

One Hundred Days of Confusion: British Press perspectives on the Qing Dynasty's September 1898 Coup

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The Qing dynasty experienced a coup on September 21, 1898. After the Guangxu Emperor attempted to implement a reform program known as the Hundred Days' Reform, the Empress Dowager Cixi removed him from power and resumed her role as regent, a position she would hold until her death in 1908. British newspapers, namely *The Daily News* and *The Times*, actively reported on the coup's progression and commented on its ramifications for Britain's position in East Asia. This paper will explore the coup through the lens of the British press, including how they presented the coup as a struggle between two political parties, appealed to a constructed Chinese public opinion, and incorporated the Anglo-Russian rivalry into their publications. An examination of these reporting strategies reveals that the British press both influenced and was influenced by official British policy towards the Qing dynasty. Given that the British Empire had a limited presence in China at this time, British newspapers reporting on the coup tended to adopt an orientalist slant by assuming that China was radically and fundamentally different from the West. They also characterized China as a marginal region of their Empire in which British influence was restricted but important for checking Russian expansion. This explains why British newspapers reacted more strongly to the September 1898 coup, which was seen as having direct diplomatic ramifications, than to the Hundred Days' Reform, which was seen as a domestic Chinese project that did not concern British interests.

Context of the Hundred Days' Reform and the 1898 coup

The September coup ended not only the personal rule of the Guangxu Emperor, but also a short-lived period of reform that began on June 11, 1898, known as the Hundred Days' Reform. These reforms, which impacted education, the economy, the military, and the administration, were promulgated in response to foreign imperialism in China, exemplified by territorial losses against Japan during the First Sino-Japanese War in 1895 and the German occupation of Jiaozhou Bay in early 1898.¹³⁸ However, contemporaries did not consider these reforms to be radical, as they followed a precedent of the moderate reform established by the Self-Strengthening Movement after 1861; scholars such as Luke Kwong have similarly noted that there were “scarcely any surprises in the new programs.”¹³⁹ The cause of the September coup, which ended the reforms, is a controversial topic amongst historians. Kwong, for instance, argues that Cixi instigated the coup because she believed in a conspiracy that Marquis Ito Hirobumi of Japan would take over the Qing government,¹⁴⁰ while Jack Gray argues that the reforms failed “because Chinese public opinion was still unorganized and inarticulate.”¹⁴¹ These early opinions impacted later historiography, which reflect similarly conflicted explanations given by *The Daily News* and *The Times* in 1898.

British newspapers were interested in Qing politics in 1898 because the latter was geopolitically and economically significant to the former. This was partly because the British held territorial concessions in China, including Hong Kong, parts of Shanghai, and the newly acquired territory of Weihaiwei. The limited geographic size of these concessions reflects the

¹³⁸ Luke S. K. Kwong, *A Mosaic of the Hundred Days: Personalities, Politics, and Ideas of 1898*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, 1984), 169-171.

¹³⁹ Kwong, *A Mosaic of the Hundred Days*, 173.

¹⁴⁰ Kwong, *A Mosaic of the Hundred Days*, 211.

¹⁴¹ Jack Gray, *Rebellions and Revolutions: China from the 1800s to 2000*, Short Oxford History of the Modern World (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 134.

British government's aversion to expanding into Chinese territory and thereby injuring British trade interests.¹⁴² Indeed, contemporaneous British politicians viewed China as a vast market that could be accessed and protected. Additionally, the Anglo-Russian rivalry was pertinent in British policy towards China in 1898. The rivalry, commonly referred to as the Great Game, primarily manifested in British and Russian attitudes towards India and Central Asia, but British anxiety towards Russian expansionism is also evidenced in press coverage of China.¹⁴³

Historiography of Anglo-Chinese relations in the late 1900s

Many diverse studies have been conducted on Anglo-Chinese relations in the late 1800s. Scholars have applied orientalist lenses to Anglo-Chinese relations to varying degrees, as some disagree on the causes of European imperialism in China and the extent to which Western philosophy inspired reform in the Qing dynasty. Notably absent from these studies, however, is the lens of the British press and the insight it provides into the aforementioned historiographical disagreements. Further research reveals that British newspapers' attitudes towards the Qing dynasty were oftentimes orientalist, particularly in portrayals of Cixi as an inconsiderate autocrat, and Britain's limited imperialism in China created the conditions for a paternalistic attitude towards Chinese people, such as offering them protection from Russia. However, British newspapers did not strongly support the 1898 reforms themselves because they were not seen as relevant to British geopolitical interests. Viewing the September coup through the unique lens of British newspapers reveals that a complex and mutually-informing relationship existed between the press, their readership, and government policy.

¹⁴² Gray, *Rebellions and Revolutions*, 116.

¹⁴³ Martin Ewans, *The Great Game: Documents* (Oxfordshire: Taylor & Francis, 2004), 1.

The Orientalist lens adopted by prior scholarship

The historiography of Anglo-Chinese relations in the late 19th century is largely concerned with the question of Orientalism and how it continues to affect present-day scholarship. David Robles convincingly shows that, during this period, Europeans often adopted an orientalist lens towards China, as they constructed radical and essentialist distinctions between the West and China.

Though they differed somewhat on the precise nature of this distinction—Max Weber argued in 1913 that Chinese culture was fundamentally opposed to capitalism, while Giacomo Puccini saw China as exotic and mystical—most historians up to the mid-19th-century, like Karl Wittfogel, believed that China was civilized by Europeans in the 1800s: “It was only after the Industrial Revolution that the West was able to force an open-door policy upon the remote Chinese empire.”¹⁴⁴¹⁴⁵ In the late 20th century, however, many European colonial empires dissolved, and Edward Said’s critique of Orientalism led many scholars to criticize colonialism and the orientalist lenses that it had produced.¹⁴⁶ Zhang Pinggong, for example, criticized orientalism as an “inauthentic construct that exists in and for the West.”¹⁴⁷ Certain contemporary scholars still uphold orientalism though: Evgeny Sergeev argued in 2013 that East Asia was medieval, socially apathetic, economically backward, and politically anarchic until it “[awoke] under the influence of innovations that were brought to them by many of the Great Game’s ‘players,’” the Great Game referring to the geopolitical rivalry between Britain and Russia.¹⁴⁸ British newspapers, then, were a medium through which orientalist views towards China were perpetuated, as they

¹⁴⁴ David Martinez Robles, “China and ‘Orientalism,’” Oxford Bibliographies, 2015,

<https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/display/document/obo-9780199920082/obo-9780199920082-0113.xml>.

¹⁴⁵ Karl Wittfogel. *Oriental Despotism: a Comparative Study of Total Power*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1957), 426.

¹⁴⁶ Robles, “China and ‘Orientalism.’”

<https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/display/document/obo-9780199920082/obo-9780199920082-0113.xml>.

¹⁴⁷ Zhang Pinggong, “Orientalism Revisited in the Chinese Context,” *Linguistics and Literature Studies* (2019): 255.

¹⁴⁸ Evgeny Sergeev. *The Great Game, 1856–1907: Russo-British Relations in Central and East Asia*, (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2013), 330.

assumed its rulers to be despotic, its people to be unintelligent, and its borders as needing British protection.

The Imperialist Lens Adopted by Prior Scholarship

Historians also debate the question of how to define imperialism as a category in the history of Anglo-Chinese relations. Jianbo Zhou, a Marxist historian, defines Westernization as the adoption of a capitalist foundation and cooperation with the bourgeoisie class. Zhou argues that the Western imperialist presence played a crucial role in Qing reform and failure: “Facing serious foreign aggression, [the Qing government] more actively engaged in Westernization, but once the threat was removed, they returned to business as usual.”¹⁴⁹ William T. Rowe, on the other hand, claims to describe a non-materialist approach that argues that Western imperialism in China began in earnest after the First Sino-Japanese War as a reaction to the rise of Japan and the fear that East Asians would destroy the West. According to Rowe, the “infinitely wealthier and more populous China” would pose an even greater threat than Japan if it pursued Western-style reforms. Therefore, Western powers pursued imperialism in China to prevent the country from reforming altogether.¹⁵⁰ However, British newspapers’ paternalistic attitudes towards China, though indeed predicated on the presence of British imperialism in China, viewed the reforms neither as a threat to nor a result of said imperialism. Rather, the newspapers characterized China as a marginal piece of the British Empire in which British influence was restricted but important for checking the expansion of Russia.

¹⁴⁹ Jianbo Zhou, *Westernization Movement and Early Thought of Modernization in China: Pragmatism and Changes in Society, 1860s–1900s*, Palgrave Studies in Economic History (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2022), 362.

¹⁵⁰ William Rowe, *China’s Last Empire: The Great Qing*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012), 323.

Analysis of *The Daily News* and *The Times*

Cixi's proclamation of the coup

On September 21, Cixi issued an edict that placed Guangxu under her tutelage. This was the first development of the coup, and it was mentioned in the September 22 issues of both *The Daily News* and *The Times*. The *News* reported:

Rumors are current, which it is impossible to disregard, to the effect that the Empress Dowager has recovered her ascendancy over the Emperor, who is said to be now practically in a state of tutelage.¹⁵¹

The *Times* reported:

The recent Imperial decrees were mainly due to the influence of Kang-Yu-Mei [Kang Youwei]. Now Kang-Yu-Mei [Kang Youwei] has been ordered to leave Peking. The Empress Dowager has assumed charge of the government. She will be present at all Cabinet meetings and audiences, see all memorials, and approve all edicts before they are issued. This is equivalent to the virtual restoration of the regency. The early reinstatement of Li Hung Chang [Li Hongzhang] is expected as the result.¹⁵²

Both newspapers were conscious that Cixi's power was being "recovered" in some manner, revealing that her days in power from 1861 to 1889 remained present in the British consciousness, an idea corroborated days later in an interview with Wu Tingfang. The *Times* mentioned the anticipated reinstatement of the diplomat Li Hongzhang because, as evidenced in later reports, he was viewed as a close ally of Cixi and as a panderer to Russian interests.

This was also not the first time that British newspapers had reported on China. For example, Li Hongzhang's removal from office was mentioned in the September 21 issue of *The Times*.¹⁵³ A *Daily News* report from the same day, meanwhile, referenced the *Times*' reports on how Britain, the Qing dynasty, and Russia jointly negotiated loans for constructing a railroad in

¹⁵¹ "The Emperor of China in a State of Tutelage." *The Daily News*. September 22, 1898.

¹⁵² "China." *The Times*. September 22, 1898.

¹⁵³ "China." *The Times*. September 21, 1898.

China.¹⁵⁴ Clearly, Qing politics were already relevant to British diplomacy by September 1898, so the need to report on the coup was obvious.

The Daily News' speculation on Cixi's motives

The Daily News speculated at length on Cixi's motivations for launching the coup after overcoming the initial shock of the September 21 edict. Some theories are provided in the following passage:

So long as [Guangxu] continued [to be] subservient and a mere figurehead, the Dowager Empress allowed him to occupy the throne in peace, but as soon as he attempted to act upon his own initiative, she reasserted her authority and compelled him to resign... The suddenness of the coup is stated to be due to the determination of the Dowager Empress to prevent the success of the Marquis Ito's mission.¹⁵⁵

The "Marquis Ito's mission" refers to Hirobumi Ito's visit to Tianjin and Beijing in mid-September. The September 15 issue of *The Daily News* states that Ito's visit was intended to create an alliance between the Qing dynasty and Japan,¹⁵⁶ revealing the newspapers' predisposition towards interpreting events in China through a diplomatic lens

The September 23 report also speculated on Cixi's motives by quoting A. R. Colquhoun's "China in Transformation," which held an orientalist attitude towards Cixi. It reads:

For many years past the politics of Peking have been swayed by a bitter Palace feud, the young Emperor and his party on one side and the Empress-Dowager on the other. Of a passionate nature and imperious will, inspired by purely selfish considerations, the late Regent continues to dominate and even terrorise the Emperor, who is of terrible physique and incapable of wielding the authority which belongs to him.¹⁵⁷

This evaluation of Cixi, similar to aforementioned reports, is overwhelmingly negative. Her depiction as a jealous autocrat is distinctly orientalist in tone, and fits within the framework of oriental despotism expounded by Karl Wittfogel in his eponymous book: "The common

¹⁵⁴ "The Chinese Railways." *The Daily News*. September 21, 1898.

¹⁵⁵ "Chinese Emperor Resigns in Favour of the Empress." *The Daily News*. September 23, 1898.

¹⁵⁶ "The Far East." *The Daily News*. September 15, 1898.

¹⁵⁷ "Chinese Emperor Resigns in Favour of the Empress." *The Daily News*. September 23, 1898.

substance in the various Oriental societies appeared most conspicuously in the despotic strength of their political authority.”¹⁵⁸ Colquhoun’s evaluation also claims that party conflict accompanied the personal animosity between Guangxu and Cixi, revealing that British observers imposed a narrative of conflict between two political parties onto the wider narrative of the September coup. Although this narrative is reminiscent of party conflict in the British parliament, it does not mention the role of reform and conservatism in the September coup.

The urgent interview with Kang Youwei in The Times

Speculation towards the cause of the coup, and reporting on the coup in general, was sparse in *The Times* until September 26. Two competing viewpoints were provided in this report, both from Chinese officials. The first was that of Kang Youwei, who was ousted by the coup:

[Kang] further stated that recent events were entirely due to the action of the Manchu party, headed by the Empress Dowager and the Viceroy Yung Lu [Ronglu], and including all the high Manchu officials. The latter were displeased at the Emperor’s leaning towards the Chinese Reform party, and decided to restore the Dowager’s Regency.”¹⁵⁹

Similar to Colquhoun, Kang claimed that the coup was the result of conflict between two political parties, revealing his Western interventionist sympathies. More evidence of this appeared in a later section of the report: “Kang-Yu-Wei urges that England now has an opportunity to intervene and restore the Emperor to the Throne, whereby she [England] would earn the gratitude of the Chinese people.”¹⁶⁰ Kang pandered to the paternalism felt by the newspaper’s readership by mentioning the “Chinese people” because he was aware of the British public’s ability to influence official British foreign policy. My conclusion, drawing from contemporary reports from newspapers like *The Times*, corroborates that of Luke Kwong, who says that Kang “drew

¹⁵⁸ Karl Wittfogel, *Oriental Despotism: A Comparative Study of Total Power*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1957), 1. Sexism may have also motivated this negative portrayal of Cixi in the newspapers.

¹⁵⁹ “The Situation in China.” *The Times*. September 26, 1898.

¹⁶⁰ “The Situation in China.” *The Times*. September 26, 1898.

neat generalizations in dichotomies: [Cixi] versus [Guangxu], reaction versus reform, Manchu versus Han Chinese,” though Kwong does not comment on how British newspapers specifically used these dichotomies in their explanations of the coup.¹⁶¹

Finally, Kang constructed the coup as a joint Cixi-Russian operation:

The Dowager’s party is bound by an understanding with the Russians, whereby the latter, in consideration of the support of Russian interests, undertake to preserve Manchuria as the seat of the dynasty and to maintain Manchu rule in China.¹⁶²

In doing this, Kang struck at the worst fear of the British readership in regards to East Asia:

Russian expansion. Kang therefore urged the British to not only protect the interests of the Chinese people, but also their own. His personal motivation was to be reinstated in power alongside Guangxu, while *The Times* wanted to make the narrative digestible, paternalistic, and fear-inducing to capture the interest of its readership.

The reassuring interview with Wu Tingfang in The Times

The second viewpoint featured in *The Times* on September 23 was from Wu Tingfang, the Qing ambassador to the United States. This interview was also paraphrased in the September 24 report of *The Daily News*.¹⁶³ Presented immediately after Kang’s interview in *The Times*, Wu commented on the causes of the coup and its implications (or lack thereof) on diplomacy:

Dynastic reasons are solely responsible for the change. Doubtless, the recent reformatory edicts had something to do with it; certainly no foreign Power could have any influence in such a matter. It is equally absurd to say that the change is inimical to the interests of Great Britain—or of any other nation for that matter. The Dowager has always been friendly to England, as was shown during her former regency.¹⁶⁴

Wu consciously appealed to the newly-incumbent Cixi in his attempt to curb foreign interest in the coup as he, unlike Kang, was not ousted by the coup. Wu’s assertion that “no foreign Power

¹⁶¹ Kwong, *A Mosaic of the Hundred Days*, 226.

¹⁶² “The Situation in China.” *The Times*. September 26, 1898.

¹⁶³ “The Crisis in China.” *The Daily News*. September 24, 1898.

¹⁶⁴ “The Situation in China.” *The Times*. September 26, 1898.

could have any influence in such a matter” serves to refute Kang’s claim that Russia had co-orchestrated the coup, further showing that British newspapers were anxious towards Russian expansion in China.¹⁶⁵

British foreign policy in the interview with Lord Charles Beresford in The Times

Another notable interview from the September 26 issue of *The Times* was that of Admiral Lord Charles Beresford, who was in Singapore at the time. The given excerpt from his interview with *The Times* demonstrates how British foreign policy in regards to China was focused on opening trade and protecting the country from Russian economic and military intrusion:

The position in China as regards British trade was, [Beresford] said, critical... He advocates a commercial alliance between Great Britain, Germany, the United States, and Japan. This, [Beresford] said, was bound to promote peace, which was Britain’s chief interest.¹⁶⁶

This attitude was also evidenced in the political cartoon below (see figure 1), despite being published in an American magazine by a Chinese artist, provides an apt visual representation of British attitudes towards China in 1898. The title of the cartoon, “How the Russian Bear Threatens China,” reveals that the cartoonist believed Russia threatened China’s integrity, mirroring the aversion towards Russia displayed in *The Daily News* and *The Times*. The British bulldog has the words “The Open Door” (meaning free trade) and “The Integrity of China” written on its body, showing that the cartoonist was aware of British paternalistic attitudes towards the Qing dynasty. The menacing Russian bear, with the word “conquest” written on its forehead, reflects British fears of Russian expansion in China. Finally, the confused look on the bulldog’s face reveals that the cartoonist was not confident in the British government’s ability to protect its own interests, perhaps because the British presence in China was rather limited.

¹⁶⁵ “The Situation in China.” *The Times*. September 26, 1898.

¹⁶⁶ “The Situation in China.” *The Times*. September 26, 1898.

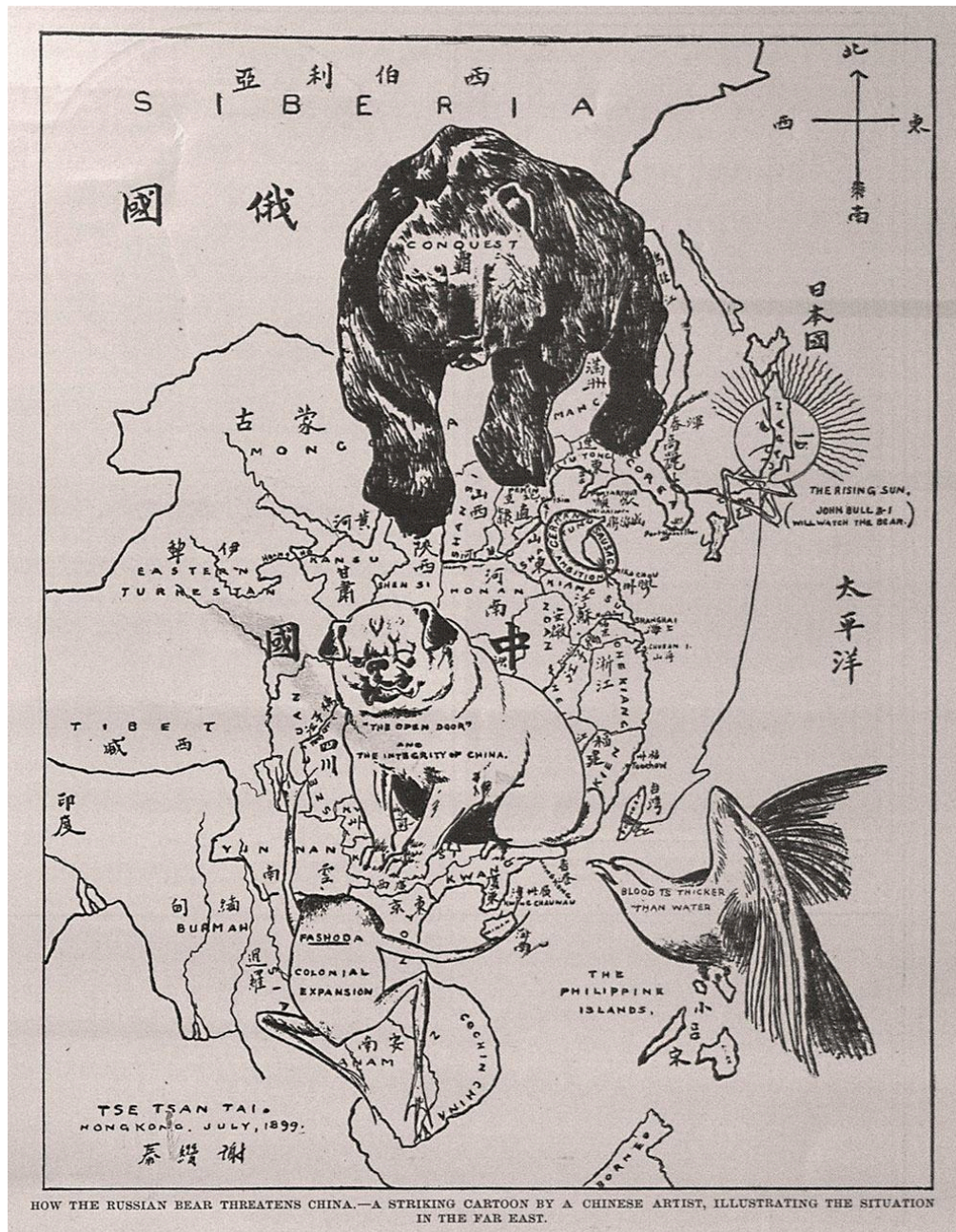


Figure 1. *How the Russian bear threatens China.* — A striking cartoon by a Chinese artist, illustrating the situation in the Far East. Political cartoon. *Leslie's Weekly*. Courtesy of MIT Visualizing Cultures. 1900.

The role of reform in calls to save the emperor

Although the reforms themselves were mentioned in the newspapers, they were not depicted as relevant to British interests. The newspapers did make sympathetic comments about the effect of reform on the Chinese public; a report in *The Daily News* from September 23 laments the lack of implementation of reform policies stated that “The hopes of reform, so ardently desired by the intelligent portion of the Chinese, has now dwindled to vanishing point.”¹⁶⁷ Although this quote is orientalist in its assumption that most Chinese people were unintelligent, it doesn’t claim that the British ought to actively promote reform in China, as China was conceived as a sovereign country rather than a British colony. A *Daily News* issue from September 16 (when the reforms were still in place), conversely, criticized the rapid speed of the reforms and gave no mention of British foreign policy:

But in the opinion of most of the Chinese and old European residents the changes are too sweeping, and tend to excite irritation in the official classes... [The Emperor’s] efforts are welcomed by all enlightened Chinese, who, however, counsel moderation.

The only instance in which reform was positioned as favourable to British interests was in Kang Youwei’s *Times* interview on September 23, and even then only tangentially so. He said:

His Majesty is convinced, however, that it is impossible to overcome the opposition without the assistance of England, which he endeavoured to obtain for his recent progressive measures.¹⁶⁸

Earlier, Kang also stated that “England now has the opportunity to intervene and restore the Emperor to the throne, whereby she could earn the gratitude of the Chinese people.” Here, the restoration of Guangxu, rather than of the reforms, is the primary justification for British intervention; the reforms are merely a corollary to restoration.

¹⁶⁷ “Chinese Emperor Resigns in Favour of the Empress.” *The Daily News*. September 23, 1898.

¹⁶⁸ “The Situation in China.” *The Times*. September 26, 1898.

This focus on Guangxu, rather than on the reforms, was present in other reports as well. The September 24 issue of *The Daily News* claimed, omitting any mention of reform, that Guangxu “desperately needs foreign protection in this emergency. There is a consensus of opinion among Englishmen here that now is Great Britain’s opportunity.”¹⁶⁹ This excerpt proposes that British geopolitical aspirations for restoring Guangxu to the throne were popular amongst the British public and the reintroduction of progressive reform to China was, conversely, of little consequence. In fact, the association between Guangxu, Kang Youwei, and reform was so feeble that the *News* claims in the same issue that “[Kang Youwei], the leader of the Reform Party, [is] accused of being the instigator of a plot to murder the Emperor,”¹⁷⁰ while the September 26 issue of *The Times* claims that Kang was instead charged with “conspiring against the Empress Dowager.”¹⁷¹ It is clear that, at least by the time of the September coup, the content of the Hundred Days Reform was confusing or of little interest to the newspaper’s readership.

The Qing dynasty as a liminal space in the British psyche

Why, then, didn’t the newspapers wish for the Qing dynasty to pursue Westernizing reforms? I argue that, because British newspapers conceived the Qing dynasty as existing between barbarity and civility, reform in China was seen as neither necessary nor enforceable. This attitude is seen in contemporaneous British attitudes towards the Empire’s firmly barbaric and civilized regions.

For example, in 1883, historian John Seeley divided the British Empire into five regions (excluding the British Isles): Canada, the West Indies, South Africa, Australia and New Zealand,

¹⁶⁹ “The Crisis in China.” *The Daily News*. September 24, 1898.

¹⁷⁰ “The Crisis in China.” *The Daily News*. September 24, 1898.

¹⁷¹ “The Situation in China.” *The Times*. September 26, 1898.

and India.¹⁷² Evidently, Seeley did not consider British territories in China to be a significant part of its empire. This absence can also be found in Joseph Chamberlain's 1897 speech, in which he defined two types of territories of the British Empire. First, there were the "self-governing colonies," to which he extended a "sentiment of kinship. We think and speak of them as part of ourselves... as part of the British Empire, united to us."¹⁷³ Such colonies included Canada and Australia, where the ruling elite was white and British. The second type of territory, Chamberlain argued, were the ones in which "the native population must always vastly outnumber the white inhabitants."¹⁷⁴ The sentiment towards these territories was "a sense of obligation." We feel now that our rule over these territories can only be justified if we can show that it adds to the happiness and prosperity of the people."¹⁷⁵ These attitudes conceived of China as existing between civility and barbarity because the Qing dynasty was strong enough to govern on its own terms yet vulnerable enough to be a theater for geopolitics. So, British newspapers believed that reform in China was neither necessary nor enforceable.

Conclusion

The attitudes expressed by *The Daily News* and *The Times* towards the September coup shows that the British press interpreted the progression of the September coup through a lens of conflict between two political parties. These newspapers were also concerned with how the Chinese public and the Russian empire reacted to the coup. Furthermore, the British press viewed China paternalistically, but only to a certain extent, with China existing in between civilization and barbarity. So, calls for the British government to restore Guangxu to the throne relied on

¹⁷² John Seeley, *The Expansion of England*, (1883). In Sally Ledger and Roger Luckhurst, eds., *The Fin de Siecle: A Reader in Cultural History, c. 1880-1900*, 1st edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 136.

¹⁷³ Joseph Chamberlain, "The True Conception of Empire," (1897). In Ledger and Luckhurst, *The Fin de Siecle*, 138-139.

¹⁷⁴ Chamberlain, "The True Conception of Empire." In Ledger and Luckhurst, *The Fin de Siecle*, 139.

¹⁷⁵ Chamberlain, "The True Conception of Empire." In Ledger and Luckhurst, *The Fin de Siecle*, 139.

anti-Russian rhetoric rather than claims that reform would benefit China. Orientalist attitudes accompanied this paternalism, though they primarily manifested in negative portrayals of Cixi as a jealous despot.

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