

 **Article REVIEW**

Ariane Knuesel. “British Diplomacy and the Telegraph in Nineteenth-Century China.” *Diplomacy & Statecraft* 18:3 (September 2007): 517 – 537. Doi: 10.1080/09592290701540249. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09592290701540249> .

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Published by *H-Diplo* on 23 January 2008

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Ariane Knuesel’s article on Britain’s use of the telegraph in its foreign relations with nineteenth-century China makes constructive contributions to the study of imperialism and to our understanding of the telegraph as a tool in foreign policy. Knuesel presents several stimulating arguments. Britain’s extension of the global telegraph network to China was not entirely popular with British envoys because it tended to reduce their autonomy. (This claim, while plausible, is mainly supported by secondary literature rather than by evidence directly related to diplomacy in nineteenth-century China.) Likewise, many Chinese officials expressed hostility to their inclusion in the telecommunications grid. Despite such opposition, telegraphy connected China and Europe as of 1871, and use of the technology became much more widespread as international trade and imperial rivalry accelerated during the 1880s and after. Relative to rates for using the transatlantic cables, prices along the far eastern routes remained very high, despite technological improvements, because of a lack of competition. (The intensity of communication between economically dynamic societies in Europe and the Americas undoubtedly contributed much to the entrance of competitors into that market, but the association among imperialism, state-controlled telegraph companies, and monopolistic business practices in East Asia also likely contributed to the inefficiency and exorbitant prices faced by customers there.¹) The article relies on Foreign Office records as its main primary source, but also shows familiarity with an extensive array of secondary materials. It would, however, have benefited from greater attention to organization and proofreading, the most glaring error being an official given the dates “1842-1823.” (524)

¹ Jorma Ahvenainen, *The Far Eastern Telegraphs: the History of Telegraphic Communications between the Far East, Europe and America before the First World War* (Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedeakatemia, 1981); Jonathan Reed Winkler, *Nexus: Strategic Communications and American Security in World War I* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2008), 146-156.

I found the discussion of imperialism a bit jumbled and unstructured, which is perhaps partially explainable by the enormous and complex academic literature on that subject. Nonetheless, the article does have a valuable point to make. At first glance, the effect of telegraphy on imperialism seems paradoxical. Did this technology contribute to imperialism by facilitating commerce and investment, as has been claimed from an economic determinist perspective?² Or did it slow imperialism by permitting central governments to restrain excessively energetic conquistadors intent on subjugating foreign societies in impracticably distant and undeveloped locations, as follows from the argument that “the man on the spot” often seized foreign territory on his own initiative.³ Knuesel’s article suggests a means of answering this conundrum by employing the notion of informal imperialism. Perhaps telegraphy neither promoted nor hindered imperialism in the abstract, but rather favored a rationalized, capitalistic, informal imperialism in place of an atavistic, pre-industrial formal imperialism.⁴ As Knuesel makes clear, however, technology and economics were only part of the story. Near the end of the nineteenth century, the influence of ideology and imperial rivalry more than counteracted the effects of telegraphic communication, thereby contributing to a shift from the “imperialism of free trade” to a more formal imperialism based on defined spheres of influence within China.

One of the richest and most fascinating sections of the article examines Chinese responses, frequently hostile, to the telegraph.⁵ Some of these responses would have seemed bizarre to contemporary Westerners. Among the objections to telegraphy were its disruption of “geomantic principles of *Fengshui*,” especially its electrical desecration of graves, which was anathema to a society in which

² The use of the telegraph in facilitating international financial transactions takes on a different resonance in the context of Lenin’s statement that “Imperialism is capitalism at that stage of development at which the dominance of monopolies and finance capital is established.” See “Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism,” in *The Lenin Anthology*, Robert C. Tucker, ed. (New York: Norton, 1975), 244.

³ For an influential statement that local officials—rather than leaders in the metropole—often initiated colonial seizures, see John S. Galbraith, “The ‘Turbulent Frontier’ as a Factor in British Expansion,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 2 (January 1960): 168. Joseph A. Schumpeter argues that imperialism is primitive, non-rational, and precapitalist in his *Imperialism and Social Classes*, Heinz Norden, trans. (New York: A.M. Kelly, 1951), 84.

⁴ Likewise, John Gallagher and Ronald Robinson contend that the development of railways and steamships facilitated British informal imperialism. See “The Imperialism of Free Trade,” *Economic History Review*, 2nd series, 6 (1953): 9.

⁵ See also Erik Baark, *Lightning Wires: The Telegraph and China’s Technological Modernization, 1860-1890* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1997); Saundra Sturdevant, “A question of sovereignty: railways and telegraphs in China, 1861-1878 (Ph.D. dissertation: University of Chicago, 1975).

ancestors were venerated. (523) Such views demonstrate the value of studying intercultural aspects of diplomatic history, supplementing excessively Western-centric views with scholarship informed by insights from anthropology.⁶ Chinese suspicion of telegraphy also resulted from its strange and miraculous capabilities (which had of course likewise astonished Westerners), as well as the extent to which it symbolized foreign imperialism. More pragmatically, Chinese officials saw telegraphy as a challenge to the existing social structure (because it redirected existing information flows), as a threat to the sovereignty of the Qing state (because it served foreign governments), and as a financial liability (the Qing government would be required to pay indemnities if, as seemed probable, disgruntled Chinese vandalized telegraph lines). Other Chinese contested these views, arguing that telegraph lines would contribute to nation building and would benefit opportunistic Chinese entrepreneurs. Arguments on both sides of this debate possessed merit, as it now seems that whereas Western technologies catastrophically disrupted societies, such as that of the Qing, that modernized under unfavorable conditions, in the longer run they contributed to the building of a stronger, more centralized Chinese state and the creation of an extraordinarily dynamic economy.

Knuesel's article offers a useful history of the expansion of the global cable network, and presents engaging evidence about the manner in which the telegraph, unevenly to be sure, reduced the autonomy of British envoys. These generalizations about diplomatic and strategic communication benefit greatly from a stimulating comparison between the Opium Wars, which occurred before China was connected to Europe by telegraph, and the Boxer rebellion, which took place after such a connection was well established. For example, the article contends that the lack of telegraphic communication aided Sir John Bowring, Britain's minister plenipotentiary, in his circumvention of oversight from London, allowing him to pursue a belligerent policy that contributed to the outbreak of the Second Opium War. In contrast, an acting British Consul-General cabled Lord Salisbury in 1900 with the suggestion that the Manchurian government be told, via its representatives in London, that it would be held responsible for the murder of Europeans associated with the lifting of the Beijing siege during the Boxer rebellion. To buttress this warning, the official suggested that Salisbury threaten to destroy "utterly" the "ancestral tombs at Mukden and Peking." (529) Responding immediately by telegraph, Salisbury nixed this proposal: "The threat to destroy the tombs of the Manchu dynasty would be very repugnant to public opinion here in Europe, and we are also informed that it would create a bad impression in China generally." (530) Nonetheless, telegraphy did not prevent the British minister in Beijing from permitting looting, and even an auction of the loot,

⁶ For an influential discussion of intercultural relations, see Akira Iriye's essay on "Culture and International History," in *Explaining the History of American Foreign Relations*, Michael J. Hogan and Thomas G. Paterson, eds. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

following the suppression of the Boxer Rebellion; partly in consequence, a dissatisfied Salisbury transferred him to Japan.

Through its focus on informal empire, this article addresses what has been something of a gap in the literature on the use of the telegraph in international relations. Scholars have considered the role of communication in the establishment and administration of formal empires.⁷ They have also explored its influence on diplomacy between sovereign nations of roughly equal status.⁸ Knuesel reminds us to pay attention to the technology of communication between nations in unequal relationships outside of a formal colonial structure.⁹

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Commissioned for H-Diplo by Jonathan Reed Winkler, Wright State University

⁷ Among the important works on this subject are Paul M. Kennedy, "Imperial cable communications and strategy, 1870-1914," *English Historical Review*, 86 (1971); Robert J. Cain, "Telegraph Cables in the British Empire, 1850-1900" (Ph.D. dissertation, Duke University, 1971); Ian K. Steel, *The English Atlantic, 1675-1740: An Exploration of Communication and Community* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986); Daniel R. Headrick, *The Invisible Weapon: Telecommunications and International Politics, 1851-1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991).

⁸ Vary T. Coates, Bernard Finn, et al., *A Retrospective Technology Assessment. Submarine Telegraphy. The Transatlantic Cable of 1866* (San Francisco: San Francisco Press, 1979); Raymond A. Jones, *The British Diplomatic Service, 1815-1914* (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1983), 116-138; David Paull Nickles, *Under the Wire: How the Telegraph Changed Diplomacy* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2003).

⁹ For a valuable example, see Michael Allan Rubin, "The Formation of Modern Iran: Communications, Telegraphy, and Society" (Ph.D. dissertation: Yale University, 1999), 433-442.