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Review of Amy Matthewson, *Cartooning China: Punch, Power, & Politics in the Victorian Era*

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Reviews

Amy Matthewson, *Cartooning China: Punch, Power, & Politics in the Victorian Era* (London and New York: Routledge, 2022). 174 pp. ISBN 9780367458225

In *Cartooning China: Punch, Power, & Politics in the Victorian Era*, Amy Matthewson explores the series of cartoons and textual satires about China and the Chinese published in the British satirical periodical *Punch, or the London Charivari*, between its launch in 1841 and Queen Victoria's death in 1901. Matthewson argues that *Punch* turned China into a site upon which anxieties of Victorian Britain's social stratifications as well as its position as an imperial power were shaped and negotiated (p. 1). Explaining why she chose the cartoon as her object of study, Matthewson states that cartoons are incredibly powerful tools in disseminating particular ideas about particular topics. Citing Scully and Varnava's *Comic Empires* (2019), she observes that cartoons could express the thinking of a broad segment of society in a pithy and succinct fashion, turning complex notions into easily comprehensible images. As such, cartoons are invaluable resources in the study of past attitudes (pp. 2–3, 9).

The *Punch* cartoons, especially, provide an excellent case study. Since the magazine wielded considerable cultural and political influence in Victorian society, particularly among the middle class, its cartoons were 'significant conveyors of information' as well as 'powerful agents' that shaped perceptions of the self and other in Victorian Britain (pp. 2–3). In the case of China, the *Punch* cartoons offer an insight into the multitude of forms that China took within the British imagination as well as into the ways in which Britain reflected on its own society and role in nineteenth-century global politics. For example, many cartoons emphasized the image of China as a country marked by stagnation, wilfully blind to the industrial progress that the western nations — with

Britain at the forefront — made (pp. 2, 85–6).

Cartooning China consists of six interlinked chapters. In the introduction, Matthewson elaborates on the theoretical framework she employs in her book. She deftly analyses the concept and politics of representation, drawing on the work of postcolonial scholars such as Edward Said and Homi K. Bhabha, and discusses *Punch* by situating the magazine in its historical context. Chapters One and Two further delve into *Punch*. In Chapter One, Matthewson describes the magazine's team of editors, writers, and artists. Chapter Two analyses *Punch*'s political stance — which Matthewson likens to that of the 'gentleman imperialist' (p. 51) — and the ways in which it was expressed in the most prolifically repeated of its cartoons, the Large Cut. In Chapters Three and Four, Matthewson shifts the focus to *Punch*'s engagement with China. Whereas Chapter 3 covers the 1840–60s, Chapter Four concentrates on turn-of-the-century *Punch*.

As Matthewson observes, *Punch*'s perspective on China underwent a fundamental change. In the 1840s, the magazine's attitude towards the Chinese was one of 'playful condescension' (p. 72). Especially in the wake of Britain's victory in the First Opium War (1839–42), *Punch* portrayed China as technologically backward, with many cartoons mocking the Chinese military for its supposed inefficiency and lack of courage. This way, the magazine could dispel any anxieties over the military threat that China posed as well as reinforce a sense of 'Britishness' among its readership, which underscored the difference between 'we' (Britons) and 'others' (the Chinese). By the end of the Second Opium War (1856–60), however,

Punch's previously playful attitude towards China had become noticeably acrimonious. In both text and image, it explicitly advocated for swift military action against the Chinese (pp. 74–75, 93–95). Many of the magazine's Large Cuts underline the idea that Britain 'was administering "justice" to a savage nation populated by cruel and barbaric people' (p. 101). As Matthewson shows, turn-of-the-century *Punch* remained very negative in its appraisal of China. As Britain became aware of other European powers encroaching upon China's weakened territory, the magazine's rhetoric took on a strong imperialist tone. For example, by portraying Russia as a stealthy, marauding bear and Kaiser Wilhelm as a power-hungry ruler, *Punch* effectively demonized their European competitors' imperialist ambitions in China while legitimizing Britain's own presence in the Far East (pp. 129, 136).

In scholarship, *Punch* has long been a popular object of study. In recent

years, especially, postcolonial scholars have frequently referred to *Punch* and its cartoons to study Victorian attitudes to and representations of British imperialism (Scully and Varnava, 2019). With *Cartooning China*, Matthewson makes an important contribution to this field. By analysing *Punch's* Large Cuts, she convincingly demonstrates how the magazine transformed China into a rich visual space onto which British anxieties of empire were projected and negotiated. In addition, Matthewson provides scholars with a practical toolkit with which to analyse cartoons. She deftly illustrates how *Punch* used particular strategies such as visual metaphors, tropes, and stereotypes to represent specific topics and thereby mould public opinion. Therefore, *Cartooning China* is essential reading material for both experts and students interested in Victorian culture and history, Chinese studies, as well as media studies.

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