

# An Exploration of the Chinese Image and Its Cultural Authenticity in Mark Twain's Literature

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**Abstract:** Mark Twain is an essential American writer from the mid-nineteenth century to the early twentieth century. Many images and descriptions of the Chinese appear in his works, which have attracted the attention of many scholars in China. This paper explores whether the images of Chinese in Mark Twain's works are consistent with cultural authenticity from the perspective of cultural authenticity. So as to clarify the representative Chinese images in Mark Twain's works and whether their description conforms to the authenticity of Chinese culture. At the same time, it also provides a new way of thinking to explore the specific reasons for the way of presenting Chinese images.

**Keywords:** Cultural Authenticity; Mark Twain; Chinese Image

## 1. Introduction

Mark Twain (1835–1910) wrote not only many classic works, such as *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and *The Million Pound Note*, but also many works related to China, his novels, plays and essays constantly featured Chinese figures and depictions of Chinese people and Chinese society. Throughout his career as a journalist, he continued to report on the Chinese diaspora. In many of Mark Twain's later political essays and letters, he continued to speak of 'China' and 'Chinese' as topics; especially in many of his later speeches, he continued to express his views on China. In his book *Cultural Conflict and Cultural Identity After the Mirror Image - The Image of China in British and American Literature*, Jiang Zhiqin argues that Mark Twain first came into contact with the Chinese in the early 1860s [10] [12]. In search of writing material and opportunities for growth, he traveled to the West Coast of the United States and met the Chinese for the first time in Nevada and California. Chen Mei notes that Twain's work in the West provided him with the best opportunity to engage with Chinese life and character [11]. Lai Rui concludes that scholars noted that contact with the Chinese contributed to the initial formation of Mark Twain's view of China and that he was always concerned with the group of Chinese workers, which in turn led him to focus on China and write about it in his works [14]. However, Twain had never been to China, and he always presented his image of Chinese workers as an observer. A representative interpretation of Mark Twain's perspective attributes the negative images to Twain's 'orientalist' perspective. It suggests that he imagined the Chinese as 'others' through tinted glasses. While the positive images reflect his personal experience, humanitarian stance and compassion. Scholars have generally analysed the work in terms of the positive and negative images of the Chinese and the context in which Twain lived [14].

Mark Twain is considered the founder of American critical realist literature. Therefore, his works have attracted the attention of readers and scholars at home and abroad since they were published. Many outsiders' impressions of 19th-century China may be obtained from Twain's descriptions, and outsiders can reduce stereotypes and misunderstandings about other cultures by getting accurate cultural descriptions. Therefore, his works' cultural authenticity of Chinese images and China-related elements deserves more attention.

This paper attempts to clarify the image of the Chinese in Mark Twain's more representative works of English and American literature. In addition, this paper evaluates whether the descriptions in his works are culturally authentic by analyzing and exploring relevant elements in his works from a new perspective. At the same time, in combination with the author's social, educational and family background, it provides new ideas for exploring the specific reasons for the author's presentation of Chinese images and other related influencing factors.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Cultural Authenticity

In China, most of the discussions on cultural authenticity focus on the tourism industry [17]. There are also discussions on cultural authenticity in educational literature but less on cultural authenticity in diverse literature. Foreign studies on cultural authenticity in literature related to China and Asia have focused on children's diverse literature, especially on cultural elements presented in picture books and other forms of illustration. Therefore, this paper mainly refers to the definition of cultural authenticity in picture books of children's literature in the past and explores the cultural accuracy in Twain's works in the context of the actual situation at the time of his writing [6]. Cultural authenticity in literature has attracted the attention of many scholars, but the definition of the term cultural authenticity is still not clear. Short and Fox point out that many studies agree with Bishop that cultural authenticity cannot be defined, but you know that a work is culturally authentic when you think it is a book about your own culture [5]. Multicultural literature is authentic when readers from the described culture find the text true, identify with it and feel affirmed by it<sup>[13]</sup>. Hence, Mo and Shen set out to define cultural authenticity as 'authenticity equals non-stereotyped portrayals, positive images, lack of derogatory language, accurate historical information and cultural details and realistic illustrations all put together' (86) [4].

Based on previous studies and the consideration of different types of literary works, this paper defines cultural authenticity in evaluating image of Chinese people in Mark Twain's works as follows: cultural authenticity refers to the correct, accurate and objective representation of core values of a specific group of people, a specific culture and a specific period throughout the text. The portrayal and exploration of reality presenting authentic Chinese cultural values and images of Chinese people enable readers to understand and enrich their understanding of the image of Chinese people and Chinese culture.

### 2.2 The Importance of Cultural Authenticity

Truth is the basic concept of literature, and different understandings of truth significantly affect the text of novels [21]. Tong Qingbing wrote in *The Course of Literary Theory*:

*Literary creation is the cognitive activity of understanding, reflecting, and interpreting the object world, and the value orientation of cognitive activity is to seek "truth" with "historical rationality". Works with the character of "authenticity" can give readers a sense of trust and identity. On this basis, "authenticity" becomes the primary criterion for measuring the achievement of literary creation' (155) [16].*

Authenticity in literature is a basic idea. Cultural authenticity in pluralistic literature is also a concern; readers getting authentic cultural descriptions can reduce stereotypes and misconceptions about other cultures. The representation of inauthentic cultural elements will affect outsiders' perception of Chinese culture. Most of the perceptions are biased stereotypes, such as 'squinting eyes' and 'wrapping small feet', which have a tremendous negative impact on the perception of Chinese culture abroad. Only by correcting the inauthentic descriptions of Chinese culture in various English literary works can we let the world know the real China [25]. At the same time, exploring the cultural authenticity of the work also facilitates the study of the social, familial and contextual factors behind its formation.

### 2.3 The Image of Chinese in Mark Twain's Works

In terms of studying Mark Twain's image of the Chinese in his writing, researchers have generally noted the division of Twain's vision into positive and negative aspects. They have explored the cultural and psychological reasons for Twain's shaping of various Chinese images [8] [13] [15]. This paper will analyse this formation of Chinese images in the textual content. Shi Weiming argues that Twain portrayed the Chinese as heathens in his early play *Ah Sin* and his novel *Roughing It*, as victims of racism through related reports and novels such as *Goldsmith's Friends Abroad Again* and as poor and weak in the colonial image in some of his novels and his later political essays [18]. He summarises several images of China that appear in Twain's writings, such as 'heathen, Ah Sin and opium empire'. In his view, the 'heathen' and 'opium empire' embody Twain's negative image of China. At the same time, there is some positive writing in *Ah Sin*, such as the description of the Chinese as the best domestic helpers, who are agile, obedient, patient, quick to learn, easy to get along with and don't need to be taught twice [18]. Based on the text, Jiang Zhiqin meticulously analyses the images of China that appear in works such as *Roughing It*, *John Chinaman in New York*, *Disgraceful Persecution of a Boy*, *Goldsmith's Friends Abroad Again* and *Ah Sin* and conducts a comprehensive interpretation based on the textual compendium. Chen Mei

and Wang Xiaojie summarise Twain's image of China as a 'dreamer, mirror and scapegoat' in three different connotations [11].

### 3. Judgment Materials and Criteria

#### 3.1 Text Selection

In many of Mark Twain's works in different genres, he left a lot of descriptions and opinions about Chinese people. In this paper, we mainly analyse the images of the Chinese characters in four stories, namely, *Roughing It*, *Goldsmith's Friends Abroad Again*, *Disgraceful Persecution of a Boy* and the play *Ah Sin*. Among them, *Goldsmith's Friends Abroad Again* consists of seven letters written by a Chinese man named Ah Song Hi to his cousin Ching Foo, describing the experiences of Chinese workers in the United States from the time they crossed the ocean with their dreams to the time when their plans were utterly shattered. The 54 chapters of *Roughing It* are devoted to the life of Chinese people in America, vividly and graphically outlining several typical images of Chinese people known to American society at that time. These two works were more widely disseminated in China and are well known to many Chinese readers. And in English education, the original text of *Roughing It* is also often used as a recommended book, with a broader influence. The play *Ah Sin* depicts the life experiences of a Chinese laundryman, Ah Sin, in the American West and portrays a secretive, treacherous and puzzling image of a heathen old Chinese man. The story of *Disgraceful Persecution of a Boy* tells the story of an American boy who stoned a Chinese worker, showing the unfair treatment of Chinese workers in America. Although these two works, *Disgraceful Persecution of a Boy* and the play *Ah Sin*, have been less visible to the Chinese public, the portrayal of the Chinese in these two works is also very representative.

Table 1. Selected Texts

	Title	Year
1	<i>Roughing It</i>	1866
2	<i>Goldsmith's Friends Abroad Again</i>	1870
3	<i>Disgraceful Persecution of a Boy</i>	1870
4	<i>Ah Sin</i>	1876

#### 3.2 Checklist

Under the study of the cultural authenticity of multicultural picture books, scholars have proposed many checklists to assess cultural authenticity in multicultural picture books. This study refers to the collating of previous scholars and considering the nature of non-multicultural books, and lists the following checklist as the evaluation criteria adopted in this paper to discuss Chinese images and their cultural authenticity in *Roughing It*, *Goldsmith's Friends Abroad Again*, *Disgraceful persecution of a boy* and *Ah Sin*[1][2][3][8][14][24].

##### Checklist

- a) Whether the story setting is clearly and truthfully represented in chronological, geographical, and historical terms?
- b) Whether the factual and historical details and the actual situation are accurately described?
- c) Whether the text misinterprets the original meaning and ideas of the Chinese?
- d) Whether the characters in the text are portrayed accurately?
- e) Whether the lousy situation and social status of the characters in the text are accurately described?
- f) Whether the characters in the text are genuinely described as people from the Chinese cultural group?
- g) Whether the subject matter of the text is fair, rather than deliberately smearing and misinterpreting or embellishing?
- h) Whether specific terms, objects, food, and other elements in the Chinese language are correctly interpreted or translated into English?
- i) Whether Chinese dialects are translated into English in a reasonable manner?

## 4. Discussion

### 4.1 *Misrepresentation of Ah's Purpose of Staying Abroad*

In *Goldsmith's Friends Abroad Again*, the first paragraph of the first letter Ah sent to his cousin reads:

*It is all settled, and I am to leave my oppressed and overburdened native land and cross the sea to that noble realm where all are free and all equal, and none reviled or abused--America! America, whose precious privilege it is to call herself the Land of the Free and the Home of the Brave (3) [7].*

Ah portrays his homeland as oppressed and overwhelmed while describing America as a noble country where everyone is free and equal and no one is abused. This seems to convey that Ah aspired to the freedom and equality of America and chose to leave his oppressed homeland and come to the noble land of liberty. However, Chinese people influenced by traditional Confucianism and the small peasant economy, have no concept of settling down in foreign places and will not leave their homeland until they have to, much less quit their homeland simply because they want freedom and equality [20]. Many disasters and wars have plagued modern China. The Opium War, the Second Opium War and the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom Movement ... these were all great disasters for the Chinese people, and the safety of life and property was directly threatened. Moreover, after these wars, the powers forced the Qing government to sign a series of unequal treaties, such as the Treaty of Nanjing, Tianjin and the Treaty of Beijing. These treaties required the opening of some coastal cities and the negotiation of tariffs and plundered the Chinese economy. In the 1850s, the drought, floods, salt tides and other natural disasters in Guangdong were severe. The late Qing dynasty was becoming increasingly corrupt, so people's lives began to fall into difficulties. In this situation, it became tough for people to support their families, and those who used to rely on a piece of land had to find another way to live. The domestic turmoil made Chinese people start to look abroad. At this time, the gold mines of America became a perfect choice. Chinese workers migrated to other countries to change their situation, create better living conditions for their families and relatives and live better lives [23]. This goal motivated them to overcome all the hardships and humiliation, not, as Ah said in his letter, 'I shall step upon the shore of America, and be received by her great-hearted people; and I shall straighten myself up and feel that I am a free man among freemen' [7].

Moreover, in his last letter, Ah even wrote that 'All men are born free and equal', which was copied in gold and hung on family altars and temples in China. This is even more incompatible with the image of modern Chinese and Chinese thought. It is evident that Twain's writing is laced with irony and criticism. He is telling the problems of American society through the self-reports of Chinese workers with a strong sense of reflection [13]. However, the misinterpretation and exaggeration of the purpose of the Chinese workers and the misunderstanding of Chinese ritual habits are likely to cause readers to misunderstand the image of Chinese people and Chinese culture and distorted interpretations. Additionally, in the text, Twain reflects on the legislative, judicial and administrative aspects of the United States through the mirror image of Chinese workers from the perspective of an observer. Still, he does not give a deep, specific and accurate description of the image of Ah, which seems to confirm the idea of the 'other' in the study of Twain's vision of the Chinese by many scholars. The essence of Twain's image of China is a strategy of Western self-representation. In the relationship between the exotic and the local, it is not the reality of the exotic that is important but rather its representation that speaks to the value of the local. This local culture defines and identifies itself in the image of the 'other' that it constructs. Thus, Twain's genuine concern is not with what China is but with what the idea of China can present to him [19]. Mark Twain uses the 'other' as a frame of reference to reflect on the problems in America.

### 4.2 *Heathen Chinks: An Unrealistic Portrayal of the Chinese*

In the middle of the 19th century, the demand for labour surged due to the expansion of the West and the need to build railroads, and many foreign workers were brought in. With the wave of immigrants pouring into the United States at that time, Chinese workers caused the image of the Chinese to suddenly and on a large scale appear in America's vision. However, in the eyes of curious Americans, the yellow Chinese were strange and alien; their pronunciation, culture, manners, appearance and many other aspects made them quite different from the native citizens. The Chinese seemed to be creatures from another world; they were difficult to communicate with, had strange behaviours, and everything was mysterious and incomprehensible. Therefore, the original Chinese characters in American literature often appear as the protagonists of picaresque adventure novels, and the Chinese are described as 'demons and ghosts'. An 1879 editorial in a California daily described the Chinese as 'half-human, half-demonic, rat-eating,

rag-clad, lawless, Christian cult-hating, opium-smoking, cheap labour, gut-sucking Asians' [18]. These stories were based on very few facts, and almost all depictions of the Chinese in American literature during this period were mixed with American misconceptions and distortions about the Chinese: they were ignorant and superstitious; they always lived frugally and wanted to go back to China when they earned money; they did not follow Christianity but believed in bodhisattvas and ancestors, and there were ancestors' graves in front of their houses; they were an uncivilised group of people, cunning by nature and not believable. These depictions are not consistent with the cultural authenticity of the Chinese but merely record the total of a country's perception of foreigners in a particular era, i.e. the heathen chinks in the 'collective social imagination' of the time [18].

In the poem *The Heathen Chinee* by Hart, an American writer, they created an image of 'Chinese Ah Sin', who hid his evil, treacherous and crafty heart with his dull appearance. Based on this text, Twain and Hart collaborated to create a play, *Ah Sin: The Heathen Chinee*. The Chinese labourers depicted in the play were only the image of China in the collective imagination of American society, which was entirely inconsistent with the actual image of Chinese people. It is a distortion of Chinese culture and concepts that is inconsistent with cultural authenticity. In the play, they portrayed Ah Sin, the Chinese laundryman, as 'a fool', 'moralless cancer', 'an unsolvable political problem' and 'a heathen' and portrayed the Chinese as working machines, dull-witted and without intelligent analysis or judgment [18]. For example, the play mentions that when a white lady in San Francisco was happy to teach Ah Sin how to set dishes and utensils on the table, she told him to observe how she did it and then do it again. But she may have been a little flustered when she did the demonstration and accidentally dropped a plate on the floor. After observing her, Ah Sin followed her demonstration precisely and accidentally dropped a leaf on the floor. At the same time, Mark Twain also wrote in *Roughing It*:

*If a Chinaman were to see his master break up a centre table, in a passion, and kindle a fire with it, that Chinaman would be likely to resort to the furniture for fuel forever afterward (488) [7].*

Actually, this is due to the cautiousness of the Chinese people in a foreign country to survive; they are 'the hard labourers who are oppressed' in the United States, 'the scapegoat whose life is not guaranteed' (20) [22]. Chinese people in the United States do not speak the language and have no life experience; they can only be conscientious and work hard. Their cautious and detailed work in order not to make mistakes is misunderstood as dullness and lack of intelligent analysis and judgment. At the same time, the vague impression and speculation about the Chinese portray them as evil, cunning and wrong inside, which is a misunderstanding and distorted description of the image of the Chinese. 'Ah Sin' objectively typified, conceptualised and formalised the image of China in a wrong way, deepening the inscrutable, mysterious and evil clichés of the heathen Chinese. Even in the middle of the 20th century, whenever Chinese actors appeared in Western movies, they always had some strange, typical habits, which gave western audiences a bad image of Chinese people [19]. These impressions also influenced Americans' attitudes and treatment of the Chinese, which led to more discrimination and unfair treatment of Chinese workers in the United States.

### **4.3 Misinterpretation of the Chinese Concept of Returning to One's Roots**

In the eyes of Americans, the Chinese do not believe in Christianity; they believe in bodhisattvas and ancestors and always have an obsession with returning to their roots. In *Roughing It*, Mark Twain wrote:

*Chinamen hold their dead in great reverence—they worship their departed ancestors, in fact. Hence, in China, a man's front yard, back yard, or any other part of his premises, is made his family burying ground, in order that he may visit the graves at any and all times(489) [7].*

Twain depicted China as a mysterious super cemetery [18]. But in reality, the Chinese plan to return to their roots was a result of their culture. Chinese people have a strong sense of family; they are attached to their motherland and their families when in foreign countries, and they are even more attached to the atmosphere of Chinese culture. In the 19th century, the Chinese struggled to survive a wave of Chinese exclusion in the United States. Most of them were racially discriminated against and ostracised by the white people in the United States. They were not accepted by the United States and did not have a sense of belonging, so their homesickness became stronger. Whenever possible, they wanted to return home after earning a little money and even signed a contract with their employers to ship their bodies back to the motherland after death. In addition, many Chinese came to the United States for the initial purpose of raising their families, earning money, and then returning to their home country or building up savings to build a house and get married [9]. They came to the United States with the beliefs of their families, and they always had their family, friends and hometowns on their minds. In short, the reason for this was

by no means, as Twain says:

*A Chinaman hardly believes he could enjoy the hereafter except his body lay in his beloved China; also, he desires to receive, himself, after death, that worship with which he has honored his dead that preceded him (490) [7].*

Mark Twain saw only the phenomenon of homesickness and ancestral feelings of Chinese workers returning to their roots. Through his imagination he misread a complex social problem, assuming that the Chinese only believe in ancestors and bodhisattvas [18]. These descriptions are not in line with Chinese concepts and ideas, and descriptions such as ‘super cemetery’ and ‘bones must be buried in China’ are not in line with the cultural authenticity of Chinese people. Such misinterpretations can reinforce the stereotypical image of Chinese people and develop a negative impression of them as eccentric, bizarre and ‘heathens’.

#### 4.4 Misrepresentation of Smething Unique to China

While working as a reporter for the Enterprise, Mark Twain went into Chinatown to observe and write about the Chinese colony, and his observations are included in his work *Roughing It*. In this book, Mark Twain recorded many images of the Chinese people he encountered in Chinatown and described many "Chinese specialties" that he had not seen before. He described Mr. AhSing's grocery store this way:

*He had various kinds of colored and colorless wines and brandies, with unpronounceable names, imported from China in little crockery jugs, and which he offered to us in dainty little miniature wash-basins of porcelain. He offered us a mess of birds'-nests; also, small, neat sausages, of which we could have swallowed several yards if we had chosen to try, but we suspected that each link contained the corpse of a mouse, and therefore refrained (491) [7].*

Among them, the variety of clay pot wine is actually the traditional Chinese white wine, not brandy. And the rat carcass in sausage is also nonsense, although ethno-scientific materials confirm that so far the custom of eating rats still exists in Guangdong, Guangxi, Fujian and parts of Sichuan and Tibet in China<sup>[13]</sup>. But Mark Twain as a outsider who does not understand Chinese culture, exaggerated this one-sided fact to the point of making speculations about all Chinese food and traditional food sausage that do not conform to the authenticity, creating misunderstandings and stereotypes. Also, the text contains descriptions of duck in sauce and skin eggs:

*His ducks, however, and his eggs, we could understand; the former were split open and flattened out like codfish, and came from China in that shape, and the latter were plastered over with some kind of paste which kept them fresh and palatable through the long voyage(491) [7].*

Finally, of the "the genius of a Chinese book-keeper," Mark Twain writes:

*Finally, we were impressed with the genius of a Chinese book-keeper; he figured up his accounts on a machine like a gridiron with buttons strung on its bars; the different rows represented units, tens, hundreds and thousands. He fingered them with incredible rapidity—in fact, he pushed them from place to place as fast as a musical professor's fingers travel over the keys of a piano (493) [7].*

It is easy to see that the “grilling machine” Mark Twain referred to is probably the abacus used by the Chinese to calculate. Mark Twain's observations were real, but his understanding and judgment were not always fair [19]. His depiction of these peculiar Chinese things, which do not all correspond to the cultural authenticity of Chinese culture, which also indicates that Mark Twain's understanding of Chinese culture at that time was stuck in fragmented ideas or symbols. They are collaged from some broken and one-sided ideas or symbols into some incomplete and even childish understandings. Mark Twain did not achieve a comprehensive understanding of Chinese culture in his mind<sup>[13]</sup>.

## 5. Conclusion

Throughout his writing career, Mark Twain portrayed many diverse images of the Chinese in America with the wise eye and sharp strokes of a critical realist writer. Through the study of the cultural authenticity of Chinese characters in his works, we can better understand the reality of American society and the situation of Chinese people surviving in the United States in the mid-to-late 19th century. We can also better analyse Mark Twain's attitude toward China and other Eastern cultures, realise the examination of self and reflect on the past.

Referring to previous scholars' studies of cultural authenticity in multicultural picture books, this paper sets out a more appropriate checklist for assessing the genuineness and cultural authenticity of Mark Twain's Chinese characters in his works. In the creation of the checklist, the paper also considers other factors, such as the nature and context of Twain's work, which finds and explores the distortion of a part of China's image that has no social and cultural authenticity. The main problems are the misrepresentation of Ah's purpose for staying abroad, the unrealistic portrayal of the Chinese, the misinterpretation of the Chinese concept of returning to their roots and the misrepresentation of things unique to China. These inaccurate portrayals may expand outsiders' perception of the poor image of the Chinese and create a stereotypical bias. The current study also reconceptualises and validates previous ideas about Twain's image of the Chinese through the lens of cultural authenticity and considers the reasons behind the formation of the Chinese image.

This paper explores whether the images of Chinese in Mark Twain's works are consistent with cultural authenticity from the perspective of cultural authenticity. So as to clarify the representative Chinese images in Mark Twain's works and whether their description conforms to the authenticity of Chinese culture. At the same time, it also provides a new way of thinking to explore the specific reasons for the way of presenting Chinese images.

However, the research on cultural authenticity has not been deepened. More in-depth analysis is needed to determine a specific definition and criteria for judging cultural authenticity in Western literature. It is also necessary to consider the real intention of the work in the context of the author's writing techniques and background, which requires more research.

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