How Bret Harte’s Satirical Poem “The Heathen Chinee” Helped Inflame Racism in 1870s America

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I had always known Bret Harte (1836–1902) as the first American writer of the American West to gain both a national and an international reputation. His short story, “The Luck of Roaring Camp,” published in 1868, remains a classic to this day. He gained greater fame in 1870, however, for a poem entitled “Plain Language from Truthful James,” popularly known as “The Heathen Chinee.” Harte, who had a deep interest in Chinese culture and deplored the treatment of Chinese immigrants in California during the 1860s and 1870s, wrote the poem as a satire on prejudices against Chinese laborers in the West. Ironically, a number of anti-Chinese immigrant writers and spokesmen ignored the satirical quality of the poem and used it to promote their venomous hatred for the Chinese. In this way, Harte’s satirical work helped formulate certain stereotypes of Chinese immigrants in North America.

During the latter part of the nineteenth century, illustrations of the poem were widely reproduced in magazines and books, on posters, and even on beer pitchers. In fact, it was a small beer pitcher made around 1876 that brought Harte’s poem to my attention. I saw the pitcher on display in the new Art of the Americas Wing at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts. Designed by Karl L.H. Muller for the Union Porcelain Works at the time when the manufacture of porcelain in the United States first became popular, the pitcher shows a jovial King Gambrinus, the mythical king of beer, introducing this drink to Brother Jonathan, an early symbol of America akin to Uncle Sam.

The other side of the pitcher is even more interesting. Here we see a graphic illustration of the main scene from Harte’s “Heathen Chinee.” The poem tells the story of a Chinese man, Ah Sin, who is about to be done in by gold miner Bill Nye for cheating at cards. The illustration shows Nye preparing to knife Ah Sin as cards tumble out of the latter’s sleeve onto the floor.
Harte, who edited the San Francisco-based literary magazine *Overland Monthly* from the late 1860s through the early 1870s, took a great interest in the lives of Chinese immigrants in China. Indeed, there were fifteen substantial articles on the subject in the first twenty-four issues of the magazine between 1868 and 1870. The articles covered a wide range of topics including language, folk customs, and the kinds of jobs that the Chinese held in California. There were also editorial pieces on the political problems facing Chinese in the West, their relationships with the majority white European population there, and attempts by white politicians to place severe restrictions on the civil rights of the Chinese and non-white population (Perry 2010).

Sadly, Harte’s poem appeared at a moment of strong sentiment against Chinese immigration in California. Many of the Irish laborers who moved to California hoping to find steady high-paying jobs following the gold rush found both a depressed economy and thousands of young hardworking Chinese who were willing to work longer hours at lower pay. Ever sympathetic to the Chinese, Harte wrote an article in the March 1867 number of the Springfield *Republican* in which he noted that the “quickwitted, patient, obedient, and faithful” Chinese were “gradually deposing the Irish from their old, recognized positions in the ranks of labor.” Chinese and Irish were competing for many of the same jobs and in many cases it was the Chinese who were getting the better of the situation. Economically depressed California of 1870 saw some of the most vicious anti-Chinese riots and demonstrations in California history (Romeo 2006), including a major riot in Los Angeles that claimed the lives of at least twenty Chinese.

Harte himself openly opposed all forms of racial discrimination — at least racism directed against Chinese immigrants who had been coming to California since 1850. His “Plain Language from Truthful James” specifically satirized Irish laborers’ prejudices against Chinese immigrants in northern California at that time, though the poem itself fails to portray any of its characters in a remotely favorable light.

Among Harte’s early writings is a piece called “John Chinaman.” Despite its derogatory title, the poem earnestly attempts to portray the life of a real Chinese immigrant. The titular “John” was the Harte family’s laundryman, whom Harte knew professionally, not personally. Harte shows both respect and affection for “John,” noting that he is generally “honest, faithful, simple, and painstaking” in his work for Harte’s family (Romeo 2006). In this sense, “John Chinaman” lacks the satiric bite of Harte’s 1870 narrative poem.

“Plain Language” concerns two Irish miners, Bill Nye and “Truthful” James, and a “naïve” Chinese man, Ah Sin, who join in a game euchre. Nye and James plan to cheat Ah Sin. Although Ah Sin at first seems an easy mark, he suddenly begins to win every hand. Clearly he is a better cheater
than either Nye or James. By the end of the poem, the hypocrisy of the situation is clear: the two white men may cheat the Chinese, but not the other way around. At sixty lines, the poem is short enough to reproduce in full:

Which I wish to remark,  
And my language is plain,  
That for ways that are dark  
And for tricks that are vain,  
The heathen Chinee is peculiar,  
Which the same I would rise to explain.

Ah Sin was his name;  
And I shall not deny,  
In regard to the same,  
What that name might imply;  
But his smile it was pensive and childlike,  
As I frequent remarked to Bill Nye.

It was August the third,  
And quite soft was the skies;  
Which it might be inferred  
That Ah Sin was likewise;  
Yet he played it that day upon William  
And me in a way I despise.

Which we had a small game,  
And Ah Sin took a hand:  
It was Euchre. The same  
He did not understand;  
But he smiled as he sat by the table,  
With the smile that was childlike and bland.

Yet the cards they were stocked  
In a way that I grieve,  
And my feelings were shocked  
At the state of Nye's sleeve,  
Which was stuffed full of aces and bowers,  
And the same with intent to deceive.

But the hands that were played  
By that heathen Chinee,  
And the points that he made,  
Were quite frightful to see,—  
Till at last he put down a right bower,  
Which the same Nye had dealt unto me.

Then I looked up at Nye,  
And he gazed upon me;  
And he rose with a sigh,  
And said, "Can this be?"
We are ruined by Chinese cheap labor,”—
And he went for that heathen Chinee.

In the scene that ensued
I did not take a hand,
But the floor it was strewed
Like the leaves on the strand
With the cards that Ah Sin had been hiding,
In the game “he did not understand.”

In his sleeves, which were long,
He had twenty-four packs,—
Which was coming it strong,
Yet I state but the facts;
And we found on his nails, which were taper,
What is frequent in tapers,—that’s wax.

Which is why I remark,
And my language is plain,
That for ways that are dark
And for tricks that are vain,
The heathen Chinee is peculiar,—
Which the same I am free to maintain.

Why Harte wrote the poem is not clear. Literary critic Jacqueline Romeo writes that “Harte sent the poem as a light parody of the topical ‘Chinese Question’ to Ambrose Bierce, then editor of the San Francisco News-letter. Bierce promptly returned the piece, urging Harte to publish such a fine poem in the Overland.” It may also be that Harte conceived the piece “as an exercise in low humor, a mockery which imitated the famous chorus of Swinburne’s romantic ‘Atalanta in Cylon’” (Romeo 2006). As Romeo notes, the classical Greek etymology of the word irony is instructive. It derives, in part, from eiron, or “underdog,” a weak but clever stock character from traditional comedy who regularly triumphs over the stupid and boastful “alazon” (Romeo 2006). In “Plain Language,” Harte’s Chinese character is an eiron with an ironic twist.

The ironic twist is that many readers failed to see the satirical bent of Harte’s poem. Taken literally, Harte paints a very ugly picture of Ah Sin — and thus Chinese in general. Ah Sin is described as “heathen” and “peculiar.” He cheats at cards and takes advantage of the naïve whites. Even his name, “Ah Sin” has strong negative connotations.

At that time the West Coast was full of men like Bill Nye and “Truthful James.” Like the two characters in the poem, they sincerely believed that there was nothing wrong with racially superior men like themselves cheating Chinese, Indians, or members of any other non-white minority group. To Harte’s chagrin, many racist whites in California and across the nation were only too glad to endorse the racist overtones of the poem. When later
versions of the poem were published with illustrations of the characters, the two miners were depicted as normal looking white men of the period. Ah Sin, on the other hand, was portrayed as a sinister creature with feline features and a ratlike queue, a version of the stereotypical Chinese character who would appear in later stories, plays and early movies — a sinister, perhaps even evil and certainly untrustworthy alien who served for decades as a foil of frontier melodrama. Ironically, then, Harte’s poem helped define and entrench the feelings of anger, resentment, and suspicion that many whites had for Chinese at that time.

The poem was soon republished in other magazines, often with graphic illustrations, and found its way to England and to the rest of Europe. Plays appeared in New York in the 1870s that followed the storyline or themes of Harte’s work. Jacqueline Romeo writes that the “cultural impact the poem exerted throughout the rest of the nineteenth century cannot be underestimated.” In his “Ah Sin and His Brethren in American Literature,” William Purviance Fenn discusses the poem’s influence on immigration policy. It was regularly quoted in Congress, and it had a similar resonance abroad, especially in England (Romeo 2006). The poem was an international sensation that made Harte one of the best-known American writers in the early 1870s.

Harte’s poem was widely quoted around the world both to condemn and to justify discrimination and violence against the Chinese. Because it was so widely published, it was not uncommon to hear opponents of Chinese immigration quoting passages which they took to demean and humiliate Chinese. Eugene Casserly, a California senator who was vehemently opposed to any further Chinese immigration to the United States, is said to have expressed his appreciation to Harte for painting such a negative portrait of the Chinese (Smee 2010).

It is possible that Harte’s poem did more to shape the popular American conception of Chinese in the late nineteenth century than any other literary work. It popularized the word “heathen” and established an idiomatic association between “heathen” and “Chinese.”

Hart was himself apparently surprised and appalled to see his work misunderstood and misused. Perhaps he had written it in a hasty or flippanter manner without truly considering the ramifications of his words. When asked about it in later years, he called the poem “trash” and characterized it as “the worst poem I ever wrote, possibly the worst poem anyone ever wrote.” On the other hand, he seemed to enjoy the fame that came with its publication. While many pirated versions of the poem were published, some with vivid illustrations depicting the evil and sinister Chinaman, Harte would later authorize publication of illustrated versions of his poem and would even co-write a play entitled “Ah Sin” with Mark Twain.
Harte attempted to clarify his feelings in a later poem, “The Latest Chinese Outrage.” In this work, Ah Sin returns as the leader of a group of Chinese laundrymen who angrily confront a group of miners who have not paid their bill. One of the miners, Joe Johnson, breaks up the crowd of Chinese by charging them and yelling, “A White Man is here.” The Chinese quietly return to their camp. Later the miners show up at the Chinese camp and encounter a tree surrounded by several Chinese men. There is a bamboo cage hanging from the tree containing an opium-dazed Joe Johnson. A sign hanging by the cage announces in Chinese, “A White Man is here.” His eyebrows have been shaved, a queue is attached to his head, and he is wearing a “heathenish suit.” The poem ends with severe criticism of politicians who base their campaigns on anti-immigrant platforms (Romeo 2006).

Harte left California not long after the publication of the poem and eventually moved to Europe where he spent the rest of his life. He continued writing with some success, but ironically his most influential work became a symbol of America’s deep racism and antipathy for Chinese.

Note

†For an image of the pitcher, see Smee 2010.

References:
