

The Boxer Uprising — II

War and Aftermath (1900-1901)

Essay by Peter C. Perdue & Ellen Sebring

War & Siege

The View from China

Occupation &
Aftermath

Sources & Credits



A grid of the Chinese nianhua—"New Years" prints—depicting events during the Boxer Uprising that will be examined in this chapter.

Woodblock prints, ca. 1900

[nianhua_grid]

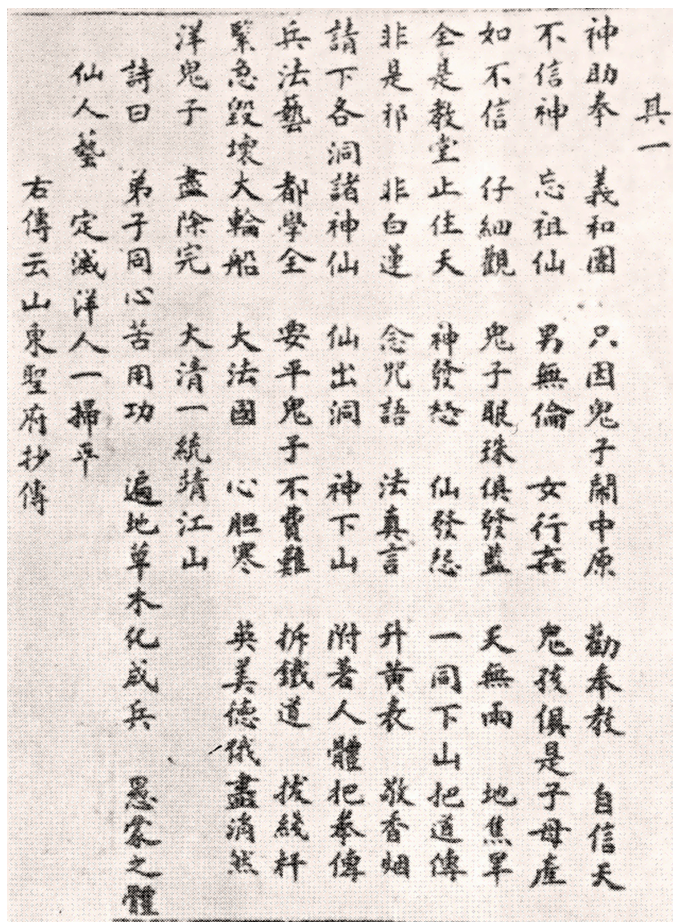
Transcriptions and translations of these Nianhua from the National Archives are by Prof. Peter C. Perdue and his graduate students at Yale University for MIT

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THE VIEW FROM CHINA

A media explosion also occurred on the Chinese side during the Boxer Uprising. While the Western media had a global reach, images produced by Chinese circulated only within China, except when they were copied by Western observers. The Boxers themselves used wall posters, placards, and flags to spread their message. Since most of their audience was illiterate, the printed word was not their main method of mobilization. The great reverence for amulets invoked by the spirit cults, however, meant that many Boxers carried small pieces of paper with them into battle. From these amulets came the common Western belief that the Boxers believed themselves to be invulnerable to bullets.

The relatively scarce imagery from the Boxers themselves, and the rarity of texts written by Boxers, shows how difficult it was for a mass peasant movement, subjected to official repression and foreign attack, to coordinate its followers and make an impact on the wider Chinese public. This pamphlet, however, used simple imagery and rhyming phrases to spread the Boxer message among large masses of the peasant population. The language continued the tradition of anti-Christian proclamations from several decades earlier. It could have been read out to the Boxer troops to rouse their indignation against foreign missionaries and Chinese followers.



Chinese pamphlet, ca. 1899
Source: Wikimedia Commons

[1899_201601_Boxerspamphlet]

Translation of pamphlet text:

"The gods aided the rise of the Boxers, just because the foreign devils had disturbed China. They promoted their alien religion, believed only in one God and rejected belief in our gods, destroying the teachings of ancestors and sages. Men had no morals, women became whores. Their demon children were a product of incest. If you do not believe me, just look closely. The devils' children flash blue from their eyes. No rain fell, the earth became barren, all because their churches only worship one God. The local gods became angry, the sages held resentment, they all came down from the mountains and went to hidden places. The Boxers are not the heterodox sects, and not the White Lotus; they chant incantations, and follow the True Words. They wore yellow clothing, worshipped with incense, begging for the gods and sages of the caves to come out. The sages came out of the caves, the gods descended from the mountains, and aided men to learn the martial arts. They studied the military techniques thoroughly, making it easy to put down the foreign devils. They destroyed the railroads, pulled up the rails, attacked and destroyed the big steamships. The great French nation has a cruel heart. England, America, Germany, Russia, all are the same. When we completely drive out the foreign devils, the great Qing empire will be united and at peace."

The poem states:

"When disciples unify all their efforts, everywhere grasses and forests sprout soldiers. We shall study the arts of the sages, and completely destroy the foreigners."

In the countryside, they took advantage of existing popular media, like New Years' pictures. These pictures, or *nianhua*, were distributed widely through China by local printing houses. Many of them celebrated local festivals and illustrated well-known themes from traditional Chinese operas and folk tales. At certain times, however, the prints depicted current events, like the Sino-French War of 1884 and the Boxer Uprising, using the inherited patterns of the folk tradition. They celebrated victories by Chinese generals, portraying them as heroes of village operas complete with flags, spears, and swaggering bravado. The walled cities and masses of soldiers combined with confused scenes of military conflict to give a sense of exhilaration in combat. In 1884 these prints celebrated the exploits of General Liu Yongfu, whose Black Flag Army had successfully fought the French in northern Vietnam. The prints about the Boxers likewise depict the famous General Dong Fuxiang leading his troops against foreign armies. They also show foreign captives being brought before the general's court for judgment.

This collection of *nianhua* prints dedicated to the events of the Boxer period portrays the major battles with the Western powers—particularly the battle of Yangcun village, the struggle in Tianjin and at the Dagu forts, and Russian incursions in Manchuria. The printmakers either describe these confrontations as victories for the Chinese forces, or they show Chinese soldiers valiantly holding off the fire of the Western attackers. They praise the heroic Chinese generals, while showing the Westerners in postures of humiliation and captivity. Captions on the pictures label the leading generals, their battle flags, and the locations of forts. The caption at the top describes the date and course of the battle briefly.

The pictorial style combines elements of traditional Chinese woodblock printing with Western features. Since the flourishing of illustrated newspapers like the *Dianshizhai Huabao*, Chinese artists had learned how to depict Western faces, Western ships and weaponry, and Western buildings. But they often inserted these features as motifs in a background framed by Chinese landscape painting. The styles of rocks, trees, waves, and building roofs asserted the native Chinese pictorial style as the foundation. The use of bright colors followed the *nianhua* tradition featuring colorful flowers, fruits, and children who celebrated the abundance of the New Year. But the poses of figures, the flags, and other elements came from illustrations of popular village operas taken from the folk tradition. The curious mixture of elements in these prints shows how such a variegated collection of cultural elements—military, landscape, personal, and decorative—had penetrated the popular mentality during this critical year.

The *nianhua* prints give us valuable insights into efforts to arouse the patriotic sentiment of the Chinese people against the foreign invasion. They did not try to represent the real military situation—they celebrated China's sporadic victories to raise morale, and they denounced the cruelty inflicted by the imperialists. Using a graphic idiom familiar to the Chinese public, they promoted a message of heroic resistance. The Qing court's defeat by the foreign powers left it vulnerable to accusations that it had betrayed the popular will. This popular mobilization would continue to develop in new forms until the end of the dynasty.

A Picture of Commander-in-Chief Dong's Plan to Attack the Western Forces at Yang Village

This print gives a close-up of the battle at Yangcun. While the Chinese commanders, led by Dong Fuxiang and his Gansu Braves, gathered in their encampment, the Western forces built a bridge to cross the river for their attack. The Chinese had, however, planted mines, which blew up the bridge and forced the foreigners to retreat.

The print shows the Chinese forces, waving the banners of their commanders, close in from three sides as the foreign soldiers try to flee back across the bridge. Desperate Western soldiers jump off the bridge, and several heads of drowning soldiers pop up in the river. The floating mines and the burning bridge issue billowing clouds of smoke, tinged with fiery red. The color red indicates at the same time fire, blood, and decorative foreign uniforms. The Chinese peasant soldiers, with cloths wrapped around their heads, drive the foreigners back with pikes and swords, while artillery pieces lie unused in the foreground. At the left, the bearded commander charges forward on his horse. Although this picture is clearly not intended to give a realistic picture of the battle, it provides details that ring true with descriptions of the battle.



董軍門楊村設計敵西兵圖

*"A Picture of Commander-in-Chief Dong's Plan to
Attack the Western Forces at Yang Village"*

七月十四日，各西兵至楊村，西官命兵士搭橋過河攻營，被董軍門李鑑帥暗設地雷，
分兵殺出，西兵大敗，十死其半。嵩山道人塗

*"On the 14th day of the 7th month, the Western armies arrived at Yang village.
Western officers ordered the foot soldiers to build a footbridge across the river to
attack the encampment. They were hit by Commander-in-Chief Dong and General Li's
secretly placed mines. Our armies attacked from different directions. The Western
army was decisively defeated, and half of them were killed. A picture by the Daoist of
Mount Song."*

Image, left: 團軍左營；團軍右營

*"Assembled boxers at the left encampment, Assembled boxers at the right
encampment"*

[na13_NatArchives011]

The Battle at Yang Village

This print celebrates the victory at Yangcun by showing hogtied Western captives being brought before General Dong for judgment. Burning ships in the background, sunk by Chinese artillery fire, signify the Western defeat. The banners of Generals Ma, Song, and Dong frame the front scene, where the foreign soldiers are forced to kneel before "Great General Dong." The Boxer militia presented the soldiers to General Dong and asked for rewards for their achievements. The print shows the close cooperation between the peasant militia and the Qing military, implying that a united front of court and battle against the alien invaders will bring about their humiliation.



楊村大戰

"The Battle at Yang Village"

宋董李三軍鎮守楊村，令五千拳民為前隊，西兵將倭軍作先行。相見之下，
兩軍渾戰，各有損傷，拳民捉得西弁進見，請功行賞。

"Song, Dong, and Li's three armies were garrisoned at Yang village, and ordered 5000 Boxers to form a front line. The Western armies ordered Japanese troops to be the front line. After they met, the two armies engaged and each side sustained casualties. The Boxers captured several Western soldiers, brought them to their leaders and asked for rewards for these deeds."

[na03_NatArchives006]

Drawing Depicting the Decapitation of Russian & Japanese Spies

Like the previous one, this print from 1900 depicts a tribunal where foreign military officers were brought before General Dong Fuxiang and condemned to execution. The foreigners, carried in cages or bound with ropes, are led through the gate of the garrison along a path lined with Qing soldiers. Boxer militiamen in the center drag the foreigners before the judgement platform on the right. Two soldiers prepare to decapitate two foreigners below the steps on the right. The scene is imaginary, but it expresses popular sentiment, including the alliance between Boxer militia and Qing soldiers, the humiliation and condemnation of foreign troops by Chinese forces, and the claim that the Boxers were loyal to the Qing and shared its goal of driving out foreign imperialists.



拿俄倭審問正法

"Drawing Depicting the Decapitation of Russian & Japanese Spies"

Image, left: 營門

"Garrison Gate"

Poster: 義和拳民典刑解審

"The Righteous Fists' Tribunal"

Flag: 拳民頭目

"Leader of the Righteous Fists"

Image, upper right: 端君王

"Prince Duan"

General Dong [Fuxiang]: 喧嘩禁止

"Disturbances prohibited"

[na02_HC1-49304874_2011_001]

Imperial Envoy Li, the Commander, & Song Gongbao Defeat the Foreign Troops

This print probably also portrays the battle of Yangcun in a more confused manner. The bridge is clearly shown on the left, and the banners of Generals Li and Song stand up from the fighting troops. The Qing encampment on the right is marked by a large banner with a tiger. On the right, Chinese soldiers present severed heads to an official. The Boxers fight the foreigners with fists, pikes, swords, and guns. The retreating foreigners, in a huddled mass, try to make their way back to the bridge, as smoke and fire surround them. The bottom caption states "the foreign soldiers died in large numbers."



李欽差督陣 宋宮保大破外兵

*"Imperial Envoy Li, the Commander, and Song Gongbao
Defeat the Foreign Troops"*

Image, left: 內山；野（？）伏兵；新竹；浮橋；張軍門埋伏；外兵死亡相繼

*"Inner mountains; guerrilla troops wait in ambush; New Bamboo [Place name];
Pontoon bridge; Commander in Chief Zhang's ambush; Foreign troops die one after
another"*

Image, right: 大元帥李；賞銀；拳民獻首；拳民接仗

*"Supreme Marshall Li; Monetary reward; The boxers present a head; Boxers engaged
in battle"*

[na07_NatArchives008]

The Battles of Tianjin & the Dagu Forts

Many of the prints dramatize the battles in Tianjin, when the Seymour expedition turned back in the face of superior forces.

General Nie & the Boxers vs. England & France

This print shows the two armies in close confrontation, firing directly at each other. Both sides have artillery pieces, and both have firearms. The Qing forces include both regular army troops, with colored jackets and guns, and peasant militia, in simpler clothes, wielding pikes and swords. A banner labeled "Righteous" (Yihe) waves over the troops, and a caption indicates the "Righteous Children's Army." General Dong, in the background, urges his troops forward.



陸軍與團民鏖戰圖

*"A Battle Picture of the Bitter Fight Between the
[Western] Land Army and the Boxers"*

六月廿八日, 團民傾巢出隊, 經英法陸軍暨各國之兵與團民開仗,
我國勦軍門標下統帶從中夾攻, 鏖戰多時, 未分勝負云。

*"On the 28th day of the 6th month, the Boxers turned out in full force and moved out
as an army. They encountered the armies of England, France, and other countries,
which began to fight with them. A legion of our army under the command of General
Nie attacked from the middle. They bitterly fought for a long time but neither side won
the battle."*

Image, upper left: 華兵從中夾攻; 義和童子軍; 後隊大砲兵埋伏

*"The Chinese army attacking from their midst; The Yihe [righteous and harmonious]
child army; An ambush by the rear army's large artillery troops"*

Image, center: 守望相助 義和; 兩軍對陣大戰

*"Mutual help and protection; Yihe [righteous/harmonious]; Two armies poised for a
large scale clash"*

Image, right: 英法各國大兵

"England and France's great army"

[na05_NatArchives002.jpg]

The Boxers Crush the Foreign Troops at Tianjin's Northern Storehouse

The battle in the preceding print was a standoff, but this one shows a great victory of the Qing troops over the foreigners. The Chinese, moving out from their fortress at the upper right, drive the foreign troops to skulk away in defeat at the lower left. There is a bloody picture of a foreigner with a severed head, but no Chinese casualties. General Dong's troops fire with cannon and guns, while the peasant braves attack vigorously with swords.



天津北倉義和團民大破洋兵

"The Boxers Crush the Foreign Troops at Tianjin's Northern Storehouse"

Middle flag: 守望相助

"Give mutual help and protection"

[na14_NatArchives012]

Ambush at Tianjin City

In this print, also portrayed as a great victory, Chinese troops rush in from all sides, firing cannon directly at the foreign commander on his horse, who leads his troops in retreat. The Dagu forts are labeled on the river in the background. Land mines explode and drive foreign troops out of the city of Tianjin.



天津城埋伏地雷，董軍門大勝西兵圖 光緒庚子孟秋

"A picture of an ambush at Tianjin city using landmines, and the great victory of Commander-in-Chief Dong over the Western forces. The first month of autumn in the Gengzi year of the Guangxu reign [1900]"

*Image, left: 大沽口；左哨
"Da Gu Kou; Left Sentry"*

*Image, center: 紫竹林
"Purple Bamboo Forest"*

[na06_NatArchives010]

Commander-in-Chief Dong & Grand Secretary Gang Jointly Training Three Amphibious Armies

This print shows General Dong and Grand Secretary Gang drilling three amphibious armies as they prepare to confront the foreigners on the river. The soldiers, wearing colorful shields, practice maneuvers to the sound of drums and flutes as the general looks on. Two ships at the upper right are the only hint of the foreign presence.



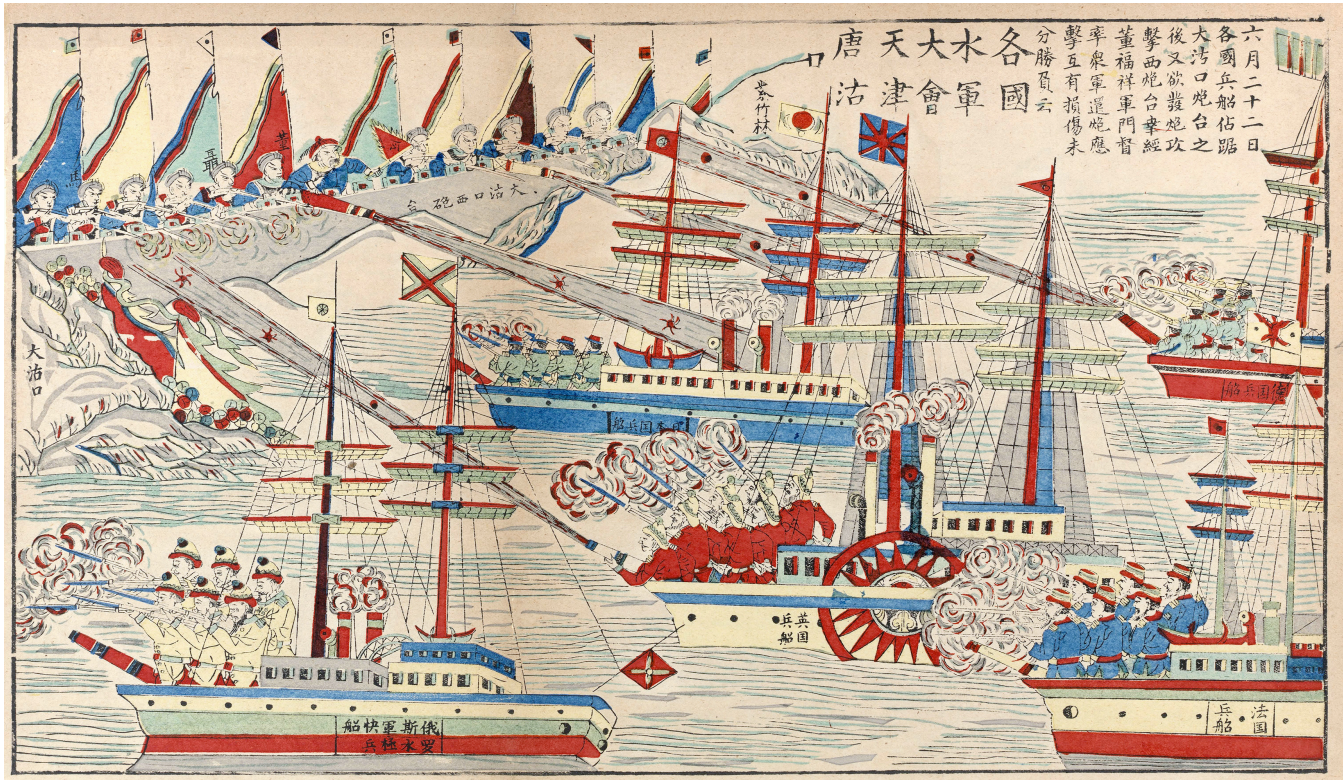
天津董軍門會同剛中堂校習三軍水陸操演圖

*"A picture of Tianjin's Commander-in-Chief Dong & Grand Secretary Gang Jointly
Training Three Amphibious Armies"*

[na11_NatArchives007]

All National Navies Gather at Tianjin's Tanggu Kou

This print portrays the full scale attack of the foreign navies on the Dagou forts protecting the river route to Beijing. A British steamboat, Japanese and Russian sailing ships, and other ships fire directly at the forts, while the Chinese return with cannon fire. According to the caption, the winner was unclear, but in fact the foreign ships easily captured and destroyed the forts.



各國水軍大會天津唐沽口

"All National Navies Gather at Tianjin's Tanggu Kou"

率眾軍還炮應擊, 互有損傷, 未分勝負云

"[Our armies] responded with cannon attacks. Each side has amassed casualties, but the winner has not yet been determined"

Image, left: 大沽口西炮台; 大沽口; 俄羅斯水軍極快兵船

"The Western cannon battery at Dagou Kou; Dagou Kou; The Russian Navy's extremely fast vessel"

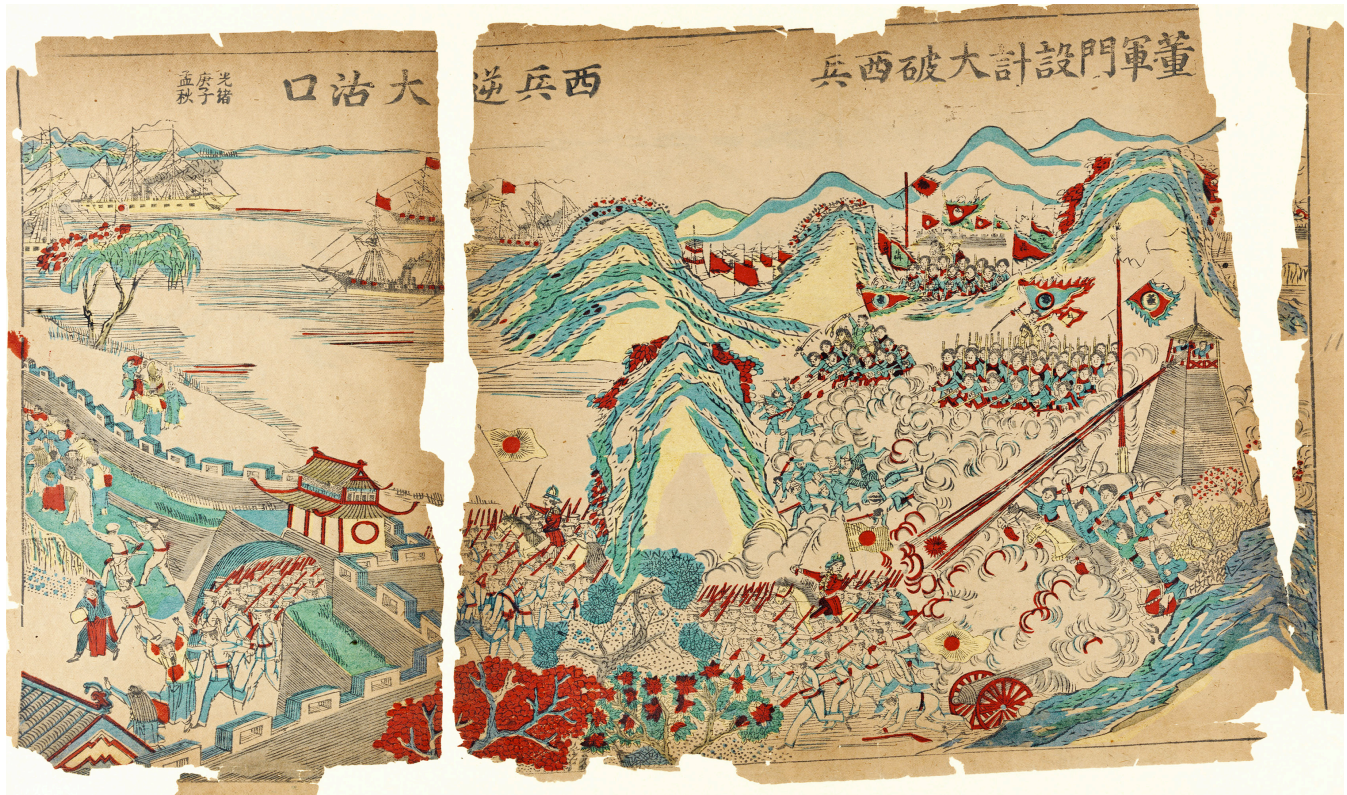
Image, right: 紫竹林; 英國兵船

"Purple Bamboo Forest; English Naval Ship"

[na07_NatArchives008]

Commander Dong Devises a Plan to Defeat the Western Army

This print takes a wider-scale perspective, showing Qing troops pouring out of the mountain passes, driving the foreign troops away from Dagu. Although the foreign ships are still sailing on the river, the troops seek refuge in the walled city on the lower left. Three Japanese flags wave conspicuously among the retreating troops.



董軍設計大破西兵 西兵逆大沽口 光緒庚子孟秋

"Commander Dong devises a plan to defeat the Western army; Western army attacks Dagu Kou; First month of autumn in the Gengzi year of the Guangxu year [1900]"

[na08_NatArchives009]

Manchuria

Two of the prints protest against Russian military conscription in Manchuria and celebrate a Chinese military victory in Heilongjiang.

Forced recruitment in Siberia

In the first print Russian army officers drag young men away as recruits, while the women in their families cry in despair. The caption denounces the tragic loss of Chinese civilians for military service.



俄人西卑里亞抽丁圖
“Forced Recruitment in Siberia”

按俄人偕保公使之名，暗襲我奉天。卒帥徑遭困，抽民為兵，通國皆怨噫，黷武窮兵，故無益哉。

“Using the pretext of [actions by] Emissary Bao, the Russians carried out a sudden attack on our southern Manchurian district of Fengtian. They finally encountered problems, and their civilians were pressed into the army. The whole country was filled with enmity. It is of no benefit to be militaristic and bellicose, or to exhaust people with the burden of supporting the military.”

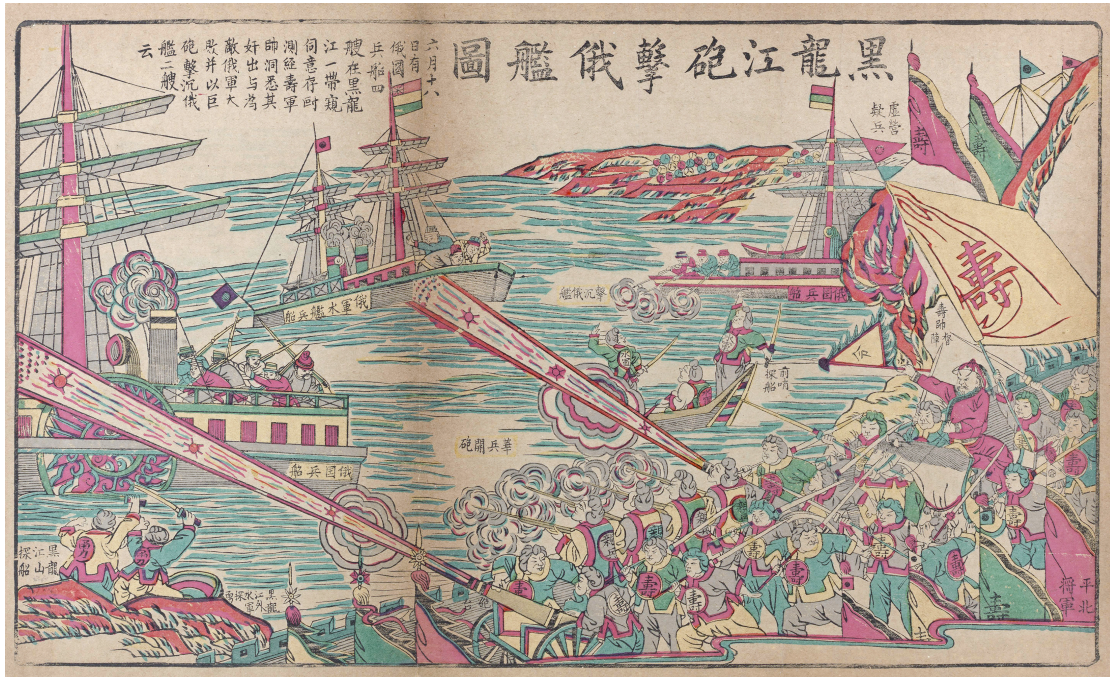
Image, left: 總理衙門
“The Yamen of Foreign Affairs”

Image, right: 長橋
“Long Bridge”

[na10_NatArchives005]

Cannons Pummeling a Russian Warship in Heilongjiang, Manchuria

This print shows Chinese troops successfully repelling attacks by Russian steamships in Heilongjiang. It claims that two Russian ships were sunk by Chinese cannon fire. The print may reflect news of Chinese bombardment of the Russian town of Blagoveshchensk on the Amur in June 1900. But in fact, the Russians responded to Chinese attacks by occupying all of Manchuria by September 1900.



黑龍江砲擊俄艦圖

"Cannons Pummeling a Russian Warship in Heilongjiang, Manchuria"

六月十八日，有俄國兵船四艘在黑龍江一帶窺伺，意存肘測。
經壽軍帥洞悉其奸，出與為敵。俄軍大敗，并以巨砲擊沉俄艦二艘云。

"On the 18th of the 6th month there were four Russian warships lying in wait somewhere in Heilongjiang, harboring unpredictable intentions. Commander Shou thoroughly understood their treachery, and went out and engaged them in fighting. The Russian army suffered a great defeat while being pummeled by a huge cannon, which sank two of the Russian warships."

Image, left: 俄軍木艦兵船；俄國兵船；黑龍江（山）探船；黑龍江外水軍探勇；
華兵開砲

*"The Russian army's wooden warships; A Russian warship;
Spy boat in Heilongjiang; A navy spy on the Heilongjiang; Chinese people setting off
a cannon"*

Image, right: 虛營疑兵；俄國兵船；擊沉俄艦；壽帥督陣；前哨探船
*"A decoy force at an empty encampment; Russian naval ships; Sinking Russian boats;
Commander Shou commanding on the battlefield;
A frontier sentry boat"*

[na09_NatArchives001]