

**Humanizing the Other**  
**Samuel Clemens (Mark Twain) and the Chinese - Part 1**  
**By Philip Chin**

Samuel Clemens, who wrote under the pen name of Mark Twain, carries a towering reputation as one of the best American writers in history as well as one of the greatest wits and humorists of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries. In China he is also famous as one of the few Americans to publicly defend Chinese against overwhelming public sentiment as well as standing against American and European imperialism.

The strong stand that Clemens would eventually take on behalf of minorities in the United States and for colonized peoples around the world wasn't an obvious evolution from his background. At the age of seventeen he left his childhood home in Hannibal, Missouri to learn the printer's trade in such cities as St. Louis, New York, and Philadelphia. He also dabbled as a journalist. Coming from a conservative, slave-holding family and community in Missouri where white supremacy was simply accepted as fact, his views as a young man were decidedly unsympathetic towards racial minorities. In 1853 he wrote to his mother from New York saying, “[n]iggers, mulattoes, quadroons, Chinese, and some the Lord no doubt originally intended to be white, but the dirt on whose faces leaves one uncertain as to that fact, block up the little, narrow street”; “to wade through this mass of human vermin would raise the ire of the most patient person that ever lived.” Clemens returned to Missouri at the age of twenty-one and trained as a riverboat pilot on the Mississippi, famously chronicled in his 1883 book, *Life on the Mississippi*.

By the the mid-1850s he'd become a supporter of the American Party, popularly known as the Know Nothing Party. This national political party enjoyed a strong following for just a few years in that decade. It grew out of the numerous anti-Catholic secret societies that had been created since start of the mass immigration of Irish Catholics following the Potato Famine (1845-1852) and of German Catholics. For many established Americans of Northern European descent this was a continuation of prejudices that their Protestant forebears had carried over from the bloody Wars of Religion that had afflicted Europe since the mid-1500s. In this religious and ethnic prejudice Clemens shared the views of others that later became active in pro-Chinese activities. Anson Burlingame, later to become American Minister to China, and, uniquely in diplomatic history, then the Chinese diplomatic representative to the world, was first elected to the United States Congress as a Know Nothing. Frederick Bee, who later acted for decades as the legal counsel for the Chinese government in the United States and became famous for his ferocious defense of the legal rights of the Chinese, unsuccessfully ran for a seat in the California State Legislature as a Know Nothing. Political views and motivations can be complicated and contradictory. The fact that many Irish Catholic immigrants came to play leading roles in forming anti-Chinese groups and passing Chinese exclusion laws may have played a major part in why these men came to strongly support the Chinese.

Upon the outbreak of the American Civil War in 1860, Samuel Clemens decided to join a local unit of the Missouri State Guard in Hannibal, Missouri. The Missouri State Guard was a volunteer military group that supported the pro-Confederate faction led by the state governor that broke away from the official Union supporting government in the state capital. Missouri ended up being both a Confederate state and a Union state during the Civil War with two hostile state governments claiming sovereignty. Many families and neighbors were badly divided in the conflict and some of the worst atrocities of the Civil War were later committed in the state as a

result. Samuel Clemens' motivation for joining the Confederate forces by his own account seemed to come more from a childish desire for adventure rather than deeply held convictions or thought. This casual attitude seemed to have been common among many of his fellow Confederates at the time as evidenced by his descriptions of the celebratory atmosphere among the recruits and their persistent refusal on a number of occasions to fight Union soldiers when such opportunities appeared. None of the men from the officers in command to the lowest private in his unit had any military experience at all. Clemens was soon promoted to first lieutenant simply because the men liked him, but not enough to actually follow any orders he gave.

After weeks of indifferent training, idleness, and boredom punctuated by sudden and panicked retreats from Union military forces that invariably turned out only to be rumors, Samuel Clemens deserted the Missouri State Guard along with about fifteen others. In his short story about his short military experience, *The Private History of a Campaign that Failed*, Clemens said, "Our boys went apart and consulted; then we went back and told the other companies present that the war was a disappointment to us and we were going to disband." As they left they encountered their commanding general who ordered them back to the ranks, "Harris ordered us back; but we told him there was a Union colonel coming with a whole regiment in his wake, and it looked as if there was going to be a disturbance; so we had concluded to go home. He raged a little, but it was of no use; our minds were made up." The unorganized and amateur way the war was being conducted in this early period meant that none of the men he served with had any sense of military discipline to keep them in the fight when they didn't feel like it. None of them even had uniforms. There was also no organization or power to enforce discipline on the soldiers either. Later in the Civil War such deserters would have been shot.

Clemens' older brother, Orien Clemens, was an open opponent of slavery who'd supported the Union and worked for the election of Abraham Lincoln. His reward was to be appointed as the secretary to the newly appointed territorial governor of Nevada, far away from any Civil War combat. In Samuel Clemens' words, the position was, "an office of such majesty that it concentrated in itself the duties and dignities of Treasurer, Comptroller, Secretary of State, and Acting Governor in the Governor's absence."

After deserting the Confederates, Samuel Clemens accompanied his brother from St. Louis and took a stagecoach from St. Joseph, Missouri to Nevada Territory in 1861. The appeal of working for his brother soon paled though and Samuel Clemens in turn became a failed miner then a newspaperman.

A chapter of his semi-autobiographical book detailing his early days in the Western states expanded on his views of the Chinese in Virginia City, Nevada and other Western locations. Chapter 54 of *Roughing It*, published in 1872, contained some unflattering and racist stereotypes of the Chinese. Samuel Clemens was a product of his time and much as his later works such as *Huckleberry Finn* and *Tom Sawyer* have also been attacked for racism. However much of the chapter was openly sympathetic towards the Chinese, a remarkable fact for a white man of any prominence in the Western states to express at the time against popular prejudice and racial hate. Among the negatives he observed, "They are imitative. If a Chinaman were to see his master break up a centre table, in a passion, and kindle a fire with it, that Chinaman would be likely to resort to the furniture for fuel forever afterward." He also expressed the common and baseless fear of Chinese food then common among white Americans, "Mr. Ah Sing keeps a general grocery and provision store at No. 13 Wang street. He lavished his hospitality upon our party in the friendliest way. He had various kinds of colored and colorless wines and brandies, with unpronounceable names, imported from China in little crockery jugs, and which he offered to us in dainty little miniature wash-basins of porcelain. He offered us a mess of birds'-nests; also, small, neat

sausages, of which we could have swallowed several yards if we had chosen to try, but we suspected that each link contained the corpse of a mouse, and therefore refrained." He also commented on the use of opium by "John Chinaman", the popular pejorative nickname that whites used for Chinese men in those days, "John likes it, though; it soothes him, he takes about two dozen whiffs, and then rolls over to dream, Heaven only knows what, for we could not imagine by looking at the soggy creature. Possibly in his visions he travels far away from the gross world and his regular washing, and feast on succulent rats and birds'-nests in Paradise."

Clemens praised the Chinese for their industriousness, their respect for their dead, and their use of the abacus to calculate sums, "as fast as a musical professor's fingers travel over the keys of a piano." He also strongly denounced white Americans for their prejudices and violence against the Chinese stating:

They are a harmless race when white men either let them alone or treat them no worse than dogs; in fact they are almost entirely harmless anyhow, for they seldom think of resenting the vilest insults or the cruelest injuries. They are quiet, peaceable, tractable, free from drunkenness, and they are as industrious as the day is long. A disorderly Chinaman is rare, and a lazy one does not exist. So long as a Chinaman has strength to use his hands he needs no support from anybody; white men often complain of want of work, but a Chinaman offers no such complaint; he always manages to find something to do. He is a great convenience to everybody—even to the worst class of white men, for he bears the most of their sins, suffering fines for their petty thefts, imprisonment for their robberies, and death for their murders. Any white man can swear a Chinaman's life away in the courts, but no Chinaman can testify against a white man. Ours is the "land of the free"—nobody denies that—nobody challenges it. [Maybe it is because we won't let other people testify.] As I write, news comes that in broad daylight in San Francisco, some boys have stoned an inoffensive Chinaman to death, and that although a large crowd witnessed the shameful deed, no one interfered.

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They are a kindly disposed, well-meaning race, and are respected and well treated by the upper classes, all over the Pacific coast. No Californian gentleman or lady ever abuses or oppresses a Chinaman, under any circumstances, an explanation that seems to be much needed in the East. Only the scum of the population do it—they and their children; they, and, naturally and consistently, the policemen and politicians, likewise, for these are the dust-licking pimps and slaves of the scum, there as well as elsewhere in America.

Clemens' comment about white men being able to swear the life of a Chinaman away in courts was a reference to the notorious 1854 case of *People v. Hall*. Hall, a white miner, had murdered a Chinese miner. The only witnesses to the case were three Chinese miners. The California Supreme Court ruled that the provision in the state constitution prohibiting "Negroes and Indians" from testifying against whites in court had been meant as a generic prohibition against any non-white race testifying against whites in California. It was a free license to murder Chinese at will that many white people took advantage of, not only in California, but in other Western states. The violence led directly to the creation of ethnic enclaves across the West where the Chinese could gather and protect each other, the first distinct Chinatowns in the United States. The atmosphere of violence and intimidation against the Chinese that Samuel Clemens encountered in California would change his views about race and of treatment of racial minorities in America.

Among the most deeply troubling episodes of Samuel Clemens' life was something that he must have dwelled on and forced him to think very deeply because he referred to it on a number of occasions throughout the rest of his life. It happened in San Francisco in 1864, where he had moved from Nevada that year. In an essay published in the *Galaxy Magazine* in 1870, he gave several examples of the persecution of the Chinese. This was delivered in the satirical style that Mark Twain often adopted. Satire helped make the content of unpalatable fare that Clemens wanted to write about as Mark Twain bearable for many ordinary whites to read. A white child in San Francisco had been arrested and now faced prosecution for throwing rocks at Chinese and injuring them. Twain asked indignantly why the child being prosecuted when it was the example of his elders in abusing the Chinese, which Twain was happy to detail at length, that had led him into such indiscriminate violence. A sober editorial postscript stated, "I have many such memories in my mind, but am thinking just at present of one particular one, where the Brannan street butchers set their dogs on a Chinaman who was quietly passing with a basket of clothes on his head; and while the dogs mutilated his flesh, a butcher increased the hilarity of the occasion by knocking some of the Chinaman's teeth down his throat with half a brick. This incident sticks in my memory with a more malevolent tenacity, perhaps, on account of the fact that I was in the employ of a San Francisco journal at the time, and was not allowed to publish it because it might offend some of the peculiar element that subscribed for the paper."

He later expanded on the incident in his 1906 autobiographical dictation. He was working as a reporter for the *San Francisco Call* newspaper and, "One Sunday afternoon I saw some hoodlums chasing and stoning a Chinaman who was heavily laden with the weekly wash of his Christian customers, and I noticed that a policeman was observing this performance with an amused interest—nothing more" At the time he prepared an outraged article about the incident but his editor at the *Call* refused to allow it to be published lest it offend the newspaper's anti-Chinese readers. Clemens wrote another article as a satire against San Francisco police corruption in general, citing several outrageous examples that included one passage about the Chinese. The content was so inflammatory that it was not published by the *San Francisco Call* newspaper but by his former employer, the *Territorial Enterprise* newspaper in Virginia City, Nevada as "What Have the Police Been Doing?" In part the article read, "What have the police been doing? Ain't they virtuous? Don't they take good care of the city? Is not their constant vigilance and efficiency shown in the fact that roughs and rowdies here are awed into good conduct?... isn't it shown in the fact that although many offenders of importance go unpunished, they infallibly snaffle every Chinese chicken-thief that attempts to drive his trade, and are duly glorified by name in the papers for it?" Such material didn't make Mark Twain a popular figure among San Francisco city officials since the article spread back into California and across the West.

In 1865, Mark Twain earned a nationwide reputation when his humorous short story, "The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County" appeared in newspapers across the country. In 1866, his travelogue about his trip to the Sandwich Islands (the independent nation that is now the State of Hawaii) was printed by the *Sacramento Union* newspaper, and serialized by other newspapers across the country. Mark Twain had begun to establish a reputation as a witty and observant international traveler. These travels formed the basis of the lectures he gave from 1866 to 1873 titled, "Our Fellow Savages of the Sandwich Islands." Among his observations was a typically sarcastic one, "When these islands were discovered the population was about 400,000, but the white man came and brought various complicated diseases, and education, and civilization, and all sorts of calamities, and consequently the population began to drop off with commendable activity. Forty years ago they were reduced to 200,000, and the educational and civilizing facilities being increased they dwindled down to 55,000, and it is proposed to send a few more missionaries and finish them."

By 1867, Samuel Clemens had left the United States again and was voyaging to Europe and the Holy Land, a trip paid for by the Alta California newspaper, accompanied by a group consisting mainly of very pious American Christians. The series of letters that he wrote back and were serialized by the newspaper and again reprinted across the United States provided the basis for his novel, *"The Innocents Abroad."* The newspaper articles made Mark Twain even more known across the United States as an international traveler. It has to be remembered that at this time most Americans didn't have the money or opportunity to travel far from home. The public eagerly traveled vicariously through the writings of mainly rich private travelers or scholars, some of which were not only overly credulous but also absurdly histrionic in their writings. Mark Twain lampooned these figures in a way that nobody had done before. He expressed shock at the realization that the great kings and figures of the Bible that loomed so large and mighty for Americans worshipping in churches across the United States had been greatly exaggerated for centuries.

The word Palestine always brought to my mind a vague suggestion of a country as large as the United States. I do not know why, but such was the case. I suppose it was because I could not conceive of a small country having so large a history. I think I was a little surprised to find that the grand Sultan of Turkey was a man of only ordinary size. I must try to reduce my ideas of Palestine to a more reasonable shape. One gets large impressions in boyhood, sometimes, which he has to fight against all his life. "All these kings." When I used to read that in Sunday School, it suggested to me the several kings of such countries as England, France, Spain, Germany, Russia, etc., arrayed in splendid robes ablaze with jewels, marching in grave procession, with sceptres of gold in their hands and flashing crowns upon their heads. But here in Ain Mellahah, after coming through Syria, and after giving serious study to the character and customs of the country, the phrase "all these kings" loses its grandeur. It suggests only a parcel of petty chiefs—ill-clad and ill-conditioned savages much like our Indians, who lived in full sight of each other and whose "kingdoms" were large when they were five miles square and contained two thousand souls. The combined monarchies of the thirty "kings" destroyed by Joshua on one of his famous campaigns, only covered an area about equal to four of our counties of ordinary size. The poor old sheik we saw at Cesarea Philippi with his ragged band of a hundred followers, would have been called a "king" in those ancient times.

In Chapter 46 of the book, Clemens described the party meeting Czar Alexander II of Russia at his summer palace in Yalta on the Black Sea (later the famous site of the meeting between Roosevelt, Churchill, and Stalin that determined the shape of Europe and the Cold War after World War II.) Clemens was among the committee of passengers selected to write an address thanking the czar for meeting them. He was the most experienced writer among them and must have played a leading role in its creation because he described being acutely pained in Chapter 47 when the sailors aboard their ship endlessly parodied the obsequious address made to the czar. The address began, "We are a handful of private citizens of America, traveling simply for recreation—and unostentatiously, as becomes our unofficial state—and, therefore, we have no excuse to tender for presenting ourselves before your Majesty, save the desire of offering our grateful acknowledgments to the lord of a realm, which, through good and through evil report, has been the steadfast friend of the land we love so well." Clemens would later note privately, "Unquestionably the person that can get lowest down in cringing before royalty and nobility, and can get most satisfaction out of crawling on his belly before them, is an American. Not all Americans, but when an American does it he makes competition impossible." The 1869 book summed up the value of the travelling experience by saying, "Travel is fatal to prejudice, bigotry, and narrow-mindedness, and many of our people need it sorely on these accounts. Broad, wholesome, charitable views of men and things cannot be acquired by vegetating in one little corner of the earth all one's lifetime."

The end of 1867 brought the resignation of Anson Burlingame as United States Minister to China and his immediate appointment as Chinese Minister to represent China to the world. Such was his fairness and willingness to stand up for the Chinese in negotiations with the European powers during his time as the chief diplomat of the United States in China that China had asked Burlingame to switch services. Burlingame agreed to this arrangement with the full agreement of the United States Government. The question then was who would replace Burlingame in China? In early 1868, Clemens wrote to his mother saying, "They want to send me abroad, as a consul or a minister. God knows I am mean enough and lazy enough now without being a proper consul." John Conness, the United Senator from California, was advocating that Samuel Clemens become that man in China. Samuel Clemens had an eye for things that were happening around him and was cynical enough not to be fooled by fancy words of shows. These were precisely the qualities needed in a diplomat making sober reports to Washington about foreign states and rulers. Ultimately, Clemens turned down the honor. He felt that he was now being paid much more as a successful writer and lecturer than he would ever make as a diplomat. The post went instead to John Ross Browne, another travel writer who'd gone to and written about Europe, the Middle East, and South America. Some of Browne's illustrations would even be used in Mark Twain's book, "Roughing It."

The changes to history and literature that would have happened if Samuel Clemens had become Minister to China instead of concentrating on his writing career are unimaginable. He had yet to write the novels for which he became most famous, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, *The Prince and the Pauper*, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, and *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* were all at least a decade or more in his future. He also had many more travelogues to write.

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