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The rise of China and the decline of the West: it's been a long time coming

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Western anxieties about China's economic potential and fears about a new 'Dark Age' for Europe date back more than a century, Professor Peter Cain of Sheffield Hallam University shows in a new History and Policy paper, [China, globalisation and the west: A British debate, 1890 – 1914](#), published today.

According to Professor Cain, a key contributor to the debate was the British-born historian and journalist Charles Henry Pearson, who argued in his 1893 book, *National Life and Character*, that the western desire to spread civilisation and modernisation to the East would ultimately equip the Asian powers with the means to out-compete them, precipitating the decline of western power.

One contemporary newspaper warned that the Chinese were 'a people of marvellous ingenuity, industry and flexibility' and that the absorption of modern techniques by the Chinese people and other races would lead to 'a black Manchester at Timbuctoo, a brown Liverpool at Rio de Janeiro and a yellow New York at Hong Kong or Shanghai'. In short, late nineteenth-century commentators predicted the 'rise of the rest' a full century before Fareed Zakaria articulated his famous thesis in *The Post-American World*.

Professor Cain said:

"It is important for Western policymakers and commentators to recognise that China's current position of relative economic strength is based on a much longer and deeper history of economic development than that which followed the market reforms of the late 1970s."

"Pearson's prediction that China would learn from Europe how to emancipate itself has interesting echoes in the work of 20th century sages like Spengler, who in his *Man and*

Technics, predicted that Asian industrialisation would precipitate the decline of western civilisation.”

“What depressed Pearson most was his vision of the Chinese ‘being here’ and as the most powerful nation on the planet, for it was impossible for him to think of them as civilisational equals.”

But not everyone shared Pearson’s pessimism, as Professor Cain points out. A reviewer in the *Pall Mall Gazette* argued that the ‘white race has not made a very brilliant success in life that we should grudge nature a fresh start with a new breed’. The liberal historian, Spencer Walpole, believed that high and rising western productivity would limit Chinese competition; others stressed that the industrialisation of Asia and Africa would provide large markets for western goods.

Professor Cain continued:

“For some in Britain the 1911 Revolution was a dramatic sign that China was learning from the west. China was now ‘awake’ and on the move, a new spirit of patriotism was taking shape, based upon western education and the press. With its orderly and industrious population, China would soon be ready to take its place as one of the progressive races on the globe.”

Notes to editors:

1. Peter Cain’s History & Policy paper, [China, globalisation and the west: A British debate, 1890-1914](#), is published today at www.historyandpolicy.org.
2. [Peter Cain](#) is Emeritus Professor of History at Sheffield Hallam University. As well as *Hobson and Imperialism*, he is the author (with A. G. Hopkins) of *British Imperialism, 1688-2000* (2001). He is currently working on the influence of ‘character’ discourse on elite perceptions of the British Empire and of Britain’s place in the wider world between 1850 and 1914.
3. [History & Policy](#) is an independent initiative working for better public policy through an understanding of history. The initiative was founded by historians at the Universities of Cambridge and London and is based in the [Centre for Contemporary British History](#), at the [Institute of Historical Research](#), University of London. History & Policy is funded through a charitable grant from the Philanthropic Collaborative.

4. History & Policy has a network of almost 200 historians willing to engage with policymakers and media and now publishes [rapid responses](#) by historians to the news of the day. To sign up for our monthly newsletter, receive press releases or to request an interview with a historian, please contact:

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