

China and the Victorian Imagination: Empires Entwined

Ross G. Forman, *Cambridge Studies in Nineteenth-Century Literature and Culture*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013. x+ 300pp. ISBN 9781107013155.

In *China and the Victorian Imagination: Empires Entwined*, Ross G. Forman offers a meticulously researched account of nineteenth-century literary and cultural depictions of China. His archive is expansive and moves beyond canonical authors like Joseph Conrad to develop a more complex understanding of imperial literary production.

In doing so, Forman pushes against Victorian scholars' focus on India as the center of British imperial studies, arguing that it produces a lopsided view of imperialism. Instead, he argues that scholars should broaden their focus to include China, since British engagement in the "celestial empire" offers a very different blueprint for imperialism. Forman suggests that this shift in focus "pluralizes" imperialism and demonstrates how "entwined" the British Empire was with other empires. He emphasises the word "entwine," because it offers a view of empire that is not centralised or top-down but instead examines how imperial discourse is shaped informally and improvisationally through dialogue and interactions with others. For Forman, China provides insight into informal structures of imperial power. By examining China, Forman challenges monolithic ideas surrounding Britons' behaviour when abroad and demonstrates that lived experienced might not adhere to linguistic and national divisions.

As part of this approach, Forman encourages us to de-emphasise opium's role in British perceptions of China, because the drug became less central as the nineteenth century progressed and attention shifted to Chinese migration. Indeed, he says that the focus on opium misrepresents Victorian perceptions, and instead he wants to emphasise conceptions of China as also a place of possibility (16). He argues that this approach will bring us closer to the Victorians' own relationship to empire: "Victorians and their interlocutors knew that the British Empire emerged out of geopolitical rivalries, out of the competition and cooperation between various European powers" (4). Victorians themselves did not see India as the central focus of their understanding of Great Britain's global influence.

Particularly illuminating is Forman's engagement with the varying methods of literary production in the colonies and the metropole. He observes differences in the way that manuscripts treated imperialism, depending on whether they were published abroad or in London. As a result, Forman critiques the scholarly focus on literary production generated in London and distributed to the periphery; in fact, he points out that many texts were produced *at the periphery for the periphery*. The way people viewed empire at home was very different from the perceptions abroad.

He also questions scholars' focus on novelistic imperial narratives, since these narratives tend to offer a more coherent picture of empire by virtue of their formal qualities. Instead, he refocuses on short stories that play with humour, satire, and irony, offering a more critical and varied engagement with British imperialism. From this approach, he finds that treaty port narratives show a greater sense of the artificiality of imperial structures than we see in formal imperial locations, like India. In treaty ports like Shanghai, texts do not show a binary relationship between coloniser and colonised; rather, they demonstrate something more nuanced and complex. Forman writes:

Recent scholarship has emphasized the limitations of envisaging empire through Manichean systems and has underscored that the centrality of the "mother country" as

the hegemonic locus for the discursive formation of notions of imperialism and nationalism has been overstated, arguing for a greater diversity of opinion within the metropole itself and a greater degree of both tension and intercourse between “center” and “periphery.”(43)

The first half of the book focuses on literature developed in the imperial periphery, and the second half returns to cultural products in London and perceptions of Chinese immigrants. The first chapter examines treaty port fictions and the material production of texts in locations like Shanghai. These fictions usually emphasise the “supposedly inscrutable Chinese” and follow the *bildungsroman* form in tracing the interior growth of young Englishmen in China. Chapter 2 looks at the material production of texts in Hong Kong and short stories by colonial writer James Dalziel. Chapter 3 examines accounts of the Boxer Rebellion, and chapter 4 scrutinises novels that imagine Asiatic invasions and reverse colonisation. Of these two chapters, Forman writes, “Both, however, reflect anxieties about the potential rebound of Western-induced modernization in Japan and China and about the future of British imperialism in light of the new global dynamics that were emerging late in the nineteenth century” (25). These narratives tend to depict the Chinese masses as ignorant and easily manipulated. Following on this theme, chapters 5 and 6 return to London and focus on the fictional depictions of London’s Chinese community.

Although Forman offers a fruitful challenge to imperial narratives focused on India, it could be argued that he reifies China in this competing account of “entwined” empires. He writes, “I ask whether, in taking India as the symptom and synecdoche for British imperialism as a whole, postcolonial criticism reproduces aspects of the logic of imperialism itself” (68). But a similar critique could be applied to his account. In the process of refuting India’s centrality, Forman emphasises the informal model yielded by China. He argues, “The popular image of a China that was backward both in time and space could not answer the question of why tactics that worked in other parts of the world never succeeded in China, or why China was able to assert a will that other non-European societies seemed unable to muster” (15). Indeed, he calls China Great Britain’s “topsy turvy.” Part of the problem is that Forman does not engage with any Chinese sources; the book’s exclusive focus on British sources reinforces the vague sense of China’s inscrutability.

This limitation to British sources is particularly problematic in the book’s conclusion, in which Forman applies his deductions regarding nineteenth-century British imaginings of China to contemporary global politics and culture. He argues that the Western imaginary continues to “demonize” China and essentialises “Chinese standards of human rights as fundamentally inferior to Western ones, especially through the supposed de-emphasis of individuality and lack of commitment to liberty” (225). While it is true that essentialist rhetoric about China still persists in many forms, Forman’s generalisation here undermines legitimate critiques of human rights abuses in modern China. It also blurs the distinction between China as a cultural or national idea and contemporary China’s political instantiation: the People’s Republic.

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