The Racial Frontier:  

_Ah Sin_, a Play by Bret Harte and Mark Twain*

Mi-Seong Woo  
(Konkuk University)

Even among American literary scholars, the fact that Mark Twain wrote a play for the American stage has been generally unknown. Since the play _Ah Sin_ was not Twain’s sole work, Mark Twain scholars have tended to ignore the play as not-so-noteworthy literature or just as part of his diverse cultural activity. Although Bret Harte was the best known writer of the Western frontier, literary scholars outside of the United States, including Koreans, rarely discuss his works. _Ah Sin_, written by Harte and Twain in 1876 and first presented in Washington D.C. in 1877, has been not only a non-canonical work but a forgotten play.1)

---

* This work was supported by the Korea Research Foundation Grant. (KRF-2002-074-AL 1004).

1) There were only 450 copies of the play printed by Bibien and Mallette Dean. Although the play ran for a year with mixed reviews, it was a commercial failure which effectively quashed all interest in its publication. The present edition of this long-lost work was printed from the sole surviving manuscript, only recently discovered. The manuscript of _Ah Sin_ is in the Clifton Waller Barrett Library of American Literature at the University of Virginia.
In this paper, I propose to focus on the play as a historical text in which the two opinion-leading literary figures of the United States of America in the 1870s view Asian presence in American society. Ah Sin offers probably the first major theatrical representation of an Asian character on an American stage and reflects the two American writers’ and the late nineteenth-century Americans’ social conception of the Asian race and their immigration to the United States. Despite the play’s historical significance, however, I argue that both the play and the production Ah Sin manifest the ways in which the two writers’ dangerous crossing of the boundaries between local color and national concern, between prose and drama, in their drive for commercial success, resulted in negative representation of the Asian character. With its blend of topicality and satire, and its excessively exotic and comic representation of Asian character’s interaction with white people, Ah Sin sets the negative tone for historical representation of Asians in America.

I. Background to the Depiction of “Ah Sin”

The idea of collaboratively writing a play first came from Bret Harte,2) who was financially more desperate. According to Gary Scharnhorst, a well-known Twain scholar and a prominent expert on Twain and Harte, Harte is considered the first important Western writer and was the highest paid American author in the early 1870s. It was the fall and winter of 1876 when Bret Harte came to Twain’s mansion in Hartford, Connecticut. Harte’s trek across America to take on the literary world of the East Coast was motivated by his troubled financial and family life in California. He was influenced by some of the greatest literary figures of all time such as William Shakespeare, Charles Dickens, and Victor Hugo; Harte created the local color of his stories with carefully

2) For a summary treatment of Twain and Harte’s careers, see Margaret Duckett’s Mark Twain and Bret Harte, for a detailed sketch of the two writers’ relationship, see Gary Scharnhorst’s Bret Harte, Opening the American Literary West and Axel Nessen’s Bret Harte, Prince and Pauper.