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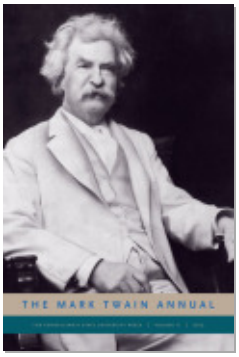

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> A good candidate for "the most under-appreciated work by Mark Twain" would be *The Treaty with China*, which he published in the *New York Tribune* in 1868. This piece, … an early statement of Twain's opposition to imperialism . . ., which conveys his vision of how the U.S. ought to behave on the global stage, has not been reprinted since its original publication.
>
> —Shelley Fisher Fishkin, from a 2010 interview for the Library of America

The above assessment is hardly an exaggeration. Mark Twain's "The Treaty with China," virtually unknown to scholars during the 142 years between its *Tribune* appearance and republication, is a major political statement, underscoring the conclusion that, prior to his emergence as an icon of American literature, he held anti-racist and anti-imperialist views which would permeate the next four decades of his writing. Belying his budding reputation as a "mere humorist," "The Treaty with China" provides unequivocal evidence for the conclusion that the young Twain was capable of utilizing his writing to denounce racial oppression he had witnessed in his western days, while advocating equal treatment on a par with that presumably accorded to recently freed African Americans. "The Treaty with China" is an example of serious editorial advocacy, replete with information regarding the history of Chinese–American relations, laced with the wit and sardonic humor which made Twain's polemics simultaneously entertaining, revealing, and convincing. After more than a century of undeserved obscurity, it serves as proof that irony, sarcasm, humor, empathy, and strong racial and political views were integral components of Twain's literary armamentarium from his earliest writings.

"The Treaty with China," published more than a year prior to his breakthrough work, *The Innocents Abroad*, offers stylistic and substantive clues regarding the literary trajectory of the writer likely known to its readership as either a comic lecturer or the creator of "The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County." This seven-thousand-word piece, written at the behest of his friend and mentor, Anson Burlingame, then serving as head of a Chinese Embassy mission to the United States, is also evidence of Twain's journalistic background, having been completed in the span of a few days, at a time when he was under pressure to complete the manuscript of *The Innocents Abroad*

for Elisha Bliss. Twain undoubtedly was coached by Burlingame regarding the meaning and import of the provisions of the treaty, whose passage was being advocated by Burlingame, but the sentiments expressed by Twain on behalf of his friend's goals are clearly his own, often restatements of those expressed in his western journalistic apprenticeship, when Twain had ample opportunity to witness the predations of his prejudiced countrymen on the Chinese immigrants who washed their laundry, cooked their meals, and handled nitroglycerine in the mines in the pre-dynamite era.

When Sam Clemens wrote his mother from New York, in 1853, referring to Chinese he had encountered as "vermin," he was merely reflecting the Know-Nothing nativism of his Hannibal childhood. The transformation in his racial attitudes in the intervening years, during which he jettisons his prior attitudes toward African Americans, is also seen in "The Treaty with China," in his complimentary descriptions of Chinese immigrants he has observed firsthand, and in the rhetorical questions he poses to his readers: "Do not they compare favorably with the mass of other immigrants? Will they not make good citizens?" In a more humorous vein, Twain reveals a future when voters will elect "the people's choice, Donnerwetter, O'Shaughnessy, and Ching-Foo!" The recital of successive immigration populations is no accident, though Twain's earnestness is tempered by what must have been a strange concept to the 1868 reader, the inclusion of an Asian candidate.

It is not only Twain's changing race consciousness that is revealed in this writing, but the anti-imperialism that would infuse much of his later writing (e.g., "To the Person Sitting in Darkness"). When Twain, commenting on a treaty provision, opines that "There is in China a class of foreigners who *demand* privileges, concessions and immunities, instead of asking for them . . . a tyrannical class who openly say that the Chinese should be *forced* to do thus and so," he is presaging sentiments he will express more emphatically as a vice president of the Anti-Imperialist Society four decades later.

Twain's assertion that, "Apart from its grave importance, the subject is really as entertaining as any I know of," may be made tongue-in-cheek, but there is no denying that "The Treaty with China" is a strong stylistic and substantive precursor of all his better-known writings. Readers of this virtually unknown, now republished piece will, at the very least, be convinced that Twain, who had earlier acknowledged to his mother his talent for "literature of a low order," was hardly a "mere humorist," even at this early stage of his career.