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THE YELLOW PERIL IN BRITAIN

Abstract:

Between the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Britain experienced a wave of xenophobia against a single ethnic minority, the Chinese, that would become known as the Yellow Peril. Britain was not alone in experiencing this phenomenon, but compared to the more documented example of the Peril in North America, the British example has been far less documented. Initially reflecting international notions of the Yellow Peril, such as fears over mass immigration from Asia into the West, at its heart the British example reflected local concerns vis-à-vis the recently emerged Chinese communities. The following article will present a discussion on the exclusively Sinocentric British experience of the Yellow Peril and document how despite their minute numbers, the Chinese would bear the brunt of Britain's alien xenophobia during the period. It will examine how their visible and cultural differences signalled them to become scapegoats for a host of social, labour and political issues. It will also mention how these same differences led to a mystique developing around their communities, spawning a uniquely British aspect of the Yellow Peril, that of the popular pulp fiction of the time, most notably the Dr Fu Manchu stories. This article will also argue that despite the uniqueness of the British experience, it nonetheless would not have developed in isolation without the international aspects of the Peril feeding into the local debate. Ultimately, it was the outside stimulus of the First World War and associated post-war settlements that would signal the end of the British Yellow Peril in the early twentieth century.

Keywords:

Introduction

The Yellow Peril in Britain can be said to have existed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. The Peril emerged and developed at a time when Great Britain's confidence in itself and status in the world was beginning to wane. In the face of emerging challenges, fears around a loss of its economic superiority, worries over Britain's security and leading position in the world, the notion of a Yellow Peril as a threat to Britain began to emerge. Challenges to Britain's commercial position from America, the emerging German Empire and the protracted Long Depression (economic) of 1873-96 (Coppock, 1961) began to undercut British economic dominance over the world. The Boar War, the Boxer Rebellion and territorial pressures around the borders of the British Empire began to raise doubts about security both abroad and at home. Britain had much to fear over the security of its far-flung colonial possessions and their associated markets, as it depended on these for Britain's prosperity. Coupled with a social commentary that the past decades of industrialisation had resulted in a weakened physical state of the nation, added to a slow development of a narrative that the nation was being assailed by dangers from within and without. These fears would by the turn of the twentieth century have become focused on a relatively minute alien population in Britain, resulting in an exclusively Sino-centric experience of the Yellow Peril.

The Chinese began to arrive in Britain in the late eighteenth century (Benton & Gomez, 2008) as seamen on the merchant marine and began to settle in port cities around the nation, notably in Cardiff, Liverpool and London. As these settlements began to grow, local Chinese communities began to form which were primarily made up of single males. While population figures cannot be equated to and certainly not justify xenophobia, it helps to set the British experience in its proper context. Compared to the figure of 10,044,714 Chinese who had immigrated to America between 1861-1892 (Immigration Service, 1892) the British census of 1891 recorded a total of only 582, mostly single male seamen as resident in Britain. This was to rise to the figure of 3192 by the 1911 census but would fall drastically in the 1920s (May, 1973), a result of post-war settlements.

The very small population of Chinese, spread across the nation, could never generate the same level of hysteria as was seen on the American west coast. Domestic causes alone most likely would have failed to generate much concern, given that relatively few people would have even met a Chinese person, let alone have been come into for example economic competition with them. However, experiences from the colonies and America (Sascha, 2009; as quoted in Gan, 2012) would be taken from reports in the press and would be fed into the British debate as examples of the dangers of the Yellow Peril.

One of the fears experienced by some on the American west coast was the threat of large numbers of Asian immigrants willing to work longer, harder and cheaper than whites, thus taking away white jobs. These fears had ultimately lead to the Restriction Act of 1882 (Dept. of Immigration, 1929) being introduced in America, excluding Chinese labour

from entering the country for ten years. Interestingly, in Britain, very little concern for the Chinese taking British jobs was initially seen (May, 1973), their extremely small numbers simply could not generate the levels of concern they did across the Atlantic. Additionally, the Chinese primarily focused their economic efforts in supporting the needs of their community, although later, they would carve a niche in the laundry business. Therefore, rather than any genuine concern, it would be general hysteria and anti-immigrant xenophobia, originating in British readings of the international Peril, which stoked the flames of the British Yellow Peril.

Initially treated no better or worse than other ethnic minorities, the Chinese community would later bear the brunt of xenophobic fears towards foreign aliens becoming the scapegoats for a whole set of social issues. The Yellow Peril in Britain would never reach the level of political importance that it would be in the America west coast (Gollwitzer, 1962), instead it would become more significant at a local level regarding labour relations, social issues and as a local election issue. The social commentary against the Chinese and their perceived dangerous acts would find their way into the popular fiction of the times, becoming cause and symptom of the xenophobia towards the Chinese. With the outbreak of the First World War, these concerns would spur the creation of new legislation; some intended to target the Chinese community directly. Such legislation and other post-war settlements would signal the effective end of the Yellow Peril in Britain.

Emergence of the Yellow Peril in Britain

In December 1897, the British Spectator magazine published an article attacking the recent German seizure of Kiaochow from China, fearing that actions such as these could prompt the Chinese into joining with the Japanese in retaliation against the West. This article entitled "The Yellow Peril" (Spectator, 1897) marked the first published public discussion on a topic that had already become part of the public discourse. The fear was, in common with other European and North American nations, that there existed an Asian horde, ready to sweep across the globe and destroy Western civilisation. Notions of the Yellow Peril such as these would be read and ingested in Britain, informing upon the British concept of it. British attitudes towards the Peril were to a large extent shaped by the American attitudes and experiences of Chinese and later Japanese immigration to the west coast of America. Social commentators, trade unionists and politicians in Britain would use these examples to raise fears of the same thing happening in Britain. However, unlike on the west coast of America, the British experience of the Peril would remain exclusively Sino-centric throughout (Prince, 1987). Owing to the almost non-existence of Japanese immigrants to Britain, a few Japanese seamen were to be found in Britain serving on Japanese ships, and the positive relations between the two nations culminating in the first Anglo-Japanese alliance of 1902, anti-Japanese sentiment would not be a feature of the British Yellow Peril.

The Chinese population in Britain was minuscule and the fear and concern directed towards the Chinese as part of the Yellow Peril, by far outweighed their small numbers. The Chinese community was singled out and targeted not because of an experience of a large number of Chinese arriving in Britain, but rather unlike some other ethnic minorities in Britain, they were easily identified as foreign. The nature of their settlement, centred in small communities in large metropolitan areas and their lack of assimilation with the surrounding local communities, only served to heighten their differences and set them apart.

By far the largest, Chinese settlement in Britain was in an area around the East London Docklands known as the Limehouse district, and it was here that mostly single males were to form Europe's first Chinatown. By the 1891 census, 582 Chinese were recorded as resident in Britain and approximately 300 of these were centred in the Limehouse district (Birch, 1930). Their visible and cultural differences, such as their habit of smoking opium openly, running opium and gambling dens, although over exaggerated, nonetheless soon led to a mystique growing up around this community. Initially, the Chinese were seen as good or at worst indifferent neighbours and by some were considered as favourable husbands due to their lack of drinking and violence towards their wives (Platt, 1900). However, at the same time some questioned the advisability of interracial marriage, with the Review of Reviews (Stead, 1900) noting that if the Chinese "…beats the Englishman in connubial competition, the outlook becomes appalling" (p. 51). This fear of the Chinese out populating and pushing out Europeans was a common theme of the Yellow Peril, both internationally and within Britain. By the turn of the century, previous ambivalent attitudes would change and a more openly negative view of the Chinese communities would begin to develop. Public opinion would change and view these images of opium smoking, gambling and interracial relations as a sign of the moral and physical decay of the nation at the time.

Decay of the Moral and Physical Fabric of Britain

By the turn of the nineteenth / twentieth centuries, previous confidence in the superiority of European nations over the rest of the world was beginning to falter and the ill effects of nearly a hundred years of industrialisation were perceived to be beginning to be felt in Britain. Ideas of the survival of the fittest and the social-Darwinism of the time (Prince, 1987), led many nations to question their ability to compete and survive in the ever-advancing and changing world. The example of Japan, adopting the western model of economy and military organisation and then defeating the much larger China in the Sino-Japanese war (1894-95) and later over the Russians in 1905, lead many to conclude Europe had lost its superiority. This lesson was not lost on the British.

At the turn of the century, there was a concern in Britain that the physical health of the nation had declined, across the social classes. Previous decades of industrialisation had

weakened the working classes by overwork, poisoning from pollution and disease from overcrowding in the urban slums. At the other end of the social scale, the upper classes were seen as in no better position. In an article featured in the Review of Reviews, the upper classes had become "Splendid Paupers," with their position challenged by raising taxes and Radical social reformers (Stead, 1894). In short, Britain was seen as being in "an advanced state of rottenness," (Shaw, 1889). With these ideas of a decaying background to the fabric of the nation, the images of the Chinese smoking opium, running illegal gambling dens and interracial marriages, going together to form a notion that the Yellow Peril was a threat to the security and strength of the nation.

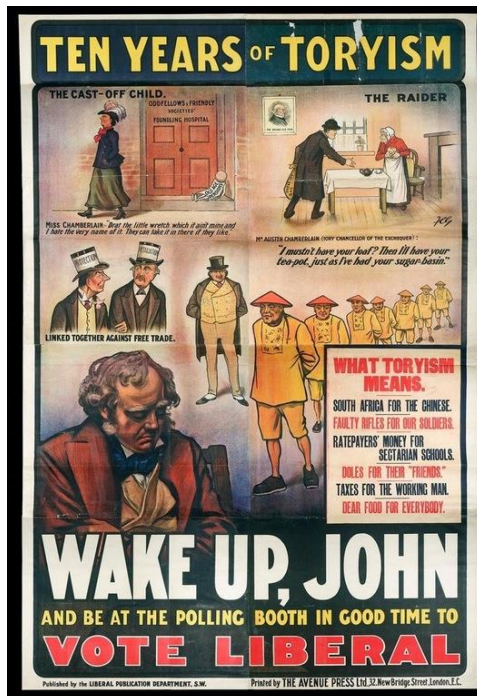## Global Issues of the Peril Meet Domestic Issues

At the end of the nineteenth century, there was a call by some in the country for an Aliens Act to deal with the large numbers of immigrants coming from primarily Europe into Britain. Although Europeans significantly outnumbered the numbers of Chinese immigrants, the latter were naturally more easily identified as aliens as compared to the former, and as a result, the campaign would turn most vehemently against them. Taking their cue from writings about the Yellow Peril on the American west coast, Australia, South Africa and elsewhere, Conservative anti-alien campaigners were responsible for spreading rumours about the moral and economic dangers of Chinese immigration. They used images of opium smoking Chinese, engaging in interracial relationships, taking white jobs to fan the public fears, so that by the 1905/6 election campaign the previously nonchalant attitudes to the Chinese had been turned (Prince, 1987). White (1886) used an argument in favour of a Chinese Exclusion Act stating experiences learnt in America, British Columbia (Canada) and Australia, such as tax evasion, ungovernability under (the) white law and grave desecration (p. 142-3) to justify his claims. However, it should be noted that White provides no references or evidence for these claims.

With the end of the Boer War (1899-02) in South Africa, there was a general shortage of white and black labour for reconstruction work. As a result of these shortages, between 1904-1907 63,695 Chinese labours were encouraged to migrate to South Africa (Bright, 2013) by the British Conservative government at the time, a practice repeated across much of the British Empire (Bulfin, 2015). However, the poor pay living and working conditions the Chinese were forced to endure soon raised concerns in Britain, giving rise to the term 'Chinese slavery.'

The British working class was seen to sympathise with their fellow white South Africans owing to the dangers that this influx of Chinese labour represented to their jobs. Fred Bower (1936) an important trade unionist, lamented that after fighting hard to keep South Africa British, the Chinese were brought in to "bring down the wages of white workers" (p. 172), and close the country to whites. In 1906, the Chinese Slavery issue became an election topic in Britain, with the Liberal opposition condemning the incumbent

Conservatives over their treatment of the Chinese in South Africa. In one Liberal poster used during the camping of 1906 (see figure 1), the point is made that 'What Toryism means,' is 'South Africa for the Chinese,' amongst other charges.

Figure 1: 'Ten Years of Toryism.'

Source: The London School of Economics Digital Library.

In another entitled 'Chinese Labour' (see figure 2, p. 6), set in front of a group of Chinese labours in South Africa, the Tory Prime Minster is seen to be sympathising with a British 'workman' over the Chinese taking away white jobs. However, the workman replies, 'Let 'em all come,' as there is money to be made from '…boss[ing] 'em.' One opposition candidate from Blackburn shared a common concern claiming that if the Conservatives won, after their experience of employing cheap Chinese labour in the colonies, some capitalists would do the same in Britain (Clarke, 1971). The issue of Chinese slavery was used during the election campaign of 1905/6 had a deep significance as it contributed to fears that the Yellow Peril purported. As the contemporary socialist and Liberal Candidate Graham Wallas (1920, p.51) wrote:

> Any one [sic], however, who saw much of politics in the winter of 1905-6 must have noticed that the pictures of Chinamen on the hoardings aroused among very many of the voters an immediate hatred of the Mongolian racial type.

Unfortunately, rather than gaining sympathy for the victims of the exploitation in South Africa, the election campaign only served to raise fears of the Yellow Peril coming home to Britain and hatred towards its victims, the Chinese.

Figure 2: 'Chinese Labour.'

Source: The London School of Economics Digital Library.

During the Great Unrest (1910-14), a term to describe a broad range of industrial tensions that manifested themselves in strikes, protests and violence across Great Britain, the rhetoric against the Chinese that had remained mostly nonviolent changed. In Cardiff during the night of the 18th July 1911, the Chinese community became the victims of mob violence when a trade union dispute between the National Sailor's and Fireman's Union (NSFU) and ship owners escalated too far. The NSFU was angered over fears that Chinese seamen were taking white seamen's jobs. The rhetoric turned violent when a mob attacked all thirty Chinese laundries in the city. Chinese laundries had become an aspect of the Yellow Peril across the nation by this point in time. The reasons were two-fold; firstly, they required extra Chinese labour to run them, and there were fears that this labour might look for other work, taking white jobs. Secondly, they took away potential work for white women at a time when the scope of employment for women was limited (May, op. cit.) The riots in Cardiff can be seen as exceptional, as violence towards the Chinese was a very rare aspect of the British Yellow Peril, social commentaries and political attacks against the Chinese were by far the norm.

World War One

The Great War would play an important part in shaping the course of the Yellow Peril in Britain and would ultimately signal the beginning of the end for it. The war quickly put huge demands on labour, coming alongside an almost equal demand for new soldiers and sailors to replace those fallen during the war. Large numbers of Chinese labours were encouraged to migrate to Britain and Europe to meet this labour shortage and free white men for military service. However, this was not met with universal enthusiasm by the white working classes nor the trade unions who were still fearful of the Chinese threat to white jobs. Instead, they only agreed to put their reservations aside until the war was won, such as in the case of the NSFU who agreed to the hiring of Chinese seamen only if "British white or coloured seamen were not forthcoming" (Sailors and Fireman's Panel, 1918, as cited in Prince, 1987).

Eleven days after the outbreak of war, on the 8th August 1914, the Defence of the Realm Act (DORA) was passed that gave the government far-reaching emergency powers. As the war dragged on and the fight toughened, people looked for anything that was possibly hindering the war effort and one such thing soon identified was the Chinese community. During the war, drug use across the nation increased due to war stress and the Chinese community with their already established association with opium use were soon signalled out. In 1916, provision 40B of DORA was used to restrict the sale of narcotics and introduce tougher penalties for their possession, the result of which was a crackdown on supposed Chinese drug use and opium dens. At a time when Britain was attempting to come together as one socially and ethnically homogenous nation, sensational reports of Chinese behaviour and the negative effects these had on the War effort, added a new dynamic to the Yellow Peril not seen before.

During the war, the tensions that were representative of the Great Unrest were put on hold, but with the end of the war, old and new issues were soon taken up. Under pressure from the NSFU, the Home Office in 1919 decided to finally deport 3000 Chinese seamen recruited during the war (Prince, 1987). Coinciding with the enforcement of DORA and Alien Restriction Act 1914, this lead to a dramatic drop in the numbers of Chinese residing in Britain. Taking London for example, by 1921 there were only 711 Chinese persons left out of an approximately three thousand population by the end of the war (Ng, 1968). The result of which was that by the 1920s the Yellow Peril domestically in Britain had effectively died away as a socio-political issue with the clamp down on the visible and physical removal of many Chinese persons. However, it would remain in one uniquely British guise, that of popular fiction.

The Yellow Peril and Popular Fiction in Britain

As the American newspapers and magazines can be seen to have reflected the North American discourse on the Peril, illuminating opinion and propaganda with their myths and fantasies (Barrows, 2017), the same can also be applied to the British case viz-a-viz works of popular fiction of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.

One of the most virulent notions of the Peril was that there was a danger that the nations of Asia would unite into horde that would flood across the world, like the Mongolian horde in earlier times, to destroy Western civilisation. In Britain, this concern was first put together into a work of fiction in Sheil's, The Yellow Danger (1898), in which the arch villain Dr Yen leads his "hordes" across Eurasia, to be ultimately stopped and defeated by Britain at the Channel. Sheil's Dr Yen is important because he was seen as the prototype for Rohmer's arguably more famous and influential character, Dr Fu Manchu (French and Witchard, 2015). Dr Fu was a criminal mastermind extraordinaire and opium addict who was always plotting the ruin of the British. First published in 1912, Rohmer was to publish thirteen in total, with his last 'Dr Fu' book published in 1959, being turned into a movie starring the legendary British actor Peter Sellers in 1980 entitled, 'The Fiendish Plot of Dr Fu Manchu'. While not suggesting that the Yellow Peril was felt as late as the 1980s, it serves to demonstrate that certain aspects of the Peril had made deep cultural impacts into British culture, with others gaining more permanency (Auerbach, 2009).

These novels are important because they presented to the public a dangerous image of the Chinese community in Britain subverting the national morals and physical condition, at a time when the British nation was perceived to be in decline. Thomas Burke's novel 'Limehouse Nights,' first published in 1916, was centred in the Limehouse district and concerned interracial relationships between Chinese males and local white women. His book was rejected by various publishers because it was felt that it was dangerous to the morals of the country during the Great War as it did not outright condemn the practice of interracial marriage (French and Withcard, 2015). Although different from Rohmer's style of writing in which the Limehouse district was seen as a den of criminality, Burke's writings were as influential because they romanticised Chinese stereotypes. Although his treatment of the Chinese characters could be argued to be sympathetic, it nonetheless indirectly incited conservative thinking among the British further against the Chinese community. Published in a country that had an extremely small Chinese population, the majority of the readers who would have had no real-world contact with this community to counter act these images, popular fiction was very important in shaping public opinion.

Conclusion

Emerging not in isolation, but concurrent and in part influenced by international notions of the Yellow Peril, the British Peril emerged as a symptom of a nation that felt morally and

physically sick. It would never reach the level it would be on the American west coast, due to the minute number of Chinese present in Britain at the time. Without the international aspects of the Yellow Peril and impetus of the Great War, it is doubtful whether the Peril in Britain would have materialised itself into anything more than another form of xenophobia against an alien population. When the more spectacular notions of the Peril failed to materialise, it would morph into a British-centric form of Sinophobia. The Chinese were used as easily identifiable scapegoats in a whole host of local and national concerns, from labour concerns to drug and immigration enforcement. With the socioeconomic settlements of the post-war period and the expulsion of thousands of Chinese from Britain, many of the sources of the tensions that manifested themselves into the Yellow Peril evaporated. Popular fiction would ensure that the legacy of the Peril would gain a degree of permanency in British culture, but this would gradually fade from relevancy into uncomfortable comedy.

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