

Review: Amy Matthewson, *Cartooning China: Punch, Power, & Politics in the Victorian Era* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2022) 188pp. ISBN 9780367460990, £38.99.

SAMUEL CHENEY

AMY MATTHEWSON'S 2022 publication *Cartooning China: Punch, Power, & Politics in the Victorian Era* is an excellent incursion into the study of both Victorian popular culture and the history of China in the Western social imaginary. It examines China's fluctuating image in nineteenth-century Britain, offering a detailed analysis of the China-themed satirical images and texts published in *Punch* magazine between 1841 and 1901. This was a turbulent era in which China was increasingly subjected to British imperial influence and political disagreements between the two empires frequently boiled over into direct military conflict (such as the two Opium Wars, 1839 – 1842 and 1856 – 1860, and the Boxer Rebellion, 1899 – 1901). While centring on this particular period, the work draws upon a wider scholarly tradition charting the history of Sino-Western relations, stretching at least to Raymond Dawson's foundational 1967 work *The Chinese Chameleon*, a study examining the many 'contradictory qualities' attributed to a perpetually-shapeshifting China by Europeans over the past half-millennium.¹ Matthewson specifically calls upon recent histories that emphasise the influence of China's visual image on nineteenth- and early twentieth-century British selfhoods, particularly work by Elizabeth Hope Chang, Catherine Pagani, and Sarah Cheang.² By focusing on *Punch's* predominantly middle-class London readership, however, Matthewson offers her own solution to Dawson's longstanding conundrum of the 'Chinese chameleon', showing how the tangibly and discursively 'broad church' of Victorian visual culture could accommodate such a wide range of socio-cultural perspectives on China.

¹ Raymond Dawson, *The Chinese Chameleon: An Analysis of European Conceptions of Chinese Civilization* (London: Oxford University Press, 1967), p. 2.

² Elizabeth Hope Chang, *Britain's Chinese Eye: Literature, Empire, and Aesthetics in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010); Catherine Pagani, 'Chinese Material Culture and British Perceptions of China in the Mid-Nineteenth Century', in Tim Barringer and Tom Flynn, eds., *Colonialism and the Object: Empire, Material Culture and the Museum* (London: Routledge, 1998), pp. 28 – 40; Sarah Cheang, 'Selling China: Class, Gender and Orientalism at the Department Store', *Journal of Design History*, 20.1 (2007), 1 – 16.

Matthewson's central focus upon China's unstable image in nineteenth-century Britain is shaped by her methodological approach, particularly her theoretically-grounded use of cartoons as historical evidence. Matthewson reacts against a tendency among historians to deploy cartoons in a selective manner, as she argues, cherry-picking images to bolster points developed from other source bases, such as newspaper reportage and literature.³ This approach, she claims, exploits the often-ambiguous messages of cartoons, which can only be understood in their precise historical and cultural context. By placing *Punch's* consistently-racialised cartoons of China in their original publication contexts, Matthewson shows that these images fluctuated in meaning across the nineteenth century, despite their seemingly unchanging visual appearance:

Visual representations of the Chinese from 1841 to 1901 remained relatively static with *Punch* employing an age-old lexicon of stereotypes; however, the textual accompaniment and message in the cartoon shifted according to developments in British politics in relation to China.⁴

Although racially-stereotyped tropes of 'Chineseness' may appear unchanging as they were codified through repeated use, Matthewson argues that these visual signifiers were in fact semantically malleable, capable of communicating a diverse range of contrasting messages about China that shifted alongside Britain's increasingly interventionist interactions with the country.⁵ Furthermore, Matthewson suggests that cartoon stereotypes epitomise the mechanics of British imperial culture, showing how the anxiety-inducing complexities of empire were rendered visually comprehensible for a middle-class reading public.⁶ Cartoons were particularly useful here, she argues, as they reduced the often confusing and contradictory parameters of Britain's imperial

³ Amy Matthewson, *Cartooning China: Punch, Power, & Politics in the Victorian Era* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2022), p. 17.

⁴ Matthewson, p. 18.

⁵ Matthewson, p. 156.

⁶ For the anxieties generated by British imperialism in China, see: James Louis Hevia, *English Lessons: The Pedagogy of Imperialism in Nineteenth-Century China* (Durham; London: Duke University Press, 2003); Sascha Auerbach, *Race, Law, and 'The Chinese Puzzle' in Imperial Britain* (New York; Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

expansion into simpler visualisations of normative power disparities between 'ruler' and 'ruled'.⁷ As Matthewson explains, *Punch*

did not create new visions of the Chinese [but instead] used familiar tropes to provide its readers with a sense of reassurance and stability in an ever-changing and uncertain world of imperialism, global capitalism, and immigration. These caricatures signified a way to classify and understand thereby rendering people, places, and objects less frightening and threatening.⁸

Cartoonists, in 'three or four strokes', could transform complex colonial realities into easily digestible cultural stereotypes.⁹ Matthewson therefore emphasises *Punch's* fundamental role in the visual domestication of imperialism in nineteenth-century Britain.

Matthewson implicitly divides *Cartooning China* into two complementary sections. After outlining her methodology in the introductory first chapter, chapters two and three examine *Punch's* institutional and creative history, while chapters four and five specifically focus on China's changing representation across the period. In chapter two, 'The Men Behind the Magazine', Matthewson examines the shifting creative impulses and political prerogatives of *Punch's* network of writers, editors, and artists. By showing how these often-oppositional stances (from conservative to radical, tolerant to prejudicial) were negotiated and balanced in the magazine's weekly publication, Matthewson illuminates the multi-layered professional working environment in which contrasting representations of China were generated.¹⁰ Chapter three builds upon this examination of the magazine's institutional foundations by charting broad shifts in *Punch's* salient political outlook across its first sixty years. By focusing on the magazine's

⁷ For the role of cartoons (and other stereotypes) in perpetuating imperial discourse, see: Richard Scully and Andrekos Varnava, eds., *Comic Empires: Imperialism in Cartoons, Caricature, and Satirical Art* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2019); Homi Bhabha's chapter on 'The Other Question: Stereotype, Discrimination and the Discourse of Colonialism', in *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), pp. 66 – 84.

⁸ Matthewson, p. 3.

⁹ Diana Donald, *The Age of Caricature: Satirical Prints in the Reign of George III* (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 1996), p. 14.

¹⁰ Matthewson, p. 38.

visual centrepiece, the Large Cut cartoon – a full- or double-page cartoon on political themes – Matthewson shows how *Punch* gradually shifted from its initially liberal stance in the 1840s towards an imperial nationalism that catered to its predominantly conservative middle-class readership.¹¹ While noting the ambiguity often latent within the Large Cut cartoon, whose ‘razor-sharp humour often cut both ways’, this chapter shows how cartoons were the perfect tool for crystallising complex ideas of the British Empire into easily digestible forms.¹²

In chapters four and five, Matthewson explores the gradual deterioration of China’s image in the collective British mind at three separate points of geopolitical instability: the two Opium Wars (1839 – 1842 and 1856 – 1860), the First Sino-Japanese War of 1895, and the Boxer Rebellion (1899 – 1901). Chapter four argues that between 1840 and 1860, *Punch*’s ‘tone and outlook’ towards China shifted, ‘beginning with playful condescension before slipping into scornful condemnation’.¹³ By examining China’s presence in mid-century exhibitions alongside cartoons relating to the Opium Wars, Matthewson shows how an orientalised China (constructed as arrogantly resistant to the supposedly superior lessons of European ‘civilization’) became a cultural ‘other’ against which unified ‘British’ identities could be erected atop nineteenth-century society’s deep class stratifications.¹⁴ The chapter concludes by considering *Punch*’s overwhelming support for Lord Palmerston’s anti-China campaign of the late-1850s, with Matthewson arguing that ‘negative representations of China [from this period] were therefore important in the production of both a British identity as well as a superior national identity’.¹⁵

In the work’s final chapter, Matthewson argues that China’s tumultuous 1890s heightened British imperial anxieties about East Asia. As the First Sino-Japanese War and the Boxer Rebellion exposed the weakening authority of the Qing state, Britain and its international rivals ‘scrambled’ for territorial advantage in China – a free-for-all that many Britons feared would upset the balance of power in the region.¹⁶ In particular,

¹¹ Matthewson, p. 51.

¹² Matthewson, p. 53; 68.

¹³ Matthewson, pp. 72 – 73.

¹⁴ Matthewson, p. 88; 73.

¹⁵ Matthewson, p. 108.

¹⁶ Matthewson, p. 128.

Matthewson demonstrates the ways in which 1890s' *Punch* cartoonists reduced China to a status of civilizational 'backwardness' as they simultaneously celebrated Japan as a 'plucky nation' analogous to Britain.¹⁷ The chapter ends by claiming that although the Boxer Rebellion did precipitate a rise in 'yellow peril' representations of the Chinese as 'a menacing and threatening people with intense hatred towards foreigners', overall, China had been denigrated to such an extent by 1900 that this 'sick man of Asia' was rarely represented as threatening.¹⁸ Rather, the country was constructed as 'an important space upon which [Britain's] imperial rivalries were played out'.¹⁹

The structure of *Cartooning China* successfully reflects Matthewson's central argument, even if the connections between chapters are usually left implicit: China's chameleonic image in the nineteenth century was due as much to the tangible creative politics of *Punch* magazine's employees as it was to developments in imperial discourse. However, the author might have expanded upon China's representation in other areas of British popular culture in order to highlight the particularities of *Punch's* perspective on China. One of the central arguments of Matthewson's work is that 'the downward trajectory of *Punch's* narrative of China and the Chinese people [...] was directly linked to fluctuations in Britain's relationship with China'.²⁰ This link between the Victorian disenchantment with China and moments of geopolitical tension is supposedly confirmed by the fact that nearly no references to China appear in *Punch* between the mid-1860s and the mid-1890s (times of relative political stability).²¹ While it is perhaps obvious that a self-avowedly political publication such as *Punch* would comment on China only at times of particular public relevance, it should not be assumed that British interest in China was always linked to geopolitical turbulence. In many other Victorian contexts (from the literary and visual, to the musical and theatrical), international political events were not necessarily decisive in shaping China's ever-shifting representation – rather more important were the needs and desires of respective audience groups. Matthewson's excellent case study could therefore benefit from contextualisation within secondary scholarship that considers representations of China

¹⁷ Matthewson, p. 114; 116.

¹⁸ Matthewson, p. 145.

¹⁹ Matthewson, p. 148.

²⁰ Matthewson, p. 19.

²¹ Matthewson, p. 19.

in other creative spheres.²² This is certainly not a criticism of Matthewson's project – she never claims that her arguments can be extrapolated to cultural contexts beyond satirical political publications such as *Punch*. Nonetheless, readers of *Cartooning China* should not themselves assume that all Victorian representations of China were automatically tethered to imperial politics.

This last point notwithstanding, Matthewson's *Cartooning China* makes a significant contribution to scholarship on nineteenth-century visual culture and the shaping of China in Western minds. The work offers a nuanced handling of cartoons as historical evidence and emphasises the importance of visual images in maintaining Britain's imperial culture. It not only encourages further research into comparable geographic and temporal contexts, but also demands our renewed examination of the complex connections between international politics and the domestic representation of these events. Finally, the work should be commended for the rich repository of printed primary images that it contains. With its wealth of expertly-analysed primary material, this is an excellent resource for researchers, students, and educators alike. *Cartooning China* will be a worthy addition to any course of study on the visual cultures of empire, or China's relationship with the modern West.



BIOGRAPHY: Samuel Cheney is a PhD student in History at the University of Edinburgh, AHRC-funded by the Scottish Graduate School of Arts and Humanities (SGSAH). His research examines Perceptions and Representations of Chinese Musicality in Britain, 1860 – 1939, exploring how music and sound influenced British conceptions of China's racial and civilizational profile in the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries.

CONTACT: S.A.Cheney@sms.ed.ac.uk

²² Ross G. Forman, *China and the Victorian Imagination: Empires Entwined* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013); William A. Everett, 'Imagining China in London Musical Theatre During the 1890s: *The Geisha* and *San Toy*', *Studia Musicologica*, 57.3 (2016), 417 – 426; Chang Dongshin, *Representing China on the Historical London Stage: From Orientalism to Intercultural Performance* (New York; London: Routledge, 2015); Zheng Yangwen, ed., *The Chinese Chameleon Revisited: From the Jesuits to Zhang Yimou* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013); Shih-Wen Chen, *Representations of China in British Children's Fiction, 1851 – 1911* (Boca Raton, Florida: Routledge, 2016).