

HOW THE OTHER HALF LIVES

The late 19th century social reformer, Jacob Riis, considered himself a friend to the immigrants he wished to “Americanize.” In his famous book *How the Other Half Lives* (1890), Riis hoped that his photos and essays describing the daily life of different immigrant groups in New York City would raise Americans’ awareness of the hard work and poverty these immigrant families endured and would make people more sympathetic to their plight. As a product of the 19th century, however, Riis was unable to escape the prejudiced view of the world held by most Americans at that time.

While reading the following excerpt, consider the following:

What would Riis consider to be the qualities and characteristics of a “real” American or “good” American?

Would his description of the Chinese community have helped Americans to understand the Chinese or encouraged them to be more accepting of these immigrants?

Between the tabernacles of Jewry and the shrines of the Bend, Joss has cheekily planted his pagan worship of idols, chief among which are the celestial worshipers’ own gain and lusts. Whatever may be said about the Chinaman being a thousand years behind the age on his own shores, here he is distinctly abreast of it in his successful scheming to “make it pay.” It is doubtful if there is anything he does not turn to a paying account, from his religion down, or up, as one prefers. At the risk of distressing some well-meaning, but, I fear, too trusting people, I state it in advance as my opinion, based on the steady observation of years, that all attempts to make an effective Christian of John Chinaman will remain abortive in this generation; of the next I have, if anything, less hope. Ages of senseless idolatry, a mere grub-worship, have left him without the essential qualities for appreciating the gentle teachings of a faith whose motive and unselfish spirit are alike beyond his grasp. He lacks the handle of a strong faith in something, anything, except his passions when aroused... I am convinced that he adopts Christianity, when he adopts it at all, as he puts on American clothes, with what the politicians would call an ulterior motive, some sort of gain in the near prospect - washing, a Christian wife perhaps, anything he happens to rate for the moment above his cherished pigtail...

From the teeming tenements to the right and left of Chinatown come the white slaves of its dens of vice and their infernal drug [opium], that have infused into the “Bloody Sixth” Ward a subtler poison than ever the stale-beer dives knew, or the “sudden death” of the Old Brewery. There are houses, dozens of them, in Mott and Pell Streets, that are literally jammed, from

the “joint” in the cellar to the attic, with these hapless victims of a passion which, once acquired, demands the sacrifice of every instinct of decency to its insatiate desire... I came across a company of them [young Caucasian prostitutes] “hitting the pipe” together, on a tour through their dens one night with the police captain of the precinct. The girls knew him, called him by name, offered him a pipe, and chatted with him about the incidents of their acquaintance, how many times he had “sent them up,” and their chances of “lasting” much longer. There was no shade of regret in their voices, nothing but utter indifference and surrender.

One thing about them [the Chinese] was conspicuous: their scrupulous neatness. It is the distinguishing mark of Chinatown, outwardly and physically. It is not altogether by chance the Chinaman has chosen the laundry as his distinctive field. He is by nature as clean as the cat, which he resembles in his traits of cruel cunning and savage fury when aroused. On this point of cleanliness he insists in his domestic circle, yielding in others with crafty submissiveness to the caprice of the girls, who “boss” him in a very independent manner, fretting vengefully under the yoke they loathe, but which they know right well they can never shake off, once they have put the pipe to their lips and given Mott Street a mortgage upon their souls for all time...

The frequent assertions of the authorities that at least no girls under age are wrecked on this Chinese shoal, are disproved by the observation of those who go frequently among these dens, though the smallest girl will invariably, and usually without being asked, insist that she is sixteen, and so of age to choose the company she keeps. Such assertions are not to be taken seriously. Even while I am writing, the morning returns from one of the precincts that pass through my hands report the arrest of a Chinaman for “inveigling little girls into his laundry,” one of the hundred outposts of Chinatown that are scattered all over the city, as the outer threads of the spider’s web that holds its prey fast...

Withal the police give the Chinese the name of being the “quietest people down there,” meaning in the notoriously turbulent Sixth Ward; and they are. The one thing they desire above all is to be let alone, a very natural wish perhaps, considering all the circumstances. If it were a laudable or even allowable ambition that prompts it, they might be humored with advantage, probably, to both sides. But the facts show too plainly that it is not, and that in their very exclusiveness and reserve they are a constant and terrible menace to society wholly regardless of their influence upon the industrial problems which their presence confuses. The severest official scrutiny, the harshest repressive measures are justifiable in Chinatown, orderly as it appears on the surface, even more than in the Bend, and the case is infinitely more urgent. To the peril that threatens there all the senses are alert, whereas the poison that proceeds from Mott Street puts mind and body to sleep, to work out its deadly purpose in the corruption of the soul.