

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.

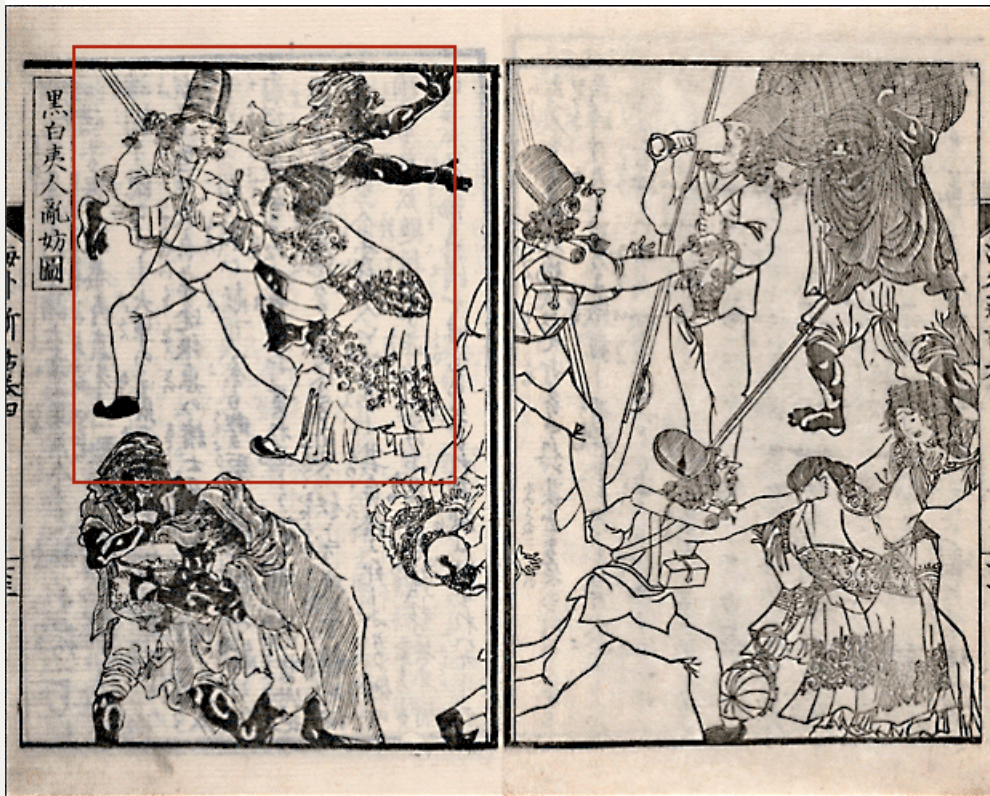
In relying on Chinese-language sources, Mineta also makes the Chinese side come alive in ways the British rarely succeed in doing. Singling out distinct personalities—or “personality types”—is but one aspect of this. *Kaigai Shinwa* also makes palpable the panic that arose when city dwellers saw the 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.

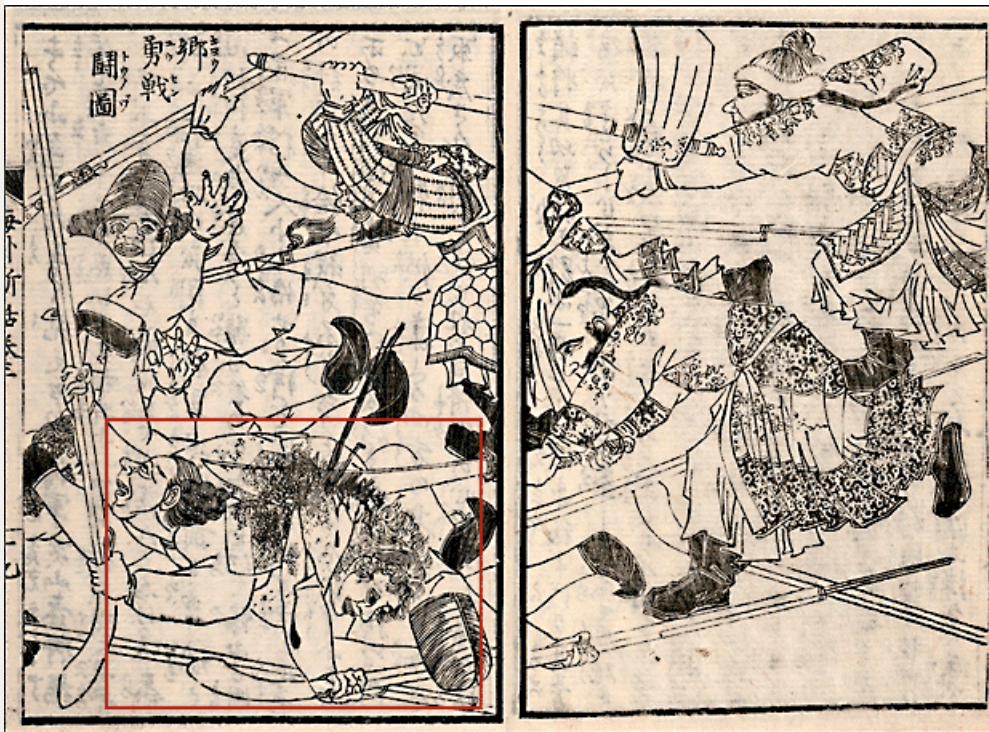
This sensitivity to local grievances and fears helps illuminate a development (and theme) that had a particularly great impact among Chinese at the time, as well as among sympathetic Japanese like Mineta's small cohort of samurai intellectuals: the rage and potential military contributions of grassroots 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