

2022 Curran Fellowship

“China, Humour, and the Opium Wars in *Punch*: An Intertextual Enquiry”

Narrative Report

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This project is a part of a larger research project seeking to explore the East in Victorian comic periodicals. This part looks at *Punch* and the Opium Wars, with a focus on the intertextual linkage between *Punch* and other periodical publications. With the help of Curran Fellowship, I was able to subscribe to several digital databases that are essential to my research and to gather primary sources in the British Library. Due to covid restriction, my plan to visit the British Library was postponed from July to December 2022, but despite this delay all the proposed activities in relation to materials collection have been completed within the fellowship period. Reading, analysis, and organization are on-going, one paper has been produced, and more writing will follow. Below is an outline of my findings and the work I have completed at present, along with some notes on further outcomes to expect.

One of my findings is about the intertextual connection between *Punch* and the reformist press in their engagement with the First Opium War (1840–1842). By “reformist press” I refer to those periodicals that were campaigning for political reform and a change in social condition, of which the Chartist press was a leading representative. When the First Opium War broke out in 1840, it was this kind of periodicals that made the loudest voice against Britain’s waging of war towards China, and it was by criticizing the oppressiveness, hegemony, and corruption of the British government that they framed their anti-war rhetoric as a kind of “rhetoric of homology” between China and the subjugated working class. Interestingly, *Punch*’s writing of the Opium War shows a clear resemblance to this rhetoric of the reformists, and in not a few instances *Punch* actually adopts the Chartist language when commenting on the war. Its comic reportage of the war, too, is almost a restatement of the reformists’ colonial-social criticism from such an intertextual perspective. This phenomenon forms the subject of a paper I have submitted to the *Victorian Periodical Review*, entitled “Writing the Opium War: Intertextual Dialogue Between *Punch* and the Reformist Press,” the abstract of which is appended to the present report. This paper shows how *Punch*’s comic

writing is embedded within the intertextual context of periodical reading and how, within this context, discourses on imperialism is intermixed with and complicated by domestic criticisms.

In his study of early *Punch*, Richard Altick talks of *Punch*'s lack of interest in foreign affairs before 1848 (when republican revolutions swept Europe; it marked, at the same time, the decline of Chartism in Britain).¹ My own reading of *Punch*'s treatment of the East agrees with this observation, and I am inclined to add that, when *Punch* did show interest in foreign affairs, especially those related to the East, its interest is almost always domestically minded. Here I diverge to my reading of Henry Silver's diary, which recorded the weekly discussion of *Punch*'s members of staff chiefly on the large cut to be produced in the next issue. Covering the period from 1858 to 1870, Silver's diary is a valuable document that allows us to probe the actual exchange of ideas that took place in the *Punch* meetings during this period. My reading of the diary in the British Library is focused on *Punch*'s discussion of the East. This subject, however, turns out to be a rare one in the meetings; with the exception of India, then a British colony, the East was a conspicuous absence in the collective mind of the *Punch* club. As far as the discussions of the large cut is concerned, Eastern affairs often had to give way to issues of more immediate relevance to the society; the subject of India, for example, won over the Oxford Movement as *Punch*'s large cut of 11 September 1858 ('The Accession of the Queen of India'), but lost to the campaign of the reformist Social Science Association for 30 October 1858 ('One Good Turn Deserves Another'), and yet again to John Bright's political reform for 25 December 1858 ('A Step in Reform').²

The same is true for the subject of China as far as Silver's diary can tell. Silver's diary covers the period of the Second Opium War (1856–1860), but unfortunately no entries were made regarding the large cuts produced on the subject.³ In one instance, however, the war with China made way into Silver's record of the large cut discussion:

¹ Richard D. Altick, *Punch: The Lively Youth of a British Institution, 1841–1851* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1997), 380.

² Henry Silver, 1 September 1858; 21 October 1858; 15 December 1858. Henry Silver Diary, *Punch* Archive, British Library.

³ *Punch* published seven large cuts about the Second Opium War: "The Great Chinese Warriors Dah-Bee and Cob-den" (7 March 1857), "A Lesson to John Chinaman" (9 May 1857), "A Little Tea Party" (4 September 1858), "The New Alliance" (24 September 1859), "New Elgin Marbles" (24 November 1860), "What We Ought to Do in China" (22 December 1860), and "The Real Barbarian from China" (5 January 1861). I have, therefore, expected to find quite some discussions about China and the war in Silver's diary. Unfortunately, almost no entries are found about these large cuts. Silver's diary started in 1858, but his record leaped from 4 August 1858 to 1 September 1858, then again from 2 March 1859 to 18 January 1860, and then again from 15 August 1860 to 16 October 1861, leaving no entries at all about the large cuts mentioned.

LC. John Bull and Britannia at Breakfast – “I must give up my paper if you spend such a lot on that China” (paper duties retained by Lords.) ML. Pam offering up paper duties as a sacrifice to a Chinese Joss. TT. Cares, or Britannia, welcoming the Sun and shutting up umbrella. (accepted) JL. More talk about this fine week than about the Chinese.⁴

This single entry about China tells us much about the place China and the war had in the table talk of *Punch*. The proposal to make a large cut about the war was initiated, by Mark Lemon, with a domestic issue in mind – the repeal of paper duties, which was rejected by the House of Lords on financial grounds in 1860. Refining the proposal, Tom Taylor suggests putting Palmerston, the Prime Minister, on the cut instead – possibly to thin out the clash between John Bull and Britannia in the matter of war expenditure. In any case, the proposal was eventually dismissed; what came into place is the “The Long Lost Sun” (14 July 1860), a large cut about the fine weather that began at last to set in after almost an entire year of rain (which plagued the agricultural industry). As Silver cared to remark, there was “more talk about this fine week than about the Chinese.” China, and Eastern affairs at large, tended to capture the attention of the *Punch* club when they were associated with things happening at home. But even with such an association, what is foreign seems always to be secondary to what is close and around. What dominated the table talk of *Punch*, in the end, is the near and the intimate – domestic issues that affect the society in a more connected way.

To contextualize *Punch*’s writing of the East against the domestic context it associates with is therefore a significant step towards understanding its very existence in the comic magazine. I have written about the First Opium War and the socio-political content of *Punch*’s treatment of it; *Punch*’s writing of the Second Opium War is likewise closely connected with domestic politics. The link between them is encapsulated in the first large cut *Punch* made about the war, “The Great Chinese Warriors Dah-Bee and Cob-den” (7 March 1857) (figure 1). Done by John Leech, this large cut is a reworking of an illustration Leech made during the First Opium War for Thomas Sealy’s “Kublai Khan” in *Bentley’s Miscellany* (figure 2).⁵ In Leech’s re-imagination, the Chinese warriors now wear the faces of Richard Cobden and Edward Stanley (Lord Derby), the two parliamentary members who opposed the aggressive foreign policy of Palmerston (the sailor replacing Kublai Khan in the large cut).

⁴ Henry Silver, 5 July 1860.

⁵ [Thomas Sealy] T. T. T., “Kublai Khan, or, The Siege of Kinsai,” *Bentley’s Miscellany* 10 (August 1841), 186–97 (186).

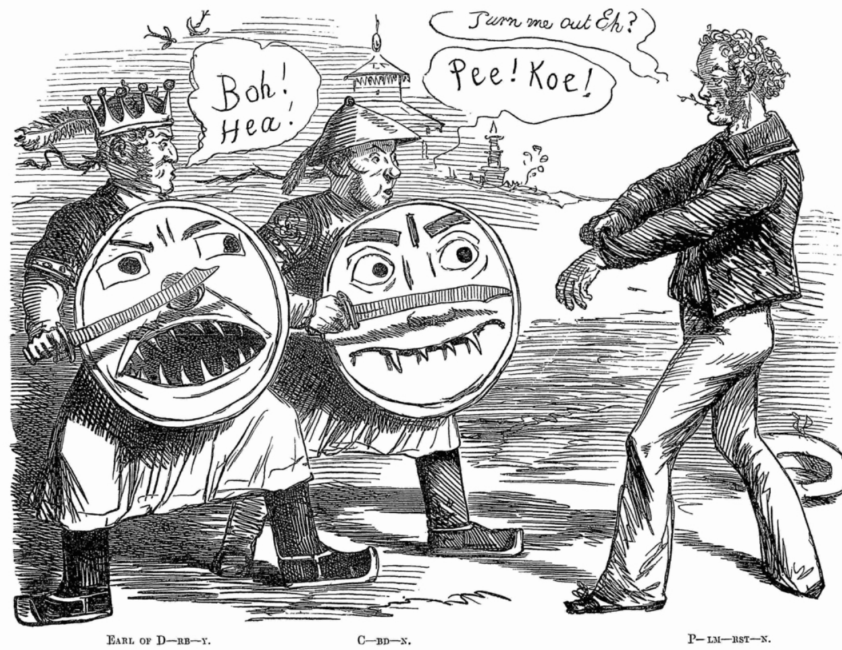
Rather than a war that took place in far China, *Punch*'s large cut really pictures an inner war that took place in the British parliament over the issue of the Second Opium War. What interested *Punch* is, in fact, the general election upcoming in April 1857, in which the Chinese question featured prominently. And it was the general election that seems to have exerted the most decisive influence upon the way *Punch* writes about the Second Opium War, because, as my present reading suggests, *Punch*'s attitude towards the war changed drastically before and after the dissolution of the House of Commons in March 1857. *Punch* was, at first, highly sceptical about the British pretext for war; "About the English of It" (24 January 1857) shows *Punch* attempting to expose the deception practised by the British in the Arrow Incident, and "A Few Mandarins Wanted" (14 February 1857) offers a pacifist option to end the war in much the same way as Douglas Jerrold had proposed for the First Opium War.⁶ As the House of Commons was dissolved in March and the electoral campaign set in motion, *Punch* became, at least in appearance, increasingly belligerent and segregationist. Its opposition to Cobden, the spokesman of the British manufacturers, seems to have developed into a virtually pro-Palmerston and pro-war discourse when blended with the parliamentary debates. It speaks of Cobden, who lobbied for peace, as a degrader of Old England, as a fabulist, and as a "Chinese member" of the parliament. Cobden and his allies were satirized and censured in such articles as "The Chinese Boy" (7 March 1857), "Cobden's Capability" (14 March 1857), and "Cobdenisms on China" (14 March 1857). By March *Punch* would have looked, as Karl Marx thought was the case, "the Clown of the British press [...] riveted to the present administration by golden and official links."⁷ To contextualize *Punch*'s writing of the Second Opium War against the political factionalism and ideological polarization of the 1850s and 1860s will be the focus of my succeeding writing, and one of the points to make will be the necessity of recognizing *Punch*'s imperialist posture as a means to an end.

All these findings point to one telling conclusion: *Punch* is not writing about China when it writes about China. At least, *Punch* is not writing only about China when it writes about China. The same is very likely true to the East at large. Curran Fellowship has thus enabled me to further develop the frame of my present and future research by allowing me to study the materials that demonstrate a different relationship between the foreign and the domestic in *Punch* as well as in other periodicals. It has, moreover, confirmed the usefulness

⁶ Douglas Jerrold, "Shakspeare in China," *New Monthly Magazine* 50 (June 1837), 233–39.

⁷ Karl Marx, "The Coming Election in England," *New York Daily Tribune*, 31 March 1857.

of an intertextual lens not only in rediscovering the nexus of periodical publications but also in contextualizing the existence of a cultural text against a less perceptible background of writing to readers of today. How the practice of cross-referencing and borrowing, which was so common in Victorian periodicals, transfers willy-nilly the political, social, and cultural views of one periodical to another remains a topic worthy of exploration. I will continue to explore these themes and duly acknowledge the support of Curran Fellowship in my future research outputs.



THE GREAT CHINESE WARRIORS DAH-BEE AND COB-DEN.

Figure 1 John Leech, *Punch*, 7 March 1857



Figure 2 John Leech, *Bentley's Miscellany*, August 1841

Appendix I

Writing the Opium War: Intertextual Dialogue Between *Punch* and the Reformist Press

Abstract

From the beginning till its end, the Opium War (1840–1842) was a subject of much controversy and antagonism in the British press. It was also one of the very few instances of foreign affairs that captured the interest of *Punch* in its founding years. This paper explores the writing of the Opium War in *Punch* by contextualizing it within the just-war debate, driven principally by the conservative and the reformist fronts. It examines how the Opium War was used as a rhetoric of dissent in the reformist press, and how the intertextual linkage between *Punch* and the reformist papers, especially the early Chartist papers, renders the *Punch*'s writing of the Opium War a form of socio-political expression. Predicating upon the periodical culture of intertextual exchange and interplay on which *Punch* premises much of its wit, this paper argues that *Punch*, in writing about the Opium War, was engaging not only with foreign affairs but also with domestic politics. It seeks to obscure the boundary between the foreign and the domestic in *Punch*'s journalism, and, by that means, to draw a different picture of *Punch*'s topical horizon and its implication.