are happy in being able to state that this is the forty-seventh boy arrested by this gallant officer since the new ordinance went into effect. The most extraordinary activity prevails in the police department. Nothing like it has been seen since we can remember.'"

In September 1870, *Galaxy Magazine* came out with another Mark Twain article entitled, "John Chinaman in New York." Outside one of the major New York tea stores stood a Chinese as an advertisement for the products inside. Crowds of whites stared at and catcalled this spectacle. Twain said, " Men calling themselves the superior race, the race of culture and of gentle blood, scanned his quaint Chinese hat, with peaked roof and ball on top, and his long queue dangling down his back; his short silken blouse, curiously frogged and figured (and, like the rest of his raiment, rusty, dilapidated, and awkwardly put on); his blue cotton, tight-legged pants, tied close around the ankles; and his clumsy blunt-toed shoes with thick cork soles; and having so scanned him from head to foot, cracked some unseemly joke about his outlandish attire or his melancholy face, and passed on. In my heart I pitied the friendless Mongol."

The narrator lamented, "...we, who prate so much about civilization and humanity, are content to degrade a fellow-being to such an office as this?" He then idealized the Chinese like some overblown white writers of the 19th Century were prone to do when talking about the "noble savages" among the non-white races, "I wondered what was passing behind his sad face, and what distant scene his vacant eye was dreaming of. Were his thoughts with his heart, ten thousand miles away, beyond the billowy wastes of the Pacific? among the ricefields and the plummy palms

of China? under the shadows of remembered mountain peaks, or in groves of bloomy shrubs and strange forest trees unknown to climes like ours? And now and then, rippling among his visions and his dreams, did he hear familiar laughter and half-forgotten voices, and did he catch fitful glimpses of the friendly faces of a bygone time? A cruel fate it is, I said, that is befallen this bronzed wanderer."

Addressing the Chinese man, the narrator says to him, "Cheer up—don't be downhearted. It is not America that treats you in this way, it is merely one citizen, whose greed of gain has eaten the humanity out of his heart. America has a broader hospitality for the exiled and oppressed. America and Americans are always ready to help the unfortunate. Money shall be raised—you shall go back to China—you shall see your friends again. What wages do they pay you here?"

The answer is delivered in a comically broad Irish brogue, "Divil a cint but four dollars a week and find meself; but it's aisy, barrin' the troublesome furrin clothes that's so expensive."

The narrator concludes with the observation, "The New York tea merchants who need picturesque signs are not likely to run out of Chinamen."

Clemens performed the double twist of making fun of the whites staring, taunting, and making racist remarks about the despised Chinese, but he also made fun of the sympathetic narrator. Both were so prejudiced by their own beliefs about Chinese that they failed to recognize that the Chinese man advertising on the street was in fact an Irishman hired to wear Chinese clothes. They were fooled by the external manifestations of nationality and race, the Chinese clothes, without having any understanding beyond their own positive and negative prejudices and shallow understanding. In his cleverness, Samuel Clemens was showing his growth as both a writer and as a humanist.

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