

The Opium War in Japanese Eyes

An Illustrated 1849 “Story from Overseas”

Essay by John W. Dower

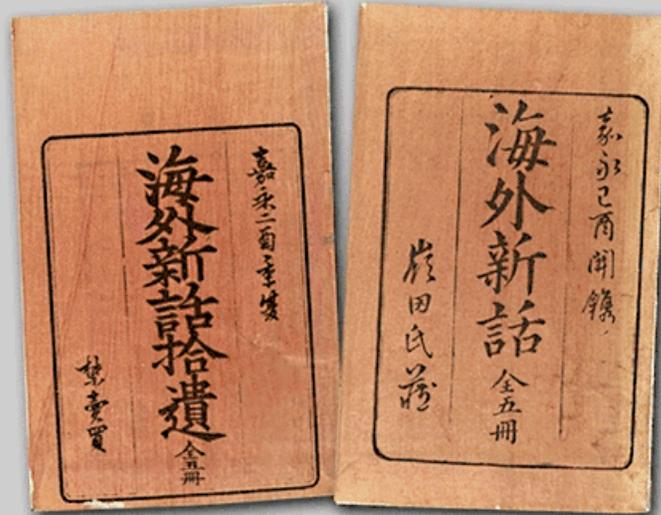
“New Stories
from Overseas”

The Eye of
the Beholder

Monsters,
Heroines
& High Officials

Lessons from the
War Next Door

Sources
& Credits



Over a decade after the end of the first Opium War in 1842, China’s island neighbor Japan also was subjected to gunboat diplomacy and “opened” to the outside world. In Japan’s case, it was not the British navy but rather an American expedition led by Commodore Matthew Perry that forced the issue with two displays of naval power, in 1853 and 1854.

Like the British, Perry’s fleet mixed sail and steam. His coal-powered warships became famously known to Japanese as the “black ships”—partly because of their color, partly because of the dark clouds that spewed from the smokestacks. Unlike in China, however, no gunfire was exchanged. There was no carnage. There were no casualties on either side. Japan’s feudal leaders, led by the Shogun and his government in Edo (later renamed Tokyo), acknowledged the superior firepower of the foreigners and—in treaties signed in 1854 and 1858—agreed to open the country to commerce, foreign residence, and diplomatic exchanges.

The rights and privileges that characterized the unequal treaties England and other Western powers extracted from China after the first Opium War—extraterritoriality, “most-favored-nation” status, and a fixed tariff—were repeated in the treaty agreements with Japan. Opium itself, on the other hand, never entered the country, either before or after Perry.

This unit introduces Japanese writings about the Opium War published in the late 1840s, a few years after that conflict pitting China against England ended. Based primarily on Chinese reports, these publications were strongly sympathetic to the Chinese side and highly critical of the foreign “barbarians.” They also included many original woodblock illustrations that had no counterpart on the Chinese side.



The images in this unit (unless otherwise noted) were generously provided by Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library Yale University



“NEW STORIES FROM OVERSEAS”: *Kaigai Shinwa*

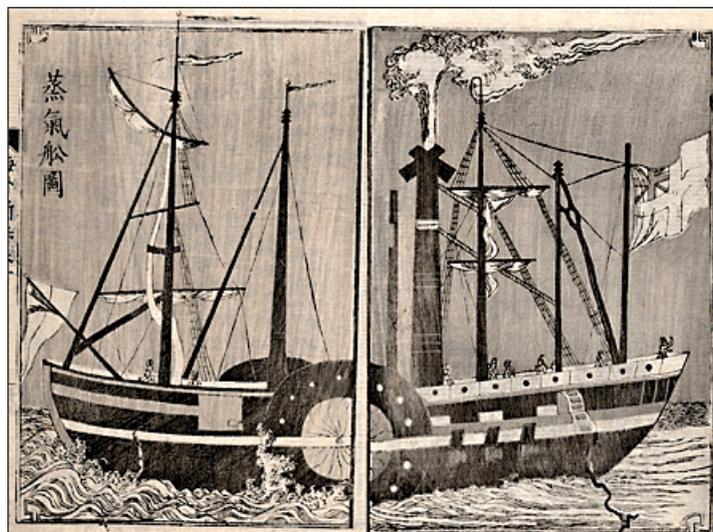
Ever since the early-17th century, Japan’s samurai leaders had enforced a strict policy known as *sakoku*, or “closed country.” Foreigners were not allowed in, nor were Japanese permitted to leave and then return. In practice, however, the closed-country policy was not watertight. It leaked in various ways—and one of the most significant of these exceptions to strict seclusion was a window to the outside world established at the port city of Nagasaki in the southernmost island of Kyushu.

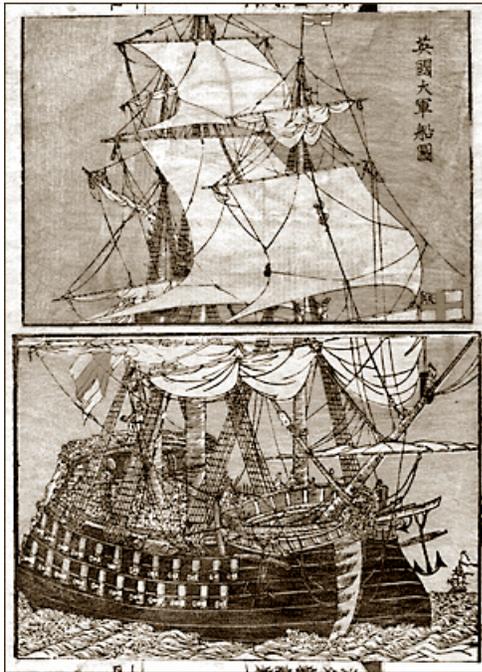
Tightly regulated trade was permitted at Nagasaki, restricted almost entirely to the Dutch and the Chinese. This is an engaging story in itself. What is important here is that this window allowed more than just trade goods to enter and leave Japan. It also opened the country to knowledge of the world beyond its borders, in the form of Chinese writings and Dutch books and reports. Long before Perry appeared on the scene, “Dutch learning” had become the specialty of a small but increasingly influential number of intellectuals. Some of these scholars, who usually came from the lower ranks of the samurai class, were particularly interested in issues of military technology and coastal defense.

Because of the seclusion policy, there were no Japanese observers in China to witness the Opium War firsthand. It was the Nagasaki window that brought Japan knowledge of this conflict—and, with this, knowledge of the “black ships.” Until Commodore Perry made his first show of force in Edo Bay in 1853, the Japanese had never seen a steam-powered warship. They had read about them in connection with the war next door in the early 1840s, however—and had even drawn their own pictures of them, as well as of the huge multi-cannon men-of-war that made the British navy so formidable.

*“Steamship”
from the 1849
Japanese account
of the Opium War
Kaigai Shinwa
vol. 1*

[ks_v1-5]





“Great English Warship”
 Kaigai Shinwa
 vol. 1
 University of
 British Columbia

[UBC_I:30-31]

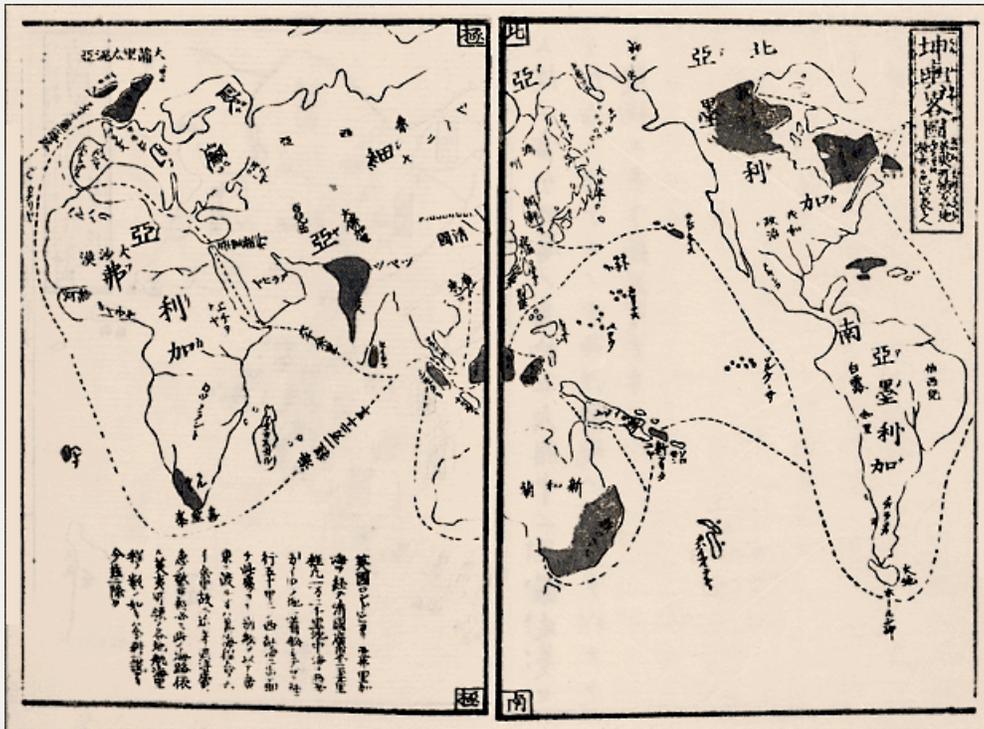
Knowing about the Opium War, however, did not necessarily translate into reporting about it with meticulous accuracy. On the contrary, detailed factual information went hand-in-hand with misinformation and fabrication. This combination of fact and fiction makes the Japanese war stories especially vivid and revealing. We might even call these accounts “doubly” graphic. The language is vigorous. And beyond this, unlike the Chinese, the Japanese also produced highly imaginative illustrations of the war. The seminal graphic example of the Opium War in Japanese eyes was published in five string-bound parts in 1849, under the title *Kaigai Shinwa*, “New Stories from Overseas.” The author was a low-ranking samurai scholar named Mineta Fūkō (1817–83). His text and illustrations combined totaled roughly 250 pages, and the initial print run appears to have been 200 copies. In his introduction to *Kaigai Shinwa*, Mineta gives the titles of five Chinese accounts to which he is particularly indebted, and his narrative reproduces much of the detailed and emotional flavor of these sources.

Although *Kaigai Shinwa* became well known to other intellectuals, it was not met with favor by the Shogun’s minions, who were always vigilant in suppressing anything that might cause popular concern and unrest. Mineta was imprisoned for two years for publishing the book without official permission, and banned from residing in the three great cities of Edo, Osaka, and Kyoto after being released. The woodblocks used to print the original edition were incinerated, and the anonymous artist who provided the illustrations suffered more grievously than Mineta, for he too was arrested, and died in prison.

It tells us something about the temper of these times that such harsh censorship did not stop commentaries about the Opium War from circulating among the samurai scholars who were deeply interested in developments beyond Japan’s borders. Mineta’s peers produced a number of such texts both before and after Perry’s arrival. Before the authorities closed in on him, moreover, Mineta himself produced an illustrated sequel to *Kaigai Shinwa*, probably also in 1849. Titled *Kaigai Shinwa Shūi* (Gleanings from the New Stories from Overseas), this also was hand-bound in five slim volumes. The woodblock illustrations in *Kaigai Shinwa* total 16 two-page spreads plus two single-page images; there are 14 graphic spreads in the “Gleanings” sequel.

Certain patterns and themes characterize these Japanese writings about the war in China. All draw on the same basic Chinese and Dutch sources of information, mostly dating from 1839 to the early 1840s—that is, during the Opium War and in its immediate aftermath. All display general knowledge of England’s global expansion; indeed, the first illustration in *Kaigai Shinwa* is a world map that highlights areas under British control. All show detailed knowledge of the opium trade in China, and the futile attempts of Chinese officials to suppress this. All acknowledge the impressive warships

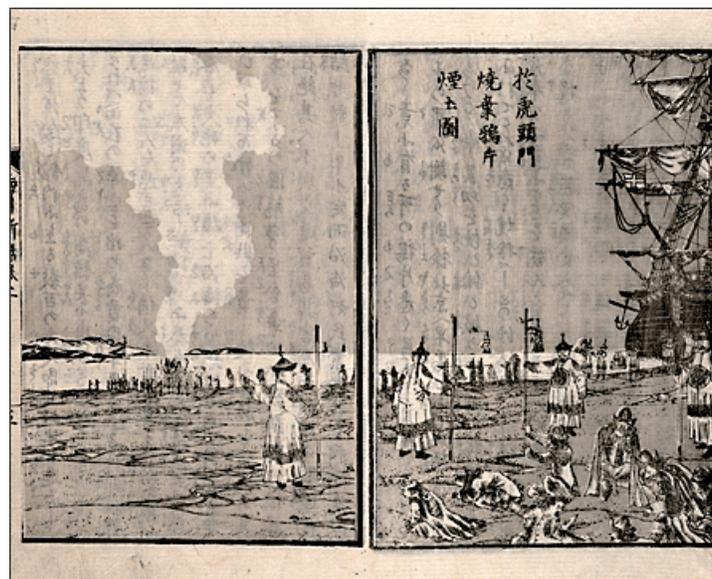
and cannons of the foreigners, a fact the Dutch in particular emphasized. All—here following the Chinese accounts—portray the British in general, and their fighting men in China in particular, as immoral and rapacious.



“Map of the World”
Kaigai Shinwa, vol. 1

Shaded portions of the map indicate areas under English control.

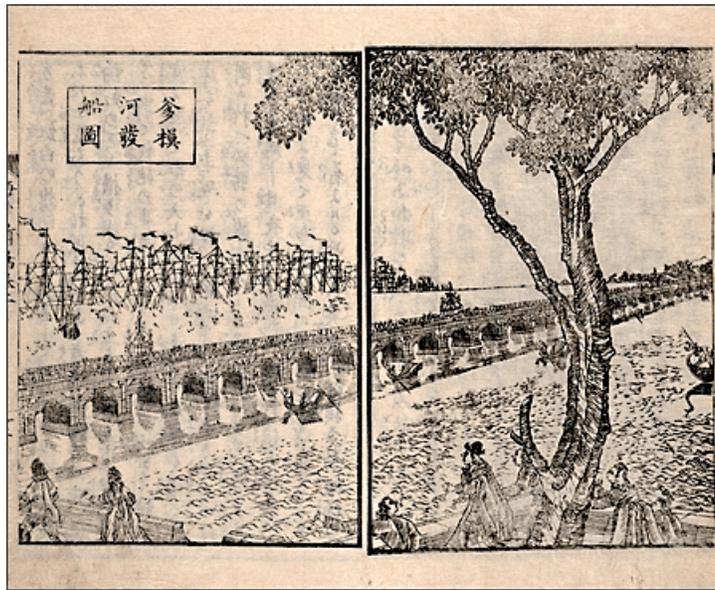
[ks_v1-1]



“Incineration of
Opium at the
Bogue”
Kaigai Shinwa,
vol. 2

[ks_v2-1]

This illustration depicts the famous destruction by the Chinese of thousands of chests of opium owned by British traders, which took place outside Canton in June 1839 and marked a decisive moment in the tensions that culminated months later in the first Opium War. The opium was not actually burned, but rather mixed with lime and water, which produced billows of toxic smoke. The presence of the English as observers at this dramatic event is indicated by the intimidating man-of-war at the far right of the print.



“The Fleet Sets Out
from the River
Thames”
Kaigai Shinwa
vol. 2
[ks_v2-2]

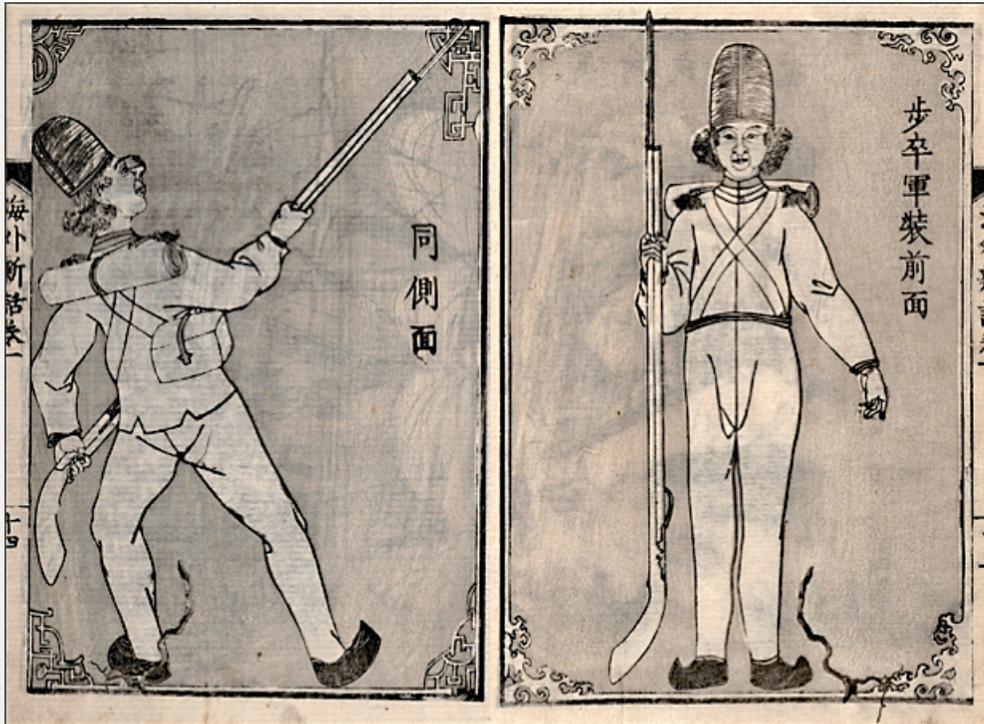
In actuality, the English fleet that attacked China was dispatched and reinforced largely from British-controlled India (which is also where England's opium exports came from). In this illustration, Kaigai Shinwa imagines the huge armada departing directly from London.

By closely following their Chinese sources, texts like *Kaigai Shinwa* also devote many pages to accounts of extensive destruction and death inflicted on the foreign invaders that, in fact, never occurred. While such fanciful storytelling dilutes the thoroughgoing nature of China's military humiliation, the shortcomings of the Manchu-led Qing court in countering the foreign threat nonetheless clearly emerge as a negative object lesson for Japan.



English Commander (right)
and Foot Soldier (below)
Kaigai Shinwa
vol. 1

[ks_v1-3]
[ks_v1-4]



The first white foreigners one literally sees in *Kaigai Shinwa* are straightforward generic sketches of a navy commander and a foot soldier face-on and in profile, holding a flintlock musket. Little that follows is this plain and serene. As scholars like Bob Tadashi Wakabayashi and Masuda Wataru emphasize—and the illustrations confirm—Mineta is as much a novelist as he is a reporter or historian. Indeed, he takes open pride in this, stating in the introductory pages of his 1849 text that his prose model is certain classic texts in the medieval Japanese genre of *gunki monogatari*, or epic war chronicles. Hyperbole and vivid personalized anecdotes are his stock in trade, increasingly so as his account of the Opium War unfolds and readers are introduced to just about everything one expects in an epic war story: heroes and villains, bravery and cowardice, virtue and debauchery, imagined speeches, extravagant language, bloody battles, supernatural occurrences, and undiluted horrors.

Here, for example—straight out of the *gunki monogatari* tradition—is a snippet from a battlefield scene in the closing stage of the Opium War:

General Hai Ling wielded a sword in each hand and fought with the crazed fury of the warrior god Kongo Yasha, whirling his blades about and slaying 20 of the black and white barbarians. Cavalry Commander Xian Yun, on the other hand, wished to take his own life rather than fall to the enemy, and hurled himself to his death in the moat. [TR 69]

Throughout his narrative, Mineta relies on the sort of evocative metaphors that characterize not just medieval Japanese prose, but epic chronicles in every culture. Thus, early in his story he reports that in capturing the strategic island city of Dinghai, “the English launched hundreds of small landing boats, which swirled down from the warships like leaves in a gale.” [TR 15] Midway in his tale, he describes the panic that gripped soldiers and residents in Zhapu when “Six huge warships that looked like floating mountains appeared together with six steamships, pulling into the harbor one after the other.” [TR 56] Later, writing about the Chinese defeat at Zhenjiang, Mineta offers a deceptively gentle simile in observing that the sides of the British men-of-war “were crowded with gun ports looking like the openings of a beehive”—and then moves to language that is the very opposite of gentle to describe the ferocious fighting in this climactic battle: “The air was so thick with gore that it was impossible so see anything clearly, and the deafening roar of the cannons put thunderstorms to shame, seeming likely to shake the earth off its axis.” [TR 66-67]

Even in these accounts of British victories, however, Mineta and his anonymous illustrator usually manage to incorporate vivid depictions of British warships being destroyed and hundreds, even thousands, of British soldiers and sailors being killed. At Canton early in 1841, for example, *Kaigai Shinwa* tells us that the Chinese destroyed seven great warships and two steamers with “fire-boats” (craft loaded with flammable straw, brush, and explosives), and killed well over a thousand of the enemy, including “many black soldiers from the sweltering land of India,” who either burned to death, or were drowned, or were slaughtered after swimming to shore. “The Chinese forces were jubilant at having won their second battle,” we read, “and raised a thunderous victory cry that reached the heavens and shook the earth, resounding across the world to the farthest reaches of the barbarian lands.” [TR 23-25]

Months later, at Zenhai, *Kaigai Shinwa* relates, three successive waves of fire-boats launched by local “braves” again created an “inferno” within the British fleet. While the Chinese did not suffer a single casualty in this particular attack, destruction on the enemy side was dramatic:

In an encounter that lasted only a few short hours, they [the Chinese] had sent down in flames four large warships and over 40 smaller boats, and there was no telling how many casualties the barbarians suffered. About 10 days later, barbarian corpses, blackened fragments of boats, and all manner of weapons floated to the surface in a mass, so that a seven or eight-hundred square meter section of the harbor looked like it was dry land. [TR 53]

Shortly after this, we are told, fire-boats deployed at Dinghai again wreaked havoc on British warships and their crews, including a paddlewheel steamer. “They all drowned as the ship went down,” Mineta writes, “doubtless becoming the next meal for the large fish of those waters.” [TR 55]

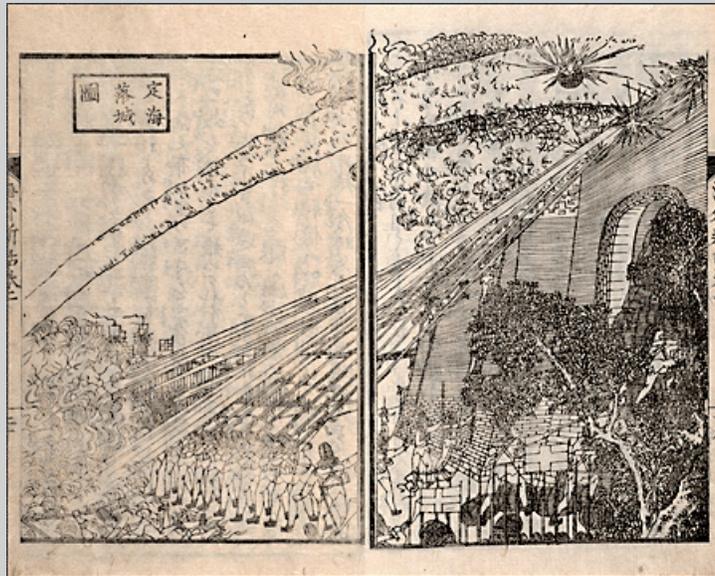
Picturing Destruction and Death Among the Foreign Invaders

Mineta Fūkō's two illustrated texts about the first Opium War, both published in 1849, include several woodblock pictures of the British capturing Chinese cities. The graphics are most emphatic and dramatic, however, in depicting Chinese forces inflicting great damage on the enemy, especially the British fleet. Shore batteries direct devastating cannon fire against the invading warships.

“Fire-boats” filled with straw, brush, and explosives ignite shipboard conflagrations that either consume the crews, or force them to abandon ship and face the likelihood of drowning or being slaughtered by Chinese soldiers as they make their way to shore.

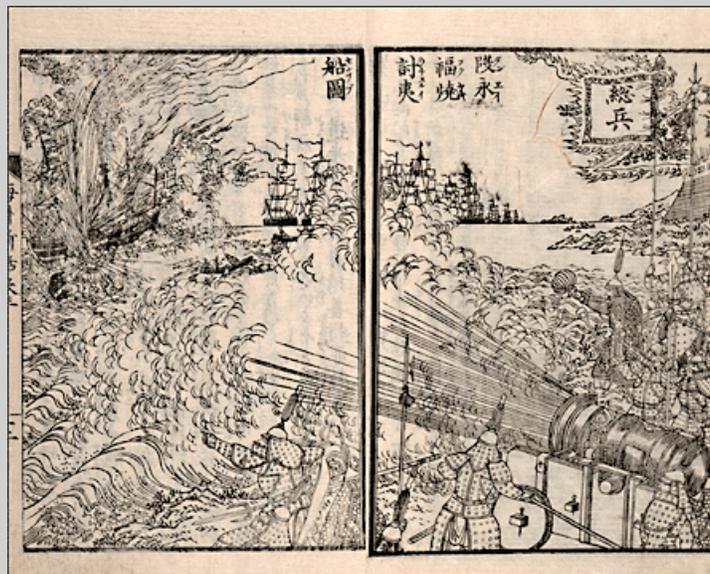
In fact, the shore batteries and fire-boats both were largely ineffective; and although Chinese land forces fought bravely in some battles, even earning praise from their British adversaries, they enjoyed no significant victories. British combat deaths were negligible—less than 200 over the full course of the war, which lasted from late 1839 to August 1842. By contrast, the destruction of fortifications, war junks, and cities on the Chinese side was extensive, and countless thousands of Chinese, civilians as well as fighting men, were killed.

Mineta's two illustrated books were based primarily on Chinese sources, and he was extremely sympathetic to the Chinese side. There were no Chinese models for the illustrations themselves, however: these were pure products of Japanese pictorial imagination. Confronted with woodblock war scenes such as those which follow here, it is natural to speculate how Japanese readers responded to this decidedly mixed presentation. Did British firepower, and the military might of the West more generally, seem irresistible? Did China's defeat reflect, in considerable measure, a failure of capable leadership at the highest levels? In all likelihood, most readers answered yes to both questions.



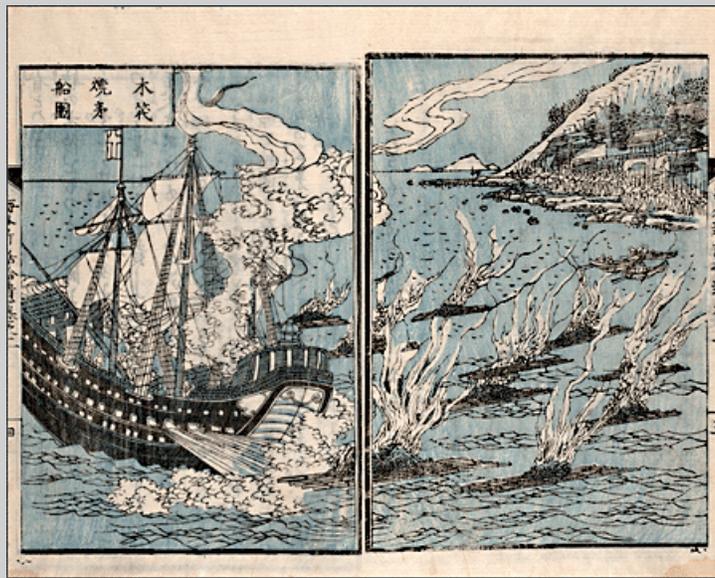
*"The Fall of Dinghai"
Kaigai Shinwa
vol. 2
[ks_v2-3]*

British artillery bombards the capital of the Chusan islands, near Ningpo, while a landing party prepares to occupy the city. This strategic victory gave the British navy control of access to north China.



*"Tuan Yongfu
Burns the
Barbarian Ships"
Kaigai Shinwa,
vol. 4
[ks_v4-2]*

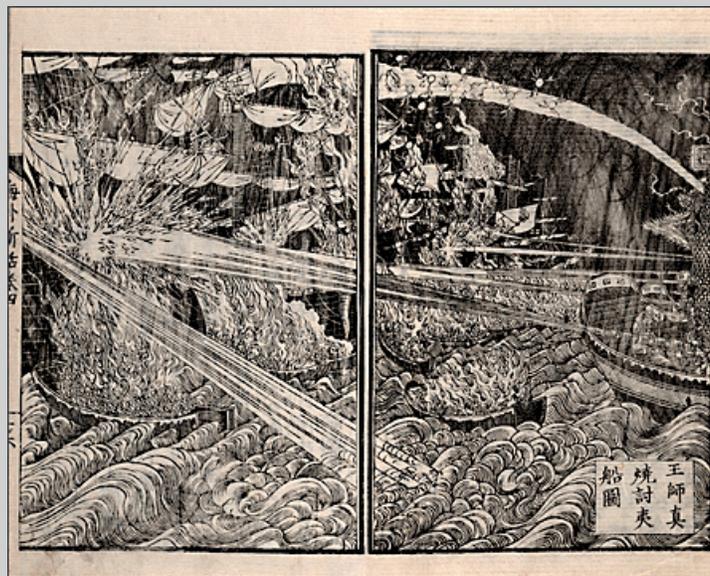
The two-character banner reads "Combined Forces." This is the battle at Canton in early 1841 in which Mineta imagines the Chinese side destroying nine British warships including two steamers.



*“Fire-boats
Approaching a
British Warship”
Kaigai Shinwa
Shūi, vol. 2*

[kss_v2-1]

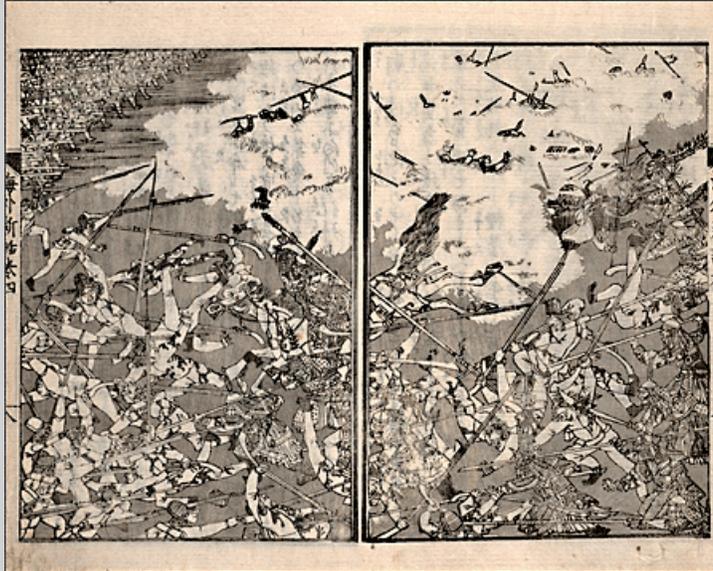
Although the Chinese navy relied heavily on these small floating infernos, which contained explosives and were intended to ignite wooden enemy warships, the tactic in fact proved largely ineffective against the British fleet.



*“Wang Shizhou
Burns the
Barbarian Ships”
Kaigai Shinwa,
vol. 4*

[ks_v4-2]

In this tumultuous naval battle scene, Chinese war junks bombard the British fleet while fire-boats crash against a flaming warship on the left. The streaks that crisscross the illustration represent cannon fire.



*“Wang Zipeng in
Bloody Battle”
Kaigai Shinwa,
vol. 4*

[ks_v4-1]

The accompanying text offers the following word-picture of this battle in late 1841, in which the Chinese fought heroically before being vanquished “Wang Xipeng led the charge on the English guns. He was severely wounded and his blood flowed like a spring; nonetheless, he felled 10 white men and eight black men before he took five more bullets and died a splendid death. When his men saw him succumb they, too, surged forward and went down fighting.” [TR 44-45]

There were, in fact, few if any such dramatic Chinese military accomplishments. In the early battle at Canton where *Kaigai Shinwa* speaks of the incineration of seven British warships and two steamers, for example, Professor Wakabayashi calculates that the actual losses were seventy-one Chinese war junks and sixty shore batteries. Contemporary British military sources recorded their total casualties in this battle as 15 killed and 127 wounded, and calculated that—as always in these encounters—Chinese losses were vastly greater, possibly totaling as many as 1,000 killed and 3,000 wounded.

In the Opium War as a whole, which lasted over two-and-a-half years, more British troops died of disease than from combat, where the official British fatality figure is a miniscule 156 killed. By contrast, some estimates put the total number of Chinese killed and wounded at as high as a hundred times that number.

Mineta did not invent these imaginary Chinese military accomplishments. Misleading accounts of success permeated the reports of Chinese officials at the time, and obviously made their way into the written materials Mineta and his samurai peers relied on so heavily. Like their Chinese sources, moreover, the sympathies of the Japanese clearly lay with China. In recounting these stories and embellishing them with the verbal and visual ornamentation associated with their own traditional war chronicles, they produced an “Opium War” very different from the conflict as British writers of the time described it.

On viewing images of a potentially disturbing nature: [click here](#).

Massachusetts Institute of Technology © 2010 Visualizing Cultures

Creative Commons License 

The Opium War in Japanese Eyes

An Illustrated 1849 “Story from Overseas”

Essay by John W. Dower

“New Stories
from Overseas”

The Eye of
the Beholder

Monsters,
Heroines
& High Officials

Lessons from the
War Next Door

Sources
& Credits

THE EYE OF THE BEHOLDER

Although many of the “facts” and illustrations in *Kaigai Shinwa* are pure fantasy, this does not mean that either the more restrained contemporary British accounts of the Opium War, or the supposedly “realistic” Western-style battle art of that conflict, are fundamentally more trustworthy or “true” than the story Mineta conveys. On the contrary, in approaching the war from a fundamentally Chinese and Asian perspective, both his narrative and its woodblock graphics call attention to subjects that are muted or altogether absent in English renderings.

One such subject is the racial composition of the British forces. Another is the repeated engagement of these forces in pillage, rape, and desecration of local places—all of which, combined with the opium trade itself, reinforced the Chinese and Japanese conviction that the epithet “barbarian” was entirely appropriate.

In relying on Chinese-language sources, Mineta also makes the Chinese side come alive in ways the British rarely succeed in doing. Singling out distinct personalities—or “personality types”—is but one aspect of this. *Kaigai Shinwa* also makes palpable the panic that arose when city dwellers saw the warships-big-as-mountains enter their harbor. Because the Chinese sources themselves reflected various partisan positions, moreover, the “China” that emerges from this narrative is extremely complex—full of tensions, and seething with unrest.

It is no secret that a large portion of the British force that waged war on China was comprised of natives of India recruited as “sepoys” in the British Indian Army. Although race and ethnicity almost literally defined the imperial forces with which England controlled its far-flung empire, however—and certainly defined place and status within that military—English writers addressing a general audience generally chose not to highlight this. The sepoys receive passing mention. Those fighting men who are identified by name tend to be all Anglo officers. In British prints, engravings, and sketches of the first Opium War, the Indian troops are conspicuous by their absence.

By contrast, in *Kaigai Shinwa* the British force is routinely color-coded. “White and black men” or “black and white barbarians” is the common phrase. In the fifth and last part of *Kaigai Shinwa*, where the final devastating Chinese defeat (at Zhenjiang) is being described, this color-coding provides the basis for a vivid metaphor derived from the ancient Asian board game played with multiple black and white pieces or “stones”:

From Ganlu Temple to the west, to Jinshan Temple to the east, the lands around Zhenjiang were full of black and white barbarians like pieces scattered across a go board, and the locals wondered if they would ever go away. [TR 69]

There is no fixed order of precedence in Mineta’s black/white phrasing, but the text makes clear at various points that the Indian troops were regarded as particularly atrocious and unsanitary; their habit of eating “without spoons or chopsticks, stuffing food in their mouths by hand” reinforced the latter perception. [TR 59-60] Only one illustration in *Kaigai Shinwa* actually portrays these frequently mentioned black men—there are none in the “Gleanings” sequel—and its caption concisely couples the race and rape motifs that run through the entire narrative: “Atrocities of the Black and White Barbarians.”



"Atrocities of the Black and White Barbarians"
Kaigai Shinwa, vol. 4

[ks_v4-3]



English-language commentaries and graphics dealing with the first Opium War rarely highlighted the fact that a major portion of the British troops that fought in China was composed of men recruited in England's colony India. They also buried the fact that these forces engaged in pillage and rape. By contrast, Kaigai Shinwa constantly calls attention to the mixed racial composition of the "barbarians," and frequently mentions their violent abuse of women. This is the only Japanese illustration that emphasizes the "black and white" composition of the foreign forces, however, and also the only one that calls attention to their atrocities.

Contemporary English writings about the first Opium War did not ignore plunder and pillage by the British side; and, indeed, collections in British museums today contain some of the better samples of this loot. (The word loot itself comes from the Hindu "lut," and entered popular usage as an English word at this time.) It is also possible to find mention of rape by the foreigners buried in the English sources, particularly where local hostility is said to have been triggered by this and other acts like vandalism of temples. At the same time, the British writings also call attention to parallel—and, usually in their view, more egregious—outbursts of pillage, plunder, arson, and rape by Chinese mobs that preyed on local inhabitants whose cities had come under British assault.

Mineta's rendering of Chinese accounts of the war fleshes out this dark picture in various ways. He, too, calls attention to rapacious Chinese mobs—particularly in a harrowing account of soldiers from Hunan who ran amok in Canton in the spring of 1841, when the city was under British attack. (His Chinese rabble even engages in cannibalism, in the belief this can cure a scourge of measles.) [TR 35-37]

At the same time, because he writes largely from a Chinese perspective, Mineta gives both a personal and a sociological face to the high incidence of rape and other atrocious behavior by the foreign invaders. He reports that many Chinese women committed suicide after being raped. He gives two particularly intimate vignettes of virtuous upper-class women—the wife of a general and the young daughter of a scholar—who committed suicide rather than face abuse and probable rape at the hands of British troops. And he helps readers understand why many residents of cities under attack fled in panic before the enemy set foot on land—leaving their homes ripe for plunder by both the foreigners and the native mobs.

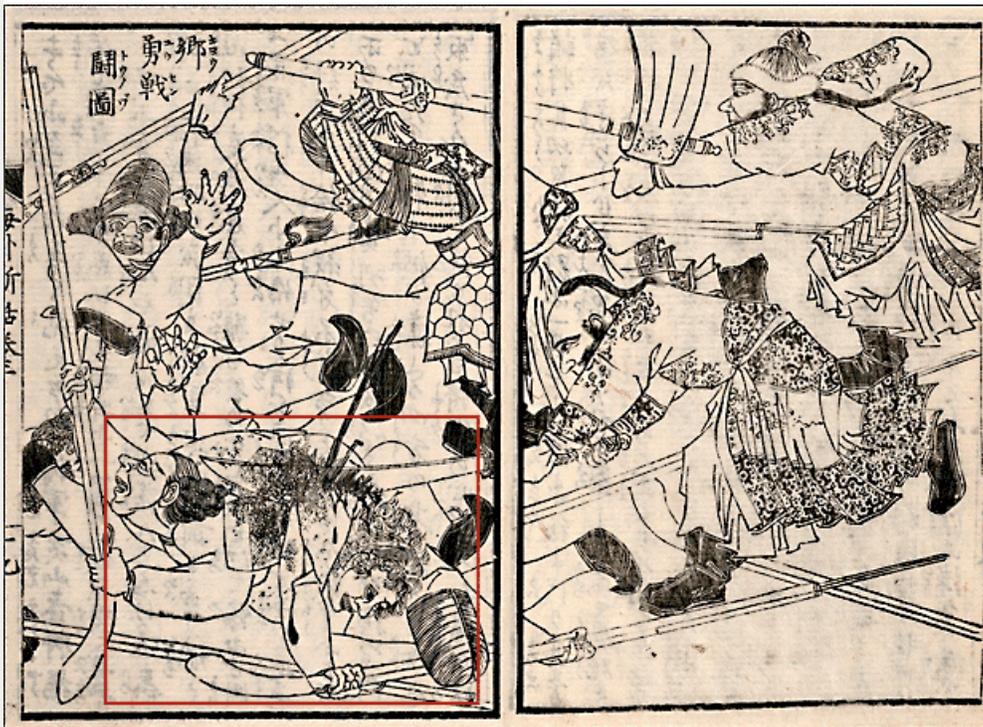
This sensitivity to local grievances and fears helps illuminate a development (and theme) that had a particularly great impact among Chinese at the time, as well as among sympathetic Japanese like Mineta's small cohort of samurai intellectuals: the rage and potential military contributions of grassroots leaders and local "braves." At one point in *Kaigai Shinwa* this is expressed in eloquent Confucian terms:

When the blowing wind brings frost, it becomes clear which grasses are strong enough to survive; just as when the government falls into chaos, it becomes clear which subjects are steadfast and true. During an age of tranquility, the reverse tends to be the case: individuals who lack ability are able to ascend to high position, and men with wicked hearts are able to wield power, while the just and loyal live quietly among the commoners, with no chance to put their talents to good use. [TR 63]

Some of the heroes singled out by name in *Kaigai Shinwa* are local Chinese men (as opposed to the Manchu elites). The "fire-boats" that supposedly incinerated British warships are invariably assembled and set afloat by local braves. Most strikingly, Mineta highlights an encounter that receives inordinate attention in Chinese accounts, even to the present day: the so-called Sanyuanli incident, which took place near Canton in the closing days of May 1841.

The ingredients of a gripping war story were certainly present at Sanyuanli (this place name itself is not mentioned in the Japanese text), where a detachment comprised largely of sepoys became caught in a torrential downpour, mired in paddy-field mud, and surrounded by upwards of 10,000 crudely armed commoners mobilized by local gentry. In Chinese accounts of the time, this encounter quickly became mythologized as a great but ephemeral victory, as well as a prime symbol of the incompetence and perfidy of Manchu commanders and officials who failed to support the grassroots uprising.

In *Kaigai Shinwa*, the thwarted local militia is said to have mobilized under banners reading "English-Subduing Squad." [TR 37-40] The accompanying illustration takes the encounter to a new level of graphic mythmaking by depicting these stalwart braves decimating the foe with pikes and huge axes and swords. Superior military technology, the message implicit here seems to be, was no match for an aroused populace.



“The Local Braves in Combat”

Kaigai Shinwa, vol. 3

[ks_v3-3]



Like the Chinese sources on which they are based, Japanese writings on the Opium War emphasize local military actions against the foreign invaders and criticize high officials and officers for failing to support such grassroots initiatives. This dramatic illustration imagines a legendary skirmish near Canton in 1841, in which local militia armed with primitive weapons attacked a detachment of British troops armed with flintlock muskets.

In fact, the detachment attacked at Sanyuanli was rescued by reinforcements, and total casualties were probably one man killed and fifteen wounded. The incident was not regarded as significant by British military observers, and the treatment it receives in *Kaigai Shinwa* is not of interest because it is an accurate corrective to the British casualty reports. It is not.

What the Chinese and subsequently Japanese attentiveness to Sanyuanli does reveal that can not be gleaned from British reports and narratives is more interesting. We see, on the Chinese side, the tensions that existed between local and central authority, between ethnic Chinese and their Manchu rulers, between local militias and government-led military commanders and their forces. And we see, on the Japanese side, how closely Mineta and his scholar colleagues were able to follow what irate Chinese were reporting about the war—and, of no small significance in the Japanese context, how receptive these scholars were to imagining the barbarian invaders being routed by a grassroots uprising.

On viewing images of a potentially disturbing nature: [click here](#).

Massachusetts Institute of Technology © 2010 Visualizing Cultures

Creative Commons License 

MIT VISUALIZING CULTURES

The Opium War in Japanese Eyes

An Illustrated 1849 “Story from Overseas”

Essay by John W. Dower

“New Stories
from Overseas”

The Eye of
the Beholder

Monsters,
Heroines
& High Officials

Lessons from the
War Next Door

Sources
& Credits

MONSTERS, HEROINES & HIGH OFFICIALS

The most bizarre illustration in *Kaigai Shinwa* depicts a monster that enters and quickly leaves the story for no apparent purpose beyond simple entertainment. At best, it might be taken as a supernatural portent of the sort associated with cataclysmic times. In this instance, the illustration hardly does justice to the flamboyant narrative—offering what appears to be little more than a pathetic foreigner in a cat suit with a smoking glob on his head. (In the text, the monster has two heads, one on top of the other, with two eyes in the top one and three in the lower. Its body was covered with green scales, and toxic blue smoke spewed from the mouth of the topmost head.) [TR 18-19]

“The Monster”
Kaigai Shinwa,
vol. 2

This supernatural creature—covered with scales and possessing two heads, one on top of the other—is mentioned only in passing in the narrative. Poisonous smoke billowed from the mouth of the topmost head.

University of British Columbia
[v2_p45_ubc]



The most unexpected illustration in Mineta’s Opium War writings appears in the “Gleanings” sequel to *Kaigai Shinwa* and concerns neither monsters, nor white or black barbarians, nor Chinese or Manchus, nor warships being consumed in flames. It portrays a Caucasian woman—and not just any ordinary white woman, but rather one transformed into a “brave and superb” warrior.

Here Mineta is embellishing on a true incident that stimulated the imagination of the British and Chinese in entirely different ways: the capture and brief imprisonment of Anne Noble, the young wife of an English captain whose armed transport ran aground near Ningpo in the fall of 1840.

While Western commentators focused on the fact that Anne Noble was carried to prison in a wooden cage and exposed to ridicule by Chinese onlookers along the way, the Chinese side in fact regarded her with awe. It was widely rumored, for example, that she was a princess and close relative of Queen Victoria, perhaps even the monarch's younger sister. (Her surname "Noble" probably helped reinforce this rumor.) Japanese renderings of the story not only embraced this aristocratic lineage, but built on the Chinese accounts of the shipwreck and capture in a manner that turned Mrs. Noble into the counterpart of those rare woman warriors who appeared, larger than life, in Japan's own medieval war chronicles and battle pictures.

An early account of the Opium War written by the samurai scholar Satō Chikudō and published in 1843 under the title *Ahen Shimatsu* (Opium Beginning to End), for example, calls Anne Noble a "female chieftain" who "was exceedingly brave, and she killed four or five men, breaking scores of swords and spears, completely routing the Chinese" before she was finally overcome. She was, Satō went on, "a woman with bright eyes and luxuriant eyebrows, jet black hair and a skin white as snow. She was about 18 years of age, and looked very much like an Asiatic woman."

The same flowery rhetoric was recycled in later Japanese accounts extending, as it turned out, to the end of the 1880s. An 1849 book by Satō Nobuhiro titled *Son-Ka Zateki Ron* (On Preserving China and Crushing the Barbarians), for example, portrayed Anne Noble dispatching the enemy in language almost identical to that in *Ahen Shimatsu*. And although Mineta neglected to mention the incident in his *Kaigai Shinwa* that same year, he more than made up for this in his "Gleanings" sequel. The heroic princess does not just appear on the stage there. She is also assigned magical powers (such as transforming herself into a flower "just for fun"), and is given star billing in a heroic two-page woodblock picture titled "Woman Warrior Putting Up a Valiant Fight."





*“Woman Warrior Putting Up a Valiant Fight”
from Kaigai Shinwa Shūi (1849)*

[kss_v2-4]

This illustration from the sequel to Kaigai Shinwa embellishes on the capture of an English sea captain’s wife who was shipwrecked off the China coast in 1840 and quickly assumed mythic qualities—in both China and Japan—as a young woman of high and possibly even royal lineage who also possessed extraordinary military skills.

It is difficult to imagine a greater contrast, in both prose and picture, than that between Anne Noble the miraculous woman warrior on the one hand, and the atrocious white and black barbarians on the other. At the same time, however, this heroic white woman also stands in sharp contrast to Mineta’s depiction of male villains on the Chinese side—men who acted, he observes scathingly at one point, “as if they had been possessed by the demons of cowardice after only a few encounters with the enemy.” [TR 37]

These negative portraits of high officers and officials in China are forceful in the text, more subdued in the illustrations. One two-page graphic, for example, appears at first glance to be just an elaborate banquet. On closer examination, what we see are Manchu dignitaries obsequiously entertaining the English with food, drink, and beautiful women in an attempt to curry their favor.

The banquet being imagined here is a real one, given by the Manchu high commissioner Qishan near Canton in January 1841 in an effort to achieve some kind of compromise agreement with his English counterpart (Captain Charles Elliot). Their joint handiwork, known as the “Convention of Chuanpi,” was repudiated by both the emperor in Peking and the British cabinet in London, and both men were cashiered for not holding to a hard line in these negotiations.

In Mineta’s contemptuous words in the text itself, Qishan “gathered twenty beautiful Chinese maidens aged seventeen or eighteen, dressed them in rich garments, and had them dance and sing to entertain Elliot and his retinue of hundreds of black and white barbarians. If one were to look back on Qishan’s actions and wonder what he was thinking in all of this, it becomes clear that he was frantically doing whatever he could just to make it out of that encounter alive.” [TR 22]



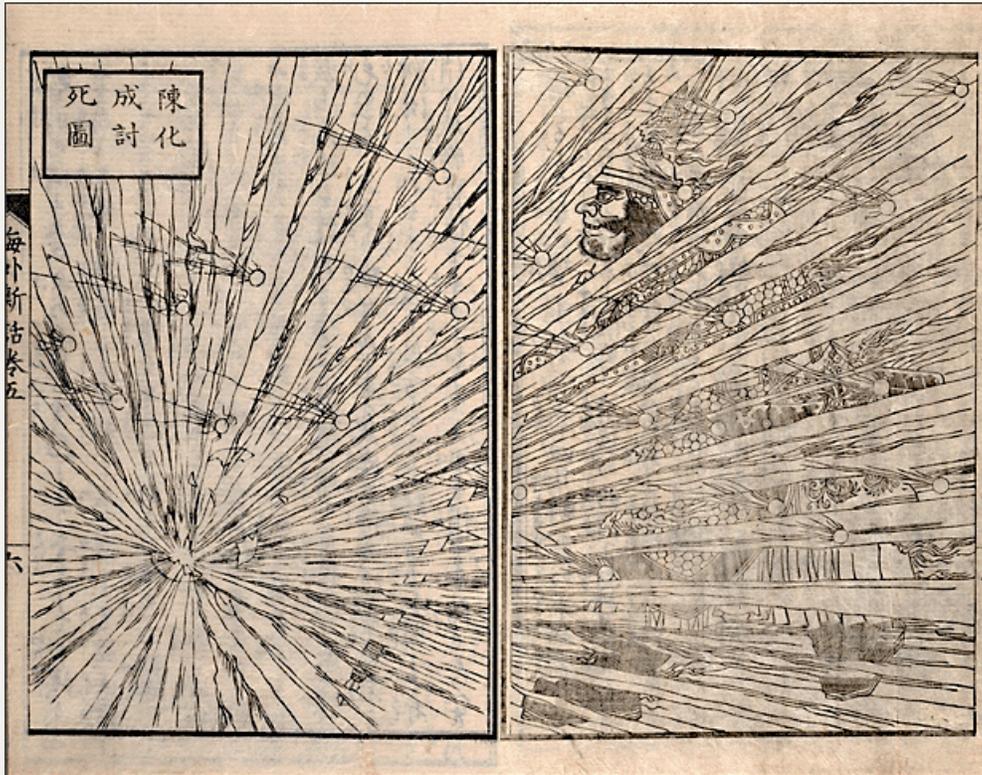
"A Feast for the Rebel Leader Elliot"
Kaigai Shinwa, vol. 3

This seemingly benign banquet scene is in fact a contemptuous indictment of the Manchu high commissioner Qishan, who is widely criticized in both Chinese and Japanese sources for having wined and dined the foreigners in a vain attempt to curry their favor.

[ks_v3-1]

From beginning to end, an inherent and perhaps inevitable tension runs through *Kaigai Shinwa*. On the one hand, the barbarians' military might—those huge warships that suddenly appeared "like floating mountains" in Chinese harbors—inspires awe. On the other hand, the author sings of naval victories by Chinese fire-boats and laments thwarted victories on land by "stalwart braves" epitomized by the gentry-led militia at Sanyuanli. His scorn for those generals, admirals, and high officials who became possessed by the "demons of cowardice" is transparent, and the disdainful dismissal of Qishan is but one small example of this.

The counterpoint to denigration of top officials like Qishan is celebration of Chinese heroes who fought to the bitter end in defense of the country. The penultimate illustration in *Kaigai Shinwa* singles out such a hero in the person of Chen Huachang, who became a regional admiral during the hostilities with England. In his narrative, Mineta identifies Admiral Chen as precisely the sort of virtuous man who emerges in times of grave national need. In the accompanying woodblock picture, Chen stands resolute and defiant in the midst of the huge explosion that killed him.



“Chen Huachang Falls in Battle”
Kaigai Shinwa, part 5

Chen Huachang is introduced in the closing section of Kaigai Shinwa as a perfect example of a virtuous and valorous Chinese leader who rose from lower rank to the position of regional admiral during the hostilities with England. Chen vowed to die in defense of his country, was killed by a rocket explosion that burned his entire body, and with his dying breath urged his men to keep fighting to the bitter end. [TR 63-66]

[ks_v5-1]

It is difficult to avoid concluding from all this that while England may have possessed superior firepower, it was mostly corrupt and inept leadership that caused China to lose the war. This is never stated directly, however, and *Kaigai Shinwa* actually concludes on a surprisingly muted note. It ends, as the Opium War ended, with the Treaty of Nanking signed in August 1842. Mineta quotes the terms of the long treaty almost in entirety, and writes finis to his story with a mild, even optimistic sentence. “In fact,” he concludes, “it may be that the threat of England, by disturbing the habits of two hundred years of idle peace, may end up being the basis of a new strength that will preserve China for many years to come.” [TR 80]

The final two-page illustration in *Kaigai Shinwa* depicts the Chinese and British officials who negotiated the Nanking treaty. This, too, is restrained—albeit with a sharper edge than the accompanying prose. The illustration depicts the two sides at the treaty table, the English representative seated a bit lower in the picture affixing his seal to the treaty document, the Chinese dignitary in his peacock feather hat wearing a supercilious smile. Neither side appears the least bit trustworthy.



“Chinese and English Leaders Make a Peace Agreement”

Kaigai Shinwa, part 5

The treaty that ended the first Opium War was signed in Nanking in August 1842.

[ks_v5-2]

On viewing images of a potentially disturbing nature: [click here.](#)

Massachusetts Institute of Technology © 2010 Visualizing Cultures

Creative Commons License 

MIT VISUALIZING CULTURES

The Opium War in Japanese Eyes

An Illustrated 1849 “Story from Overseas”

Essay by John W. Dower

“New Stories
from Overseas”

The Eye of
the Beholder

Monsters,
Heroines
& High Officials

Lessons from the
War Next Door

Sources
& Credits

LESSONS FROM THE WAR NEXT DOOR

Mineta and other Japanese who wrote about the Opium War do not appear to have strayed very far from the information contained in the several critical Chinese accounts that were their primary sources of information. They took these materials very seriously. At the same time, the illustrations in *Kaigai Shinwa* were obviously pure products of imagination. They did not replicate Chinese visual renderings of the war, for there was no large or cohesive or remotely similar body of artwork for them to copy. Rather, these Japanese graphics were inspired by Chinese texts that were themselves a mix of facts, half-truths, biases, and omissions—and inspired, as well, by Japan’s own well-established visual traditions of battle art and woodblock pictures.

It should be kept in mind, however, that there is nothing peculiarly Japanese about artists imagining events of the past in general, or war scenes more particularly. Most war art is fanciful and produced at a great distance—in time as well as place—from the scenes depicted. None of this artwork is unbiased. English illustrations of the Opium War, for example, were generally produced in London and published a year or two or more after the events portrayed. Sometimes they were based on eyewitness sketches by someone else. Always, the artist’s gaze was highly partisan, reflecting the point of view of the invaders.

The prolific English artist Thomas Allom was a perfect example of this, churning out four volumes of elaborate prints of China in the 1840s, including the Opium War, without ever setting foot in the country. In Allom’s version of realism, one encounters imposing British warships, disciplined British fighting men, interesting Chinese backgrounds—and no real hint of carnage, rage, fury, corruption, rape, or pillage. There are, in fact, few Chinese at all, living or dead, in Allom’s war scenes.

For historians of Japan, *Kaigai Shinwa* and companion works of like nature dealing with the Opium War are particularly interesting because they open a window on the world Commodore Perry encountered—and, more telling yet, on the domestic response his gunboat diplomacy triggered. The shogun and his high officials were reading the same Chinese and Dutch reports Mineta and other alarmed samurai scholars were reading. That they gave in so quickly to Perry’s ultimatums to open the country in 1853 and 1854 reflects their acute grasp of their military vulnerability. But given this shared concern with national security, why did they respond so harshly to *Kaigai Shinwa* and try to suppress it?

The answer to this question is that the lessons that Mineta and his intellectual colleagues drew from the Opium War—or at least suggested—were alarming in more ways than one. Most obviously, they were pointing out that the foreign gunboats were coming, and Japan’s coastal defenses, like China’s, were pitiful. “That heaven has presented us with this foretelling,” Mineta writes in his opening pages, “is not without significance.” Another Japanese account of the Opium War—written at this same time by Nagayama Nuki and titled *Shin Ei Senki* (Account of the War between China and England)—begins with the author stating bluntly that “I have read Western books, and I know that their rapacious greed is not satiated.... I am afraid that their violent blaze has not burnt out.”

At the same time, however, these Japanese accounts also intimated that the shogun's government in Edo, much like Manchu-led Qing court in Peking, was incapable of countering this threat. *Shin Ei Senki* includes a preface by a scholar other than the author who makes no bones about this. The aim of these accounts, he declares, "is to make known the integrity of loyal ministers and righteous men, the crimes of corrupt and thieving officials, and the conditions surrounding the cruelty and craftiness of the British barbarians. It is an attempt to ring a tocsin and issue a warning."

Who were the loyal ministers and righteous men who should and would heed this warning? Where could they be found? The implicit answer was twofold. They could only be found outside the topmost levels of government—in local heroes like Admiral Chen Huachang. And thus the only recourse was to overthrow the corrupt status quo and bring about an uprising from below—much like the grassroots militia of valiant "braves" mobilized by local gentry at Sanyuanli.

The intellectual seeds of the domestic turbulence that followed Commodore Perry and the "opening" of Japan in the 1850s were already present in these Japanese writings about the Opium War. And the rulers ensconced in Edo were right to be alarmed by the polemical use these lower-ranking samurai were making of the war next door. In 1868, forces led by lower samurai overthrew the feudal regime headed by the shogun—arguing that it was corrupt, and had lost all credibility by failing to repel the barbarians.

On viewing images of a potentially disturbing nature: [click here](#).

Massachusetts Institute of Technology © 2010 Visualizing Cultures

Creative Commons License 

MIT VISUALIZING CULTURES

The Opium War in Japanese Eyes

An Illustrated 1849 “Story from Overseas”

Essay by John W. Dower

“New Stories
from Overseas”

The Eye of
the Beholder

Monsters,
Heroines
& High Officials

Lessons from the
War Next Door

Sources
& Credits

SOURCES | CREDITS

[1] Wataru MASUDA, *Japan and China: Mutual Representations in the Modern Era*, translated by Joshua A. Fogel (St. Martin’s Press, 2000). See especially chapters 7-15, all of which are accessible online. ([View on Google Books](#))

[2] Wataru MASUDA, select translations from *Seigaku Tōzen to Chūgoku Jijō [The Eastern Spread of Western Learning and Conditions in China]*, translated by Joshua A. Fogel. *Sino-Japanese Studies Journal Archive*. Access through author’s name @ <http://chinajapan.org/authors.html>. See especially parts 3, 4, and 5.

Fogel’s translation of Masuda’s book was published under the title *Japan and China* [item #1 above], but these earlier online versions contain the ideographs for key Chinese and Japanese names and terms.

[3] LIU Jianhui, “Demon Capital Shanghai: The ‘Modern’ Experience of Japanese Intellectuals—Chapter 2: Birth of an East Asian Information Network,” translated by Joshua A. Fogel, *Sino-Japanese Studies*, vol. 16 (2009). Access @ <http://chinajapan.org/articles/16/5>.

[4] Bob Tadashi Wakabayashi, “From Peril to Profit: Opium in Late-Edo to Meiji Japan,” in Timothy Brook and Bob Tadashi Wakabayashi, *Opium Regimes: China, Britain, and Japan, 1839-1952* (University of California Press, 2000), esp. pp. 58-63. ([View on Google Books](#))

[5] Bob Tadashi Wakabayashi, “Opium, Expulsion, Sovereignty: China’s Lesson for Bakumatsu Japan,” *Monumenta Nipponica*, vol. 17, no. 1 (Spring 1992), pp. 1-25. [Accessible through JSTOR with subscription](#).

[6] R. H. van Gulick, “Kakkaron: A Japanese Echo of the Opium War,” *Monumenta Serica*, vol. 4 (1939), pp. 478-545.

Not accessible online.

[7] MINETA Fūkō, *Kaigai Shinwa*, 5 volumes, (1849). Original volumes accessible online through University of British Columbia Library Digital Collections and Services. ([View](#))



[Click here for the complete five-volume Japanese text of Kaigai Shinwa in the University of British Columbia Library Digital Collections and Services](#)

CREDITS

"The Opium War In Japanese Eyes" was developed by Visualizing Cultures at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and presented on MIT OpenCourseWare.

MIT Visualizing Cultures:

[John W. Dower](#)

Project Director

Emeritus Professor of History

Author, essay

[Shigeru Miyagawa](#)

Project Director

Professor of Linguistics

Kochi Prefecture-John Manjiro Professor of Japanese Language and Culture

[Ellen Sebring](#)

Creative Director

[Scott Shunk](#)

Program Director

[Andrew Burstein](#)

Media designer

In collaboration with:

Samuel Malissa

Translation of *Kaigai Shinwa*

Images provided by

Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University

SUPPORT

Funding for this website was provided by:

The J. Paul Getty Foundation

The Henry Luce Foundation

The Andrew Mellon Foundation

The U.S. Department of Education

The Japan Foundation

On viewing images of a potentially disturbing nature: [click here.](#)

Massachusetts Institute of Technology © 2010 Visualizing Cultures

Creative Commons License 