CHINESE CHARACTERS IN AMERICAN FICTION

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I HAVE before me a number of volumes of American fiction, published during the last few seasons, with plots laid in China or among the Chinese living in this country. Some of the novels are works by rather well known authors and have been adjudged best sellers by their publishers, who in the usual blurbs on the covers did not fail to extol the thorough knowledge of the subject the author had acquired during his or her prolonged stay in the Far East, etc., etc. Yet even a cursory perusal of these novels revealed to me a general and utter misconception of the Chinese characters by the various authors who attributed to them traits which never have been and in all probability never will be Chinese.

I have lived in China for several years. Not merely in China, as do so many others, but among the Chinese, who in some cases considered me one of them. I speak several Chinese dialects and am as well acquainted with their psychology as continuous and close contact with them in their native country could ensure.

The favorite characters woven into their stories by most authors are: (1) the cruel, devilishly ingenious Chinese; (2) the cunning and tricky Chinese; (3) the persecutor of white women; (4) the opium smoker and criminal; (5) the "mysterious" tong man. The last two characters especially seem to be considered essential to any story whose plot is laid among the Chinese living in this country — especially in large cities like New York and San Francisco, where the Chinese congregate in so called Chinatown.

I refrain from mentioning book titles or names of authors, for I know that the great majority of writers acted in good faith when they endowed their Chinese personages with the sinister traits. But I have ascertained that exceedingly little is known in this country about the true character of the Chinese, and most of the information accessible to the general public is based on erroneous beliefs or misapprehensions.

Thus it has come about that the Chinese in modern American fiction are generally used for villains or other undesirable characters. This is the more deplorable since the natives of China as a whole have nothing but the most sincere friendly feelings toward us — they have not forgotten that this country was one of the first to recognize the young Chinese government at a time when other nations held back, sitting on the fence and awaiting developments before officially recognizing the republic which had just then emerged from the chaos of the revolution of 1911-1912. The remission of the Boxer Indemnity for the purpose of sending Chinese students to this country to be educated was another factor which contributed

greatly to the promotion of friendly feeling toward America. Yet America does not seem much inclined to reciprocate the cordial attitude of the Chinese.

Being in constant and close touch with the Chinese living in this country, I have it from authoritative sources that the great majority of them are much aggrieved at the fact that they are used as sinister or ridiculous characters in fiction — the kind of literature which because of its nature has an infinitely wider circulation among the American public than have serious textbooks or books on the geography or ethnography of China.

There is no doubt that the diplomatic representatives of any other nation would raise energetic objections to an habitual vilification or *capitis deminutio* of their fellow countrymen. It will be remembered that only a short time ago the Mexican government launched successful protests in Washington against the constant abuse of the Mexican as a "bad hombre" in literature as well as in motion pictures. The Chinese people have not made many efforts along this line — their philosophy teaches them not to bother about statements that are untrue — yet they have come to realize the grave injustice done to them, and they appeal to the fairmindedness of the American public and especially of the American authors. Apropos of authors — there is hardly a nation which appreciates literary men more than does China. To be a writer is to merit great consideration in the opinion of the Chinese.

I am convinced that book readers as well as authors will be interested in my attempt to give a true portrait of the various Chinese traits of character, and of some American-Chinese institutions which have been before the eye of the American public ever since the Chinese came to this country in greater numbers.

Before all I must mention the relation of the Chinese to the white woman, concerning which many gruesome stories have been in circulation. It is a well known fact that the Orientals in general and the Chinese in particular are of a less actively amative nature than are the Caucasians. The Chinese idea of woman is utterly different from that of the American or European. For one thing, the Chinese men don't bother as much about women as do the Caucasians and they don't make as energetic efforts to win the favor of the opposite sex. They know that if woman is interested in man it is she who will begin the offensive — why exert oneself?

During a seven years' sojourn in China I remember only one attack committed upon a white woman by a Chinese. This happened in Shanghai. The offender was brought to trial, where American physicians proved that he was insane. A few years ago a woman was beaten by some Chinese soldiers. During the investigation which I conducted, it appeared that the woman was a missionary who in an obnoxious manner had interfered with the soldiers and attempted to break their wine jars and take their cigarettes away from them.

I dare say that a white woman, however pretty she may be, is infinitely safer in a Chinese city or Chinese quarter than she is in the "Forties" near Broadway in New York. People might stare at her and ask her all possible questions in good natured curiosity, but nobody would even dare to touch her. The Chinese are very gentle at heart; they respect strangers whom they consider guests of their country; and woman whom

they still regard as a representative of the weaker sex is absolutely safe among them.

The opium smoker is another favorite character. Various writers would lead the reader to believe that opium is part of the daily menu of the average Chinese. Yet it must not be forgotten that opium smoking is by no means a Chinese institution. Originating in India and Persia, the drug found its way up north as well as to the west. The government of the then Empire of China, realizing the havoc which the deadly habit wrought among its subjects, passed laws making it a capital offense to smoke opium. And ever since then the Chinese government, in spite of opposition from other countries, has made strenuous efforts to prevent the importation of opium into China.

Of course there are addicts in China. But their percentage is infinitely smaller than that of drug addicts in America, England, or France. The Chinese don't trust an opium smoker and have a thorough contempt for those who indulge in "tah yen", the "big smoke"; as a result the unfortunates who have become a slave to the habit do their best to conceal the facts.

Among the Chinese living in this country there are practically no drug addicts. To smoke opium is very expensive and time consuming, and Chinese in America are working hard to save as much as possible, so that they may return to their home country.

The cunning and tricky Chinese who works with poison or the dagger has become almost an institution in American fiction. Like everyone in public life I made enemies as well as friends in China. Yet I am still alive, and I do not remember a single instance in which anyone tried to get me out of his way by using a dagger or poison. Those who did not like me tried less subtle methods. It is only natural, however, that the Chinese should defend themselves in the same fashion as do the French, the Italians, and other races physically less strong than the Anglo-Saxon, when attacked by a stronger adversary.

Another thing the Chinese object to is the fact that many artists persist in depicting Chinese still wearing the queue. The Chinese, after having been defeated by the Manchus, were ordered by the victors to wear queues as a sign of submission. The "Sons of Han" — of Liu Pang who founded the Han dynasty about two thousand years ago, a direct descendant of whom, Captain Liu Tao, Chinese Military Forces, retired, lives now in New York — resented the queue bitterly. But those who dared to cut off their queues were beheaded by the Manchus. As proof of how hated the queue was, I mention that even at the time when the Manchus were in power, it was part of the burial rites to loosen the hair of the dead man and cut it off to the shoulders, or else to roll up the queue and coil it atop of the head, similar to the style affected by the taoist priests. Then the body was dressed in classical Chinese garments of the period before the Manchus came into power. A favorite proverb regarding this custom was: "Slaves when alive, but free sons of Han when dead."

But — I know how difficult it is to convince an artist that Chinese don't wear queues any longer! A certain illustrator who made very clever sketches to accompany some of my stories got me promptly in trouble with many of my Chinese friends who thought I was responsible for the illustrations. It is true that in certain

parts of northern China the queue is still worn, but generally only by small farmers or coolies.

The Chinese resent the popular term *Chinaman*. They prefer to be referred to as *Chinese*, just as the natives of Japan are termed *Japanese*. Would anyone ever use the expression *Japanman? Chinaman* is about as popular among the Chinese as a "Black and Tan" would be in County Tyrone, Ireland.

Last, but not least, I shall give an explanation of the "mysterious tongs" which have become an essential to every story whose plot is laid among the Chinese living in this country. "Tong" is the Cantonese pronunciation of "tung" which, in Kuan-Hoa, the official language of China, means "society, association, fraternity". The tongs in this country are simply associations of a benevolent nature and there is no secrecy about them. In fact, in cities like New York, San Francisco, and Chicago which have Chinese quarters, huge signboards indicate the headquarters of the various tongs, thus enabling strangers to find them without difficulty.

The tongs are of recent date, in America at least. Toward the end of the nineteenth century, when the so called western expansion began, a great number of Chinese laborers were imported into this country to work on railroads and the like. Soon afterward non-Chinese laborers, resenting the efficient work of the Chinese, formed the so called Knights of Labor who, besides exercising pressure upon the government for the purpose of halting a further influx of Chinese labor, intimidated the Chinese in a very unknightly manner by using physical violence. In many cases the Chinese, physically inferior to their assailants, had to quit their work. The Chinese then began to unite for the sake of self protection. Natives of the same province, or of the same county, formed fraternities, contributions to which were used to assist fellow countrymen in need. The Chinese know that a man in need is likely to become a criminal, and national pride urged them to prevent this result as much as possible.

There are no "down and outers" among the Chinese in this country, which accounts for the minimum of criminality charged against them. If a man is at the end of his resources or if he is a stranger who has just arrived in the United States, he need but apply to his tong, and a helping hand is extended to him, work is found for him, and a place to sleep.

Even seamen who arrive here and whose stay is limited avail themselves of the tongs. The seamen are just as thrifty as the other Chinese, and they try to save as much money as possible instead of "blowing" their wages in the manner of seafaring men of other nations. Upon his arrival the seaman visits his tong, and generally finds a place where he works for his board or for nominal wages till his ship sails again. I have Chinese servants who are seafaring men, employed on ships which sail between Atlantic and Pacific ports. During their stay here they work for me. And when one has to leave he always produces some friend to take his place. The man, having been recommended, behaves very well, for not only his own reputation but that of the "recommender" as well is at stake. These men are honest and hardworking, know their place, and appreciate friendly treatment more than anything else.

The tong wars which have stood in the public eye for quite a time have a perfectly natural origin with no mys-

tery about it, as the following example will show.

The members of a tong generally follow the same occupation. Years ago, when many Chinese had to quit work on railroads, they found themselves without means to earn a livelihood. Presently a member of a tong composed of men from Sing Ying County, in the Province of Canton, conceived the notion of taking up laundry work. He discovered not only that the work paid well but that very little capital was needed to start such a business. After a short while most of the Sing Ying men established themselves as laundrymen and the "Chinese laundryman" became an American institution. (It would be erroneous to believe that laundry work is considered a man's job in China. There the women attend to it.)

Other Chinese tried to follow this example and encountered the ire of the Sing Ying men. For hadn't the original idea come from their midst? The result was squabbles and altercations. Association with non-Chinese laborers had taught the Chinese to resort to violence; somebody used a gun, a hatchet, a knife, or a brick; others followed suit — the tong war was on!

Now, the Chinese, living more among themselves and mixing no longer with outsiders, have found out that the Chinese way of settling things is better. Consequently, for years there has been no tong war.

The Chinese, in their native country, are much opposed to physical violence. Even nowadays the military profession enjoys but little popularity because of the violence it demands. There are practically no fights among civilians. Arguments are settled in other ways. If Chinese have an altercation, they do not give each other black eyes as do other nations, but prefer to abuse each other. I am willing to testify that the Chinese are most expert and proficient "cussers". I have gathered a collection of curse words, every one of them more delightfully expressive than the other. Yet the Chinese are by no means timid. I have commanded Chinese soldiers, and the very same men who looked as gentle and as harmless as children, and who acted like them when everything was quiet, proved to be excellent fighters and stood shrapnel fire without flinching.

The warm feelings the Chinese have for this country deserve to be reciprocated. I hope some day to see a closer international friendship between intellectuals of America and of China.