

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.

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