

Humanizing the Other
Wu Chih Tien, Huckleberry Finn, and the Connecticut Yankee - 1889
By Philip Chin

Mark Twain became better known to posterity for his association with African Americans after the release of *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* in 1876 and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* in 1884. The novels were based on life in Missouri before the Civil War and were the novels that defined his career, most notably to generations of American school children that have been assigned to read them. Huckleberry Finn, in particular, humanized African Americans in a way that African Americans had never been portrayed before in American popular culture. Instead of serving as buffoonish comic relief or as an evil subhuman servant, the slave, Jim, is regarded as a human being worth sacrificing the white main character for. When Jim is threatened with being taken back into slavery, Huck Finn makes the momentous decision to risk any consequence to free him. In doing so Huck stands against a whole lifetime of education and society that had taught him that slavery was part of the natural order and that to stand against it was unnatural and sinful. He says the shocking words, "All right, then, I'll go to hell!" Despite the various controversies about racism and language since the release of those novels, the books have remained popular for over a hundred years.

Samuel Clemens retained a lively interest in Chinese subjects throughout this period and it probably influenced his writings directly. In 1889, his book, *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* was published. This book, was only the second Mark Twain book to be published by the publishing company owned by him, the Charles L. Webster Company. The first was Huckleberry Finn. By being the publisher, Samuel Clemens had complete control over every aspect of the printing and content, including the illustrations. He hired Daniel C. Beard to prepare 250 illustrations for \$3,000 over much better known book illustrators, including those artists he'd previously worked with. Beard, at this time, was still relatively unknown, his illustrations only having appeared in magazines previously. \$3,000 was more than the standard rate that Mark Twain had been selling his books to publishers for. It would today be the equivalent of over \$720,000. Clemens told Fred Hall, his agent at Webster Company, that he wanted "to contract for the very best an artist can do" -- "This time I want pictures, not black-board outlines & charcoal sketches."

Clemens based his selection of Beard on the illustrations that Beard had made for the story, *Wu Chih Tien, The Celestial Empress*, which had appeared in the March 1889 edition of *Cosmopolitan Magazine*, around the time Clemens was completing the manuscript for the *Connecticut Yankee*. In his autobiography, Beard wrote, "Mr. Fred Hall, Mark Twain's partner in the publishing business, came to my studio in the old Judge Building and told me that Mark Twain wanted to meet the man who had made the illustrations for a Chinese story in the *Cosmopolitan* and he wanted that man to illustrate

his new book, *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*. The manuscript was sent to me to read. I read it through three times with great enjoyment.”

Wu Chi Tien, purported to be a Chinese tale translated from ancient sources about a prince trying to depose of a usurping empress, but no original source work has ever been identified or discovered. It seems obvious that it was a fictional creation. Clemens wrote in his personal journal that it was a “charming Chinese story.” It was written by Chinese American journalist and raconteur, Wong Chin Foo, and was the first novel ever published in America by a Chinese American. Wong had led an eventful and dangerous life that might have been tailor-made for a Mark Twain adventure novel. This included a farcical failed attempt at revolution against the Qing Dynasty from which Wong had to flee China for his life, the rescue of Chinese prostitutes that led to threats and attempts against his life by outraged Chinese gangsters, and Wong and his friends attending East Coast anti-Chinese rallies in the front row to heckle the ferociously anti-Chinese agitator, Denis Kearney. Kearney’s infamous slogan, “The Chinese Must Go!” became a rallying cry for all anti-Chinese fanatics in America throughout the 19th Century and into the 20th Century. Wong even publicly challenged Kearney to a duel, with chopsticks, guns, or potatoes, whichever Kearney preferred. Kearney refused. Wong was also the first to use the term “Chinese American” when he named the newspaper he founded in New York City in 1883, “The Chinese American.” His articles appeared in such prestigious publications as the *New York Times* and *Harper’s Weekly* and was widely reprinted in newspapers and magazines across the United States.

Wong’s iconoclastic magazine article, *Why Am I A Heathen?*, appeared in the *North American Review* in 1887 and made him nationally infamous. In the article, Wong Chin Foo pointed out the hypocrisy of white Christians trying to convert Chinese to Jesus, when so many of them conducted themselves with such avarice and violence that they failed to follow the Christian principles that they advocated. Among the gems were such searing paragraphs as:

The heathen does much and says little about it; the Christian does little good, but when he does he wants it in the papers and on his tombstone.

Love men for the good they do you is a practical Christian idea, not for the good you should do them as a matter of human duty. So Christians love the heathen; yes, the heathen's possessions; and in proportion to these the Christian's love grows in intensity. When the English wanted the Chinamen's gold and trade, they said they wanted "to open China for their missionaries." And opium was the chief, in fact, only, missionary they looked after, when they forced the ports open. And this infamous Christian introduction among Chinamen has done more injury, social and moral, in China than all the humanitarian agencies of Christianity could remedy in 200 years. And on you, Christians, and on your greed of gold, we lay the burden of the crime resulting; of tens of millions of honest, useful men and women sent thereby to premature death after a short miserable life, besides the physical and moral prostration it entails even where it does not prematurely kill ! And this great national curse was thrust on us at the points of Christian bayonets. And you wonder why we are heathen?

The only positive point Christians have impressed on heathenism is that they would sacrifice religion, honor, principle, as they do life, for — gold. And then they sanctimoniously tell the poor heathen: "You must save your soul by believing as we do."

Wong concluded his piece in a most memorable way. His article was roundly denounced nationally by many white Americans and Chinese converts, except for some outliers like an Episcopalian magazine that sagely said that Wong, the heathen, had given Christians much to think and reflect upon:

"Do unto others as you wish they would do unto you," or "Love your neighbor as yourself," is the great Divine law which Christians and heathen alike hold, but which the Christians ignore.

This is what keeps me the heathen I am! And I earnestly invite the Christians of America to come to Confucius.

The jaundiced and cynical views expressed about Christian hypocrisy by Wong Chin Foo must have delighted Clemens. As Mark Twain, Clemens often made the same types of irreverent observations and references about Christianity in his own works to point out the hypocrisy between what was preached and actual practices. Twain was often accused of being a heathen or an atheist as a result, but unlike Wong Chin Foo, never proudly and publically claimed the title of heathen.

Huckleberry Finn had several passages that showed white Christians to be badly flawed, stupid, stubborn, and oftentimes criminal, far away from the Christian ideals that Americans lauded. In the novel, Huck stays with a wealthy Southern aristocratic family in Kentucky named the Grangerfords. The Grangerfords are engaged in a bloody feud with a neighboring family of wealthy aristocrats named the Shepherdsons. Huck asks what a feud is and gets this explanation:

"Well," says Buck, "a feud is this way: A man has a quarrel with another man, and kills him; then that other man's brother kills him; then the other brothers, on both sides, goes for one another; then the cousins chip in--and by and by everybody's killed off, and there ain't no more feud. But it's kind of slow, and takes a long time."

Huck asks how long this feud has lasted and how it started:

"Well, I should reckon! It started thirty year ago, or som'ers along there. There was trouble 'bout something, and then a lawsuit to settle it; and the suit went agin one of the men, and so he up and shot the man that won the suit--which he would naturally do, of course. Anybody would."

It turns out that nobody still alive remembers what the original dispute was about or which side fired the first shot. They only know that family members on both sides have been regularly killed for the past thirty or more years and swear more mindless revenge in return.

Both families attend the same church, and everyone goes armed. Ironically as it proves, both families listen to and admire a Christian sermon about brotherly love.

Next Sunday we all went to church, about three mile, everybody a-horseback. The men took their guns along, so did Buck, and kept them between their knees or stood them handy against the wall. The Shepherdsons done the same. It was pretty ornery preaching--all about brotherly love, and such-like tiresomeness; but everybody said it was a good sermon, and they all talked it over going home, and had such a powerful lot to say about faith and good works and free grace and preforeordination, and I don't know what all, that it did seem to me to be one of the roughest Sundays I had run across yet.

When one of the daughters of the Grangerson family elopes with a Shepherdson son, it precipitates a running gun battle in which all the male Grangersons are killed, even down to the unarmed teenage sons. So much for Christian ideals. Maybe they should have come to Confucius, Wong Chin Foo might have said.

There are several interesting parallels between Wu Chih Tien and a Connecticut Yankee, besides sharing the direct connection of having the same illustrating artist and being published in the same year. Both heroes set out to overthrow and change the status quo. The 19th Century Yankee, a common American workingman named "Hank" travels in time to the 6th Century England of King Arthur. Far from the romantic vision drawn by many contemporary Victorian writers, the protagonist finds Arthur's England to be a dark place where the peasants are oppressed and kept backward by brutal aristocrats, superstition, and the Catholic Church, which conspires to keep ordinary people ignorant and fearful. Hank sets out to overthrow the system through the introduction of 19th Century liberal education and technology. Starting with only what he has in his pockets he rises through his hard work, merit, and unflinching goodness to become "Sir Boss," a feared wizard, and the second-most important man in the kingdom after King Arthur. He lays out the secret plans behind all the modernization he is forcing through:

I was very happy. Things were working steadily toward a secretly longed-for point. You see, I had two schemes in my head which were the vastest of all my projects. The one was to overthrow the Catholic Church and set up the Protestant faith on its ruins--not as an Established Church, but a go-as-you-please one; and the other project was to get a decree issued by and by, commanding that upon Arthur's death unlimited suffrage should be introduced, and given to men and women alike--at any rate to all men, wise or unwise, and to all mothers who at middle age should be found to know nearly as much as their sons at twenty-one. Arthur was good for thirty years yet, he being about my own age--that is to say, forty--and I believed that in that time I could easily have the active part of the population of that day ready and eager for an event which should be the first of its kind in the history of the world--a rounded and complete governmental revolution without bloodshed. The result to be a republic.

Mark Twain's protagonist longs to introduce a democratic republic to replace rule by kings and emperors but ultimately fails because King Arthur dies, the nobles turn against him in favor of the old system, and the people in their ignorance and superstition also turn against him after the Catholic Church issues their own pronouncement against Sir Boss and his innovations.

In Wong Chin Foo's novel, the Chinese prince, living in China between 140 B.C. and 120 B.C., sells himself into indentured servitude to avoid being sold into slavery after being hounded nearly to death by the pursuing soldiers of the usurper empress. From these poor circumstances, he rises through his hard work, merit, and unfailing goodness, to eventually triumph and becomes an intelligent, benevolent, and liberal emperor. He then marries a poor commoner for love, throwing class differences completely out the window. The couple become virtuously monogamous because he says he loves her too much to ever take another woman.

This story would have been far too radical to have actually happened in real life in China. Like royal dynasties in the West in the 19th Century, imperial Chinese marriages were made for dynastic reasons, not for personal preferences like romance. Romance, in Chinese imperial history, and the numerous examples of trouble that caused, was reserved for concubines. This was much like the system where European royals, rich American men (and quite a number of middle class ones), kept mistresses in the 19th Century that they professed their love to and sometimes foolishly spent their fortunes on. Marriage solely for economic reasons, or to advance the dynastic interests of their family, in Europe and America, often didn't create much room to love lawfully wedded wives. Many white Christians secretly weren't much different than the openly polygamous and heathen Chinese they decried as immoral. What Wong was trying to show was that Chinese were just as capable as whites in displaying loyalty, virtue, and honor, and were liberal enough to go against traditions. They could exemplify the best of 19th Century Western ideals even in 2nd Century B.C. China. These were the good traits that American popular culture and politicians regularly said the Chinese didn't have which had helped lead to the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act.

Both books feature a climactic armed confrontation. Both heroes attack with the same method. In Wu Chih Tien, anachronistic gunpowder bombs buried underground instantly kill 20,000 of the prince's enemies in battle as they are about to overwhelm him. In Twain's novel, the Connecticut Yankee, surrounded in a similarly desperate situation, anachronistically blows up thousands of armored knights with buried gunpowder bombs. He also uses Gatling guns, and electric fencing against them. Daniel Beard illustrated the explosion of the gunpowder bombs with similar looking pictures.

Wong Chin Foo had several purposes in writing Wu Chih Tien. The usurping empress was an analogy to the Dowager Empress Cixi of the Qing Dynasty. In 1861, Cixi had overthrown the council of regents appointed by the late Emperor Xiangfeng to rule until his infant son, the Emperor Tongzhi, reached his majority. When Tongzhi was allowed to take power in 1873, he publicly clashed with ministers that his mother supported. Cixi became regent again in December 1874 with the announcement that Tongzhi had contracted smallpox. The emperor died in January 1875, leaving many to suspect that he'd been poisoned. The infant son of her sister, Cixi's nephew, was appointed as Emperor Guangxu. In 1898, the Emperor Guangxu, was overthrown by Cixi because of

his reformist beliefs that had led to the so-called Hundred Days of Reform. Many of his liberal aides were executed or fled into exile and their modernization policies were reversed. The emperor was kept under house arrest for the rest of his life. His death at only 37 was announced the day before Cixi's died in 1908, leading many to suspect that he too had been poisoned to prevent him from resuming the reforms after her death. Like Sir Boss in Twain's fiction, the Chinese imperial reform movement centered on the young emperor ultimately failed in modernizing the monarchy because of the ferocious counterattack by the aristocracy and conservatives. The conservative policies that the empress dowager supported kept China backwards and played a major role in China's territorial and economic losses to Western colonialism, the eventual collapse of the Qing Dynasty in 1911, and the creation of the Republic of China in 1912. Wong's story was meant as encouragement for a liberal revolution in China when Chinese would stand up for themselves against their imperial oppressors. Wong Chin Foo was 24 years too early in anticipating the Republic of China and 13 years too late for him to personally see the revolution that overthrew the Qing Dynasty because he died in 1898.

Wong's second purpose was to highlight the heroism and modernity of a Chinese hero and throw that in the face of the Americans. The idea of a Chinese hero was a revolutionary concept that went against everything in 19th Century popular culture in the United States and the Western world. Non-whites were usually presented solely as comic buffoons and evil subhuman caricatures. The echo of this can still be seen in Hollywood movies of today showing the all-white hero or heroes gunning down hundreds or thousands of heartless, perfectly interchangeable, and anonymous Asian enemies. By making a Chinese hero, Wong Chin Foo was saying that Chinese were capable of having the highest virtues and ideals, just as whites imagined for their heroes. Moreover, by claiming that the Wu Chih Tien story was merely a translation of real ancient Chinese history of the 2nd Century B.C. instead of a fictional creation, Wong was indirectly claiming that the Chinese had developed those virtues and ideals independently even before the whites had ever heard of Jesus Christ and Christianity. As Samuel Clemens wrote, Wu Chih Tien was a "charming Chinese story."

Huckleberry Finn similarly challenged the contemporary white American view of African Americans. While Jim is escaping slavery with the help of Huck and Tom Sawyer, Tom is shot in the leg. Tom and Huck both urge Jim to leave the area on their raft as quickly as possible while Huck goes to fetch a doctor. Rather than abandon Tom, Jim stays to help his wounded friend, even though he knows that he risks being taken back into slavery. Huck says about Jim, "I knowed he was white inside, and I reckoned he'd say what he did say—so it was all right now, and I told Tom I was a-going for a doctor. He raised considerable row about it, but me and Jim stuck to it and wouldn't budge; so he was for crawling out and setting the raft loose himself; but we wouldn't let him. Then he give us a piece of his mind, but it didn't do no good." Although saying that Jim was white inside is obviously racist to modern eyes, Mark Twain was in effect saying that Jim, the African American slave, was no different than a free white person in displaying loyalty to a friend and showed great courage in facing the possible consequences without flinching. This

vindicates Huck Finn's previous decision to risk his soul going to hell for trying to free Jim from slavery against all that society had taught him. The resolute and brave Jim is far from the cowering and sniveling "nigger" that was the stock American image of African Americans, then, and for generations afterwards.

At the end of Huckleberry Finn, Huck is preparing to flee American civilization poisoned with such racism and hypocrisy for the freedom of the frontiers and says, "But I reckon I got to light out for the Territory ahead of the rest, because Aunt Sally she's going to adopt me and sivilize me, and I can't stand it. I been there before."

Oddly, despite their similar styles and sarcastic and biting humor, no evidence to date has ever surfaced of either writer directly mentioning the other by name, even though their careers were contemporaneous and they were even signed on as lecturers for the same speaker's bureau at one time. In the 19th Century, a decent living could be had by traveling from city to city delivering lectures on whatever subject the speaker specialized in. A speaker's bureau was an agency that would arrange these tours and would often have several lecturers on the same ticket. Wong Chin Foo even wrote for many of the same magazines that Mark Twain appeared in. Obviously Clemens had read Wong Chin Foo's work since he'd commented on it in his journal and specifically requested the services of Daniel Beard for the art in Connecticut Yankee because of Beard's work illustrating Wu Chih Tien.

Wong Chin Foo was probably the most famous Chinese living in the United States because of his voluminous writing in the English language and publicity hungry showmanship. Would Mark Twain, who was so publicly known for his interest and sympathy for the Chinese, passed up the opportunity to meet with Wong Chin Foo, even if it was just to share a joke or two? Would Wong Chin Foo have declined the meeting? Nobody today knows the answer, but the possibility that the greatest American writer of the 19th Century and the greatest Chinese American writer of the 19th Century met and were directly connected to each other remains an intriguing possibility.

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