

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.

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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 Shū (1849)

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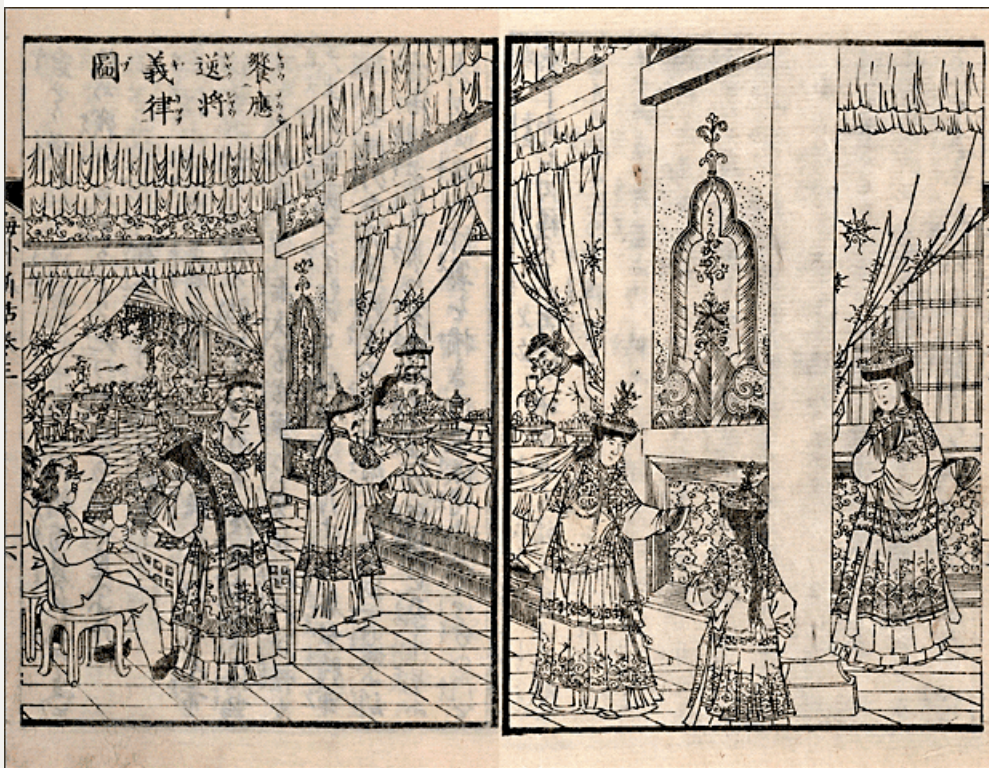
This illustration from the sequel to Kaigai Shinwa embellishes on the capture of an English sea captain’s wife who was shipwrecked off the China coast in 1840 and quickly assumed mythic qualities—in both China and Japan—as a young woman of high and possibly even royal lineage who also possessed extraordinary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



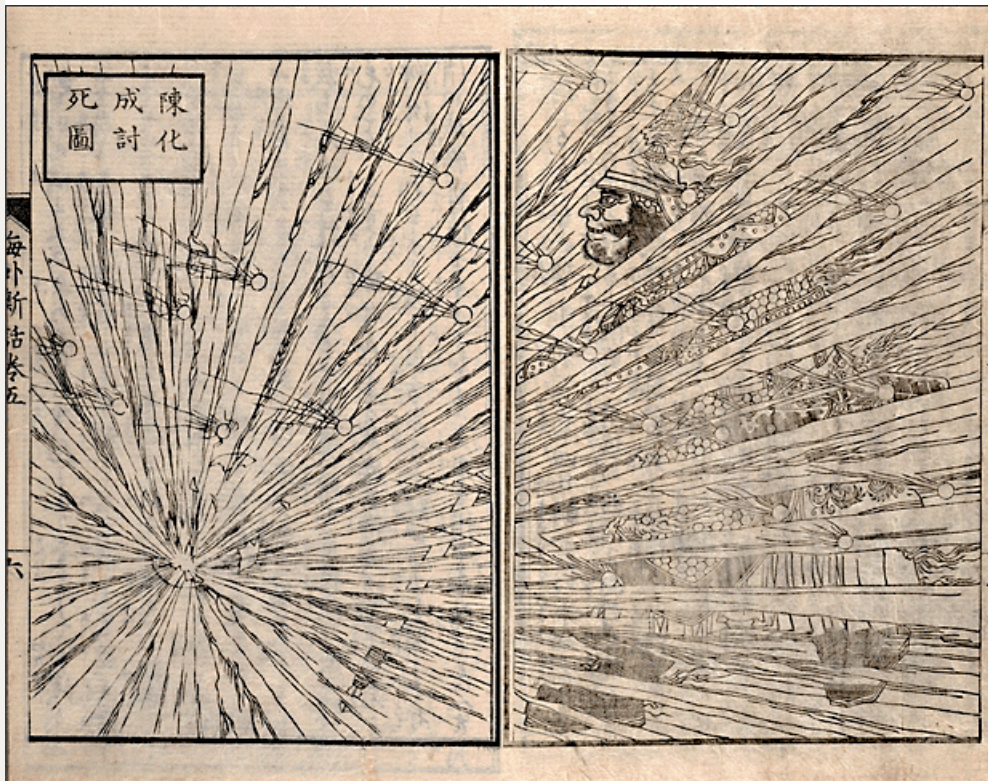
"A Feast for the Rebel Leader Elliot"
Kaigai Shinwa, vol. 3

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.

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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]

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