

GLOBAL RUMOURS: THE PRESS, TELEGRAPHY AND THE BOXER WAR IN CHINA, SUMMER 1900

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The outbreak of hostilities between China and a loose coalition of eight imperialistic powers in June 1900 known as the Boxer War created an ‘information panic’ in the Western press.¹ At the centre of this scare was a community of about a thousand Europeans, North Americans and Japanese — diplomats, civilians, missionaries and their families, and about 450 soldiers — in the Legation Quarter in Beijing who came under siege by a combination of regular Chinese soldiers and a militia known as Boxers. As communication with the Chinese capital was completely cut off, a flurry of wild rumours began to circulate in newspapers and magazines, culminating in the belief that all foreigners in Beijing had been massacred. A memorial service to be held at St Paul’s Cathedral in London was only called off at the last minute. The whole episode features in histories of the Boxer War but has been consigned to a mere footnote in the historical narrative.² This article will demonstrate how an examination of

¹ For the term ‘information panic’, see C. A. Bayly, *Empire and Information: Intelligence Gathering and Social Communication in India, 1780–1870* (Cambridge, 1996). The term ‘West’ is used in this article as a convenient shorthand to denote western Europe and North America. It is, of course, a construct. By the same token, ‘China’ stands for the formally correct ‘Qing empire’.

² See, for example, Peter Fleming, *The Siege at Peking* (London, 1959), 134–9; Diana Preston, *Besieged in Peking: The Story of the 1900 Boxer Rising* (London, 1999), 134–6; David J. Silbey, *The Boxer Rebellion and the Great Game in China* (New York, 2012), 164–5; Paul French, *Through the Looking Glass: China’s Foreign Journalists from Opium Wars to Mao* (Hong Kong, 2009), 66–71; Ariane Knüsel, “‘Western Civilization’ against “Hordes of Yellow Savages”: British Perceptions of the Boxer Rebellion’, *Asiatische Studien*, lxii, 1 (2008), 67; Yixu Lü, ‘Germany’s War in China: Media Coverage and Political Myth’, *German Life and Letters*, lxi, 2 (2008), 207–9.

the role of rumour in this information panic can sharpen our understanding of the relationship between globalized news production, media technology and imperialist discourse at the turn of the twentieth century. It investigates how rumours, shaped by imperialist discourse, became a currency of new global communication technologies and media networks, challenging a literature that tends to treat rumour as an oral form of communication that is anonymously authored, unintentionally spread and unverifiable (though not by definition untrue). Even the most important analysis to date of rumours during the Boxer War, Paul Cohen's seminal *History in Three Keys*, focuses almost exclusively on locally and orally transmitted stories.³ By looking at the sources and pathways of rumour during the Boxer War and addressing questions of authorship, origin and means of transmission, this article offers a new account of how rumours proliferated in the press during a period in which global communication technologies became central to news-gathering.⁴

Examining the role rumour played in the generation of news stories highlights the problem of what Jürgen Osterhammel has

³ Paul A. Cohen, *History in Three Keys: The Boxers as Event, Experience, and Myth* (New York, 1997), ch. 5, with a brief mention of the press rumours on p. 161. There exists a vast theoretical literature on rumour: see, for example, Gordon W. Allport and Leo Postman, *The Psychology of Rumor* (New York, 1948), pp. ix–xi, ch. 2, with the classical definition; Ralph L. Rosnow, 'Inside Rumor: A Personal Story', *American Psychologist*, xlv, 5 (1991), 485–7; Hans-Joachim Neubauer, *The Rumour: A Cultural History* (London, 1999); Anjan Ghosh, 'The Role of Rumour in History Writing', *History Compass*, vi, 5 (2008); Sebastian Jobs, 'Uncertain Knowledge', *Rethinking History*, xviii, 1 (2014). This article is not concerned with the deliberate spread of rumour, but see Mark Argemi and Gary Alan Fine, 'Faked News: The Politics of Rumour in British World War II Propaganda', *Journal of War and Culture Studies*, xii, 2 (2019), 177.

⁴ Tamotsu Shibutani, *Improvised News: A Sociological Study of Rumor* (Indianapolis, 1966), ch. 2, has laid the theoretical groundwork on the relationship between rumour and news. For historical case studies of press (or, more broadly, printed) rumours, see Nicholas Herriman, '"Hard-Copy Rumours": Print Media and Rumour in Indonesia', *South East Asia Research*, xxiii, 1 (2015); Astrid Erll, *Prämediation — Remediation: Repräsentationen des indischen Aufstands in imperialen und post-kolonialen Medienkulturen (von 1857 bis zur Gegenwart)* (Trier, 2007), 36–49; Adam Fox, 'Rumour, News and Popular Political Opinion in Elizabethan and Early Stuart England', *Historical Journal*, xl, 3 (1997); David Coast, *News and Rumour in Jacobean England: Information, Court Politics and Diplomacy, 1618–25* (Manchester, 2014). Most of these studies emphasize the interplay between oral communication and printed media.

called the ‘ideology of “objectivity”’ that began to shape journalistic practice from the 1830s.⁵ The idea that the role of journalism was to relate mere facts in a manner that eschewed political partisanship, and that this was the very business of the press, was used by newspaper publishers to promote their product to newly literate readerships. Although challenged in the 1890s by the sensationalism and overt political partisanship of the ‘new journalism’, a notional objectivity was still mobilized by many editors and publishers.⁶ The currency of rumour during the Boxer War, however, blurred the supposed dividing line between ‘serious’ broadsheets and ‘sensationalist’ tabloids.

In the global history of rumour, telegraphy played a central role. By the turn of the twentieth century, it had evolved into a worldwide, if unevenly spread, network of lines and operators, managers and capital flows.⁷ As the first ‘dematerialized’ medium, it enabled the transmission of information across global distances in near-real time. Telegraphy both contributed to the ‘modern notion of informational immediacy’ and brought about a standardization of language and narrative that reinforced the notion of objectivity.⁸ At the same time, the system exhibited inherent weaknesses. The wires and poles which

⁵ Jürgen Osterhammel, *The Transformation of the World: A Global History of the Nineteenth Century* (Princeton, 2015), 38. On the historical background, see Steven Maras, *Objectivity in Journalism* (Cambridge, 2013); Volker Barth, *Wa(h)re Fakten: Wissensproduktionen globaler Nachrichtenagenturen, 1835–1939* (Göttingen, 2019), esp. 24–8; David T. Z. Mindich, *Just the Facts: How ‘Objectivity’ Came to Define American Journalism* (New York, 1998), 5–14; Michael Schudson, ‘The Objectivity Norm in American Journalism’, *Journalism*, ii, 2 (2001).

⁶ David R. Spencer, *The Yellow Journalism: The Press and America’s Emergence as a World Power* (Evanston, 2007), esp. ch. 6; Adrian Bingham and Martin Conboy, *Tabloid Century: The Popular Press in Britain, 1896 to the Present* (Oxford, 2015), 1–11. See also Barth, *Wa(h)re Fakten*, 147.

⁷ Roland Wenzlhuemer, *Connecting the Nineteenth-Century World: The Telegraph and Globalization* (Cambridge, 2013); Peter J. Hugill, *Global Communications since 1844: Geopolitics and Technology* (Baltimore, 1999); Dwayne R. Winseck and Robert M. Pike, *Communication and Empire: Media, Markets, and Globalization, 1860–1930* (Durham, NC, 2007); Simone M. Müller, *Wiring the World: The Social and Cultural Creation of Global Telegraph Networks* (New York, 2016).

⁸ The quotation is in Don Randall, ‘Autumn 1857: The Making of the Indian “Mutiny”’, *Victorian Literature and Culture*, xxxi, 1 (2003), 4. See also James W. Carey, *Communication as Culture: Essays on Media and Society* (repr. New York, 1992), 210.

formed a key component of its 'hardware' into the first decade of the twentieth century were vulnerable to destruction, especially in times of upheaval and war. And the informational economy of the telegram, determined by both speed and cost, made it a rather sparse textual genre, even though, by the 1890s, news correspondents were discouraged from telegraphing 'skeletal' texts.⁹ Most importantly for the coverage of the Boxer War in the summer of 1900, there existed no independent and reliable mechanism to verify telegraphically transmitted information. As a result, the same ambivalence of fact and fiction, news and rumour, operated within telegraphy as it did in the press.¹⁰ By virtue of its speed and reach, however, telegraphy had the power to project this ambivalence from a local onto a world scale, thus contributing to the global proliferation of rumours, or what one might call the global rumour mill.

The existing literature focuses on telegraphy's practical impact on imperialism and its politics. The telegraph enabled closer integration, more effective management and tighter control of empires, but it also empowered anti-imperialist resistance.¹¹ Rumour was similarly Janus-faced: it both served subaltern groups as a vehicle of resistance and helped them to make sense of their inferior status in their daily lives.¹² Among colonizers

⁹ Barth, *Wa(h)re Fakten*, 112–113. See also Erl, *Prämediation — Remediation*, 41–9; Randall, 'Autumn 1857', 4–5.

¹⁰ On the ambiguous relationship between news and rumour, see also Irmela Schneider, 'Das "Quasi-Zuhause" des Gerüchts: Zur Theorie des Nachrichtenwerts im 20. Jahrhundert', in Jürgen Brokoff et al. (eds.), *Die Kommunikation der Gerüchte* (Göttingen, 2008).

¹¹ Daniel Headrick, 'A Double-Edged Sword: Communications and Imperial Control in British India', *Historical Social Research*, xxxv, 1 (2010); Deep Kanta Lahiri Choudhury, *Telegraphic Imperialism: Crisis and Panic in the Indian Empire, c. 1830–1920* (Basingstoke, 2010); John A. Britton, *Cables, Crises, and the Press: The Geopolitics of the New Information System in the Americas, 1866–1903* (Albuquerque, 2013); Daqing Yang, *Technology of Empire: Telecommunications and Japanese Expansion in Asia, 1883–1945* (Cambridge, MA, 2010); Ariane Knüsel, 'British Diplomacy and the Telegraph in Nineteenth-Century China', *Diplomacy and Statecraft*, xviii, 3 (2007).

¹² Luise White, *Speaking with Vampires: Rumor and History in Colonial Africa* (Berkeley, 2000), esp. ch. 6; Kim A. Wagner, *The Great Fear of 1857: Rumours, Conspiracies and the Making of the Indian Uprising* (Oxford, 2010); Wim Klooster, 'Slave Revolts, Royal Justice, and a Ubiquitous Rumor in the Age of Revolutions', *William and Mary Quarterly*, lxxi, 3 (2014); Xiaoli Tian, 'Rumor and Secret Space: Organ-Snatching Tales and Medical Missions in Nineteenth-Century China', *Modern China*, xli, 2 (2015).

and imperialists, on the other hand, the circulation of rumours reflected a deep-seated fear that hitherto subject populations might upend existing power structures. In the press, fear of the colonial or imperial Other found particular expression in the notion of the ‘imperilled European’, a common figure in the news media since the 1880s.¹³ As rumour is an inherently social phenomenon rooted in shared cultural values, norms and discourses, this article will demonstrate how, during the Boxer War, it acquired credibility (with regard to its purveyors) and plausibility (with regard to its content), not least because it aligned with historical precedents and popular memory.¹⁴

In order to elucidate the complex and contradictory nature of the rumours around the alleged massacre in Beijing, as well as their waxing and waning, this article presents a close reading of two interconnected sets of stories: first, the reports on the murder of the German minister to China, Clemens von Ketteler (1853–1900), which began to circulate three days before he was actually killed; and second, the versions of a wholesale massacre that spread between late June and mid July 1900. The material comes from a large sample of British, German, French and American newspapers and a few periodicals, including two European-language journals published on the China coast. These texts were chosen for their divergent political and social standpoints, differing styles (‘serious’ versus ‘popular’ journals) and regional diversity. In contrast to existing studies, which have focused on a limited number of titles mostly on a national level, this article presents rumours as part of a transnational Western

¹³ Jürgen Dinkel, Florian Greiner and Christian Methfessel, “‘Murder of a European’: Der “bedrohte Europäer” als Leitmotiv im Kolonialdiskurs vom Zeitalter des Hochimperialismus bis zur Epoche der Dekolonisation’, *Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaft*, lxii, 3 (2014), 219–220, 222–6. See also Kim A. Wagner, “‘Treading upon Fires’: The “Mutiny”-Motif and Colonial Anxieties in British India’, *Past and Present*, no. 218 (Feb. 2013). Gregory Evans Dowd, *Groundless: Rumors, Legends, and Hoaxes on the Early American Frontier* (Baltimore, 2016), looks at both sides of the colonial cultural divide. A good introduction to the wider context is Maurus Reinkowski and Gregor Thum (eds.), *Helpless Imperialists: Imperial Failure, Fear and Radicalization* (Göttingen, 2013).

¹⁴ See Ghosh, ‘Role of Rumour in History Writing’, 1235–6; Luise White, ‘Social Constructions and Social Consequences: Rumors and Evidence’, in Gary Alan Fine, Véronique Campion-Vincent and Chip Heath (eds.), *Rumor Mills: The Social Impact of Rumor and Legend* (New Brunswick, 2005), 241.

imperialist discourse on China.¹⁵ Although the Chinese press is generally excluded from the analysis, inasmuch as Chinese newspapers relied on the same sources as their European and North American counterparts, they circulated some of the same rumours, as well as some specifically Chinese ones, and this will be noted in passing. The Chinese press was also governed by the same standards of objectivity, but, importantly, it did not exhibit the same information panic during the Boxer War that dominated Western coverage.¹⁶

This article thus diverges somewhat from the trend towards a decentred understanding of history that has informed recent interventions in the field of global history.¹⁷ Rather, it elucidates the gathering and global dissemination of (uncertain) information in the context of a ‘global imperialism’ characterized by different forms of territorial expansion as much as by the development of international and transimperial co-operation.¹⁸ In doing so, it moves beyond the Eurocentrism inherent in the modernity- and progress-driven narratives of many global histories of communication by elucidating the Chinese entanglement with the production and circulation of rumours and by identifying rumour as the downside of the optimism driving Euro-American imperial expansion. The article begins by introducing the historical context since it is important to understand the

¹⁵ Compare, for example, Knüsel, “‘Western Civilization’ against ‘Hordes of Yellow Savages’”, 56; Lü, ‘Germany’s War in China’; Jane E. Elliott, *Some Did it for Civilisation, Some Did it for their Country: A Revised View of the Boxer War* (Hong Kong, 2002), chs. 1–2.

¹⁶ This assessment is based on a survey of *Shenbao* 申報, published in Shanghai and arguably the most influential Chinese newspaper at the time, and the Yokohama-based weekly *Qingyibao* 清議報, as well as spot checks in some other journals. Examples of journals reporting on the killing of all foreigners include the Singaporean *Lebao* 叻報, 17 July 1900, 1, but not the *Xinwenbao* 新聞報 edition of the same day, whose front page included an editorial critical of Western imperialism. A specifically Chinese rumour was the short-lived information that Qing diplomats abroad and local officials in China had been arrested by the Western powers: see *Qingyibao*, 27 June, 13a–b, 14a. Chinese dates have been converted according to the Gregorian calendar.

¹⁷ A particularly fascinating and insightful example is Martin Dusenberre, *Mooring the Global Archive: A Japanese Ship and its Migrant Histories* (Cambridge, 2023). See also Xin Fan, *Global History in China* (Singapore, 2024).

¹⁸ Pierre Singaravélou, *Tianjin cosmopolis: Une autre histoire de la mondialisation*, e-book edn (Paris, 2017), 26–7.

outbreak and early development of the Boxer War, especially the timing of key decisions and actions. Following this, the methods of information-gathering, the acceptance of the rumour that a massacre of all foreigners had occurred, and the varying depictions of how they had died, as well as subsequent adjustments to reality, are each examined in turn.

I

‘THEY PULL OUT TELEGRAPH POLES’: THE SIEGE OF THE LEGATION QUARTER

In the late 1890s, the crisis of China under the ruling Qing 清 dynasty (1644–1911) was reaching boiling point. Internationally, China was suffering from the ‘unequal treaties’ imposed by the Western powers, which had crippled its sovereignty and created foreign enclaves in the increasing number of so-called treaty ports.¹⁹ Following on the heels of defeat at the hands of Japan in 1895, the ‘scramble for concessions’ of 1897–8 saw the Qing administration forced to lease coastal bridgeheads to Germany, Britain, France and Russia, de facto colonies designed to facilitate the exploitation of spheres of economic influence in their respective hinterlands. Domestically, the empress dowager Cixi 慈禧 (1835–1908) and her conservative entourage had crushed the reform movement of 1898. Placed under house arrest, the young Guangxu 光緒 Emperor (reigned 1875–1908), her nephew, still posed a threat to Cixi’s grip on the reins of power, the more so as the Western powers appeared to be favouring him over his aunt.²⁰ These tensions led to an explosion once the Boxers appeared on the scene.

The Boxer movement emerged out of several martial arts schools about 1898 and quickly expanded across North China the following year. Its European name is derived from one of these groups, whose members called themselves Yihequan 義和拳 (Boxers United in Righteousness); the subsequent renaming as Yihetuan 義和團 (Militia United in Righteousness) became

¹⁹ See Dong Wang, *China’s Unequal Treaties: Narrating National History* (Lanham, 2005); Li Yumin 李育民, *Zhongguo fei yue shi* 中国废约史 [The History of Treaty Abolition in China] (Beijing, 2005), 13–31.

²⁰ See Lanxin Xiang, *The Origins of the Boxer War: A Multinational Study* (London, 2003), 129–39.

the official designation of the movement as a whole. Steeped in local culture and religion, the Boxers held the foreigners and, secondarily, Chinese Christians responsible for a string of natural disasters and social conflicts; in their eyes, the physical liquidation of their enemies was the only means to restore tranquillity and prosperity.²¹ Throughout the year 1899, Boxers killed Christians, destroyed their property, and set chapels ablaze, while the Qing government's attempts to subdue the loosely organized movement proved unsuccessful. Attacks on Westerners did not occur until after large groups of rural Boxers had begun to congregate in the capital of the Qing empire, Beijing, as well as the port city of Tianjin 天津, in May and June 1900. By this time, events were spiralling into a major crisis.

In view of the apparent inability or unwillingness of the court in Beijing to subdue the movement, the foreign diplomats and military commanders on the spot took matters into their own hands. Between mid April and mid June, about thirty warships from eight countries (Britain, Italy, France, the United States, Germany, Russia, Japan and Austria-Hungary) concentrated off Dagū 大沽, the gateway to Tianjin and the Chinese capital.²² As anxiety mounted in the foreign legations in Beijing, marines arrived to reinforce the legation guards on 28 May, increasing the total strength of the Western military presence to about 450. On 10 June, an expeditionary force of almost 2,000 marines from the various national contingents under the command of the British admiral Sir Edward Hobart Seymour (1840–1929) set off for Beijing, initiating a *de facto* state of war. However, in the face of Chinese resistance, Seymour's column had marched only about halfway to its destination before it was forced to pull back to Tianjin, its exact whereabouts having remained unknown for the better part of two weeks.²³

²¹ On the name, cultural background and ideology of the movement, see Joseph W. Esherick, *The Origins of the Boxer Uprising* (Berkeley, 1987); Cohen, *History in Three Keys*, ch. 1.

²² See Xiang, *Origins of the Boxer War*, 283.

²³ Roland Felber, 'Die Kriegserklärung der Kaiserinwitve vom 21. Juni 1900 und die Belagerung des Gesandtschaftsviertels', in Susanne Kuß and Bernd Martin (eds.), *Das Deutsche Reich und der Boxeraufstand* (Munich, 2002), 59. See also Preston, *Besieged in Peking*, 71–82; Silbey, *Boxer Rebellion and the Great Game in China*, 112.

While Seymour was still on his way, communication between Beijing and the coast was disrupted. Since 1883, a telegraph line had connected Tianjin, and later Beijing, with China's telegraphic centre, Shanghai 上海, and thence with the wider world, and as early as 1872, a cable linking the Qing capital with Europe via Siberia and Moscow had been laid.²⁴ However, throughout May and June 1900, all the lines in North China were cut at various points. For the Boxers, this was not only a military expedient to obstruct the enemy's war effort; attacks on Western technology were also part and parcel of their drive to eradicate foreign influence in China. A popular ditty widely circulated as Boxer propaganda explicitly stated that the Boxers 'tear apart railways, pull out telegraph poles, and promptly destroy steamships'.²⁵ By 14 June, the Westerners in Beijing were cut off from communication with the outside world. The Allied naval commanders now escalated the conflict by storming and occupying the Dagou Forts on 17 June. On the same day, Qing troops attacked the foreign concessions in Tianjin.²⁶

Even without full knowledge of the situation in Dagou and Tianjin, the Qing government issued an ultimatum of its own on 19 June demanding that foreign representatives leave the capital within twenty-four hours. The following morning, the German minister, Ketteler, whom some Western newspapers had already reported dead three days earlier, was assassinated by a Manchu soldier en route to the Zongli Yamen 總理衙門, the government body responsible for diplomatic relations with Western countries. The foreign ministers now opted to stay and defend the Western community and about 3,000 Chinese Christians against the impending attack. This began at 4 p.m. on

²⁴ French, *Through the Looking Glass*, 67.

²⁵ Two all but identical versions of this quotation, one from Shandong and one from Tianjin, can be found in *Shandong Yihetuan diaocha ziliao xuanbian* 山东义和团调查资料选编 [Selected Materials from the Boxer Survey in Shandong], ed. Lu Yao 路遥 (Jinan, 1980), 315; *Yihetuan wenxian jizhu yu yanjiu* 义和团文献辑注与研究 [Boxer Texts: Annotated Collection and Analysis], ed. Chen Zhenjiang 陈振江 and Cheng Xiao 程猷 (Tianjin, 1986), 34. On the destruction of telegraph lines, see Roger R. Thompson, 'The Wire: Progress, Paradox, and Disaster in the Strategic Networking of China, 1881–1901', *Frontiers of History in China*, x, 3 (2015), 410.

²⁶ Silbey, *Boxer Rebellion and the Great Game in China*, 112–116; Xiang, *Origins of the Boxer War*, 281–90, 300–303.

20 June as Qing artillery started shelling the legations. The next day, having learnt of the capture of the Dagou Forts, the imperial court issued an edict declaring a state of war and ordering the regular army to join the Boxers in fighting the foreigners.

During the ensuing siege of the Legation Quarter in Beijing, the international troops attempted to hold a perimeter encompassing most of the legation buildings and fortified by makeshift barricades. Legations outside the line of defence were abandoned, and most of the civilians, including women and children, found shelter in the British legation.²⁷ The Chinese side, however, lacked both unity of purpose and a clear military and political objective.²⁸ Between 16 and 28 July, there was effectively a truce, during which time the legations received supplies from the Qing authorities. Even when the fighting resumed on 29 July, both sides seemed to have run out of steam; only from 9 August did attacks on the Legation Quarter reach an unprecedented ferocity.²⁹

By 14 July, the Allies had secured their first strategic objective: the relief of the foreign concessions in Tianjin. About 20,000 men commenced their march on Beijing on 4 August, defeated the Chinese regulars and Boxer militia in several battles, and lifted the siege of the Legation Quarter on 14 August 1900. The Qing court fled for the faraway western city of Xi'an 西安.³⁰ While not signalling the end of the war (which continued in the form of punitive exhibitions on the part of the Allies against supposed Boxer strongholds and was not formally settled until the signing of the so-called Boxer Protocol on 7 September 1901), the relief of Beijing marked a turning point as the lives of foreigners were no longer perceived to be in danger. As will be shown below, this greatly impacted on the Western coverage of events.

²⁷ The isolated Beitang 北堂, or Northern Cathedral, was defended by a small French–Italian contingent, as well as Catholic missionaries and Chinese Christians. As this sideshow played a minor role in the press coverage, it will not be dealt with in this article.

²⁸ Felber, 'Die Kriegserklärung der Kaiserinwitwe vom 21. Juni 1900 und die Belagerung des Gesandtschaftsviertels', 71–2.

²⁹ Victor Purcell, *The Boxer Uprising: A Background Study*, new edn (Hamden, 1974), 254–5; Felber, 'Die Kriegserklärung der Kaiserinwitwe vom 21. Juni 1900 und die Belagerung des Gesandtschaftsviertels', 73.

³⁰ Silbey, *Boxer Rebellion and the Great Game in China*, 137–58, 167–214.

II

‘WE MUST BASE OUR PREDICTIONS ON REASONING’:
RUMOUR AS INFORMATION

The proliferation of rumours in the Western press during the siege of the Legation Quarter was not the result of a deliberate strategy of misinformation. Rather, newspapers and periodicals were reacting to the anomalous and paradoxical condition of the telegraph network in China in the summer of 1900. As the telegraph lines had been severed, what information could be got out of Beijing was reduced to a trickle. On the other hand, telegraphic communication continued to flow profusely from treaty ports such as Zhifu 芝罘 (Yantai 煙台) and Shanghai, the German leasehold of Kiaochow (Jiaozhou 膠州), or the British crown colony of Hong Kong to the European and North American metropolises. Where necessary, warships carried telegrams in an attempt to bridge gaps in the lines.³¹ Western newspapers and periodicals therefore had access to news from China, although they were conscious of its limits and found it ‘meagre and unsatisfactory’.³² The French popular daily *Le Petit Journal*, at the time probably the journal with the widest circulation, succinctly summarized the situation thus:

What is happening in China borders on the limits of the improbable and the dream: there are — at least, that is what we are hoping — European ambassadors in Beijing, there are European troops and generals in Tien-Tsin [Tianjin], there are squadrons and admirals in the Gulf of Petchili [Beizhili 北直隸, the name by which the Bohai 渤海 Sea was known at the time], consuls-general in the big cities and correspondents of journals everywhere . . . And yet we know nothing, absolutely nothing — positive, mind you — of what is going on there.³³

Complaints that there was ‘no news’ or ‘no word’, that no ‘fresh’, ‘authentic’, ‘reliable’, ‘trustworthy’ or ‘definite’ information

³¹ Jorma Ahvenainen, *The Far Eastern Telegraphs: The History of Telegraphic Communication between the Far East, Europe, and America before the First World War* (Helsinki, 1981), 143. See also Knüsel, “‘Western Civilization’ against ‘Hordes of Yellow Savages’”, 53.

³² *Times*, 26 July 1900, 9.

³³ *Le Petit Journal*, 26 July 1900, 1. On 16 July, the journal reported a print run of 1,113,250 copies. The next largest would have been the *Daily Mail* with 989,000 copies: Knüsel, “‘Western Civilization’ against ‘Hordes of Yellow Savages’”, 51.

was available, or that information was 'unverified', 'uncontrollable' or coming with 'no confirmation', formed a constant background noise to the reporting.³⁴ The same uncertainty was expressed metaphorically in references to the situation as a 'mystery' or 'enigma', or to a 'veil' obscuring the hard facts.³⁵ It is important to note that Western newspapers published on the China coast, such as the Shanghai-based *North China Herald* and the *Deutsch-Asiatische Warte* from the German leasehold of Kiaochow, were no better off than their counterparts back in the metropolises.³⁶ Newsmakers were aware that much of what they published on the siege was rumour, and regularly alluded to the problem.³⁷ Caught in a dilemma between the dearth of reliable information and the desire to print news, they resorted to a solution which the sober Catholic French daily *La Croix* explicated as follows:

We have been careful to warn our readers that they ought to mistrust the extraordinary, sensational, exaggerated news that has been transmitted to us by the English journals regarding 'affairs in China'. Caution is necessary and reservations are imperative. . . . With this general observation in mind, we shall nonetheless continue to make available the telegrams which are arriving from various sources in China. The reader requires no more than an indication of its source to judge the merit of this information from English sources. He will

³⁴ The wordings are taken from, among others, *Daily Mail*, 7 July 1900, 5; 13 July, 5; *Times*, 6 July, 9; 24 July, 9; 13 Aug., 7; 21 Aug., 7; *New York Times*, 22 June, 1; 17 July, 6; 18 July, 1; 3 Aug., 1; *Atlanta Constitution*, 22 June, 2; 11 July, 1; *San Francisco Chronicle*, 21 June, 8; 11 July, 1; *Le Petit Journal*, 13 July, 1; *Vorwärts*, 22 June, 1; *Kölnische Volkszeitung*, 19 June, morning edn, 2. Chinese newspapers also tended to state that the fate of the ministers was 'unknown' (*wu xi* 無悉) or, occasionally, 'unpredictable' (*wu bu* 無卜): see, for example, *Shenbao*, 6 July, 1; 18 July, 1; 24 July, 1; 26 July, 2; *Qingyibao*, 17 July, 9a–b.

³⁵ For references to a 'veil', see *Daily Mail*, 1 Aug. 1900, 5; *Atlanta Constitution*, 12 July, 1 ('a terrible veil of silence'); *Times*, 7 July, 11. For 'mystery', see *Daily Mail*, 28 July, 5; 11 Aug., 3; *Times*, 26 June, 9; 30 June, 11; *New York Times*, 20 June, 1; 30 June, 1; 11 July, 1; *Le Petit Journal*, 26 July, 1. For 'enigma', see *New York Times*, 28 July, 1.

³⁶ See *North China Herald*, 27 June 1900, 1144–5; 18 July, 105; *Deutsch-Asiatische Warte*, 24 June, 1–2.

³⁷ Barth, *Wa(h)re Fakten*, 116, suggests this was standard practice at the time. For examples, see *New York Times*, 11 July 1900, 6; 12 July, 2; *North China Herald*, 27 June, 1155; *Daily Telegraph*, 6 July, 7; *Atlanta Constitution*, 1 Aug., 4; *San Francisco Chronicle*, 10 July, 2; 13 July, 1; 16 Aug., 1; *L'Aurore*, 18 June, 2; *Le Petit Journal*, 12 July, 1, all referring to Shanghai as a hotbed of rumours.

remember that the English are in control of all cables and that they allow through the most ludicrous information (*les informations les plus saugrenues*) in order to increase the general anxiety.³⁸

Journalists and editors across the board undoubtedly agreed with the French left-wing journal *L'Aurore* that 'we must base our predictions on reasoning', which, in reality, was a euphemism for guesswork.³⁹

As the Boxer crisis exposed the vulnerability of telegraphy, this technology and thus the structure of the global media network itself became newsworthy. Newspapers reported regularly on the destruction and interruption of lines along the coast, as well as on the attempts by the Allies to repair them and restore communication between the various treaty ports — Beijing, the chief point of interest, of course remaining out of range until mid August.⁴⁰ In late June, the *New York Times* went out of its way to reconstruct the probable global pathway of a telegram received by Wu Tingfang 伍廷芳 (1842–1922), the Chinese minister to the United States and the most vocal spokesman of the Qing government in the West. In this case, as in others, the route of the information was deemed as significant as its contents.⁴¹

More importantly, telegraphy played a crucial role in how the press documented its sources. Thus, the representation of the Beijing siege of 1900 in newspapers and periodicals differed from the pattern suggested by the literature on rumour. While Western newspapers did occasionally resort to the language that scholars have typically associated with rumour, using phrases

³⁸ *La Croix*, 23 June 1900, 2.

³⁹ *L'Aurore*, 24 July 1900, 2. A random sample of references to rumours (and their intermingling with authentic information) includes *Kölnische Volkszeitung*, 19 June, morning edn, 2; *Vorwärts*, 8 July, 1; *Le Petit Journal*, 16 July, 1; *Daily Mail*, 16 July, 4 (claiming that Chinese rumours were often true); *L'Aurore*, 18 June, 2; *New York Times*, 5 Aug., 1.

⁴⁰ *New York Times*, 20 June 1900, 1 and 3; *Daily Mail*, 22 June, 5; *Atlanta Constitution*, 24 June, 3; 28 June, 1; *Manchester Guardian*, 1 July, 5; *L'Aurore*, 13 July, 2; *La Croix*, 14 July, 3; *Qingyibao*, 17 June, 8b and 12b.

⁴¹ *New York Times*, 28 June 1900, 2. On Wu's role during the Boxer War, see Ding Xianjun 丁贤俊 and Yu Zuofeng 喻作风, *Wu Tingfang pingzhuan* 伍廷芳评传 [Wu Tingfang: A Critical Biography] (Beijing, 2005), ch. 8. See also the overview of telegraphic lines out of China in *Deutsche Zeitung*, 29 July, B.

such as 'they say', 'it is known', 'it seems to be universally believed', 'in well-informed circles it is believed', these were clearly exceptions.⁴² On the other hand, as the vast majority of reports reached the Western metropolises by way of telegraphy, telegrams became almost synonymous with incoming news.⁴³ However, telegraphy was not sufficient in itself to demonstrate authenticity. While the full text of telegrams was occasionally included in articles to corroborate information, most newspaper articles and editorials point to a more complex pattern of authentication.⁴⁴

Even so, the precision of the documentation varied. The most basic form was to state the place of origin from which a telegram had been received.⁴⁵ This method was frequently used, albeit usually alongside more sophisticated methods of corroboration. One important source of information was the news agencies: Reuters, Dalziel's News Agency and Laffan News Bureau for the English-language press, but also some outlets in Germany, Wolffs Telegraphenbüro for practically all German newspapers, and Havas for the French ones. Correspondents for these agencies were deployed locally and sent reports back to Europe and the United States by telegraph. Some newspapers (such as the *Daily Mail* and *Daily Express*, the *Times*, *Daily Telegraph* and the *World*) had their own reporters in China. In most cases, these journalists operated from Shanghai, with only a few making

⁴² Examples can be found in *L'Aurore*, 9 July 1900, 2; *Le Petit Journal*, 11 July, 1; *New York Times*, 18 June; *Manchester Guardian*, 7 July, 9. I have not been able to find more than two instances of such language in any individual Western newspaper and none in the Chinese press. For the theory, see Allport and Postman, *Psychology of Rumor*, p. x; Jobs, 'Uncertain Knowledge', 5.

⁴³ For example, the *Atlanta Constitution* routinely marked telegrams it had received, and *L'Aurore* equally introduced its reports on China with the remark that they had arrived 'by dispatch'. *Qingyibao* was extreme in reporting nothing but the content of cables, carefully noting the dates and places of origin.

⁴⁴ The most striking example of a telegram being reproduced in full is the facsimile in *World*, 17 June 1900, 1, reporting the (alleged) death of Ketteler and destruction of the legations.

⁴⁵ For example, *Le Petit Journal*, 26 June 1900, typically opened a report with the remark that 'There is a telegram from Zhifu to the *Daily Mail*' ('On télégraphie de Ché-Fou au *Daily Mail*').

their way to the theatre of war.⁴⁶ Correspondents in capitals from Washington to Tokyo transmitted government information, coverage from local newspapers, as well as glimpses of public opinion. Articles from the international press were often reprinted (and translated where necessary), especially from those newspapers that could draw on their own journalists in China.

The political, diplomatic and military representatives of the Western powers (including Japan), both in China and in the Western capitals, provided a further source of information.⁴⁷ Consuls stationed in the treaty ports (especially Zhifu, Tianjin and Shanghai), as well as military commanders on the spot, reported all developments of which they became aware to their governments, which were usually happy to share this information with the press. Cases in which governments chose not to make dispatches public were exceptions.⁴⁸

Chinese officials offered an additional reservoir of information. Imperial edicts and other important information were forwarded to the foreign consuls by figures outside the capital, such as the provincial governor of Shandong 山東, Yuan Shikai 袁世凱 (1859–1916), and Sheng Xuanhuai 盛宣懷 (1844–1916), the Shanghai-based director of the Imperial Chinese Railways as well as of the privately owned Imperial Telegraph Administration. Both were also in touch with the Qing empire's diplomats in Europe, North America and Japan, whose communication with their host governments was regularly shared with newspapers in and beyond the respective capitals. The most visible was the indefatigable Wu Tingfang, whose central role was widely acknowledged in the Western international press.⁴⁹

⁴⁶ Editors explicitly marked reports 'by our special correspondent' but did not normally reveal their names. On the identity and reporting of the most influential correspondents, see Elliott, *Some Did it for Civilisation, Some Did it for their Country*, 14–15, 28–30; Fleming, *Siege at Peking*, 138–9.

⁴⁷ See, for example, *San Francisco Chronicle*, 1 July 1900, 9.

⁴⁸ The two cases I have noted both involved the United States government: *New York Times*, 5 Aug. 1900, 1; *Le Petit Journal*, 6 Aug., 1; *San Francisco Chronicle*, 16 Aug., 1; *L'Aurore*, 16 Aug., 2.

⁴⁹ *Manchester Guardian*, 18 July 1900, 6–7; *Daily Mail*, 14 July, 5; *Times*, 14 July, 7; 18 July, 7; *L'Aurore*, 29 June, 2; 15 July, 3; 18 July, 2; 22 July, 2; *Le Petit Journal*, 18 July, 1; 22 July, 1; *Deutsche Zeitung*, 22 July, A.

Finally, unofficial Chinese informants filled gaps in the communication network. These were, as *Le Petit Journal* suggested, 'Chinese who have been taken prisoner or who have been able to leave the capital'.⁵⁰ The latter group included refugees from the fighting, but also people variously referred to as 'runners', 'couriers' or 'messengers', who had been smuggled through enemy lines carrying oral or written information from or about the besieged foreigners. In the words of the *San Francisco Chronicle*, such intermediaries gave a 'vivid but fragmentary picture'.⁵¹

The accuracy of Chinese reports became a constant source of concern, however. Shanghai correspondents who found some of their informants 'reliable' represented a minority. While the Western press generally distrusted information coming from Chinese, it was particularly derogatory about Qing officials.⁵² A prime target of vilification was Sheng Xuanhuai, who was repeatedly accused of deliberately withholding key information. The criticism was partly down to his position at the interface between Chinese and Western information networks, and partly because, more than anyone else, he symbolized Chinese control of the telegraph lines. By the early 1880s, the Chinese side had taken ownership of the network initially established by Westerners and managed it through a mixed arrangement of public and private enterprise. Ironically, the 'telegraphic sovereignty' thus achieved was partially dismantled as a result of the Boxer War after the foreign powers demanded and received control over certain lines of communication towards the coast in North China.⁵³ Even though Western mistrust of Sheng may

⁵⁰ *Le Petit Journal*, 6 July 1900, 1.

⁵¹ *San Francisco Chronicle*, 4 July 1900, 5. On the practice of smuggling couriers through the lines, see Sir Claude MacDonald's siege diary, reprinted in *The Siege of the Peking Embassy, 1900: Sir Claude MacDonald's Report on the Boxer Rebellion* (London, 2000), 197–9.

⁵² For informants, see *Times*, 21 June 1900, 6; 29 June, 7; *Daily Mail*, 7 July, 5; 10 July, 5. See also *Atlanta Constitution*, 6 July, 5. For a critique of officials, see *Daily Mail*, 30 June, 4; 17 July, 5.

⁵³ The *San Francisco Chronicle*, 23 July 1900, 1, offers a veritable character assassination. The article was ostensibly quoting a *Times* cable, but no related article could be identified in that paper around this date. See also *San Francisco Chronicle*, 20 July, 2; 4 Aug., 2; 26 June 1900, 1: this last summarizes an article in *Neue Preußische Zeitung*, 25 June, evening edn, 2, offering a fine example of how

(cont. on p. 201)

have resulted from frustration at the lack of reliable information, it revealed a deeper cultural antipathy that was reflected in the use of anti-Chinese stereotyping. Despite its anti-imperialist stance, the left-wing *LAurore* went furthest in insinuating that lies and duplicity were part and parcel of Chinese diplomatic tradition, even though it readily admitted that European diplomats practised the same arts, albeit, in its opinion, less effectively.⁵⁴ In fact, both Yuan and Sheng were often as much in the dark about the situation in Beijing as the Western press, and the latter's often frantic search for information, especially in the early stages of the siege, is evident from his telegraphic correspondence.⁵⁵ Whatever the case, communications from the two officials were regularly published.

News usually reached the Western press through chains of transmission. Three examples must suffice: on 18 June, the German consul in Zhifu, Philipp Lenz (1850–1930), passed on a report from a Japanese torpedo boat to the effect that the legations in Beijing had been 'taken'. As the *Kölnische Zeitung* conjectured, the boat had been carrying an official telegram from Dagu to Zhifu. Once the message had been made available to the foreign ministry in Berlin, German, British, French and American newspapers quickly either reprinted it verbatim or elaborated on it, the last three taking their cue either from diplomatic circles or from the German press.⁵⁶ Two weeks later,

(n. 53 cont.)

newspapers borrowed content from one another. Further criticisms of Sheng can be found, for example, in *Atlanta Constitution*, 10 July, 3; *LAurore*, 19 July, 2; *Times*, 21 July, 7. On the Chinese administration and control of telegraph lines, as well as its eventual fate, see *San Francisco Chronicle*, 21 June, 8; Thompson, 'The Wire' (from which the term 'telegraphic sovereignty' is borrowed); Erik Baark, *Lightning Wires: The Telegraph and China's Technological Modernization, 1860–1890* (Westport, CT, 1997).

⁵⁴ *LAurore*, 27 July 1900, 2; see also 21 July, 1; 9 Aug., 2. Charges of 'duplicity' or 'mendacity' were also made by the *Daily Mail*, 17 July, 4; 24 July, 4; *Atlanta Constitution*, 2 Aug., 2; *Le Petit Journal*, 29 July, 1. On anti-Chinese stereotypes at the time, see Colin Mackerras, *Western Images of China* (Hong Kong, 1989), esp. 59–61.

⁵⁵ See *Yihetuan: Sheng Xuanhuai dang'an ziliao xuanji zhi qi* 义和团: 盛宣怀档案资料选辑之七 [The Boxers: Selected Archival Materials by Sheng Xuanhuai, vii], ed. Chen Xulu 陈旭麓 *et al.* (Shanghai, 2001), especially nos. 234–5, 243, 246, 281.

⁵⁶ The original telegram can be found in Politisches Archiv des Auswärtigen Amtes, Berlin, R 18278, fol. 22. See also *Kölnische Zeitung*, 18 June 1900, evening edn, 2; *Kölnische Volkszeitung*, 19 June, morning edn, 2; *LAurore*, 19 June, 1; *La Croix*, 19 June, 3; *Le Petit Journal*, 19 June, 3; *Times*, 19 June, 5; *Daily Mail*, 19 June, 5 (quoting a Reuters dispatch).

on 2 July, *La Dépêche*, one of the few influential French journals published outside Paris, printed a short notice stating that all foreign legations in Beijing, with the exception of the British, French and German, had been burned to the ground. It identified as its source a telegram sent by the commander of an Italian warship off Dagu two days earlier, who claimed to have received a communication from Ketteler, the German minister who, it should be remembered, had been killed ten days before the officer dispatched his telegram. In reality, parts of Beijing had been set on fire, but only a few legations outside the defensive perimeter had met with complete destruction.⁵⁷ Finally, on 18 July, the *Times* published part of a telegram stating that the residents of the Legation Quarter were safe, and traced it back to its origins: it had been received by the Belgian foreign minister, to whom it had been forwarded by the Belgian *chargé d'affaires* in Shanghai. The latter had obtained the message (whether verbally or in writing is unclear) from Sheng Xuanhuai, who in turn had been sent a telegram by Yuan Shikai. Yuan, finally, had received a report from a courier who claimed to have left Beijing on 9 July. In contrast to the previous two examples, this time the information was authentic.⁵⁸

Two important conclusions can be drawn regarding the role of telegraphy in the emergence of press rumours in the summer of 1900: first, it served as the pivotal link in chains of transmission, with often, though not always, unreliable starting points, transforming rumours from oral into written communication. Second, in providing a worldwide conduit for the flow of information,

⁵⁷ *La Dépêche*, 2 July 1900, 3. See Gilles Feyel, *La Presse en France des origines à 1944: Histoire politique et matérielle* (Paris, 1999), 143, for a characterization of the paper. *Shenbao*, 11 July, 1, had similar information but traced it to a telegram from Zhifu via the Japanese Navy Ministry and an Osaka newspaper. *Lebao*, 5 July, 1, referred to a telegram from Hong Kong quoting a dispatch from Zhifu. Yuan Shikai was even told by couriers that only two legations were left standing: see *Yuan Shikai quan ji* 袁世凱全集 [Collected Works of Yuan Shikai], ed. Luo Baoshan 駱寶善 and Liu Lusheng 劉路生, v (Zhengzhou, 2013), nos. 5-1418, 5-1432 and 5-1443; *Shenbao*, 12 July, 1; *Qingyibao*, 17 July, 8b. On the real state of affairs in the Legation Quarter as recorded by an eyewitness, see *Peking 1900: Paula von Rosthorns Erinnerungen an den Boxeraufstand, März bis August 1900*, ed. Alexander Pechmann (Vienna, 2001), 30-45.

⁵⁸ *Times*, 18 July 1900, 7. Yuan's original telegram, dated 16 July, can be found in *Yuan Shikai quan ji*, ed. Luo and Liu, no. 5-1610.

the telegraph enabled the global spread of rumours that otherwise would have remained local. Passing through a number of hubs (*L'Aurore* singled out Zhifu, London and Shanghai as the most important ones), this phantasmagorical news ended up on newspaper readers' tables in the metropolises.⁵⁹

III

'ALL FOREIGNERS IN PEKING DEAD': ACCEPTING RUMOUR AS FACT

It was the loss of telegraphic communication with Beijing on 14 June 1900 that set the rumour mill in motion. Not coincidentally, the rumour of Ketteler's killing appeared only three days later in the majority of the international press, with some papers initially harbouring reservations.⁶⁰ In the days following the alleged assassination, Western newspapers began to hint that more diplomats had been murdered, but it was not until after the death of the German minister had been officially confirmed on 2 July (still clinging to the wrong date of 18 June, two days early) that this idea really gained traction. Suggested victims included the French minister, Stephen Pichon (1857–1933), his Russian counterpart, Mikhail de Giers (1856–1924), and the British or American envoys.⁶¹ A second rumour to the effect that the legations had been 'taken' arose simultaneously with that of the German envoy's murder, and the reprinting of the telegram from the German consul, Philipp Lenz, over the following two days reinforced the idea. Although the capture of the legations would have involved military action of some sort, as yet the focus was not generally on the possible loss of human lives.⁶²

⁵⁹ *L'Aurore*, 10 Aug. 1900, 1.

⁶⁰ For the initial scepticism, see *Berliner Morgenpost*, 17 June 1900, 1; *Manchester Guardian*, 17 June, 5; *Le Petit Journal*, 18 June, 1; *Atlanta Constitution*, 20 July, 1–2.

⁶¹ For the unidentified ministers, see *Times*, 22 June 1900, 7; *L'Aurore*, 4 July, 1; *Le Petit Journal*, 4 July, 1; *San Francisco Chronicle*, 5 July, 9. For Giers, see *New York Times*, 15 July, 1; *San Francisco Chronicle*, 15 July, 1. For Pichon, see *Atlanta Constitution*, 4 July, 3 (including the British minister); *La Croix*, 5 July, 1 (including the American minister); *Le Petit Journal*, 5 July, 1; critically but from hindsight: *L'Aurore*, 14 Aug., 1.

⁶² An exception was the *Kölnische Zeitung*, 18 June 1900, evening edn, 2.

Mentions of a massacre of all ministers, or, more frequently, the entire foreign community, sprang up sporadically from the pages of newspapers in late June.⁶³ But it was not until the first week of July that the rumour began to intensify. In the meantime, two important things had happened: not only had the murder of Ketteler been confirmed, but the following day a message was published in various newspapers signed by Sir Robert Hart (1835–1908), the widely respected director of the Imperial Maritime Customs Service, a Chinese government institution headed by Westerners. The short text, which Hart had been able to smuggle out of Beijing by courier, provided the first inside information that the foreign legations were being besieged and climaxed in the dramatic injunction: ‘The situation is desperate. Hasten’.⁶⁴ From this point onwards, the possibility of a blood-bath appeared increasingly likely. On 13 July, the *Daily Mail* was already claiming to have established the date of the carnage as exactly a week earlier; three days later, the massacre became an accepted fact, at least for a number of days. The rumour was typically formulated retrospectively, suggesting that the disaster had already happened.⁶⁵

However, not all the stories circulating were dread rumours. While anxiety was gradually mounting, wish rumours also circulated to the effect that the foreign community in Beijing were safe. Two versions were especially potent, the first being that Seymour’s expeditionary force had indeed reached Beijing and

⁶³ *Le Petit Journal*, 20 June 1900, 1; 26 June, 1 (both times drawing on the *Daily Express* and in the first instance referring to the information as rumour); *Atlanta Constitution*, 23 June, 1; *World*, 24 June, 1; *North China Herald*, 27 June, 1155; *La Croix*, 22 June, 1 (with some reservations). The *Daily Mail*, *Manchester Guardian*, *New York Times* and *L’Aurore* all reported on 22 June. Apparently, the term ‘ministers’ often referred synecdochically to the entire foreign community not only in Western but also in some Chinese papers, such as *Qingyibao*.

⁶⁴ *Daily Mail*, 3 July 1900, 5. See also *Manchester Guardian*, 3 July, 7; *New York Times*, 3 July, 7; *San Francisco Chronicle*, 3 July, 3. French and German translations in *Le Petit Journal*, 3 July, 1; *Berliner Morgenpost*, 3 July, 2; *Vorwärts*, 3 July, 1. The *Times*, 3 July, 5, rendered the concluding words as ‘Make haste’, thereby pointing to variations in the transmission of the telegram. See also *Qingyibao*, 7 July, 10b.

⁶⁵ The typology of rumours applied here draws on Allport and Postman, *Psychology of Rumor*, 6–13; Rosnow, ‘Inside Rumor’, 487; Warren A. Peterson and Noel P. Gist, ‘Rumor and Public Opinion’, *American Journal of Sociology*, lvii, 2 (1951), 159.

was either protecting the foreigners there or escorting them back to Tianjin. Coming at least in part from Chinese sources, the information was unverifiable, but, given the military and political volatility of the situation, neither was it completely implausible. Only in hindsight does Seymour's defeat seem inevitable.⁶⁶ A complementary but more imaginative variant had a Russian force marching on Beijing from the north.⁶⁷ The other version suggested that Prince Qing 慶 (Yikuang 奕劻, 1838–1917), head of the Zongli Yamen and a known sympathizer with the foreigners, had taken them under his protection.⁶⁸ This rumour was intimately linked to more far-fetched stories about the power struggle at the Qing court. Such stories drew on widespread knowledge of the conflict between pro- and anti-Boxer factions and at the same time filled an informational void. Prince Duan 端 (Zaiyi 載漪, 1856–1922), believed to be the leader of the war faction, was reported to have staged a coup, forced the Guangxu Emperor to commit suicide, and declared himself emperor; meanwhile, the empress dowager had either fled or been killed, or had been taken captive or gone mad, a fate to which another article consigned Prince Duan himself. A concomitant version had it that Prince Qing had initiated a counter-coup, but some newspapers later suggested that he had been killed trying to protect the foreigners during the wholesale massacre. All of this

⁶⁶ A point that is lost on Elliott, *Some Did it for Civilisation, Some Did it for their Country*, 14–20. Versions of the rumour can be found in *World*, 21 June 1900, 1; *Times*, 25 June, 12; 27 June, 11; 28 June, 4; 29 June, 4 and 7. The *Times* issue of 30 June, 7 and 11, proved this assumption wrong. See also *Atlanta Constitution*, 28 June, 1; 29 June, 1–2; 30 June, 1; *New York Times*, 21 June, 1; 22 June, 1; 29 June, 1; *San Francisco Chronicle*, 24 June, 2; *Le Petit Journal*, 21 June, 1. More careful were *L'Aurore*, 21 June, 2; *Qingyibao*, 27 June, 14b.

⁶⁷ *L'Aurore*, 19 June 1900, 2; 13 July, 2; *La Croix*, 21 June, 2 (reporting that the column had reached Beijing); 28 June, 1; 14 July, 3; *Le Petit Journal*, 17 June, 1; 10 July, 1 (referring to a mixed Russo-Japanese force); *San Francisco Chronicle*, 20 June, 8; *New York Times*, 16 July, 2. See also *Qingyibao*, 17 July, 9a and 10b; *Shenbao*, 21 July, 1; *Xinwenbao*, 7 Aug., 1. The *World*, 20 June, 1, suggested that the Russian column might have arrived too late to save the foreigners, whereas the *Times*, 16 July, 7, denied the existence of the force altogether.

⁶⁸ See *Daily Mail*, 10 July 1900, 5. See also *Daily Mail*, 20 July, 5; *Times*, 10 July, 5; *Atlanta Constitution*, 11 July, 1 and 3; 19 July, 1 and 3; *New York Times*, 10 July, 1; 19 July, 2; *San Francisco Chronicle*, 10 July, 6; *L'Aurore*, 10 July, 6; *La Croix*, 10 July, 2; *Le Petit Journal*, 10 July, 1; 11 July, 1.

was contradicted by the counter-rumour that Cixi had herself regained control.⁶⁹

What fundamentally shaped the 'information panic' during the early summer of 1900 was the continuous oscillation between wish and dread rumours, between visions of salvation and spectres of doom. Not only could the tenor of reporting make a U-turn from one day to the next, but in their attempt to incorporate information from as many sources as possible, newspapers would print diametrically opposed versions of events on the same day, even on the same page: in a single glance, readers would be assured that members of the foreign community in Beijing were both all dead and all safe. *L'Aurore* summarized the ensuing confusion on 27 July: 'The same constant gloomy refrain regarding the European residents of Peking continues. Saved! Massacred! Resaved! Remassacred! This may continue for a long time'. The wording picked up the paper's own coverage from three days earlier when, in an ironic nod to both its own practice and that of other journals, it had printed two consecutive articles titled, respectively, 'Legations remassacred' and 'Legations resaved'.⁷⁰ The ability to draw on multiple sources and to distribute contradictory information spatially across the printed page had taken on a greater dynamic as newspapers had increasingly replaced their rigid, linear columns with flexible, headline-orientated layouts, albeit in varying degrees, since the second half of the nineteenth century.⁷¹ In any case, it endowed the press rumours with a complexity not remotely attained by oral rumours with their inbuilt tendency towards 'levelling and sharpening'.⁷²

⁶⁹ See, for example, *Atlanta Constitution*, 4 July, 3; 5 July, 1; 10 July, 1; *New York Times*, 21 June, 1; 6 July, 1; 7 July, 1; *San Francisco Chronicle*, 21 June, 8; *L'Aurore*, 3 July, 1; 12 July, 3; *La Croix*, 22 June, 1; 8–9 July, 2; *Berliner Morgenpost*, 7 July, 1. See also *Qingyibao*, 27 June, 15a; 17 July, 7a, 10a. For the madness of Cixi, see *L'Aurore*, 6 July, 2; for that of Prince Duan, see *Times*, 13 July, 5. For Prince Qing's counter-coup, see *New York Times*, 8 July, 2; *La Croix*, 13 July, 2. For the death of Prince Qing, see *Le Petit Journal*, 26 June, 1; 14 July, 1; *La Croix*, 14 July, 2. For Cixi retaking power, see *La Croix*, 11 July, 2.

⁷⁰ *L'Aurore*, 27 July, 2; 24 July, 2.

⁷¹ On this development, see Søren Kolstrup, 'The Change of News Structure: Danish Newspapers 1873–1914', in Niels Brügger and Søren Kolstrup (eds.), *Media History: Theories, Methods, Analysis* (Aarhus, 2002), 71–84.

⁷² See Allport and Postman, *Psychology of Rumor*, 86: 'as the protocols become briefer, items that are not leveled out are, of necessity, made relatively more salient. They are sharpened'.

In view of this complexity and the ensuing confusion, the question remains why all the newspapers began to entertain the notion of a full-scale massacre and presented it, if only for a brief period, as accepted fact. Clearly, this acceptance cut across national differences (if one excludes the criticism of the British press) as well as political cleavages. True, there existed a deep chasm between the conservative *Times*'s hearing a 'righteous cry of vengeance' arising from the Western metropolises and the left-wing *L'Aurore*'s suggestion that if the imperialist monarchies could not keep their hands off China, republican France certainly should not send troops to support them.⁷³ But neither pro- nor anti-imperialist newspapers doubted the truth of the massacre itself. It was over the appropriate response that they differed, and in this context, *Vorwärts*, the organ of Germany's parliamentary left, the Social Democratic Party, experienced the most remarkable conversion. Since early July, the paper had been lambasting the 'sensationalist' newspapers, especially those in Britain, for spreading false rumours about a massacre in Beijing.⁷⁴ As the main reason for such irresponsible reporting the journal identified the commercial interests of the 'bourgeois' press. *Vorwärts*'s change of heart regarding the situation in Beijing was intimately connected with the anti-imperialist critique of the Social Democrats. Fitting seamlessly into the discourse of the German political left, the reference to a massacre allowed its editors to apportion political blame: 'Thus the Peking disaster has to all intents and purposes been caused by imperialism — a bloody landmark testifying against the predatory inroads made by the system of capitalism [on weaker countries]'.⁷⁵ Neither the critique of the British press nor the attribution of the massacre to imperialist aggression was unique, but this was the only case

⁷³ *Times*, 17 July 1900, 9; *L'Aurore*, 22 July, 1.

⁷⁴ *Vorwärts*, 7 July 1900, 1; 10 July, 1; 11 July, 1; 12 July, 1; 14 July, 1; and even 17 July, 1. On the commercial aspect of newspaper production, see Gerald J. Baldasty, *The Commercialization of News in the Nineteenth Century* (Madison, 1992), ch. 4.

⁷⁵ *Vorwärts*, 17 July 1900, 1. See also the less principled critique of the British press in *La Croix*, 23 June 1900, 3, and the blame apportioned to imperialism for the crisis in the *Manchester Guardian*, 7 July, 9. On *Vorwärts* and the Social Democratic Party press, see Alex Hall, *Scandal, Sensation and Social Democracy: The SPD Press and Wilhelmine Germany, 1890–1914* (Cambridge, 1977), esp. 24–40.

in which coming round to accepting the carnage as fact was so patently driven by the desire to score a point in a political debate.

Nor was the difference between 'serious' and 'popular' newspapers (the yellow press in the United States, the early tabloid press in Britain, and the *petits journaux* in France) a significant determinant during the 'information panic' of the summer of 1900.⁷⁶ True, some popular newspapers used sensationalist language as an appetizer to pique their readers' curiosity. Thus, as early as 17 June, the *World*, an epitome of the emerging yellow press but with anti-imperialist credentials, advertised a week-old telegram as 'the First Warning to the Civilized World of the Dire Events to Come', by which phrase it meant the killing of the German minister and the destruction of the legations. Two days later, the *Berliner Morgenpost*, a journal without party affiliation targeting a middlebrow readership, referred to the same incident as 'a fatality of most dreadful consequence' and 'most horribly sensational events'. But despite their more measured and pedestrian attitudes and language, journals such as the *San Francisco Chronicle* and *L'Aurore* equally announced 'sensational' news or rumours.⁷⁷ Of the leading broadsheets with a reputation for quality reporting, the *Times* and the *Manchester Guardian* adopted a more reticent stance, while the 'champion

⁷⁶ For some of these differences, including the character of reporting, political orientation, layout and print runs, see Bingham and Conboy, *Tabloid Century*; Spencer, *Yellow Journalism*; Heinz-Dietrich Fischer (ed.), *Deutsche Zeitungen des 17. bis 20. Jahrhunderts* (Pullach, 1972); Feyel, *La Presse en France des origines à 1944*, 136–43; Lü, 'Germany's War in China'.

⁷⁷ *World*, 17 June 1900, 1; *Berliner Morgenpost*, 19 June, 1; *San Francisco Chronicle*, 17 June 1900, 1; *L'Aurore*, 30 June, 2; 6 July, 2. The characterization of these newspapers draws on Yixu Lü, 'The War that Scarcely Was: The *Berliner Morgenpost* and the Boxer Uprising', in Michael Perraudin and Jürgen Zimmerer (eds.), *German Colonialism and National Identity* (London, 2011); John L. Heaton, *The Story of a Page: Thirty Years of Public Service and Public Discussion in the Editorial Columns of the New York World* (New York, 1913), esp. ch. 13; Thoralf Klein, 'Criticizing the Eight-Power Intervention: Left-Wing Newspapers in Germany and France, 1900–1901', in Yihetuan Yanjiuhui 义和团研究会 (ed.), *Yihetuan yundong 110 zhounian guoji xueshu taolunhui lunwenji* 义和团运动110周年国际学术讨论会 [Collected Essays from the International Conference on the Occasion of the 110th Anniversary of the Boxer Movement] (Jinan, 2013), 821; Britton, *Cables, Crises, and the Press*, 329–30.

of objectivity', the *New York Times*, became an early and eager advocate of the stories of carnage and massacre.⁷⁸

It appears that, while individual newspapers' trajectories towards the acceptance of a massacre in Beijing do not reveal any consistent pattern, some took the lead while others followed more cautiously. As rumours filled the void created by the lack of reliable information, a number of journals explicitly advocated a psychology of preparedness. 'To hope for the best and to prepare for the worst', wrote the *Daily Telegraph*, 'is wisdom under all emergencies, but it is absolutely the only attitude possible towards the extraordinary enigma of Pekin'. And the China-based *Deutsch-Asiatische Warte* seconded: 'We will and must prepare for the worst. Should we later be convinced of the contrary, so much the better'.⁷⁹ Other press outlets may have tacitly worked on the same assumption, which partly arose from the logic of the situation but was also deeply embedded in historical precedent. Analogies from Europe's recent imperialist past served as 'horizons of expectation', to use Reinhart Koselleck's term. As Koselleck writes, anticipations of the future are shaped by past experiences, which it is assumed tend to repeat themselves.⁸⁰ Rumours of the siege of Beijing in 1900 were thus chiselled out of the same discursive bedrock that the event shared with its historical antecedents.

In assessing events in the Chinese capital, newspapers revisited two episodes. The first of these was the Indian Uprising of 1857–8, which contemporaries referred to as the 'Great Mutiny'. The 'Mutiny' narrative contained two siege stories. At Kanpur (immortalized in British memory as Cawnpore), the British garrison surrendered after being granted safe conduct; however, first the men and a month later about 200 women and children were murdered, the latter as (and probably because) a relief expedition was approaching, a situation widely appreciated as similar to that in Beijing in 1900. By contrast, the British community in Lakhnau (Lucknow) held out for eighty-seven days until relieved by a British army contingent. Both events

⁷⁸ The quotation is from Britton, *Cables, Crises, and the Press*, 329.

⁷⁹ *Daily Telegraph*, 13 July 1900, 6; *Deutsch-Asiatische Warte*, 15 July, 1. By contrast, *Shenbao*, 8 July, 1, found the lack of information 'heartening'.

⁸⁰ Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*, trans. Keith Tribe (New York, 2004), 256, 260–61.

took on a remarkable afterlife through histories, eyewitness reports, novels, plays, poems and other literary productions condemning the attackers (in the case of Kanpur) or glorifying the defenders (in the case of Lakhnau).⁸¹ It is interesting to note that the residents of the Legation Quarter also referred to the Indian Uprising during the siege; however, while they drew on the optimistic scenario of 'Lucknow' in an attempt to boost public morale, the newspapers by virtue of their external perspective were far more attracted to the ghastly outcome of 'Cawnpore'.⁸² The second occurrence took place in the last year of the Second Opium War (1856–60) as a combined British and French army marched from the coast to Beijing on pretty much the same route as that taken by the Allies in 1900. Before the invasion force came to grips with the Qing army, two groups of British and French soldiers and diplomats became stranded behind enemy lines; they were captured by Qing troops and incarcerated. Over half of them died in captivity: out of a total of thirty-nine, only eighteen were returned alive.⁸³ What this

⁸¹ On the events, see D. S. Richards, *Cawnpore and Lucknow: A Tale of Two Sieges* (Barnsley, 2007); Rudrangshu Mukherjee, *Spectre of Violence: The 1857 Kanpur Massacres* (New Delhi, 1998); Claudia Klaver, 'Domesticity under Siege: British Women and Imperial Crisis at the Siege of Lucknow, 1857', *Women's Writing*, viii, 1 (2001). Their memory is analysed in Gautam Chakravarty, *The Indian Mutiny and the British Imagination* (Cambridge, 2005); Astrid Erll, 'Remembering across Time, Space, and Cultures: Premediation, Remediation and the "Indian Mutiny"', in Astrid Erll and Ann Rigney (eds.), *Mediation, Remediation, and the Dynamics of Cultural Memory* (Berlin, 2009); Christopher Herbert, *War of No Pity: The Indian Mutiny and Victorian Trauma* (Princeton, 2008).

⁸² For Cawnpore, see *Daily Mail*, 3 July 1900, 4; 6 July, 4; 14 July, 5; *Daily Express*, 16 July, 1; *Atlanta Constitution*, 4 July, 1; *San Francisco Chronicle*, 14 Aug., 1; *Independent*, 19 July, 1746. I have only found one mention of Lucknow: *Daily Mail*, 4 July, 5. On the appropriation of the Indian Uprising by the residents of the Legation Quarter, see Ines Eben von Racknitz and Thoralf Klein, 'Performing Texts: The Indian "Mutiny" of 1857 as a Script during the Siege of Peking, Summer 1900', in Thoralf Klein (ed.), *The Boxer War: Media and Memory of an Imperialist Intervention* (Kiel, 2020).

⁸³ *New York Times*, 22 June 1900, 2; 7 July, 7; *Le Petit Journal*, 26 June, 1; *La Croix*, 24 July, 2; *Daily Mail*, 24 July, 4. For a crude version, see *Neue Preußische Zeitung*, 22 June, evening edn, 2. On the context, see James L. Hevia, *English Lessons: The Pedagogy of Imperialism in Nineteenth-Century China* (Durham, NC, 2003), 45–7; Erik Ringmar, *Liberal Barbarism: The European Destruction of the Palace of the Emperor of China* (New York, 2013), 79, 207 n. 86; Ines Eben von Racknitz, *Die Plünderung des Yuanming yuan: Imperiale Beuteaufnahme im britisch-französischen Chinafeldzug von 1860* (Stuttgart, 2012), 153–61, 214–217.

episode appeared to demonstrate to the press forty years later was that the Chinese authorities would not respect the sanctity of the foreign diplomats.

The events of 1857 and 1860 both appeared to point to the vulnerability of the foreign imperialists: according to the Western discourse, where circumstances allowed the non-Western Other to have the upper hand, the lives of Westerners were on the line as they could not count on the mercy of their enemies but had to fear their treachery. The resulting anxiety was the downside of the imperialist superiority complex: any laxity on the part of the imperialists could result in the subalterns not only undermining the mechanics of imperialist domination (in this case the treaties with China) but threatening the imperialists' very lives. In view of such dangers, the question was whether, in the face of death, Europeans and North Americans had been able to show their superiority. Having accepted a wholesale massacre in Beijing as the reality in July 1900, the Western press therefore immediately began to focus on the manner in which the foreigners had died.

IV

'THEY HAVE DIED AS WE WOULD HAVE THEM TO DIE': MAKING SENSE OF RUMOUR

The reports of a massacre in Beijing circulating from 16 July onwards did not emanate from a single source.⁸⁴ The international press based its coverage on the account of the *Daily Mail* correspondent in Shanghai, whose report reached the editors 'at the highest possible telegraphic cost' and 'almost in record

⁸⁴ The *Times* correspondent in Beijing, George Ernest Morrison (1862–1920), himself a participant in the siege, singled out the *Daily Mail's* Shanghai correspondent, whom he denounced as an unscrupulous adventurer, for having concocted the report: *The Correspondence of G. E. Morrison*, ed. Lo Hui-min, 2 vols. (Cambridge, 1976–8), i, 148–9. This assertion has found its way into much of the literature: see Preston, *Besieged in Peking*, 134–6; Silbey, *Boxer Rebellion and the Great Game in China*, 165; Cohen, *History in Three Keys*, 161 and 346 n. 47. Fleming, *Siege at Peking*, 138, also adopts this narrative but rightly states that the telegram was only a 'rehash of a story already widely current'. French, *Through the Looking Glass*, 66, argues that the rumour mill started with a headline in the *New York Times* on 5 July that ran 'All Foreigners in Peking Dead', ignoring that the same headline had already appeared two days earlier, only that time followed by a question mark: *New York Times*, 3 July 1900, 7; 5 July, 3.

time'; on that of his colleague from the *Daily Express*, explicitly mentioning a Chinese courier from Beijing as his chief informant; and on two telegrams published by Reuters and attributed to Yuan Shikai, who denied having sent them. And, indeed, the governor continued to receive information from couriers and agents that 'the legations still haven't been overwhelmed' (*shiguan reng bu ke* 使館仍不克), which he passed on to others while at the same time supporting those provincial officials who were making the rescue of the foreign diplomats their priority. It is therefore unlikely that he would have spread a story he knew to be patently false.⁸⁵ Nevertheless, the accounts by the two British popular dailies quickly evolved into the standard narrative of the alleged massacre: firstly, because extracts were widely reprinted in the international press, and secondly, because they defined key themes of the reporting: the heroism of the defenders, the cruelty of the enemy, and the ordeal of women and children. All of these were integral parts of the imperialist discourse.

As the examples of Kanpur and the march on Beijing in 1860 demonstrate, the military victory of imperialist armies was not always a foregone conclusion. The imperialist discourse acknowledged the possibility of defeat; however, implicit in this was the expectation that white men should face death with courage and equanimity. In mid July 1900, Western newspapers satisfied themselves that the defenders of the Legation Quarter had risen to the challenge. As the *Times* formulated it, 'they have died as we would have them to die', and, writing of their death, 'they met it like men'.⁸⁶ A number of newspapers idealized the downfall of Beijing's foreign community as a heroic 'last stand', evoking a time-honoured Western concept of remembering the history of conflict with a political and cultural Other. The last-stand narrative frames histories of defeat as stories of the courageous, as well as the desperate resistance of a small and noble band of defenders against overwhelming odds, achieving, in the moment of death, everlasting fame. Although

⁸⁵ *Daily Mail*, 16 July 1900, 5; *Daily Express*, 16 July, 1. For the alleged Yuan telegrams, see *Kölnische Volkszeitung*, 16 July, morning edn, 2; *L'Aurore*, 16 July, 2; 17 July, 1–2; 22 July, 2. Some of Yuan's authentic telegrams can be found in *Yuan Shikai quan ji*, ed. Luo and Liu, nos. 5-1554 and 5-1610; see no. 5-1595 on Yuan's priorities.

⁸⁶ *Times*, 17 July 1900, 9.

the *Daily Mail* may have taken the lead, it was again the *Times* that found the most graphic formulations, conjuring the image of Europeans fighting 'with grim courage against overwhelming hordes of fanatical barbarians thirsting for their blood . . . Standing to their battered defences, they stayed the onrush of the Chinese until, borne down by sheer weight of numbers, they perished at their posts'. That the last phrase, which also appeared in the *Daily Mail*, echoes a line from 'The Defence of Lucknow' by Alfred, Lord Tennyson (1809–92) is hardly a coincidence as it welcomes the defenders of the legations into the ranks of the heroes of the past.⁸⁷ The idea of a heroic fight to the last was equally, if perhaps with less vigour, evoked in the German and French press.⁸⁸ According to the version accepted by most newspapers, the residents of the legations had not passively awaited their fate, but had made a last sortie against the Qing soldiers and Boxers in which they were slain.

The second theme, the nature of the foreigners' death, was, on the face of it, the polar opposite of the 'last stand' in showing them not as heroes but as victims. As such, it elicited a far more complex response. Some publications flatly refused to engage with the idea that the besieged had met a painful end. As the American weekly periodical the *Independent* reassured its readers, 'there was little torture of the living. Death probably came swift and sure'.⁸⁹ In translating a key passage from the *Daily Mail*'s report, some papers excised the line that the last remaining foreigners had been 'put to the sword in a most atrocious manner'.⁹⁰ In fact, images of gruesome deaths surfaced

⁸⁷ *Ibid.* See also *Daily Mail*, 16 July, 5; *New York Times*, 16 July, 1. On the concept of the 'last stand', see Nathaniel Philbrick, *The Last Stand: Custer, Sitting Bull, and the Battle of the Little Bighorn* (London, 2010), p. xvii. The original phrase 'every man die at his post' can be found in *The Complete Poetical Works of Alfred, Lord Tennyson, Poet Laureate* (New York, 1884), 376.

⁸⁸ See, for example, *Deutsche Zeitung*, 16 July 1900, A–B; *Berliner Morgenpost*, 17 July, 1–2; *La Croix*, 17 July, 3; *Le Petit Journal*, 17 July, 1. All cite various and sometimes contradictory international sources.

⁸⁹ *Independent*, 19 July 1900, 1746.

⁹⁰ *Daily Mail*, 16 July 1900, 5. See also *Kölnische Zeitung*, 16 July, evening edn, 2; *Berliner Morgenpost*, 17 July, 1. The phrase is also missing in *L'Aurore*, which, however, did publish the gruesome details from the *Daily Express* cable. By contrast, *La Croix*, 17 July, 2, contained a translation of the phrase.

earlier than those of the last stand. Already, when the killing of Ketteler was confirmed on 2 July, some articles suggested he had been 'beaten' or 'hacked' to death; the Russian minister, Giers, was even said to have been 'boiled to death', though it was duly noted that the account was unconfirmed.⁹¹ In the first week of July, reports of torture and even rape accompanied the first surge of rumours of a full-scale massacre. It was then that the motif of the heads of whites carried aloft on spears or rifles first appeared.⁹² All of these made a comeback on 16 July, less so in the *Daily Mail*'s slightly more reticent reporting, but most definitely so the pages of the *Daily Express*, which added several gory details: some of the foreigners had been 'roasted to death' in the burning legations together with pursuing Boxers; after the fight, the Boxers had mutilated the corpses, as well as (according to the *San Francisco Chronicle*) the wounded.⁹³ Such graphic descriptions highlighted the alleged frenzy and savagery of the Boxers, accentuating the chasm between the supposedly civilized West and barbarian China. It also allowed the fallen of Beijing to be construed as 'martyrs of our civilization'.⁹⁴

Arguably the most deep-seated aspect of the imperialist crisis discourse revealed during the Boxer War was the newspapers' treatment of the white female body, and, to a lesser extent, the white infant body. Preserving the purity of women, and, by extension, the innocence of children, was one of the fundamental obsessions of the imperialist mindset, its violation one of the greatest cultural anxieties. In times when imperial authority was called into question, such as the Indian Uprising of 1857, these concerns fuelled established fears about the rape and torture of white women at the hands of the allegedly lecherous and immoral racial Other. As Jenny Sharpe has argued, Victorian society left no room for sexual violence to be addressed explicitly; however, the euphemistic characterization of it as 'unspeakable'

⁹¹ *San Francisco Chronicle*, 2 July, 1; 3 July, 1; *Atlanta Constitution*, 2 July, 2; 14 July, 3 and 9.

⁹² *New York Times*, 4 July 1900, 1. See also *Atlanta Constitution*, 4 July, 3; 6 July, 5; *Daily Mail*, 6 July, 5; *Le Petit Journal*, 7 July, 1.

⁹³ *Daily Express*, 16 July 1900, 1; *San Francisco Chronicle*, 16 July, 1. See also *La Croix*, 17 July, 1.

⁹⁴ *Kölnische Zeitung*, 16 July 1900, evening edn, 1.

had the contrary effect of stimulating the popular imagination. Not coincidentally, the idea of the protective killing of women and children had gained currency in the aftermath of the Indian Uprising.⁹⁵ In July 1900, this anxiety over the female body built up gradually. As with the rumours of gruesome death, the first stories about rape spread as early as the first week of the month. On 6 July, the *New York Times* expressed hope that the foreign men would kill the women before they could fall into Chinese hands. The following day, both *La Croix* and the *Berliner Morgenpost* suggested that this had in fact happened.⁹⁶ When the rumours of a full-scale massacre became accepted fact in mid July, various versions began to circulate. According to the more sanitized accounts, women had either been executed alongside the men or slaughtered upon their corpses, or the men had indeed shot them before their bodies could be violated.⁹⁷ The *Deutsche Zeitung*, a daily with close connections to the German government, whose colonial policy it supported, quoted a French source to the effect that the Chinese had sold women and girls into prostitution, but pondered whether their husbands' and fathers' own hands might have spared them this fate.⁹⁸ These journals portrayed the killing fantasy as a conscious and deliberate decision of white men. Much like the notion of the 'last stand', it depicted them as masters of their own fate, restoring the imperial hierarchy at least in the imaginary.

⁹⁵ 'Better to fall by the hands that they love, than to fall into theirs': 'The Defence of Lucknow', in *Complete Poetical Works of Alfred, Lord Tennyson*, 376. A similar point is made in the poem 'In the Round Tower at Jhansi, June 8, 1857', by Christina Rossetti (1830–94), written in 1857 and published in 1862. It attempts to capture the last conversation of a British colonial official (or soldier) and his wife, whom he is about to kill before killing himself. See *Poems of Christina Rossetti*, ed. William M. Rossetti (London, 1904), 159. For the context, see Jenny Sharpe, *Allegories of Empire: The Figure of Woman in the Colonial Text* (Minneapolis, 1993), 58–62.

⁹⁶ *New York Times*, 6 July 1900, 1; *La Croix*, 7 July, 1; *Berliner Morgenpost*, 7 July, 1. See also *Atlanta Constitution*, 6 July, 5. *Qingyibao*, 7 July, 11b, described this as a plan born out of the anxiety of the besieged and their despair at the delay of the relief force.

⁹⁷ *Daily Mail*, 16 July 1900, 5; *Times*, 17 July, 9; *New York Times*, 16 July, 1. The *Kölnische Zeitung*, 16 July, evening edn, 1, called the foreigners' killing of their own women and children a 'heroic decision'.

⁹⁸ *Deutsche Zeitung*, 16 July 1900. Rebekka Habermas, *Skandal in Togo: Ein Kapitel deutscher Kolonialherrschaft* (Frankfurt am Main, 2016), 36, offers a characterization of the newspaper.

The *Daily Express*, for its part, put a different spin on the story. In its earliest account, arguably provided by a Chinese informant, the foreign men had lost their nerve, firing on their own kin rather than on the Boxers. In contrast to the foreign women, who were 'put to the sword', Chinese Christian women were allegedly raped and their children cruelly beaten to death with rifle butts by the Boxers. Five days later, the newspaper followed up with a far more lurid and sexualized narration: based again on verbal information, it now claimed that European women had been stripped naked and dismembered, while the dead bodies of children were carried on spear tips. While rape was only hinted at, the correspondent suggested that the Chinese troops were promised 'the opportunity . . . of seizing the bodies of the white women', and the editor prefaced the article with a note that he had excised some details 'too horrible for publication'.⁹⁹

Thus, the imperialist mindset not only facilitated an acceptance of the rumour that all foreigners in Beijing had been killed; it also shaped the form this rumour took. Woven into its texture was an engagement with imperialism's worst nightmares. In a situation that seemed to have turned the wonted imperial order on its head and exposed the vulnerability of the imperialists, recourse to the myth of the 'last stand' and to attempts at preserving the purity of women and the integrity of female bodies served to reassert Western cultural and moral superiority. By the same token, depictions of Chinese cruelty showed the inhabitants of the Qing empire as barbaric and unworthy of sympathy. The rumour thus touched on deep-rooted discourses and mind-sets, but how stable was it? How would it develop in a fluid and permanently changing political and military situation?

V

'MERE RUMORS SHALL NOT BE FORWARDED': THE EXHAUSTION OF RUMOUR

Rumours, Jean-Noël Kapferer reminds us, have a life cycle. They 'exhaust themselves', to use his expression, as the circumstances

⁹⁹ *Daily Express*, 16 July 1900, 1; 20 July, 1. The first version was reprinted in *L'Aurore*, 17 July, 1–2, and *La Dépêche*, 17 July, 1; the second, in the *New York Times*, 20 July, 2.

that produced them change.¹⁰⁰ There can be no doubt that the rumour of a full-scale massacre of foreigners in Beijing touched a raw nerve among Western newsmakers, though, paradoxically, it was grounded in a desire to learn the truth. However, despite exposing imperialist fears, it was not stable. The first reassurances that the foreigners were still alive appeared on 18 July, a mere two days after the original *Daily Mail* and *Daily Express* articles.¹⁰¹ Coming from the Chinese side as they did, these statements initially met with considerable scepticism among the Western press. Indeed, the new reports may have exaggerated the degree to which the Qing government had tried to protect the foreign community, although during the period of truce this was, on the whole, true. By early August, however, the newspapers in Europe and North America had accepted the fact that the residents of the Legation Quarter were still alive. This was a result of improved communication between Beijing and the coast as the Qing government allowed cipher-telegrams to pass through until the truce expired. Western readers learnt for the first time of the temporary cessation of hostilities, although it was clear that the situation was still volatile, especially after the fighting resumed. Speculation resurfaced, but it was now based on largely verifiable, written communication.

It was perhaps owing to the fleeting nature of the situation that relatively few attempts were made to discover the source of the rumours. The *Atlanta Constitution* resumed its denunciation of Shanghai as a hotbed of rumours and war as a 'provoker of lying'; the *San Francisco Chronicle* published a cartoon poking fun at the newspaper correspondent as the 'disseminator of Chinese yellow war news'. The *Daily Express* and the *Daily Mail*, of course, had to accept their share of the blame. This prompted the *Mail's* foreign editor to write a letter to the editor of the *Times* laying the origins of the 16 July telegram squarely at the

¹⁰⁰ Jean-Noël Kapferer, *Rumors: Uses, Interpretations, and Images* (New Brunswick, 1990), 107–12; the quotation is on p. 107. This is even true, both in the short and in the long term, where rumours show a certain persistence, as argued by Tian, 'Rumor and Secret Space', 198.

¹⁰¹ *Times*, 18 July 1900, 7, 10 and 11; *Atlanta Constitution*, 18 July, 1; *New York Times*, 18 July, 2; *L'Aurore*, 18 July, 2; *Le Petit Journal*, 18 July, 1. The last had even published an article a day earlier in which it stated that the French Foreign Office had not confirmed the massacre: see also *Xinwenbao*, 21 July, 1.

door of the Chinese authorities and assuring him of the editorial care taken by his newspaper, a defence which the letter's recipient publicly accepted.¹⁰²

The *New York Times* appears to have been the first Western newspaper within the sample to have offered a more systematic critique. It listed all the false rumours that appeared between the end of June and mid July and called for a 'careful and searching investigation by the journals that have been the victims of the inventors and distributors of false and mistaken reports', allowing a modicum of self-criticism. The article continued:

We do not know to what extent the repetition of the experience can be avoided. It depends on the degree of care and honesty exercised by the collectors of news. It would not be possible to establish the rule that no report shall be sent out in such times that has not been verified. But it would be both practicable and wise to set the rule that the doubt attaching to the report shall be frankly indicated, and that mere rumors shall not be forwarded as news to be relied on.¹⁰³

Somewhat ironically, the advice given here had been followed by newspapers for much of the time during the siege of the legations but had then been abandoned at the most crucial moment.

Even so, the rumours had not completely run their course. Despite the greater reliability of incoming information, communication with Beijing was still sporadic at best, and a degree of insecurity remained. At least three rumours can be identified in this period. The first concerned the communication between the ministers and the outside world. A key document was a cipher-telegram from the American minister Edwin Conger (1843–1907) received by the State Department in Washington on 20 July. As the sending of such telegrams was regarded as a litmus test of the well-being of ministers, the United States government had demanded communication by cipher as a

¹⁰² *Times*, 20 Aug. 1900, 5. See *Atlanta Constitution*, 1 Aug. 1900, 3; *San Francisco Chronicle*, 7 Aug., 5; *Deutsche Zeitung*, 4 Aug., A; *L'Aurore*, 17 Aug., 2. *La Croix*, 14 Aug., 3, repeated its critique of 'alarmist English telegrams'. See also *Manchester Guardian*, 20 Aug., 4, for a vindication of the newspaper's own reservations.

¹⁰³ *New York Times*, 2 Aug. 1900, 6. In a subsequent article, the newspaper argued that the editorial boards in the metropolises were more to blame than the correspondents in Shanghai: *ibid.*, 5 Aug., 3. See the much later letter to the editor in the *Times*, 29 Aug., 6. An earlier engagement with the issue is in *Shenbao*, 4 July, 1, which did not prevent that newspaper from reprinting some of the rumours.

token of China's good faith, and Wu Tingfang had passed on the request. When the telegram arrived, however, it was not universally accepted as authentic, partly because it was undated. While this argument rested on the text of the telegram, the suspicion that the Qing authorities had somehow obtained the American cipher-code was invented out of thin air.¹⁰⁴

The second rumour belongs in the category of wish rumours. In early August, a flurry of articles claimed that the foreigners were on their way from Beijing to the coast with a Chinese escort. Although this was indeed what the Chinese government was trying to achieve, the Western diplomats in Beijing were doubtful whether the Qing court could guarantee their security and preferred to place their bet on the timely arrival of the second relief expedition.¹⁰⁵

Finally, other articles published about the same time asserted that the Qing government was holding the foreigners hostage. Again, this was mere speculation, though, ironically, it was not entirely unfounded. In a memorandum of 30 June, a Qing official had indeed suggested using the foreign envoys as bargaining chips, but the court had rejected his proposal.¹⁰⁶

After the rumours of a full-scale massacre had shown themselves to be groundless, a second narrative strand gained in importance. This concerned the frantic attempts to save the besieged, and from the start had provided a counterbalance to the terrible news of the massacre, but its source did not rely on information gathered from within China. Its topic was the

¹⁰⁴ *Daily Mail*, 21 July, 4–5; *Atlanta Constitution*, 24 July, 1; *San Francisco Chronicle*, 28 July, 1; *Le Petit Journal*, 29 July, 2; *L'Aurore*, 29 July, 2. On the genesis and context of the telegram, see *Atlanta Constitution*, 14 July, 1; Preston, *Besieged in Peking*, 134–5.

¹⁰⁵ For example, *Manchester Guardian*, 10 Aug., 5; *Atlanta Constitution*, 6 Aug., 1; 7 Aug., 1; 11 Aug., 1; *New York Times*, 25 July, 2; 26 July, 2; 6 Aug., 2; 11 Aug., 1; *L'Aurore*, 25 July, 2; 28 July, 2; 9 Aug., 2; 10 Aug., 1; *Deutsche Zeitung*, 29 July, A–B; *Qingyibao*, 5 Aug., 6a; 15 Aug., 8a–b; *Shenbao*, 5 Aug., 1; 16 Aug., 1 (with special reference to Giers).

¹⁰⁶ *Manchester Guardian*, 25 July 1900, 5; 30 July, 5; *Daily Mail*, 1 Aug., 5; 5 Aug. 5; 8 Aug., 7; *New York Times*, 25 July, 2; 30 July, 1; 1 Aug., 1; 4 Aug., 1; *San Francisco Chronicle*, 27 July, 1; 30 July, 2; 31 July, 1; 4 Aug., 1; *La Croix*, 29–30 July, 1–2; 1 Aug., 1; 4 Aug., 3; *Deutsche Zeitung*, 31 July, B. On the discussions at the Qing court, see Felber, 'Die Kriegserklärung der Kaiserinwitwe vom 21. Juni 1900 und die Belagerung des Gesandtschaftsviertels', 72.

steps taken in the metropolises for the military suppression of the Boxer 'rebellion' (at both a national and an international level), and later the advance of the second relief expedition on Beijing.¹⁰⁷ In spite of these measures, there was still widespread concern that the impending relief of Beijing might come too late for its besieged foreign community.¹⁰⁸ Only the capture of the Qing capital on 14 August 1900, reported by the international press three days later, united the two strands, bringing the siege to a fortunate conclusion for the Western side, but also focusing attention on new themes, redefining what could be articulated and thus made visible.¹⁰⁹

★ ★ ★

A close reading of the press rumours that surrounded the siege in Beijing during the summer of 1900 provides useful insights into the relationship between three interconnected components of the 'information panic' that arose out of it: the type of communication (rumour), the global technology that enabled its transmission (telegraphy), and the political, social and cultural context that shaped its content as well as endowing it with credibility and plausibility (imperialism). This article thus augments the existing literature in two significant ways.

First, it demonstrates that telegraphy, even as war damage rendered it partly dysfunctional, played a key role in extending

¹⁰⁷ For example, *Le Petit Journal* ran a regular column under the heading 'Our Reinforcements' ('Nos renforts'). As early as 18 June, an article on the front page of the *World* juxtaposed the destruction wreaked by the Boxers with the counter-measures taken by the Western powers. And on 23 June, even the anti-imperialist *Vorwärts* reported on the 'arming of the powers' (*Rüstungen der Mächte*). *Qingyibao* also regularly printed information on Allied troop movements and even estimates of Allied casualties.

¹⁰⁸ The *Manchester Guardian*, 8 Aug. 1900, 5, opined that the Allied advance was putting the lives of the foreigners in Beijing at risk. There was a general feeling that the situation in the Legation Quarter was 'desperate' or 'dangerous': for example, *Daily Mail*, 13 Aug., 5; *Times*, 9 Aug., 3; 13 Aug., 7 and 9; *San Francisco Chronicle*, 14 Aug., 1; *L'Aurore*, 12 Aug., 1; *Le Petit Journal*, 12 Aug., 2; 15 Aug., 1; *Berliner Morgenpost*, 12 Aug., 2. *Shenbao*, 6 Aug., 1; 16 Aug., 1, pointed to the shortage of rations. The *Atlanta Constitution*, 8 Aug., 1, had Li Hongzhang declaring the rescue of the foreigners impossible. On the other hand, the *World*, 10 Aug., 1, optimistically expected a speedy relief of Beijing.

¹⁰⁹ I am drawing here, of course, on Gilles Deleuze, *Foucault*, ed. and trans. Séan Hand (Minneapolis, 1986), 47–69.

the transmission of rumour. Marking a transition from predominantly oral to almost exclusively written forms of communication, telegraphy enabled the global spread of rumours that would otherwise have remained local, thus dramatically increasing their reach. The gruesome fantasies that circulated in the summer of 1900 also revealed the ambiguous nature of the telegraph: while it enabled tighter imperial control, it could also fuel the insecurities that formed the soft underbelly of the imperialist superiority complex. Regardless of the political leanings of their purveyors, and of the style and target audience of the news outlets, the proliferation of these dread rumours connected the periphery and the centre. It confirmed shared 'horizons of expectation' about the 'imperilled European' (or, more broadly, Westerner), while the sheer speed of telegraphic transmission was key to creating an impression of authenticity. But even as some versions of the rumours merely heightened the imperialist angst, others provided strategies for coping with the threat, not simply by encouraging psychological preparedness but more notably by defining the alleged superiority of Westerners in the manner in which they faced death, thereby discursively restoring the imperialist hierarchy.

Second, and at a more general level, an engagement with the 'ambiguities and fractures within the content and passage' of press rumours reveals the contradictory nature of this particular genre.¹¹⁰ Rumours had to contend with the established journalistic standards of objectivity, which led newsmakers to employ irony and critique to accompany the publication of uncertain information (sometimes explicitly reflecting a deep mistrust of the non-Western Other), although the most substantial criticisms only appeared in hindsight. Moreover, the contradictions between different versions could be reflected through the spatial arrangement of the newspaper page itself, which enabled editors to print diametrically opposed sets of information within the same edition, and indeed often on the same page. This gave the press rumours a complexity and ambiguity that orally transmitted rumours simply could not achieve. Finally, the development

¹¹⁰ The quotation is from David Coast and Jo Fox, 'Rumour and Politics', *History Compass*, xiii, 5 (2015), 224.

and transmission of rumour also drew on authentic information. In the summer of 1900, the global rumour mill responded to, among others, the confirmation of Ketteler's death, Sir Robert Hart's genuine call for help, and the progress of military operations. Rumour thus proved both adaptable and malleable. As the press could increasingly rely on substantiated information as the implied narrative reached its logical conclusion — in this case, the relief of the besieged — the wild stories about a massacre of Westerners in Beijing finally petered out.

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