

Between Satire and Politics: Tracing British Perception of China in *Punch's* Cartoons

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Abstract:

Cartooning China: Punch, Power & Politics in the Victorian Era by Amy Matthewson provides various insights into the relationship between the famous British magazine *Punch* and Sino-British politics in the Victorian era. By contextualizing *Punch's* cartoons and textual satires of China and the Chinese with the specific history of Sino-British politics, Matthewson argues that *Punch* played an important role in constructing a fixed idea of China and the Chinese in the British popular imagination, which reveals British self-perception and its role in the world.

Zwischen Satire und Politik: Die britische Wahrnehmung Chinas in den Cartoons von *Punch*

German Abstract:

Cartooning China: Punch, Power & Politics in the Victorian Era von Amy Matthewson bietet verschiedene Einblicke in die Beziehung zwischen der berühmten britischen Zeitschrift *Punch* und der chinesisch-britischen Politik im Viktorianischen Zeitalter. Amy Matthewson kontextualisiert die Cartoons und Textsatiren über China und die Chinesen von *Punch* mit der spezifischen Geschichte der britisch-chinesischen Politik. Matthewson argumentiert, dass *Punch* eine wichtige Rolle bei der Konstruktion einer festen Vorstellung über China und die Chinesen in der britischen populären Imagination spielte, welche die britische Selbstwahrnehmung und ihre Rolle in der Welt offenbart.

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As a British satirical magazine founded in 1841, *Punch* has been a popular research subject since its last issue was published in 2002. Different than other studies of *Punch*, which mostly focus on the magazine as a representative of long-running serial journalism, with *Cartooning China: Punch, Power & Politics in the Victorian Era*, visual and material culture scholar Amy Matthewson provides insights into the entanglements of *Punch* and Sino-British politics in the Victorian period by examining the series of cartoons of China and Chinese people printed in the magazine from 1841 to 1901. As the first installment of the “Global Perspectives in Comics Studies” series, *Cartooning China* serves as an important contribution to a wide range of research areas such as comics studies, cultural studies, empire politics, journalism as well as Chinese studies.

Opening her book with the analysis of a cartoon of a Chinese Humpty Dumpty published in *Punch* on 4 July 1900 that indicates racial difference and foreignness with its exaggerated features, Amy Matthewson asserts that “the visual and textual satires were, in fact, not about China at all; rather, they reveal Britain’s knowledge of China [...] the continually evolving Sino-British relationship, and fluctuating anxieties and tensions at different stages of Britain’s imperialist developments” (p. 1–2). From this perspective, the author points out that the cartoons in *Punch* reveal not only a complex understanding of China in the British imagination, but also the self-perceptions and self-reflexivity of Britain in the world. The book is comprised of an introduction followed by four chapters discussing the contributors, the characteristic tone of *Punch* and the trajectory of *Punch's* perspective towards China from the 1840s to the 1890s and closes with a conclusion.

In the first chapter, Matthewson introduces her theoretical framework and the uniqueness of *Punch* as a historical source because of its influence and popularity. The theoretical part is creatively organized by discussing the link between power and visibility, more precisely the power behind the representation and the power of the representation itself. To discuss different aspects which influence the effect of representation, Matthewson draws on colonial discourses, such as the theories of Edward Said and Homi Bhabha, as well as Jürgen Habermas' argument about the interrelationship between public sphere and media, and Victor S. Navasky's idea of utilization of visuals in critical argument. She also stresses the power of caricature especially its influence on public figures and politics.

In the second chapter, Matthewson discusses editors, writers, and artists of *Punch*, who played an important role in deciding the styles as well as the development of the magazine. By telling detailed stories about main contributors of *Punch*, this chapter serves as a basis for understanding the further entanglements of the magazine with certain events in Victorian society. In the following chapter, the author focuses on the tone and the political attitude of *Punch*. By giving various examples such as Westminster Review's (a British journal of political and social commentary published in the 19th and early 20th centuries) comments and evaluation on *Punch*, the author underscores the magazine's deliberate abandonment of scurrility and stresses its shift to a sense of decency in the character of an imperialistic gentleman who always abides by Victorian codes of conduct. Moreover, Matthewson argues that which topics were selected and how they were represented in *Punch* "reveals a highly ideological and political awareness" (p. 52). In addition, the author introduces *Punch*'s 'Large Cuts,' the full-page satirical image, which played an essential role in shaping the self-perception of empire and 'otherness' in the imagination of Britain.

The next two chapters can be viewed as the highlight of the book, in which Matthewson follows a chronological approach and situates the cartoons of China and the Chinese in *Punch* into specific contexts of the history of the English empire in the time period from the First Opium War to the Boxer Uprising. Already in the introduction, Matthewson clarifies that her study is not about China itself, but about China in the imagination of British society. Chapter four then explores in detail the trajectory of *Punch*'s perception of China from the 1840s to the 1860s which she describes as "beginning with playful condescension before slipping into scornful condemnation" (p. 72). As the only nation that refused to take part in the Great Exhibition, China

was degraded in *Punch's* cartoons as an objector to Western notions of modernity and progress. Matthewson claims that *Punch's* negative reports of China's absence from the Great Exhibition were essential to solidify Britain's self-perception of being of superior national identity.

Chapter five examines imperialist discourse represented in *Punch* around the turn of the 20th century with a focus on the imperialistic competition and power imbalance between Britain, Japan, Russia, and Germany. The author argues that the series of cartoons created during the Boxer Uprising in *Punch* "were used as a powerful tool to persuade readers that Britain's presence in China was both justified and a requirement in order to maintain the global balance of power" (p. 147). Particularly interesting in this chapter is Matthewson's elaboration on the role of language in discourse of social status and racial stereotype. The cartoon "A Touching Appeal" as well as its accompanying "poem" published in *Punch* in November 1894 illustrate the shifting power balance between China and Japan. In the cartoon, the depicted Chinese speaks in broken pidgin English, while the Japanese speaks a standard English without grammatical mistakes. Matthewson points out that the distinction of proper use and non-proper use of language is more evident when it is used to emphasize 'foreignness' (cf. p. 116).

One minor weakness of the study is Matthew's inconsistency with her own argument. In the introduction, she states that in *Punch's* cartoons the attitude towards China oscillates between "admiration and contempt" (p. 4). In chapter four and five, however, Matthewson only engages with the negative portrayal of China in *Punch*. Besides that, Matthewson does not specifically clarify why she chose to investigate the representation of China in *Punch* — instead of any other British colony — as an entry point to explore British self-perception as an imperial global power. Apart from these rather minor points of criticism, with *Cartooning China: Punch, Power, & Politics in the Victorian Era*, Amy Matthewson offers a very insightful analysis of the relationship between the famous British magazine *Punch* and Sino-British politics in the Victorian era. Her study is an important contribution to the research of *Punch* and can be interesting for scholars and researchers of cultural studies, empire histories and politics, Chinese studies as well as media studies.