

Humanizing the Other
Mark Twain and the Struggle Against Imperialism Part 3
By Philip Chin

Mark Twain's bitter article against imperialism, "To Those That Sit in Darkness," appeared in North American Review in February 1901. The start of the 20th Century was still consumed with the business of the previous century. China's repeated defeats from the Opium War onwards resulted in the creation of European and eventually Japanese colonies in China. China was also forced to pay heavy indemnities to the victorious powers in silver to recompense them for their military expenses and to pay damages to the colonial powers for losing each war. Such heavy payments also insured that China was unable to raise enough money to pay for building modern military forces in sufficient quantity to defend itself against further encroachments and at the same time also pay for the corrupt expenses of the Qing court. Famously the money set aside for the development of a modern Chinese navy was diverted after 1888 into paying for upgrades and construction at the Summer Palace by Empress Dowager Cixi. The neglect of the navy and poor leadership was made obvious by the utter annihilation and capture of many of the modern ships of the Imperial Chinese Navy in the Sino-Japanese War of 1894-1895. The army was not much better off. A few units were modernized but most remained armed with swords, spears, and bows to fight Western rifles, machine-guns, and artillery. Most of these modern units were destroyed during the Boxer Rebellion that broke out in 1899 and ended in 1900 with another Chinese defeat.

The Boxer Rebellion broke out when Chinese rebels, tacitly, and later openly supported by the Qing Dynasty, tried to drive the foreigners out of China by military force. The violence included the wholesale murder of Chinese and European Christians and their families. The Chinese Christians were targeted because they were seen as Western collaborators because of their religion and the taint of association with the foreigners not for any actual treason committed. The foreign diplomatic delegations were besieged in their district in Beijing and only held out with the key assistance of Chinese Christians that had taken shelter with them. Finally the troops of the Eight-Nation Alliance, consisting of the British Empire, France, the United States, Russia, Germany, Austria-Hungary, Italy, and Japan broke through the siege to rescue the diplomats and defeated the Boxers and the Qing troops. A punishing peace treaty was then imposed upon China.

Atrocities were committed by both sides in the conflict. Naturally European and American audiences mainly heard about the atrocities committed by the Chinese rather than those committed by their own troops against Chinese. This fueled the indignation of Westerners. Heavy reparations were demanded from the Chinese in the peace treaty to be paid in silver. Demands for silver were also made directly on the Chinese people as well by private individuals, Americans and Europeans, backed up by military force. This was effectively armed robbery because no care was taken to know if the Chinese had even been involved in the conflict. This was another cause for even more resentment by the Chinese and was particularly upsetting to Samuel Clemens as the private individuals involved were Christian missionaries. Clemens throughout his writing career cast his strongest barbs against hypocrites, particularly against Christians who preached high ideals yet conducted themselves in an entirely contradictory way.

Samuel Clemens high dudgeon was reflected in a letter he wrote on New Year's Eve on the last day of 1900:

A GREETING FROM THE NINETEENTH TO THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

I bring you the stately nation named Christendom, returning, bedraggled, besmirched, and dishonored, from pirate raids in Kiao-Chou, Manchuria, South Africa, and the Philippines, with her soul full of meanness, her pocket full of boodle, and her mouth full of pious hypocrisies. Give her soap and towel, but hide the looking-glass.

The title that he selected for his article, “To Those That Sit in Darkness,” is itself a provocation. It is taken from Matthew 4:16 in the Bible and was often used by Christian missionaries to describe their efforts to spread Christianity to non-Christian lands. The original passage reads in the King James version:

The people which sat in darkness saw great light;
and to them which sat in the region and shadow of death
light is sprung up.

Mark Twain article contrasted the high-minded rhetoric of the Christians versus their actual behavior and was definitely meant to be as controversial as possible by attacking deeply held beliefs about colonialism and the position of non-white people in the world. His article asked how the obvious hypocrisy of Christians would look “to those that sit in darkness.”

The article begins on an uncharacteristically cheery note describing the Christmas just past in 1900, the last Christmas of the 19th Century, “Christmas will dawn in the United States over a people full of hope and aspiration and good cheer. Such a condition means contentment and happiness. The carping grumbler who may here and there go forth will find few to listen to him. The majority will wonder what is the matter with him and pass on.’--New York Tribune, on Christmas Eve.”

He then immediately crashed the article down to earth by quoting the New York Sun newspaper highlighting the horrid conditions found in the East Side of New York City, “...where it is the rule, rather than the exception, that *murder, rape, robbery and theft go unpunished*--in short where the Premium of the most awful forms of Vice is the Profit of the politicians.” His message was that if American missionaries wanted to improve the morality and living conditions of people not living Christian lives they didn’t have to go all the way to China to do it but literally in their own backyard. He then continues his article with newspaper coverage of the Boxer Rebellion, in particular highlighting the outrageous actions of one American missionary:

The following news from China appeared in *The Sun*, of New York, on Christmas Eve. The italics are mine:

The Rev. Mr. Ament, of the American Board of Foreign Missions, has returned from a trip which he made for the purpose of collecting indemnities for damages done by Boxers. *Everywhere he went he compelled the Chinese to pay.* He says that all his native Christians are now provided for. He had 700 of them under his charge, and 300 were killed. He has *collected 300 taels for each of these murders, and has compelled full payment for all the property belonging to Christians* that was destroyed. He also assessed *finés* amounting to THIRTEEN TIMES the amount of the indemnity. *This money will be used for the propagation of the Gospel.*

Mr. Ament declares that the compensation he has collected is *moderate*, when compared with the amount secured by the Catholics, who demand, in addition to money, *head for head.* They collect

500 taels for each murder of a Catholic. In the Wenchiu country, 680 Catholics were killed, and for this the European Catholics here demand 750,000 strings of cash and 680 *heads*.

In the course of a conversation, Mr. Ament referred to the attitude of the missionaries toward the Chinese. He said: "I deny emphatically that the missionaries are *vindictive*, that they *generally* looted, or that they have done anything *since* the siege that *the circumstances did not demand*. I criticise the Americans. *The soft hand of the Americans is not as good as the mailed fist of the Germans*. If you deal with the Chinese with a soft hand they will take advantage of it.'

"The statement that the French Government will return the loot taken by the French soldiers, is the source of the greatest amusement here. The French soldiers were more systematic looters than the Germans, and it is a fact that to-day *Catholic Christians*, carrying French flags and armed with modern guns, *are looting villages* in the Province of Chili."

By happy luck, we get all these glad tidings on Christmas Eve--just in time to enable us to celebrate the day with proper gaiety and enthusiasm. Our spirits soar, and we find we can even make jokes: Tails I win, Heads you lose.

The tael was a unit of Chinese silver currency that weighed between 37 and 40 grams. The amount of silver extorted from what were most likely innocent Chinese townsmen, villagers, and farmers was thus about 11,100 to 12,000 grams of silver (between 24 and 25 pounds in imperial weight or 11 and 12 kilos). The impact of the massive robbery of silver by the allied governments and their private citizens in China was reflected in figures collected by the United States Government which spoke of the sharp decline on the London-based world silver market in 1902. Prices fell from the modern equivalent of £65.40 per ounce in January to £56.84 in December, "The principal factor in the market was China, the balance of trade being overwhelmingly against her and the tremendous indemnity exacted by the powers making her a seller rather than a purchaser of silver." Silver prices would have been even more depressed, the government said, without increased purchases from India in the same year. The amount of silver that Reverend Ament extorted would be the equivalent of about \$1,300,000 in today's money, just a tiny part of what Chinese were now being forced to pay the Western powers and Japan.

Mark Twain then made fun of American pretensions of civilized behavior by describing Reverend Ament as having only acted in the traditional American spirit. That is, the spirit inherited from Native Americans. As everyone in America very well knew, Native Americans at this time were still being regularly described and treated as "savages" by the white media and the public. In our jaded 21st Century, when clergy being exposed as acting in a hypocritical or barbaric fashion seems to be a weekly staple of the news, it is probably hard to imagine how such an attack against a clergyman would have been seen in 1901. Christian clergymen of that era were seen as pillars of the community, exemplars of the highest Christian values and piety. To attack one of them and accuse him of acting like a barbarous Native American would have shocked many in Twain's audience.

Twain next placed whites in the position of the Chinese as the "white Boxer" to highlight just how badly Americans were acting in China.

Our Reverend Ament is the right man in the right place. What we want of our missionaries out there is, not that they shall merely represent in their acts and persons the grace and gentleness and charity and loving kindness of our religion, but that they shall also represent the American spirit. The oldest Americans are the Pawnees. Macallum's History says:

"When a white Boxer kills a Pawnee and destroys his property, the other Pawnees do not trouble to seek *him* out, they kill any white person that comes along; also, they make some white village pay deceased's heirs the full cash value of deceased, together with full cash value of the property destroyed; they also make the village pay, in addition, *thirteen times* the value of that property into a fund for the dissemination of the Pawnee religion, which they regard as the best of all religions for the softening and humanizing of the heart of man. It is their idea that it is only fair and right that the innocent should be made to suffer for the guilty, and that it is better that ninety and nine innocent should suffer than that one guilty person should escape."

In the next paragraph, Twain sarcastically proposed that a monument be raised to Reverend Ament to commemorate his great feat of raising such a vast sum of money in the "service of propagating the Gospel." He also proposed that the monument include representations of 680 heads, because the Catholics deserved to be remembered as well for demanding that such a number of Chinese be killed in retaliation for the murder of a like number of Catholics. This was on top of the Catholic's own even larger demand for silver.

Mr. Ament's financial feat of squeezing a thirteen-fold indemnity out of the pauper peasants to square other people's offenses, thus condemning them and their women and innocent little children to inevitable starvation and lingering death, in order that the blood-money so acquired might be "*used for the propagation of the Gospel,*" does not flutter my serenity; although the act and the words, taken together, concrete a blasphemy so hideous and so colossal that, without doubt, its mate is not findable in the history of this or of any other age. Yet, if a layman had done that thing and justified it with those words, I should have shuddered, I know. Or, if I had done the thing and said the words myself--however, the thought is unthinkable, irreverent as some imperfectly informed people think me. Sometimes an ordained minister sets out to be blasphemous. When this happens, the layman is out of the running; he stands no chance.

We have Mr. Ament's impassioned assurance that the missionaries are not "vindictive." Let us hope and pray that they will never become so, but will remain in the almost morbidly fair and just and gentle temper which is affording so much satisfaction to their brother and champion to-day.

Twain then went on to quote the Tokyo correspondent from the New York Tribune from an article that appeared on Christmas Eve in 1900, "The missionary question, of course, occupies a foremost place in the discussion. It is now felt as essential that the Western Powers take cognizance of the sentiment here, that religious invasions of Oriental countries by powerful Western organizations are tantamount to filibustering expeditions, and should not only be discountenanced, but that stern measures should be adopted for their suppression. The feeling here is that the missionary organizations constitute a constant menace to peaceful international relations."

The term "filibuster" is better known today by the political definition it enjoys, but in the 19th Century, it originally described the attempts of private bands of adventurers and mercenaries, oftentimes American, to seize control of various countries through military force. Attempts by filibusters such as William Walker to seize parts of Latin America and Walker's declaration of himself as ruler of Nicaragua before his ultimate defeat, are still remembered, cited, and resented by Latin Americans even today as examples of American arrogance and imperialism. Twain was describing how white missionaries were increasingly becoming viewed as the vanguard for imperialist expansion by non-white people around the world. The propagation of Christianity not only spread the influence of whites, but the murder of missionaries provided the perfect excuse for unlimited imperial expansion and extortion. Twain argued that the game of selling Christianity to the natives as a springboard to conquest was no longer effective, the natives were no longer being fooled by the act.

The Blessings-of-Civilization Trust, wisely and cautiously administered, is a Daisy. There is more money in it, more territory, more sovereignty, and other kinds of emolument, than there is in any other game that is played. But Christendom has been playing it badly of late years, and must certainly suffer by it, in my opinion. She has been so eager to get every stake that appeared on the green cloth, that the People who Sit in Darkness have noticed it--they have noticed it, and have begun to show alarm. They have become suspicious of the Blessings of Civilization. More--they have begun to examine them. This is not well. The Blessings of Civilization are all right, and a good commercial property; there could not be a better, in a dim light. In the right kind of a light, and at a proper distance, with the goods a little out of focus, they furnish this desirable exhibit to the Gentlemen who Sit in Darkness:

He then covered some of the territorial seizures in China that had led to the Boxer Rebellion. The first chronologically was the Russian seizure of Port Arthur (now Lüshunkou District) after the Sino-Japanese War in 1895. After the Japanese defeated China, Russia seized that strategic Chinese port to prevent Japan from holding it with the connivance of France and Germany. They also didn't want to see the Japanese benefit from the war and challenge the Europeans in China. The Japanese resentment this caused was one of the factors that would eventually lead to the Russo-Japanese War that ended in complete Russian defeat in 1905. This in turn would lead to the Japanese seizure of Port Arthur, and the replacement of Russian control of Manchuria by the Japanese, with fateful consequences for how World War II in Asia started.

The second incident happened in 1897 when two German Roman Catholic missionaries were brutally murdered by unknown Chinese assailants. Germany responded by seizing Qinqdao, demanding concessions and damages in silver. The Germans eventually took effective control over all of Shandong Province. Twain also made reference to the infamous speech that Kaiser Wilhelm II made to the German troops sailing off to fight the Boxer Rebellion in 1900. Excised by embarrassed German officials from the official version of the speech, this memorably bombastic passage was widely written about and mocked across the world. Kaiser Wilhelm said, "Should you encounter the enemy, he will be defeated! No quarter will be given! Prisoners will not be taken! Whoever falls into your hands is forfeited. Just as a thousand years ago the Huns under their King Attila made a name for themselves, one that even today makes them seem mighty in history and legend, may the name German be affirmed by you in such a way in China that no Chinese will ever again dare to look cross-eyed at a German."

Next, to our heavy damage, the Kaiser went to playing the game without first mastering it. He lost a couple of missionaries in a riot in Shantung, and in his account he made an overcharge for them. China had to pay a hundred thousand dollars apiece for them, in money; twelve miles of territory, containing several millions of inhabitants and worth twenty million dollars; and to build a monument, and also a Christian church; whereas the people of China could have been depended upon to remember the missionaries without the help of these expensive memorials. This was all bad play. Bad, because it would not, and could not, and will not now or ever, deceive the Person Sitting in Darkness. He knows that it was an overcharge. He knows that a missionary is like any other man: he is worth merely what you can supply his place for, and no more. He is useful, but so is a doctor, so is a sheriff, so is an editor; but a just Emperor does not charge war-prices for such. A diligent, intelligent, but obscure missionary, and a diligent, intelligent country editor are worth much, and we know it; but they are not worth the earth. We esteem such an editor, and we are sorry to see him go; but, when he goes, we should consider twelve miles of territory, and a church, and a fortune, over-compensation for his loss. I mean, if he was a Chinese editor, and we had to settle for him. It is no proper figure for an editor or a missionary; one can get shop-worn kings for less. It

was bad play on the Kaiser's part. It got this property, true; but it produced the Chinese revolt, the indignant uprising of China's traduced patriots, the Boxers. The results have been expensive to Germany, and to the other Disseminators of Progress and the Blessings of Civilization.

The Kaiser's claim was paid, yet it was bad play, for it could not fail to have an evil effect upon Persons Sitting in Darkness in China. They would muse upon the event, and be likely to say: "Civilization is gracious and beautiful, for such is its reputation; but can we afford it? There are rich Chinamen, perhaps they could afford it; but this tax is not laid upon them, it is laid upon the peasants of Shantung; it is they that must pay this mighty sum, and their wages are but four cents a day. Is this a better civilization than ours, and holier and higher and nobler? Is not this rapacity? Is not this extortion? Would Germany charge America two hundred thousand dollars for two missionaries, and shake the mailed fist in her face, and send warships, and send soldiers, and say: 'Seize twelve miles of territory, worth twenty millions of dollars, as additional pay for the missionaries; and make those peasants build a monument to the missionaries, and a costly Christian church to remember them by?' And later would Germany say to her soldiers: 'March through America and slay, giving no quarter; make the German face there, as has been our Hun-face here, a terror for a thousand years; march through the Great Republic and slay, slay, slay, carving a road for our offended religion through its heart and bowels?' Would Germany do like this to America, to England, to France, to Russia? Or only to China the helpless--imitating the elephant's assault upon the field-mice? Had we better invest in this Civilization--this Civilization which called Napoleon a buccaneer for carrying off Venice's bronze horses, but which steals our ancient astronomical instruments from our walls, and goes looting like common bandits--that is, all the alien soldiers except America's; and (Americans again excepted) storms frightened villages and cables the result to glad journals at home every day: 'Chinese losses, 450 killed; ours, one officer and two men wounded. Shall proceed against neighboring village to-morrow, where a massacre is reported.' Can we afford Civilization?"

And, next, Russia must go and play the game injudiciously. She affronts England once or twice--with the Person Sitting in Darkness observing and noting; by moral assistance of France and Germany, she robs Japan of her hard-earned spoil, all swimming in Chinese blood--Port Arthur--with the Person again observing and noting; then she seizes Manchuria, raids its villages, and chokes its great river with the swollen corpses of countless massacred peasants--that astonished Person still observing and noting. And perhaps he is saying to himself: "It is yet another Civilized Power, with its banner of the Prince of Peace in one hand and its loot-basket and its butcher-knife in the other. Is there no salvation for us but to adopt Civilization and lift ourselves down to its level?"

With this unforgettable image in mind, Mark Twain then moved on to talk about America's sins in the Philippines.

Department of the Treasury, *Report of the Director of the Mint upon the Production of the Precious Metals in the United States during the Calendar Year 1902*, United States Government Printing Office, 1903, pp. 30-31

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