

Humanizing the Other
Roughing It – Mark Twain and the Chinese in 1872
By Philip Chin

Samuel Clemens expanded on his pro-Chinese feelings in his 1872 book, *Roughing It*. The book is a narration of the life of Samuel Clemens in the American West during the 1860s after he'd deserted the Confederate cause during the Civil War and traveled to Nevada and California. During this time, he'd adopted the pen name of Mark Twain as a writer for the Territorial Enterprise newspaper in Nevada, and the witty persona that would eventually bring him worldwide fame. This book would firmly establish his national fame as a popular chronicler of the stories and tall tales of the American West.

He devoted an entire chapter to addressing the Chinese issue, concentrating on those Chinese he'd encountered in Virginia City, Nevada. Silver had been discovered there in 1859 causing the city to become a boomtown. The Comstock Lode, as the discovery was named, was the biggest silver strike discovered in the United States until that time. The riches to be won from the ground, as well as the profits from serving the miners, attracted a great share of Chinese immigrants as well as thousands of immigrants from all around the world. The estimated wealth that was extracted in the prime boom years, that stretched from about 1860 to 1880, was about half a billion dollars in today's money. This led to Nevada still having the nickname of the "Silver State."

From the first paragraph of the chapter, Mark Twain let fly with his biting wit, lashing out at the white Americans that abused Chinese, and praising their work ethic while contrasting them strongly against whites who refused to do the same lowly jobs. He also decried the legal bar against Chinese being allowed to testify in American courts, thus making them vulnerable to murder, robbery, and every other crime. The vehemence and wit with which he ends the paragraph with his sarcastic observation of the "land of the free" was obviously influenced by the violent 1864 incident that he'd witnessed on Brannan Street in San Francisco in 1864. The white butchers incited their dogs to attack an innocent Chinese laundryman as a grinning police officer looked on. As the injured man lay helplessly on the ground one butcher took it upon himself to knock out his teeth with a brick. The scene had so profoundly shocked Clemens that it marked a turning point in his attitude towards non-whites, one that would continue to influence him throughout the rest of his life.

CHAPTER LIV.

Of course there was a large Chinese population in Virginia—it is the case with every town and city on the Pacific coast. 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 cruellest 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.

The latter incident was not uncommon in San Francisco at the time. A New York Tribune article of June 3, 1871 mentioned, "San Francisco, June 2 - The police are endeavoring to arrest a gang of boys who stoned to death an inoffensive Chinaman on Fourth St. yesterday afternoon. Dozens of people witnessed the assault, but did not interfere until the murder was complete. No attempt was then made to arrest the murderers."

Twain went on to describe where Chinese lived and what they worked at in Virginia City. He was either oblivious or unaware of the fact that such "Chinatowns" that were formed were usually the result of whites not wanting Chinese living in their neighborhood and officially, through municipal and state laws, and unofficially, through the threat or actual use of violence, confined them to certain restricted areas of a city or county, usually some wasteland that nobody else wanted. In the face of random and pervasive racist violence, Chinese also generally felt safer gathering together for whatever mutual protection they could offer each other in such racial enclaves.

There are seventy thousand (and possibly one hundred thousand) Chinamen on the Pacific coast. There were about a thousand in Virginia. They were penned into a "Chinese quarter"—a thing which they do not particularly object to, as they are fond of herding together. Their buildings were of wood; usually only one story high, and set thickly together along streets scarcely wide enough for a wagon to pass through. Their quarter was a little removed from the rest of the town. The chief employment of Chinamen in towns is to wash clothing. They always send a bill, like this below, pinned to the clothes. It is mere ceremony, for it does not enlighten the customer much. Their price for washing was \$2.50 per dozen—rather cheaper than white people could afford to wash for at that time. A very common sign on the Chinese houses was: "See Yup, Washer and Ironer"; "Hong Wo, Washer"; "Sam Sing & Ah Hop, Washing." The house servants, cooks, etc., in California and Nevada, were chiefly Chinamen. There were few white servants and no Chinawomen so employed. Chinamen make good house servants, being quick, obedient, patient, quick to learn and tirelessly industrious. They do not need to be taught a thing twice, as a general thing. 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.

The last part was obviously indicative that Clemens still bought into the popular and racist American narrative that the Chinese were imitators rather than inventors. This popular belief (still echoed in some circles today) was reflected in the less than high-minded debates in Congress in 1882 that led to the Chinese Exclusion Act. When confronted with the fact that the Chinese had invented the printing press, gunpowder, and the compass, Senator John P. Jones of Nevada confidently stated, "In reply to that, I can say to him that the very best authority denies them the honor of those inventions. The Count de

Gobineau, in his very able *History of the Diversity of the Races*, absolutely lays it down and, I think, conclusively proves that they had nothing to do with these inventions, but stole them from stray Aryan Caucasian people who had wandered into their midst." (The actual work by Count de Gobineau is titled, *An Essay on the Inequality of the Human Races*, released between 1853 and 1855. It was the first work of what became the crackpot field of scientific racism, the pseudoscience that equated the Aryan race with whites and exalted the racial superiority of such, which the Nazis later adopted as their own racial philosophy.) Some of the white supremacist views that Clemens had grown up with in small-town Missouri in the 1840s and 1850s before the Civil War, were obviously difficult beliefs to break. He then had a dig at the comparatively low state of American education in contrast to the Chinese. Something that would be familiar from the repeated annual comparison and anguished howling about international educational rankings between the United States and China today. Mark Twain also admired Chinese thrift and industry. They wasted nothing, even utilizing those things that whites threw away and making something of it.

All Chinamen can read, write and cipher with easy facility—pity but all our petted voters could. In California they rent little patches of ground and do a deal of gardening. They will raise surprising crops of vegetables on a sand pile. They waste nothing. What is rubbish to a Christian, a Chinaman carefully preserves and makes useful in one way or another. He gathers up all the old oyster and sardine cans that white people throw away, and procures marketable tin and solder from them by melting. He gathers up old bones and turns them into manure. In California he gets a living out of old mining claims that white men have abandoned as exhausted and worthless—and then the officers come down on him once a month with an exorbitant swindle to which the legislature has given the broad, general name of “foreign” mining tax, but it is usually inflicted on no foreigners but Chinamen. This swindle has in some cases been repeated once or twice on the same victim in the course of the same month—but the public treasury was no additionally enriched by it, probably.

Mark Twain here touched upon one of the most egregious but legal means of discrimination against the Chinese. Beginning with California in 1850, laws had been passed across the Western states to tax foreign miners for their right to work. In California, the 1850 tax amounted to \$20 a month, a princely ransom in those days that was far too high for anyone to reasonably pay. The law eventually had to be repealed in 1851 because it was too unrealistic. To make their discriminatory target and intent even more clear, California then passed a new foreign miner’s tax in 1852, to force all persons “ineligible for citizenship to pay \$4 a month. Since Chinese were the only people “ineligible for citizenship” under American law at the time who were working in California mines it was obvious who the law was aimed at. It is estimated that the foreign miner tax in California contributed over half the annual state revenue collected from 1850 to 1870. Under both the 1850 and 1852 laws, official government agents and private citizens made it their business to collect money from the Chinese whenever they felt like it under the guise of enforcing the foreign miner tax. Since the Chinese had no recourse for justice in American courts, because they were barred from testifying against whites in any court, every crime against them, including extortion, armed robbery, and murder, was perfectly legal under state laws across most of the Western United States.

He then detailed Chinese burial customs and the ways in which American state legislatures interfered with these customs as a way of discouraging Chinese immigration. He also mentions Anson Burlingame, the former American diplomatic representative to China appointed by President Lincoln, who'd become the Chinese diplomatic representative to the world in 1867, at the request of the Chinese government and with the consent of the American government. As detailed in a previous article in this series, Samuel Clemens had been considered as the replacement for Burlingame in China as American diplomatic representative, but had turned down the offer as he felt he'd make more money as a writer.

Chinamen hold their dead in great reverence—they worship their departed ancestors, in fact. Hence, in China, a man's front yard, back yard, or any other part of his premises, is made his family burying ground, in order that he may visit the graves at any and all times. Therefore that huge empire is one mighty cemetery; it is ridged and wringled from its centre to its circumference with graves—and inasmuch as every foot of ground must be made to do its utmost, in China, lest the swarming population suffer for food, the very graves are cultivated and yield a harvest, custom holding this to be no dishonor to the dead. Since the departed are held in such worshipful reverence, a Chinaman cannot bear that any indignity be offered the places where they sleep. Mr. Burlingame said that herein lay China's bitter opposition to railroads; a road could not be built anywhere in the empire without disturbing the graves of their ancestors or friends.

A Chinaman hardly believes he could enjoy the hereafter except his body lay in his beloved China; also, he desires to receive, himself, after death, that worship with which he has honored his dead that preceded him. Therefore, if he visits a foreign country, he makes arrangements to have his bones returned to China in case he dies; if he hires to go to a foreign country on a labor contract, there is always a stipulation that his body shall be taken back to China if he dies; if the government sells a gang of Coolies to a foreigner for the usual five-year term, it is specified in the contract that their bodies shall be restored to China in case of death. On the Pacific coast the Chinamen all belong to one or another of several great companies or organizations, and these companies keep track of their members, register their names, and ship their bodies home when they die. The See Yup Company is held to be the largest of these. The Ning Yeong Company is next, and numbers eighteen thousand members on the coast. Its headquarters are at San Francisco, where it has a costly temple, several great officers (one of whom keeps regal state in seclusion and cannot be approached by common humanity), and a numerous priesthood. In it I was shown a register of its members, with the dead and the date of their shipment to China duly marked. Every ship that sails from San Francisco carries away a heavy freight of Chinese corpses—or did, at least, until the legislature, with an ingenious refinement of Christian cruelty, forbade the shipments, as a neat underhanded way of deterring Chinese immigration. The bill was offered, whether it passed or not. It is my impression that it passed. There was another bill—it became a law—compelling every incoming Chinaman to be vaccinated on the wharf and pay a duly appointed quack (no decent doctor would defile himself with such legalized robbery) ten dollars for it. As few importers of Chinese would want to go to an expense like that, the law-makers thought this would be another heavy blow to Chinese immigration.

Mark Twain then wrote about several unpleasant but true facts of Chinese American life in the 19th Century. Such things, as anti-Chinese writers and demagogues were quick to shout at every opportunity, would negatively influence American views of the Chinese and immigration policies well into the 20th Century. To understand how this situation came

about requires some historical background. In 1870, 90.3% of the Chinese American population were men, almost all of them young men. This was a reflection of the fact that most Chinese in the early 1870s intended to go home to wives in China after they'd made their fortune in America. By 1875, the Page Act, had almost completely cutoff the possibility of any immigration by Chinese women. Congress and American immigration officials took the view that any Chinese woman attempting to enter the United States should be presumed to be a prostitute unless they could prove themselves otherwise, then made it almost impossible for them to prove the fact. This racist view not only reflected the despised status of Chinese in America but the even lower view of Chinese women that Americans had that lasted for generations. By 1880, the male Chinese American population made up 96.4% of the total Chinese, a situation that continued to remain unbalanced until the immigration laws changed in 1965. The stated intent in Congress was to drive the Chinese to eventual extinction in America.

Like many bored young men of any race with nothing better to do with their money and time, and no respectable women to marry and moderate their more wild tendencies, some of these young Chinese fell into vices such as drug addiction, prostitution, and gambling. It should be remembered that drugs such as opium and cocaine were perfectly legal in 19th Century America. Drugs and poisons were used haphazardly and indiscriminately in everyday American medicines, drinks, and household products in such quantities that they would draw lengthy prison sentences today. The drug den scenes that Mark Twain wrote about weren't mysteries to whites, but whites generally ignored genteelly hidden drug addictions in their own neighborhoods, or blamed the obvious white addicts who'd completely fallen out of polite society on convenient scapegoats, the corrupting and alien culture of the "evil Chinese."

The subject of Chinese food was also touched upon, repeating the racist assumption that this regularly included servings of mice or other rodents. It should be remembered that 19th Century China was not a pleasant place to live in. With regular natural disasters such as epic floods, civil wars that killed millions of people, and mass starvation as a result of these events, the Chinese population not only had great reason to immigrate, including to a hostile United States, but practice in eating whatever came to hand to avoid starving to death. The survival instincts of all human beings has historically not been above eating mice, rats, or anything else under dire circumstances, regardless of nationality or race. The fact that Americans couldn't recognize what was being served in Chinese food, and generally couldn't ask because of the language barrier, allied with what perhaps started out as missionary reports of what starving Chinese had been reduced to in China, has led to a continued misunderstanding of what Chinese regularly eat that continues to this day. For anti-Chinese campaigners, it was easy to go from the false assumption that if Chinese regularly ate rodents, then they were also spreaders of the diseases that rodents carried, and should be kept from immigrating to the United States.

What the Chinese quarter of Virginia was like—or, indeed, what the Chinese quarter of any Pacific coast town was and is like—may be gathered from this item which I printed in the Enterprise while reporting for that paper:

CHINATOWN.—Accompanied by a fellow reporter, we made a trip through our Chinese quarter the other night. The Chinese have built their portion of the city to suit themselves; and as they keep neither carriages nor wagons, their streets are not wide enough, as a general thing, to admit of the passage of vehicles. At ten o'clock at night the Chinaman may be seen in all his glory. In every little cooped-up, dingy cavern of a hut, faint with the odor of burning Joss-lights and with nothing to see the gloom by save the sickly, guttering tallow candle, were two or three yellow, long-tailed vagabonds, coiled up on a sort of short truckle-bed, smoking opium, motionless and with their lustreless eyes turned inward from excess of satisfaction—or rather the recent smoker looks thus, immediately after having passed the pipe to his neighbor—for opium-smoking is a comfortless operation, and requires constant attention. A lamp sits on the bed, the length of the long pipe-stem from the smoker's mouth; he puts a pellet of opium on the end of a wire, sets it on fire, and plasters it into the pipe much as a Christian would fill a hole with putty; then he applies the bowl to the lamp and proceeds to smoke—and the stewing and frying of the drug and the gurgling of the juices in the stem would well-nigh turn the stomach of a statue. 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.

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. Mr. Sing had in his store a thousand articles of merchandise, curious to behold, impossible to imagine the uses of, and beyond our ability to describe.

His ducks, however, and his eggs, we could understand; the former were split open and flattened out like codfish, and came from China in that shape, and the latter were plastered over with some kind of paste which kept them fresh and palatable through the long voyage.

We found Mr. Hong Wo, No. 37 Chow-chow street, making up a lottery scheme—in fact we found a dozen others occupied in the same way in various parts of the quarter, for about every third Chinaman runs a lottery, and the balance of the tribe “buck” at it. “Tom,” who speaks faultless English, and used to be chief and only cook to the Territorial Enterprise, when the establishment kept bachelor's hall two years ago, said that “Sometime Chinaman buy ticket one dollar hap, ketch um two tree hundred, sometime no ketch um anything; lottery like one man fight um seventy—may-be he whip, may-be he get whip heself, welly good.”

However, the percentage being sixty-nine against him, the chances are, as a general thing, that “he get whip heself.” We could not see that these lotteries differed in any respect from our own, save that the figures being Chinese, no ignorant white man might ever hope to succeed in telling “t'other from which;” the manner of drawing is similar to ours.

Sounding like a wide-eyed tourist in any Chinatown today, Twain then described shopping and buying tourist knickknacks (the unscratchable stone he talks about must have been jade, which would have been nearly impervious to the low-quality steel that was common in the 1860s), having Chinese food with chopsticks, and watching an amazing demonstration of the use of the abacus.

Mr. See Yup keeps a fancy store on Live Fox street. He sold us fans of white feathers, gorgeously ornamented; perfumery that smelled like Limburger cheese, Chinese pens, and watch-charms made of a stone unscratchable with steel instruments, yet polished and tinted like the inner coat of a sea-shell. As tokens of his esteem, See Yup presented the party with gaudy plumes made of gold tinsel and trimmed with peacocks' feathers.

We ate chow-chow with chop-sticks in the celestial restaurants; our comrade chided the moon-eyed damsels in front of the houses for their want of feminine reserve; we received protecting Josh-lights from our hosts and "dickered" for a pagan God or two. Finally, we were impressed with the genius of a Chinese book-keeper; he figured up his accounts on a machine like a gridiron with buttons strung on its bars; the different rows represented units, tens, hundreds and thousands. He fingered them with incredible rapidity—in fact, he pushed them from place to place as fast as a musical professor's fingers travel over the keys of a piano.

He then ended the chapter with another strong condemnation of anti-Chinese violence and attitudes, ascribing such feelings to the lower classes in America and the policemen and politicians that catered to them.

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.

In his own flawed way, Samuel Clemens, through his writings as Mark Twain, was showing improvement in his attitudes towards non-whites. Although he continued to exhibit some strongly racist beliefs, these were increasingly in comparatively minor areas. The Chinese have strange customs, language, and beliefs, Mark Twain says in *Rouging It*, but they are also fellow human beings that work hard and honestly and aren't completely different from white Americans. They don't deserve to be mistreated or murdered. Samuel Clemens had come a long way from the angry young man of 1853 who'd observed a crowded and racially polyglot New York City street and wrote, "...to wade through this mass of human vermin would raise the ire of the most patient person that ever lived."

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