

10-1-2010

The Chinese in Bret Harte's *Overland*: A Context for Truthful James

Tara Penry
Boise State University

The Chinese in Bret Harte's *Overland*: A Context for Truthful James

Tara Penry
Boise State University

Which I wish to remark—
And my language is plain—
That for ways that are dark
And for tricks that are vain,
The heathen Chinese is peculiar.
Which the same I would rise to explain.¹

When these lines by Bret Harte appeared in the San Francisco *Overland Monthly* in September 1870 under the title “Plain Language from Truthful James,” they were not the first statement of the magazine on the Chinese in California. For the first two years of its existence, the *Overland* displayed at least as much interest in Chinese culture as in any other single subject, if we can judge from the quantity of articles devoted to the topic. In the magazine’s first twenty-four numbers, under the editorial guidance of Harte himself, fifteen substantial articles were published on the language, folkways, and industries of the Chinese or on political questions concerning their presence in California. By the time that Harte’s “Plain Language” appeared in volume five, the magazine and its contributors seem to have exhausted what they had to say about the Chinese, offering no new articles in that volume. Lacking the context of such articles, new readers of the *Overland* nonetheless would have found a few cues directing them to a satiric reading of the poem; with the help of the earlier articles, established readers could hardly have missed Harte’s intended tone.

In “Plain Language from Truthful James,” two miners hope to cheat the Chinese character Ah Sin in a card game, only to find that he turns the tables and bests them both by holding spare cards of his own inside capacious sleeves. Nearly everyone who comments on the poem has something to say about its widespread cultural influence; despite Harte’s relative sympathy with the Chinese, the poem’s characters and language helped Americans argue in favor of the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. As the poem took on a life of its own, the prejudiced, cheating, and violent Bill Nye became a symbol of decent working men – “the ‘hard-working’ ‘Bill Nyes’ of the Pacific Coast,” according to one eastern periodical²—and the ungrammatical and biased statements of narrator Truthful James were accepted as truthful characterizations of the Chinese. Illustrated editions of the poem issued shortly after its first appearance in the *Overland* exaggerated Bill Nye’s violence against Ah Sin and encouraged readers to view the Chinese character as Truthful James did, as “dark” and “peculiar.”³ The literal or anti-Chinese interpretation of the poem was not a reading encouraged by the *Overland* itself.

In its coverage of Chinese topics during Bret Harte’s term as editor, the *Overland* provides an illustration of the way periodicals can influence textual meaning. As Nancy Glazener has observed, “Different periodicals invite different ways of being read. Through page layouts, announcements and advertisements, illustrations and typography, addresses to readers, and a variety of other signals, a periodical provokes certain kinds of attention and creates certain interpellating identifications for its readers.”⁴ By September 1870, when Harte’s poem appeared, the *Overland Monthly* had declared itself on the employers’ side of local debates about the competitive pressure of Chinese men on California wages—welcoming Chinese labor. The magazine had also established a selectively sympathetic tone toward Chinese culture, a habit of reticence and skepticism with respect to dialect writing, and a voice of gentility quite at odds with the voice of “Truthful” James. Harte’s own distaste for western racial prejudice has long been clear to scholars.⁵ By examining related contents of the *Overland* and the biographies of significant contributors, we find strong evidence that the magazine itself “invited”—in Glazener’s language—a reading of “Plain Language from Truthful James” consistent with the author’s satiric intentions.

For those who happened to pick up the *Overland Monthly* for the first time in September 1870, “Plain Language from Truthful James” would have seemed an anomaly in a magazine whose predominant tone was genteel, whose diction was polished, and whose perspective was cosmopolitan and liberal. The first-person vernacular speaker of Harte’s poem, a miner, understands the Chinese card-player Ah Sin only in stereotypes; James accepts his friend Bill Nye’s habit of cheating at cards and his ready violence toward his Chinese opponent. In eleven prose articles that

precede “Plain Language” in the September issue, on the other hand, first-person narrators use polite, conventional diction—not dialect—to tell their stories, and for the most part they avoid violence and topics of contemporary political conflict. In the magazine’s liberal spirit, one author writes open-mindedly of Mormons, “Whatever one thinks of their religion, one must admire their hard work and privations.”⁶ Another demonstrates the evils of lynch law and capital punishment by narrating a case in which community opinion came close to punishing two innocent men.⁷ Yet another article celebrates a “greatly respected old Indian” who acquired property near the Mexican border and lived the life of a *ranchero*, with servants and educated children.⁸ In these and other articles, the point of view is broader, more humane, and more sympathizing than in Harte’s poem; violence is deplorable when it occurs and even avoidable with proper understanding of others.

In this context, it would be difficult to read Harte’s dialect poem about cheaters at cards with any tone besides irony. In contrast to the genteel narrators who make efforts to recognize positive human qualities in their diverse subjects, Truthful James sees in Ah Sin only a “childlike and bland” stereotype, which turns out to be grossly incorrect. In stanza four, James thinks the Chinese player “[does] not understand” the game of euchre. After Ah Sin proves to be a better cheater than the narrator’s partner, the phrase from stanza four gets repeated in quotation marks to signify that the narrator should now understand the error of his original judgment. As Bill Nye launches a physical attack on Ah Sin, the floor becomes covered “With cards that Ah Sin had been hiding, / In the game ‘he did not understand.’” But instead of correcting his false impression and becoming a more liberal thinker, Truthful James ends where he began, repeating in line five of the last stanza exactly the racist assertion of the same line in the first stanza: “The heathen Chinese is peculiar.” Assured of his own right judgment, Truthful James refuses to learn. Such “bland” self-assurance in the face of contrary facts was not the attitude cultivated elsewhere in the September 1870 *Overland*.

For all the cues of the September issue, regular *Overland* readers had even more reason to understand “Plain Language” as a satire of the narrator’s narrow prejudice. The “ways” and “tricks” of the Chinese were less “dark” and less “vain” for subscribers who had kept up with the journal since 1868, largely because of the contributions of one man, already the author of twelve ethnological articles about the Chinese in California.⁹ Like editor Bret Harte, Augustus Ward Loomis found the worst class of Chinese immigrants more desirable company than the worst class of Americans in California; he also had more to say than Harte about the best of Chinese culture. Before a California State Senate committee in April 1876, as other clergy, merchants, and politicians lined up to recommend limits on Chinese immigration, Loomis testified that the “moral condition” of Chinese people at home was “very commendable” and that “we have people in this city who are worse than any Chinaman that can be picked up.”¹⁰ Furthermore, he asserted, “Any nation having a grade of morals superior to those taught by Confucius and the Chinese classics cannot be found”; the shortcomings of Chinese people in “liv[ing] up to the teachings of their sages” were no worse than comparable shortcomings among Christians in California who “go to church and hear good things, but . . . don’t mind them.” When asked frankly by a frustrated senator, “As a race are the Chinese honest or dishonest?” Loomis answered in contrast to many other professional men giving testimony, “Honest.”¹¹ His unwillingness to be caught in a sweeping criticism of the Chinese “race” may have been what a Chinese speaker had in mind in 1884 when he praised Loomis for his history of faithfulness when “all others had gone against the Chinese.”¹² Although his *Overland* articles reveal ethnocentrism in matters of science and religion, what’s remarkable about them is the author’s implication that if the Chinese are expected to improve in some areas of their culture by contact with America, English-speaking Americans must change too, replacing ignorance, prejudice, and scorn with cultural information and even selective admiration.

When he began writing for the *Overland* in August 1868, A. W. Loomis was approaching his ninth anniversary as a missionary with the Presbyterian Chinese Mission Church and school of San Francisco. In his early fifties, he could claim as much authority on Chinese subjects as any white man in town. Born (like Bret Harte) in New York state, he had spent six years as a missionary in China in the 1840s and subsequently kept up his studies of Chinese language and history. At the time of his death in 1891, the San Francisco *Morning Call* would refer to him as “a thorough master of the [Chinese] language” and regard him “as one of the best, if not the best, Chinese scholar in the city.”¹³ His *Overland* essays surely contributed to this reputation, publicizing beyond his small church his understanding of Chinese language, culture, and history.

As this brief history suggests, Loomis was no Truthful James. In the polished and conventional diction typical of *Overland* contributions, he educated readers about the meaning of Chinese commercial signs (by translating them into English), the organization of the Six Companies that controlled Chinese immigration, the eclectic reading tastes of educated Chinese people, and other topics. At times, his *Overland* essays sound conventionally ethnocentric, as

when he dismisses the “superstitions” of Chinese religion as “foolish” or disparages Chinese medicine for its inferiority to a medical science based on western anatomy, physiology, and chemistry.¹⁴ But he also finds much to admire in Chinese culture, such as the nation’s respect for education and literacy, and the inculcation of virtues such as respect for elders and faithfulness in marriage.

Several of Loomis’ articles contain anecdotes with a common structure of discovery very much at odds with the circular structure of “Plain Language from Truthful James.” If in Harte’s caricature, the bigoted narrator refuses to learn anything about Ah Sin’s intelligence by watching him play cards, Loomis’s articles follow quite another structure of expectation and discovery, allowing (even forcing) the reader to *learn* from facts in precisely the way Truthful James fails to do. “The Old East in the New West” illustrates this structure repeatedly. In this early essay, Loomis explicates several Chinese customs that seem most exotic and uncivilized to English-speaking Americans. He begins by observing the “contempt” or “pity” of “ignorant” Americans who “laugh at” strange Chinese customs, then proceeds to explain sympathetically that the “cue” or ponytail has a history that associates it with noble values; boys and young men who give their wages to older men are not enslaved but are fulfilling responsibilities to their families, which is more than Loomis can say for “Young America”; Chinese walk in single file because the honored “Book of Rites” prescribes respectful distances between youth and age; and so on.¹⁵ Loomis sets himself the goal of ameliorating the American racial “ignorance” by providing information about the meaning of Chinese language and habits.

Notably, when he writes of Chinese language, the missionary ethnologist does not resort to broken or “pidgin” English; instead, he considers it necessary for an observer of the culture to become a student of the language. At some point in most of his articles, he translates signs, books, prayers, newspapers, or other materials from Chinese to English, helping the reader to comprehend Chinese thought and values through language. His first *Overland* article is devoted entirely to the pleasure of such translations. Following his usual pattern of discovery, he begins “Chinese in California—Their Sign-Board Literature” with facts that English speakers can perceive and about which they may have formed negative judgments: shop names in Chinatown like “Hop Wo,” “Tin Yuk,” and “Shun Wo” seem “not euphonious” and may even inspire English speakers to laugh at unfortunate puns.¹⁶ Through numerous examples, Loomis helps American readers to understand the poetry of Chinese signs that mean “Peace and felicity,” “Everlasting plenteousness,” “Elegant and ornamental,” and more.¹⁷ By comparison, American and old-world European signs seem to Loomis rather plain.¹⁸ Based on his observation of the civilities that accompany Chinese business, he believes the Chinese “appreciate the sentiments of their signs and mottoes” and that “frequent reading of them exert[s] a favorable influence upon their character”; even if “the mass of the people” do not always live up to their “moral maxims” (a point he makes elsewhere about American Christians also), the “frequent reading and hearing of elevating thoughts,” he thinks, has kept the Chinese “from sinking to the depths of poverty, degradation and vice to which many other once civilized nations have fallen.”¹⁹

Nor was Loomis the only professional man who tried to challenge stereotypes about the Chinese prior to the publication of Harte’s satiric poem. Of the three *Overland* articles by other contributors that appear in the first four volumes, an unusually topical essay called “The Chinese Labor Problem” was most likely to have influenced the way regular readers understood Harte’s Bill Nye and Truthful James, since the card players’ real gripe with Ah Sin seems not to have been his euchre game but his presence in the labor force. As Bill Nye “went for that heathen Chinese,” he uttered the cliché of the San Francisco Workingmen’s Union, “We are ruined by Chinese cheap labor.” Far from preparing *Overland* readers to sympathize with Nye and workingmen, the November 1869 essay called “The Chinese Labor Problem” dismissed such assertions as “uninformed or partisan,” the delusions of “short-sighted protectionists.”²⁰ The article argued that the Chinese were desirable immigrants because their Confucian philosophy and the values of family duty, honesty, education, and literacy were compatible with American values.²¹ Granting that Chinese laborers did take menial jobs from white Americans, it proposed that white laborers freed of low employment would inevitably “rise” to “higher positions” in society themselves.²² If the article fell far short of a theory of racial equality, its upper-class sensibility at least rejected the “cultivated jealousy” of “a class of laborers”²³ like Bill Nye as beneath the sympathy of *Overland* readers or California policymakers.

We have reason to believe that the author of “The Chinese Labor Problem” was someone the San Francisco literati would have respected and that the “solution” proposed in his article may have met with Harte’s own approval. Charles Wolcott Brooks had been a merchant specializing in Hawaiian and Japanese trade since 1854, the same year Bret Harte steamed into the Bay, just a few years Brooks’ junior.²⁴ When Brooks’ *Overland* article appeared in 1869, the merchant had just been named the first Japanese consul in San Francisco.²⁵ A few years earlier, as the

Japanese “commercial agent” for San Francisco, he had hosted (and Bret Harte attended) a dinner for the U.S. Ministers to Japan and China, R. B. Van Valkenburgh and Anson Burlingame, as they passed through San Francisco.²⁶ (Burlingame would shortly negotiate a treaty that would create favorable relations between the U.S. and China.) Harte recalled at the time that the gentlemen who attended this dinner had worked out a “liberal, farseeing, broad and catholic . . . policy” that California should adopt toward Asia and the Chinese.²⁷ Some of this dinner conversation likely made its way into the essay penned by the party’s host.

Between the time of Brooks’ 1866 dinner party and the publication of his essay on Chinese labor, which antedated “Plain Language from Truthful James” by less than a year, workers’ complaints about Chinese competition had assumed increasing importance in California politics, to the evident irritation of propertied men like the *Overland*’s target audience. In the summer of 1867, year before the *Overland* and its ethnological essays on the Chinese were launched, the *Daily Alta California* reported “A Workingmens’ Bomb-shell” dropped at the First District Union Congressional Convention. A delegate for the Workingmen’s Party introduced a set of resolutions including an eight-hour work day, a few other clauses designed to protect working men, and this anti-Chinese plank:

That the importation of Chinese, or any other people of the Mongolian race, into the Pacific States or Territories, is in every respect injurious and degrading to American labor, by forcing it into unjust and ruinous competition; and an evil that should be restricted by legislation . . . and that we shall not vote for any man, for any office, who is not opposed to such importation.²⁸

As the *Alta* reported the reaction, “The reading of the anti-coolie resolutions did not appear to be received with great warmth by the gentlemen from the bucolic districts, who may have been less troubled with Chinese labor than with a scarcity of laborers of any hue.” Before being tabled, the proposal led to loud debate, posturing, and “confusion.” The *Alta* took the side of propertied men, distinguishing between a “firebrand” speaker for “the bone and sinew” and a “sensible speech” that dismissed the laborers’ platform as irrelevant to the convention.²⁹ In this article and elsewhere about this time, the *Alta* supported Brooks’ theory that an unpleasant “class” of laborers and firebrands were responsible for the escalating rhetoric against the Chinese in California, while “gentlemen” and “sensible” people—the sort expected to read the *Overland*—were maneuvering their party to support national Republican political priorities such as Reconstruction.

For a journal that tended to favor literary, historical, scientific, folkloric, and reflective essays over topical pieces on local political questions, the *Overland* seems to have become increasingly engaged in the Chinese immigration question during Harte’s tenure as editor. Initially ethnological in its approach to the Chinese thanks to Loomis’ numerous articles, by late 1869 the journal was willing to disparage the “uninformed” and jealous “class” of “laborers” who sought legislation against Chinese immigration. A period of relative quiet followed Brooks’ essay. Perhaps there was little more that gentlemen could say on the subject without becoming firebrands themselves. Between November 1869 and September 1870, Loomis published just one more article, and a traveler to China published a light essay called “Tea Leaves.” But fifteen essays in the first four volumes were enough: if a reader had been paying attention and identified with the *Overland*’s elite sensibility, he had ample reason to greet Truthful James with skepticism from the first stanza of bad grammar and racial prejudice to the closing stanzas in which James failed to learn from his own observations.

In its later life, of course, Harte’s poem looked nothing like the satire of working-class prejudice that its author intended and that regular *Overland* readers would have understood. As Gary Scharnhorst has shown, an unauthorized edition appeared very shortly after the original, with illustrations that added to the poem’s violence and missed its satire. Harte felt obliged to respond with an illustrated edition of his own, but as Scharnhorst has again demonstrated, the authorized edition was not strikingly different from the unauthorized edition in the tone of its illustrations.³⁰ In newspapers around the country, the poem was reprinted in periodical contexts entirely different from the gentlemanly *Overland*, with no preliminary articles directing English speakers to overcome their stereotypes about the Chinese. Each of these periodicals provided its own interpretive context, and an explication of their influence on meaning would require additional investigations.

Among his other legacies, Harte represents for many the foil to progressive Chinese policy in the late-nineteenth century. Whatever his intent, he introduced into the national vocabulary a racist epithet (“the heathen Chinese”) that influenced American opinion for generations. Since the ironic success of Harte’s poem, history has lost sight of the progressive effort of his nationally circulated *Overland* in urging English-speaking Americans to take responsibility

for learning as much about the Chinese as Asian immigrants had to learn about Americans. Ronald Takaki and Scharnhorst agree that even if Harte felt disgusted by his poem and its reception, he bears some responsibility for accepting the celebrity that came with its fame.³¹ While that is fair enough, Harte also bears responsibility for the two-year investment he made as editor of the *Overland* in trying to supply readers with information and ideas more liberal than stereotypes.³² If his chief informant revealed at times the bias of his own religious training, he also revealed more sympathy than others in California. While the *Overland* did not suggest that educated Chinese and American people were ready to mingle socially in California on equal terms, it did make a small effort to resist the tide that was pressing toward Chinese Exclusion.

Boise State University

Notes

1. Bret Harte, "Plain Language from Truthful James," *The Luck of Roaring Camp and Other Writings*, ed. Gary Scharnhorst (New York: Penguin, 2001), pp. 215-16. The poem was first published in the *Overland Monthly*, 5 (September 1870), 287-88.
2. Ronald T. Takaki, *Iron Cages: Race and Culture in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Knopf, 1979), p. 222.
3. Scharnhorst, "'Ways That Are Dark': Appropriations of Bret Harte's 'Plain Language from Truthful James,'" *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, 51 (December 1996), 377-99.
4. Nancy Glazener, *Reading for Realism: The History of a U.S. Literary Institution, 1850-1910* (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 1997), p. 189.
5. See especially Margaret Duckett, "Plain Language from Bret Harte," *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 11 (March 1957), 241-60; and Scharnhorst, *Bret Harte: Opening the American Literary West* (Norman: Univ. of Oklahoma Press, 2000), pp. 53-54.
6. "Salt Lake City," *Overland Monthly*, 5 (September 1870), 275.
7. N. S. Dodge, "Confession of a Crime—Its Value," *Overland Monthly*, 5 (September 1870), 251-56.
8. W. R. Turnbull, "Mexican Bandits," *Overland Monthly*, 5 (September 1870), 244-50.
9. Loomis contributed the following articles to the *Overland*: "The Chinese in California: Their Sign-Board Literature," 1 (August 1868), 152-56; "The Six Chinese Companies," 1 (September 1868), 221-27; "The Old East in the New West," 1 (October 1868), 360-67; "Our Heathen Temples," 1 (November 1868), 453-61; "What Our Chinamen Read," 1 (December 1868), 525-30; "Holidays in the Chinese Quarter," 2 (February 1869), 144-53; "How Our Chinamen Are Employed," 2 (March 1869), 231-39; "Chinese Women in California," 2 (April 1869), 344-51; "Medical Art in the Chinese Quarter," 2 (June 1869), 496-506; "Chinese 'Funeral Baked Meats,'" 3 (July 1869), 21-29; "Occult Science in the Chinese Quarter," 3 (August 1869), 160-69; and "The Chinese as Agriculturalists," 4 (June 1870), 526-32. He published two additional articles on the Chinese in the *Overland* in 1872, after the period considered by this study.
10. *Chinese Immigration: The Social, Moral, and Political Effect of Chinese Immigration. Testimony Taken Before a Committee of the Senate of the State of California* (Sacramento: State Printing Office, 1876), pp. 55, 58.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 58.
12. "Twenty-Five Years' Work," San Francisco *Alta California*, 16 September 1884, p. 1.
13. "Rev. A. W. Loomis," San Francisco *Morning Call*, 28 July 1891, p. 8.
14. "Chinese 'Funeral Baked Meats,'" 3 (July 1869), 22; "Our Heathen Temples," 1 (November 1868), 461; "Medical Art in the Chinese Quarter," 2 (June 1869), 496-506.
15. *Overland Monthly*, 1 (October 1868), 361, 362, 363.
16. *Overland Monthly*, 1 (August 1868), 152.
17. *Overland Monthly*, 1 (August 1868), 152, 153.
18. *Overland Monthly*, 1 (August 1868), 155.
19. *Overland Monthly*, 1 (August 1868), 156.

20. *Overland Monthly*, 3 (November 1869), 408.
21. *Overland Monthly*, 3 (November 1869), 411.
22. *Overland Monthly*, 3 (November 1869), 412.
23. *Overland Monthly*, 3 (November 1869), 408.
24. "Charles Wolcott Brooks," San Francisco *Alta California*, 17 August 1885, p. 1; Scharnhorst, *Bret Harte: Opening*, pp. 3, 6.
25. *San Francisco Directory for the Year Commencing October, 1868* (San Francisco: Henry G. Langley, 1868).
26. *Bret Harte's California: Letters to the Springfield Republican and Christian Register, 1866-67*, ed. Scharnhorst (Albuquerque: Univ. of New Mexico Press, 1990), p. 31.
27. *Bret Harte's California*, p. 31.
28. "First District Union Congressional Convention," San Francisco *Alta California*, 11 June 1867, p. 1.
29. *Ibid.*
30. Scharnhorst, "'Ways That Are Dark,'" pp. 377-99.
31. Takaki, *Iron Cages*, p. 224; Scharnhorst, *Bret Harte: Opening*, pp. 53-54.
32. Ernest R. May has claimed the *Overland* in 1868-70 "was essentially Bret Harte's magazine, formed almost entirely by his tastes and his judgments" ("Bret Harte and the *Overland Monthly*," *American Literature*, 22 [November 1950], 271).