

Why Am I a Heathen? (1887)

Wong Chin Foo

One of the most prolific writers in the English-language press among the Chinese in America was a man named Wong Chin Foo. He first came to the United States in 1868 as a seventeen-year-old student sponsored by Christian missionaries. After completing his studies, he returned to China, but because of his political activism, he was forced into exile, first to Japan and then back to the United States in 1873. For the next twenty years, until he slipped into obscurity, Wong spent most of his time in the East and Midwest, writing and speaking publicly about Chinese culture and the plight of the Chinese in America. He is credited with starting a weekly newspaper in New York titled Chinese America in 1883, the first Chinese American voters association in the United States in 1884, and the Chinese Equal Rights League to campaign for the repeal of the exclusion laws in 1892. Wong's essays appeared in prominent periodicals such as the North American Review, Chautauquan, Cosmopolitan, Atlantic Monthly, and Harper's Weekly.

The following essay, "Why Am I a Heathen?" appeared in the North American Review in August 1887 and tells why, even though he had a Christian education, Wong chose to remain true to Confucian ideals of morality and goodness. In his provocative and sarcastic style of speaking, Wong exposed the hypocrisy he saw in the prejudiced actions of American Christians against Chinese Americans. The essay provoked a response from Yan Phou Lee, whose rejoinder, "Why I Am Not a Heathen," follows this selection.

Born and raised a heathen, I learned and practiced its moral and religious code; and acting thereunder I was useful to myself and many others. My conscience was clear, and my hopes as to future life were untrimmed by distracting doubt. But, when about seventeen, I was transferred to the midst of our showy Christian civilization, and at this impressionable period of life Christianity presented itself to me at first under its most alluring aspects; kind Christian



Wong Chin Foo.
(Courtesy of Wong
Chin Foo Collection,
New York)

friends became particularly solicitous for my material and religious welfare, and I was only too willing to know the truth.

I had to take a good deal for granted as to the inspiration of the Bible—as is necessary to do—to Christianize a non-Christian mind; and I even advanced so far under the spell of my would-be soul-savers that I seriously contemplated becoming the bearer of heavenly tidings to my “benighted” heathen people.

But before qualifying for this high mission, the Christian doctrine I would teach had to be learned, and here on the threshold I was bewildered by the multiplicity of Christian sects, each one claiming a monopoly of the only and narrow road to heaven.

I looked into Presbyterianism only to retreat shudderingly from a belief in a merciless God who had long foreordained most of the helpless human race to an eternal hell. To preach such a doctrine to intelligent heathen would only raise in their minds doubts of my sanity, if they did not believe I was lying.

Then I dipped into Baptist doctrines, but found so many sects therein, of

different "shells," warring over the merits of cold-water initiation and the method and time of using it, that I became disgusted with such trivialities; and the question of close communion or not, only impressed me that some were very stingy with their bit of bread and wine, and others a little less so.

Methodism struck me as a thunder-and-lightning religion—all profession and noise. You struck it, or it struck you, like a spasm,—and so you "experienced" religion.

The Congregationalists deterred me with their starchiness and self-conscious true-goodness, and their desire only for high-toned affiliates.

Unitarianism seemed all doubt, doubting even itself.

A number of other Protestant sects based on some novelty or eccentricity—like Quakerism—I found not worth a serious study by the non-Christian. But on one point this mass of Protestant dissension cordially agreed, and that was in a united hatred of Catholicism, the older form of Christianity. And Catholicism returned with interest this animosity. It haughtily declared itself the only true Church, outside of which there was no salvation—for Protestants especially; that its chief prelate was the personal representative of God on earth, and that he was infallible. Here was religious unity, power, and authority with a vengeance. But, in chorus, my solicitous Protestant friends beseeched me not to touch Catholicism, declaring it was worse than my heathenism—in which I agreed; but the same line of argument also convinced me that Protestantism stood in the same category.

In fact, the more I studied Christianity in its various phases, and listened to the animadversions of one sect upon another, the more it seemed to me "sounding brass and tinkling cymbals."

Disgusted with sectarianism, I turned to a simple study of the inspired "Bible" for enlightenment.

The creation fable did not disturb me, nor the Eden incident; but some vague doubts did arise with the deluge and Noah's ark; it seemed a reflection on a just and merciful Divinity. And I was not at all satisfied of the honesty and goodness of Jacob, or his family, or their descendants, or that there was any particular merit or reason for their being the "chosen" of God, to the detriment of the rest of mankind; for they so appreciated God's special patronage that on every occasion they ran after other gods, and had a special idolatry for the "Golden Calf," to which some Christians allege they are still devoted. That God, failing to make something out of this stiff-necked race, concluded to send his Son to redeem a few of them, and a few of the long-neglected Gentiles, is not strikingly impressive to the heathen.

It may be flattering to the Christian to know it required the crucifixion of God to save him, and that nothing less would do; but it opens up a series of inferences that makes the idea more and more incomprehensible, and more and more inconsistent with a Will, Purpose, Wisdom, and Justice thoroughly Divine.

But when I got to the New Dispensation, with its sin-forgiving business, I figuratively "went to pieces" on Christianity. The idea that, however wicked the sinner, he had the same chance of salvation, "through the Blood of the Lamb," as the most God-fearing—in fact, that the eleventh-hour man was entitled to the same heavenly compensation as the one who had labored in the Lord's vineyard from the first hour—all this was absolutely preposterous. It was not just, and God is Justice.

Applying this dogma, I began to think of my own prospects on the other side of Jordan. Suppose Dennis [Denis] Kearney, the California sand-lotter, should slip in and meet me there, would he not be likely to forget his heavenly songs, and howl once more: "The Chinese must go!" and organize a heavenly crusade to have me and others immediately cast out into the other place?¹

And then the murderers, cut-throats, and thieves whose very souls had become thoroughly impregnated with their lifelong crimes—these were they to become "pure new-born babes"—all within a few short hours of a death-preparation—while I, the good heathen (supposing the case), who had done naught but good to my fellow heathen, who had spent most of my hard earnings regularly in feeding the hungry, and clothing the naked, and succoring the distressed, and had died of yellow fever, contracted from a deserted fellow being stricken with the disease, whom no Christian would nurse, I was unmercifully consigned to hell's everlasting fire, simply because I had not heard of the glorious saving power of the Lord Jesus, or because the construction of my mind would not permit me to believe in the peculiar redeeming powers of Christ!

But, then, it was gently insinuated: "Oh, no! You heathen who had not heard of Christ will not be punished quite so severely when you die as those who heard the gospel and believed it not."

The more I read the Bible the more afraid I was to become a Christian. The idea of coming into daily or hourly contact with cold-blooded murderers, cut-throats, and other human scourges, who had but a few moments of repentance before roaming around heaven, was abhorrent. And suppose, to this horde of shrewd, "civilized" criminals should be added the fanatic thugs of India, the pirates of China, the slavers, the cannibals, *et al.* Well, this is enough to shock and dismay any mild, decent soul not schooled in eccentric Christianity.

It is not only because I want to be honest, and to be sure of heavenly home, that I chose to sign myself "Your heathen," but because I want to be as happy

1. Denis Kearney was an anti-Chinese agitator who rose to political fame as leader of the Workingmen's Party of California in the late 1870s. He was known for his demagogic speeches and the refrain "The Chinese must go," which he delivered at outdoor rallies to stir anti-Chinese sentiment among the white working class.

as I can, in order to live longer; and I believe I can live longer here by being sincere and practical in my faith.

In the first place, my faith does not teach me predestination, nor that my life is what the gods hath long foreordained, but is what I make of it myself; and naturally much of this depends on the way I live.

Unlike Christianity, "our" Church is not eager for converts; but, like Free Masonry, we think our religious doctrine strong enough to attract the seekers after light and truth to offer themselves without urging, or proselytizing efforts. It pre-eminently teaches me to mind my own business, to be contented with what I have, to possess a mind that is tranquil, and a body at ease at all times,—in a word it says: "Whatsoever ye would not that others should do unto you do ye not even so unto them." We believe that if we are not able to do anybody any good, we should do nothing at all to harm them. This is better than the restless Christian doctrine of ceaseless action. Idleness is no wrong when actions fail to bring forth fruits of merit. It is these fruitless trials of one thing and another that produce so much misery in Christian society.

If my shoe factory employs 500 men, and gives me an annual profit of \$10,000, why should I substitute therein machinery by the use of which I need only 100 men, thus not only throwing 400 contented, industrious men into misery, but making myself more miserable by heavier responsibilities, with possibly less profit?

We heathen believe in the happiness of a common humanity, while the Christian's only practical belief appears to be money-making (golden-calf worshiping); and there is more money to be made by being "in the swim" as a Christian than by being a heathen. Even a Christian preacher makes more money in one year than a heathen banker in two. I do not blame them for their money-making, but for their way of making it.

How many eminent Christian preachers sincerely believe in all the Christian mysteries they preach? And yet it is policy to be apparently in earnest; in fact, some are in real earnest rather from the force of habit than otherwise; like a Bowery auctioneer who, to make trade, provides customers too—to keep up the appearance of rushing business. The more converts made, the more profit to the church, and the more wealth in the pocket of the dominie. . . .

If we do anything charitable we do not advertise it like the Christian, nor do we suppress knowledge of the meritorious acts of others, to humor our vanity or gratify our spleen. An instance of this was conspicuous during the Memphis yellow-fever epidemic a few years ago,² and when the Chinese were virulently persecuted all over the United States. Chinese merchants in China donated \$40,000 at that time to the relief of plague-stricken Memphis, but

2. In 1878 a yellow-fever epidemic devastated the city of Memphis, killing more than five thousand residents and causing the city to go bankrupt.

the Christians quietly swallowed the sweet morsel without even a "thank you." But they did advertise it, heavily and strongly, all over the world, when they paid \$137,000 to the Chinese Government as petty compensation for the massacre of 23 Chinamen by civilized American Christians, and for robbing these and other poor heathen of their earthly possessions.³

In matters of charity Christians invariably let their right hand know what the left is doing, and cry it out from the house-tops. The heathen is too dignified for such childish vainness.

Of course, we decline to admit all the advantages of your boosted civilization; or that the white race is the only civilized one. Its civilization is borrowed, adapted, and shaped from our older form.

China has a national history of at least 4,000 years, and had a printed history 3,500 years before a European discovered the art of type-printing. In the course of our national existence our race has passed, like others, through mythology, superstition, witchcraft, established religion, to philosophical religion. We have been "blest" with at least half a dozen religions more than any other nation. None of them were rational enough to become the abiding faith of an intelligent people; but when we began to reason we succeeded in making society better and its government more protective and our great Reasoner, Confucius, reduced our various social and religious ideas into book form and so perpetuated them.

China, with its teeming population of 400,000,000, is demonstration enough of the satisfactory results of this religious evolution. Where else can it be paralleled?

Call us heathen, if you will, the Chinese are still superior in social administration and social order. Among 400,000,000 of Chinese there are fewer murders and robberies in a year than there are in New York State.

True, China supports a luxurious monarch, whose every whim must be gratified; yet, withal, its people are the most lightly taxed in the world, having nothing to pay but from tilled-soil, rice, and salt; and yet she has not a single dollar of national debt.

Such implicit confidence have we Chinese in our heathen politicians that we leave the matter of jurisprudence entirely in their hands; and they are able to devise the best possible laws for the preservation of life, property, and happiness, without Christian demagogism, or by the cruel persecution of one class to promote the selfish interests of another; and we are so far heathenish as to no longer persecute men simply on account of race, color, or previous condition of servitude, but treat them all according to individual worth.

3. In reference to the Rock Springs massacre in 1885, when twenty-eight Chinese men were killed and fifteen wounded. In response to Chinese diplomatic pressure, Congress appropriated \$150,000 to cover indemnities.

Though we may differ from the Christian in appearance, manners, and general ideas of civilization, we do not organize into cowardly mobs under the guise of social or political reform, to plunder and murder with impunity; and we are so far advanced in our heathenism as to no longer tolerate popular feeling or religious prejudice to defeat justice or cause injustice. . . .

We do not embrace our wives before our neighbor's eyes, and abuse them in the privacy of home. If we wish to fool our neighbors at all about our domestic affairs we would rather reverse the exhibition—let them think we disliked our wife, while love at home would be the warmer.

I would rather marry in the heathen fashion than in the Christian mode, because in the former instance I would take a wife for life, while in the second instance it is entirely a game of chance.

We bring up our children to be our second selves in every sense of the word. The Christian's children, like himself, are all on the lookout for No. 1, and it is a common result that the old people are badly "left" in their old age. . . .

Christians are continually fussing about religion; they build great churches and make long prayers; and yet there is more wickedness in the neighborhood of a single church district of one thousand people in New York than among one million heathen, churchless and unsermonized.

Christian talk is long and loud about how to be good and to act charitably. It is all charity, and no fraternity—"there, dog, take your crust and be thankful!" And is it, therefore, any wonder there is more heart-breaking and suicides in the single state of New York in a year than in all of China?

The difference between the heathen and the Christian is that the heathen does good for the sake of doing good. With the Christian, what little good he does he does it for immediate honor and for future reward; he lends to the Lord and wants compound interest. In fact, the Christian is the worthy heir of his religious ancestors.

The heathen does much and says little about it; the Christian does little good, but when he does he wants it in the papers and on his tombstone.

Love men for the good they do you is a practical Christian idea, not for the good you should do them as a matter of human duty. So Christians love the heathen; yes, the heathen's possessions; and in proportion to these the Christian's love grows in intensity. When the English wanted the Chinamen's gold and trade, they said they wanted "to open China for their missionaries." And opium was the chief, in fact, only missionary they looked after, when they forced the ports open. And this infamous Christian introduction among Chinamen has done more injury, social and moral, in China than all the humanitarian agencies of Christianity could remedy in 200 years. And on you, Christians, and on your greed of gold we lay the burden of the crime resulting of tens of millions of honest, useful men and women sent thereby to a premature death after a short miserable life, besides the physical and moral prostration it entails even where it does not prematurely kill! And this great na-

tional curse was thrust on us at the points of Christian bayonets. And you wonder why we are heathen? . . .

In public affairs, it is either niggardliness that puts a premium on dishonesty, or loose extravagance for show, that encourages political debauchery and jobbery. In general, businessmen are lauded as great financiers who actually conspire to buy laws, place judges, control senates, corner and regulate at will the price of natural products; and, in fact, act as if the whole political and social machinery should be a lever to them to operate against the interests of the nation and people. In a heathen country, such conspirators against social order and the general welfare would have short shrift.

Here in New York, the richest and the poorest city in the world, misery pines while wealth arrogantly stalks. The poor have the votes, and yet elect those who betray them for lucre to corporate and capitalistic interests; and the administration of justice—in fact, the whole system of jurisprudence—is to stimulate crime rather than prevent it. As to preventing poverty, or rendering it less intolerable, that is the most remote thought of religious and political local administration.

It is no wonder, under such circumstances and conditions, that New York is a most heavily taxed city, and the worst governed for the interests of New York. "Public office a public trust?" Rather, it is a form to be worked, Christian-like, for all it is worth. Public spiritedness and moral worth have no value or utility in "practical" Christian politics. Such civic virtues "don't pay."

Do as we do. Give public office to the competent. Pay them well. If they are inefficient or indifferent, remove them at once. If dishonest, morally or financially, kill them as traitors.

"It is better that a child knows only what is right and what is wrong than to have a rote knowledge of all the books of the sages, and yet not know what is right and what is wrong." Collegiate education does not necessarily make a youth fit for the duties of life. And men like [Abraham] Lincoln, [Horace] Greeley, and other such Americans prove it. "The most successful youth in life is not the most learned, but the most unblemished in conduct." So say the heathen. But here, it is called smart when a boy is merely impudent to the old, and it is "smartness," and is excused by the phrase that "boys will be boys," when a boy throws a stone with malice to break someone's window, or do some injury. And parents of such a boy, while they chide, will secretly chuckle, "He's got the makings of a man in him."

It is our motto, "If we cannot bring up our children to think and do for us when we are old as we did for them when they were young, it is better not to rear them at all." But the Christian style is for children to expect their parents to do all for them, and then for the children to abandon the parents as soon as possible.

On the whole, the Christian way strikes us as decidedly an unnatural one; it is everyone for himself—parents and children even. Imagine my feelings,

if my own son, whom I loved better than my own life, for whom I had sacrificed all my comforts and luxury, should, through some selfish motive, go to law with me to get his share prematurely of my property, and even have me declared a lunatic, or have me arrested and imprisoned, to subserve his interest or intrigue! Is this a rare Christian case? Can it be charged against heathenism?

We heathen are a God-fearing race. Aye, we believe the whole Universe—creation—whatever exists and has existed—is of God and in God; that, figuratively, the thunder is His voice and the lightning His mighty hands; that everything we do and contemplate doing is seen and known by Him; that He created this and other worlds to effectuate beneficent, not merciless, designs, and that all that He has done is for the steady, progressive benefit of the creatures whom He endowed with life and sensibility, and to whom as a consequence He owes and gives paternal care, and will give paternal compensation and justice; yet His voice will threaten and His mighty hand chastise those who deliberately disobey His sacred laws and their duty to their fellow man.

“Do unto others as you wish they would do unto you,” or “Love your neighbor as yourself,” is the great Divine law which Christians and heathen alike hold, but which the Christians ignore.

This is what keeps me the heathen I am! And I earnestly invite the Christians of America to come to Confucius.

SOURCE: *North American Review* 143, no. 2 (August 1887): 169–79.

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Why I Am Not a Heathen: A Rejoinder to Wong Chin Foo (1887)

Yan Phou Lee

A month after Wong Chin Foo's essay “Why Am I a Heathen?” appeared in the *North American Review*, Yan Phou Lee wrote the following rebuttal in defense of Christianity while boldly condemning bigots for their un-Christian ways. Born in 1861 in Xiangshan District, Guangdong Province, Lee had come to the United States in 1873, at the age of twelve, as a member of Yung Wing's Chinese Educational Mission and had completed his first year at Yale College when the group was recalled to China in 1881. He managed to return to the United States with the help of U.S. missionaries and had just graduated from Yale when he wrote this rejoinder. He later went on to work at various jobs—farming, business, court interpreting, and journalism—before returning to China in 1931 to become editor of the *Canton Gazette*, a bilingual newspaper.

Yan Phou Lee's autobiography, *When I Was a Boy in China*, was published in 1887. Like Wong Chin Foo, he lectured widely on Chinese manners and customs, and often defended the Chinese in the press. His other well-known work, “The Chinese Must Stay,” in response to Chinese exclusion, appeared in the *North American Review* in April 1889.

I draw a sharp distinction between Religion and Ethics. Religion pertains to the heart. Ethics deals more with outward conduct. Religion inculcates principles. Ethics lays down rules. Religion without Ethics is like a disembodied spirit; Ethics without Religion is a body from which the soul has fled. The most intelligent form of Heathenism, namely, Confucianism, never taught the “relations and acts of individuals toward God,” the Ruler of the Universe. Confucius inculcated a lofty morality, but left Religion to shift for itself.

“Born and raised a heathen, I learned and practiced its moral and religious code,” by worshiping the prescribed number of idols, and I was useful to others, though not to myself, because I helped to fatten the lessees of the



Yan Phou Lee.
(Frontispiece in
*When I Was a Boy
in China*, 1887)

temples, incense-venders and idle priests. "My conscience was clear," because I knew not what I was doing, "and my hopes as to the future life were undimmed by distracting doubt," simply because they were never very bright. In fact, I was not precocious enough to think much on the subject.

I came under Christian influences at the age of thirteen, and I am ashamed to confess that I did not take to Christianity kindly at first, and for three years to come, for it takes a long time to weed out error, and my Chinese friends and teachers had taken special pains to prejudice my mind against Christianity. But in 1876 that grand man of God, Mr. Moody, came to proclaim the Gospel in Springfield, Mass. I attended the meetings and listened to his presentation of the truth with wonder, and, at length, with conviction of my lost estate, of my need of redemption. I had a personal interview with Mr. Moody, and was strengthened in my resolution to be a Christian. That was one of the happiest periods of my life. I did not join the church then, as friends advised me to wait; for it was feared that the Chinese Commissioner of the Educational Mission, to which I belonged, might send me home before I got well started on the right road. I identified myself with Christians, and took part in all religious exercises; and certainly friends there are who can testify that I became more gentle and more thoughtful of others. I

got along well with my studies, because my mind was free and I had learned concentration. When the Chinese students were recalled in 1881, I went home with the rest. The mandarins made some attempt to draw us back to heathenism, with varying success. Not confident of my strength to stem the current that was setting in toward heathenism, I left the naval school as soon as I could get leave of absence, went to Canton, and joined the Presbyterian Church in charge of Rev. Dr. A. P. Happer. I had to give up the government service and heathenism at the same time; but do you suppose I regretted it?

I did not bother myself with the peculiarities and shortcomings of different denominations. It mattered little to me which sect I identified myself with. For the frailties of human nature are no part of Christianity. They are the very things it teaches us to overcome. There are as many conceptions of Christianity as there are men who give any thought to the subject. But Christianity is one; it is like its head, the same yesterday, today, and forever. It appears to be distorted on account of the human medium through which it must pass. But the very fact that so many people misunderstand it, misapply its principles, and abuse its privileges, is proof positive of its Divine origin. Whatever is human can be understood of man; whatever is from God can only be apprehended imperfectly by man.

Thus, I not only discriminate between Christianity in the abstract and Christianity in the concrete, but also between its correct application and its perversion. There was at one time a dyspeptic who preached a crusade against eating. He argued that, because a great many men abused it, and injured themselves by eating too much, and ruined their health by defying its rules and violating its principles, therefore the whole doctrine and practice of eating was a humbug. He said, moreover, that eating, instead of giving health and maintaining life, was every day making people sick, and in some cases people had actually died from eating. In consequence of such representations, he converted a great many to his views, and was hailed as a great deliverer of mankind. The more zealous of his followers eschewed eating, and, as they persisted to the last, of course they died. Then people began to open their eyes, and said: "Since without eating we die any way, while *with* eating we may live to a green old age, we will stand by eating and let those cranks do as they please." The doctrine and practice of Christianity is very much like the doctrine and practice of eating.

I did not have much difficulty in believing the Bible to be an inspired book. If the wickedness and imperfections of men obscured the mercifulness and goodness of God, it was a great pity; but that is no argument against Christianity. Clouds may get between me and the sun, but I believe it is there, and that it shines all the same.

I did not profess to comprehend the Divine Will, Purpose, Wisdom, and Justice, in the plan of Salvation. What a conceited fool you would have called me if I did! I accepted the truth as it is told in the Bible, and confessed that

there were things that I could not comprehend, and was not expected to comprehend.

If others believe that a man can enter heaven by repenting at the eleventh hour, what is that to me? How should that destroy my faith in the saving grace of Christianity? Such, indeed, is its power to change the heart of man, that even if Dennis [Denis] Kearney should slip into the Heavenly Jerusalem, he would be lamb-like and would be heard to say: "*The Chinese must stay!* Heaven is incomplete without them."

It is very easy to misinterpret the Bible. Some minds are so crooked that everything which goes through invariably comes out crooked. Some men understand the Bible literally. Others take each verse out of its context and tack it to some other place, and the result is something like this: "And Judas went out and hanged himself," "Go and do thou likewise!"

The reason why I am enabled to sign myself a "Christian" is because I am endowed with the faculty of reason, which I have supplemented with formal logic and *a desire to tell the truth.*

Heathenism teaches nothing if it does not teach fatalism and the control of Destiny. If it does not go so far as predestination, it is because its notions of a future life are a confused heap of nonsense.

Now, my faith teaches me to cultivate my mind, rectify my heart, and to make my conscience delicate and sensitive. It bids me to be tolerant, charitable, and just to my fellow-men. It tells me to faithfully discharge my duties, public and private. It gives me the requisite strength to act the good citizen and the true husband. It commands me to accord to others their rights, and to take nothing that is not my due. Finally, it teaches me how to discharge my duties towards God, Father and Preserver of us all.

I not only discriminate between Christianity and its professors, but I also discriminate between true Christians and hypocrites. Confucius says: "It is impossible to carve on rotten timber." Christianity is not responsible for the acts of morally rotten men, and yet, where there is any soundness at all, it has demonstrated its power to heal and to save. I think that ministers should be paid according to the work they do. The laborer is worthy of his hire. But I am not "down" on all ministers because some betray their trust. I do not believe that all Christians are worldly because I have met some conspicuous cases of worldliness among them.

Organized charities may seem to lack sympathy, and, perhaps, have too much of red tape to be vigorous; but private charity is too apt to be indiscriminate, and too liable to be imposed upon, so that, instead of relieving the distress of the really deserving, it may encourage shiftlessness and idleness. Neither method of relief is perfect. But that is owing to the sinfulness of man, which Christianity alone can cure. When the Chinese were persecuted some years ago—when they were ruthlessly smoked out and murdered—I was intelligent enough to know that Christians had no hand in those out-

rages; for the only ones who exposed their lives to protect them were Christians. The California legislature that passed various measures against the Chinese was not Christian, the Sandloters¹ were not Christians, nor were the foreign miners. They might *call* themselves Christians, but I don't call a man a great genius simply because he *claims* to be one. Let him *do* something worthy of the name first. You shall know a man by his works. If there is any sentiment in this country in favor of the Chinese today, it is only to be found in the Christian church. I don't forget that that Congress (which was most liberal and most jealous of the national honor) that finally voted the magnificent indemnity,² was influenced and urged on by Christian opinion as expressed in petitions and the press. If there was no Christianity in this land, things would be too hot, not only for the Chinese, but for all who form the base of the social pyramid.

I flatter myself that I am broad, and entertain cosmopolitan views. For while I glory in China's ancient civilization, her extensive literature, and lofty philosophy, I am aware that other nations are superior to her in science and the arts. While I am proud of China's philosophers, statesmen, and heroes, I am admit that other countries have also produced great men.

Murders and robberies may be pretty frequent in New York State, but who knows how many are committed in China in a year? If foreigners have such paradises in their native countries, why do they persist in staying *here*? For my part, I am content to stay and cast my lot with the good people of this country, who, you will find, are mostly Christians.

I do not confound Christian congregations with cowardly mobs organized for arson and murder, and I deny that Christianity encourages the young to abuse the aged. Granting that there is more wickedness in the neighborhood of a single church district of one thousand people in New York than among one million heathen in China, that only proves that one thousand heathen in New York have a greater capacity for wickedness than one million heathen in China.

By no torturing of Aristotelian logic can I connect heartbreaking and suicides in New York with Christian charity, and wherever I have met with any "fraternity" I invariably found it in the Christian church. Having been a heathen myself, and an associate of the heathen, I am competent to say that they never do any good without expecting a return, or gaining some merit. The true Christian does good for the love he has toward all God's creatures. When I was in need of friends, Christians befriended me. Christians helped me to return to this country, and they said nothing about it either. When I was in

1. In reference to Denis Kearney and other agitators who made speeches at outdoor rallies to instigate riots against the Chinese.

2. In reference to the indemnity of \$150,000 appropriated by Congress to cover losses suffered by Chinese victims of the Rock Springs massacre in 1885.

doubt about the advisability of returning to college, Christian friends gave me encouragement and promised help. When I undertook to work my way through college, Christian people assisted me in pursuing that course. They got me to lecture, and aided me in the disposal of my literary wares. When I stood on the commencement platform to denounce the anti-Chinese policy of this government, it was the Christians who strengthened me with their enthusiasm and their applause. It is the Christian who looks on me as his equal, and who thinks that the Chinese are as well endowed, mentally, as he. The true Christian is the friend of the poor, the down-trodden, and the oppressed of all countries. When the famine was at its height in China, some twelve years ago, Christian missionaries went into the doomed districts to heal the sick and relieve the distressed.

If England were a truly Christian country, as she *claims* to be, the Opium War would have never taken place. Christianity is nowhere so explicit as where it warns people against the sin of covetousness. If Mephistopheles persuaded John Bull Faustus to sell his soul for gold, I don't see what Christianity has to do with it. Were half the Christians running mad after the Golden Calf, Christianity would still be the only saving religion in the world.

The ways of the American heathen and the Chinese heathen are wonderfully alike. Only the American may become a Christian whenever he chooses with greater facility than the Chinese. That is not saying, however, that the American heathen may not be worse than the Chinese.

I fervently believe that if we could infuse more Christianity into politics and the judiciary, into the municipal governments, the legislature and the executive, corruption and abuses would grow beautifully less. The Christian men are the last hope of the Republic. The final appeal is to be made to the Christian sentiment of the nation.

I have the misfortune to be a college-bred man; but a collegiate education does not necessarily disqualify one for the duties of life. A classical education would not have injured men like Lincoln and Greeley, but they had something better than that,—they had a Christian education. No greater praise can we give them than this: They were *Christian* gentlemen.

The duties of parents and children are reciprocal. The Americans lay more stress on the duty of parents towards their children, while the Chinese insist too much on the duty of children towards their parents. Both have departed from the golden mean. Christianity alone can restore harmony in the domestic relations. Neither foolish parents nor undutiful children are the products of the Christian religion. They are such either from imperfect training or natural depravity. Water, and air, and sunlight are beneficent things, but when applied to some seeds, fine fruit-trees spring up from the soil; when applied to others, poisonous weeds overrun the land. In the last case, water, air, and sunlight are misused. So the perversion of Christian teachings has produced many poisonous weeds.

It is hard to tell what a heathen fears or what he believes. It is some consolation to know that he does believe in something. He is slightly better off than the atheist. There are good men among the heathen. Such men you will find to be just, reasonable, honest, and truthful. Christianity would make such men perfect almost. But a bad heathen is quite the reverse.

I have some confidence left yet that Christianity will survive this last and most terrible of attacks. Indeed, I am silly enough to believe that that religion, which flourished in spite of the Pharisee and the Sadducee, which survived the persecutions of the Caesars, and finally supplanted them, which passed through the Dark Ages of ignorance and barbarism undimmed in lustre, which rose serenely after the terrible French Revolution, will continue to reign supreme so long as eternity itself shall endure.

Christianity has demonstrated its fitness to supply my spiritual needs. Its authenticity as a history no reasonable man can deny. I believe, I accept, its truths, as I hope to be happy in this life and to enjoy a blessed immortality in the life to come.

Do you wonder that I am a Christian? I cordially invite all heathen, whether American, or English, or Chinese, to come to the Saviour.

SOURCE: *North American Review* 145, no. 3 (September 1887): 306-12.

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The Geary Act: From the Standpoint of a Christian Chinese (1892)

Jee Gam

The Geary Act of May 5, 1892, extended the provisions of the Chinese Exclusion Act for another ten years and also required all Chinese in the United States to obtain certificates of residence within one year or face deportation. Among the community leaders who spoke out against the Geary Act was Jee Gam. One of the earliest Chinese to be baptized and admitted into the First Congregational Church of Oakland in 1870, he was a missionary worker and court interpreter at the time he wrote this essay. His main arguments were that the Geary Act was unjust, un-Christian, and an outright violation of the Burlingame Treaty of 1868.

The Chinese consul and the Chinese Six Companies went so far as to advise the community against registering while their attorneys fought the law in the courts. In Fong Yue Ting v. United States, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled the Geary Act constitutional on the basis of public interest and necessity. To avoid wholesale deportation, Congress passed the McCreary Amendment of 1893, extending registration for another six months. Despite the eloquent and reasoned appeals of Jee Gam and other defenders of the Chinese, the Chinese Exclusion Act was made indefinite in 1904 and not repealed until 1943.

During the last six months this act has been more talked about than any other question in America. You can hardly take up a daily paper, a magazine, or any religious paper, without finding something about the Geary Law. The Chambers of Commerce, the Board of Trade, the mass meetings, the religious conventions, preachers in their pulpits, in fact all clubs and societies have discussed this question. Every individual from the lowest to the highest has spoken on it. Some are for it; others are against it. Even the judges of the highest tribunal in America differ in opinion concerning it.

I have been requested to write on it, and have with great reluctance consented, because it is a hard question to handle. Yet I feel it my duty to try.

I am a Chinaman and a Christian. I am not any less Chinese for being a follower of Christ. My love to Jesus has intensified rather than belittled my love for my native country. I am proud of China, for it is a great country. I admire her, for she has a wonderful future. What a glorious nation she will be when she embraces Christianity! I praise her authentic history, for it goes back 4,800 years.

I honor all things that are honorable in my country. I blush for whatever has marred her record. I pray for her daily, that she may speedily become a Christian nation.

I am in some sense also an American, for I have lived in America almost twice as long as in China. I love this country. I teach my children who are native-born Americans to sing the National hymns. And just as I rejoice in whatever is honorable to America, and commend her example to my countrymen, so I am pained when unjust and oppressive laws are permitted to be placed upon her statute books. Such a law as the Geary Act seems to me to be one which dishonors America, as well as injures my countrymen and native land.

It dishonors America as a breaking of solemn pledges—for the Chinese were invited here by the Americans. Mr. Burlingame was one of the most prominent representatives of the U.S. who gave us this invitation.¹ He assured China that a million Chinese laborers could find welcome and employment on the Pacific Coast alone. These invitations were endorsed by express treaties. China took these invitations and treaties in good faith. Her people came, but not in such a number as need call forth the alarm of the Americans, for in the period of 40 years there were less than two hundred thousand Chinese that ever put their feet on America's soil. But the laborers from Europe and especially from Ireland, who have no more right to be in America than the Chinese have, and perhaps much less, began to kick, and demand that "the Chinese must go." Sandlot agitators and other demagogues saw in this an opportunity to get famous, and also to gratify their greed by echoing the cry in Congress; and the anti-Chinese Scott Act, in 1882, was the outcome of that agitation.² This act, though prohibiting the coming of Chinese laborers, said that those already here were at liberty to go and return as they pleased; and when they should go the Government was to give them return certificates. Accordingly there were over 20,000 Chinese la-

1. Anson Burlingame, who was the American minister to China in 1860, negotiated the Burlingame Treaty of 1868 on behalf of China. The treaty recognized the right of free migration and guaranteed the reciprocal privileges of residence and travel on the basis of most favored nation treatment, with the exception of naturalization.

2. The Scott Act was actually passed in 1888, a presidential year. Its passage came on the heels of an aborted U.S.-China treaty and was motivated by electoral politics in California and the Western states.

borers that went to China with such certificates. Not one of these certificates was ever honored. Thus another solemn pledge was broken. It is said that no Chinese shall be allowed to become citizens of the United States. One of the charges against the Chinese is that they do not become naturalized, but this act said they shall not be. So not only is there no consistency in blaming the Chinese for not becoming citizens, but this act is a direct violation of the Burlingame treaty, which guaranteed the Chinese the same rights as those of the most favored nation.

Now the Geary Act is even worse, for it not only prohibits the Chinese laborers from entering into the United States, but compels the deportation of those that are lawfully here, which is virtually an act of war.

So this Geary Act is an oppression of the weak. China is a great and powerful nation, but not just now in condition to fight a power like America. At any rate, America thinks so, and it looks to us cowardly for her to take undue advantage of a weaker nation. We all despise a man who stabs another in the back; how much more despicable when the person so attacked is weaker than he!

See how this law injures China.

1. It discriminates against her subjects. It says all Chinese laborers must register or be deported, but says this of no others. If America is fair in her dealing, she ought never for a moment to allow discrimination to exist within her borders. Her laws ought to be applicable to all people, regardless of nationality. To single out the despised Chinese, the only people who hold no votes, shows cowardliness. Would America venture to enact a similar law against any of the European powers?

And now, what harm is in the registration law? Why do the Chinese object? Every American has to register. These have been the questions and assertions of many friends. My answer to these is as follows: An American if he fails to register forfeits only the right of voting at that particular election. For that no harm can come to him. But there is a vast difference in the Geary registration, for it means that the Chinese must register, or be forcibly removed from this country. So one registration is voluntary, while the other is compelled. In other words, the former law makes a person a free man, the other law makes one a slave, a criminal, or even a dog. For the only class that are required to give photographs are the criminals, and the only animal that must wear a tag is a dog. The Chinese decline to be counted in with either of these classes, so they refuse to register, and I do not blame them;

2. A registration paper will add trouble to its owner instead of protection. A laborer will have to carry the paper with him wherever he goes. Suppose

3. According to proponents of the Geary Act, it was supposedly passed to protect legal Chinese residents.

he is in a strange town, and some hoodlums should play the part of officers, and should demand the showing of his paper, and, when he complies, suppose they should immediately tear it to pieces. Now, how can this man prove his loss? He has no witness but himself, and the Court will not believe him unless he has some white witness to corroborate his testimony. Consequently, his request for a renewal will be denied. Not only so, but they must charge him with having sold his papers. If he gets clear once, when he goes into the next town he is liable to be arrested again, and he will have no rest until he is deported.

3. This Act withdraws some sacred rights such as in the Declaration of Independence are declared to be inalienable. The right to a free, untrammelled pursuit of happiness, the right of habeas corpus, the right to be adjudged innocent until proven guilty. The Geary Act says, when a Chinese is arrested under the provision of this Act, he shall be adjudged to be unlawfully within the United States, *unless* he shall establish by *affirmative proof*, to the satisfaction of such Justice, Judge or Commissioner, his lawful right to remain here. Now if that law which says every person arrested and charged with a crime is presumed to be innocent until he is proven guilty will hold good for a white man, *why not for a Chinaman also?* In other words, the people must make out a case against the accused before he can be convicted of the crime charged. If he choose to be silent, the law says that is his privilege, and judgment must not be entered against him for doing so. This also should apply to the Chinese as well as other people, but the Geary Act says No, and therefore it is un-American, barbarous and inhuman. It is unchristian, for it is contrary to the teaching of Christ.

All this is so plain to us that we did not for a moment suppose that it could be declared constitutional, and therefore did not register. Furthermore, if we registered we would be traitors in the eyes of our countrymen. The course of our Christian work would be greatly hampered; for ever since they have heard that the American Christians, and especially the ministers, are against this Geary Act, and have repeatedly petitioned the Government to repeal the same, not only do they feel *very grateful*, but we feel greatly encouraged. They naturally expected the Chinese Christians to cooperate with them in their efforts to have the law tested, and so we did. Therefore our brethren have said that they would rather take the chance of being deported than to be charged with disloyalty; rather sustain the cause of Christ than disgrace it.

If the United States should enforce this disgraceful Geary law, China will most assuredly retaliate. The lives of missionaries and the properties of missions will be in danger. The leading commercial interest, which is now held by America in China, will be given to the nations of Europe. If America can afford to lose that, I am sure China can also. But is that the best policy? Not conflict, but peace and harmony. Let not this infamous act mar the progress of Christianity in China, as the English opium has done: for while the gospel

sent to China by the people of England is saving one soul, her opium, that she so wrongfully and selfishly forced into China, is destroying a thousand.

I never can forget the remark made by the Chinese mandarin to a British minister: "Sir, I wish you would take back with you the opium your country sent us." What a blush went over the face of the British representative! What a great stumbling block to Christianity! Let America regain her good name by repealing the Geary law.

Our sincere thanks are due to all our Christian friends. Their sympathy and prayers have greatly comforted us; and may God overrule all injustice and wrong to His glory, and the final triumph of the right!

SOURCE: *Our Bethany* 3, no. 4 (February 1892): 5.

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Leaves from the Life History of a Chinese Immigrant (1936)

Elizabeth Wong

The Chinese were first recruited to Hawaii as contract laborers to work on the sugar-cane plantations in 1852. Because of the low pay and harsh working conditions, many left upon completion of their contracts and turned to farming, growing rice, or shop-keeping. By the 1880s, Chinese owned a third of the businesses in Honolulu and had become an important part of the growing mercantile class. Unlike most Chinese laborers in Hawaii, they enjoyed the comforts of having wives, families, and servants.

Chinese bond servants, or mui tsai as they were called, either came with the family from China or could be imported from China. Under the mui tsai system, poor parents who sold their daughter into indentured service usually stipulated in the deed of sale that the girl be freed through marriage when she turned eighteen. If the girl was lucky, her master would treat her well and marry her off to a good husband. If unlucky, the girl could be treated like a slave, suffer sexual and physical abuse, or be sold into prostitution. This is the story of one lucky mui tsai who came to Hawaii in 1891.

LIFE IN A CHINESE VILLAGE

"Lucky come Hawaii? Sure, lucky, come Hawaii," said Mrs. Teng,¹ pushing back her black hair with her hands, which showed signs of hard labor. "Before I come to Hawaii I suffer much. Only two kinds of people in China, the too poor and the too rich. I never can forget my days in China," she said, her mouth falling into a smile revealing a pretty good set of teeth. She is proportionally built for her five feet four.

"In a small crowded village, a few miles from Hongkong, fifty-four years

1. Author's note: I am using a fictitious name for the lady who has given me her life account. She has used broken English and Chinese. I shall translate her Chinese accordingly and shall try not to alter her style.