

TAIPING WAR PAINTINGS

Ten scenes recording the retreat and defeat
of the Taiping Northern Expeditionary Forces,
February 1854-March 1855.

(From the Chaoying Fang Collection)

China in the middle 19th century was inflicted by European invaders and native rebellions. After China was defeated by the British in the Opium War (1840-42), the weakness of the Manchu imperial government which had ruled over China for two centuries was exposed to the populace. Rebellions flared up here and there. The most serious one was known as the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom which lasted fifteen years (1848-64) and caused extensive devastation of a large part of the empire.

In March 1853 the Taiping army occupied Nanjing, naming it their capital city. Two months later they sent a northern expeditionary force of twenty or thirty thousand men on the mission to take the Manchu capital at Beijing some six hundred miles to the north. In about six months this force fought their roundabout way of over a thousand miles and reached the outskirts of Tianjing only eighty miles from Beijing. But the winter cold of north China forced these southerners from subtropical regions to stop at Duliu, ten miles west of Tianjing. Meanwhile the Manchu government gained enough time to rally a strong resistance force with Mongol cavalry under Prince Sanga Rinsin and Chinese regulars and volunteers under General Shengbao. Their strategy was to rely on numbers to encircle the rebels and starve them out. The rebels fought bravely but the cold finally forced them to retreat.

The ten paintings cover the various stages of that retreat, a heroic event which lasted 13 months. These brave men, besieged or pursued by overwhelming numbers, fought gallantly to the end. They were Chinese patriots fighting with a nationalistic zeal. Unfortunately their heroic saga is presented here by paintings made from the point of view of their enemy, the Manchu victors. The artist was probably commissioned by the merchants of Tianjing as a souvenir to Prince Sanga Rinsin. The paintings recorded only his victories.

The Taiping retreat began from Duliu on Feb. 5, 1854, and were waylaid by the prince at Wangjiakou, a town ten miles south of Duliu. This is the scene shown in painting No. 1. With government troops in pursuit the rebels stopped three or four days later at Shucheng, about thirty-five miles from Duliu. After being encircled for almost a month (Feb. 9 to Mar. 7), they broke out (painting No. 2). They then occupied the walled city of Xianxian but abandoned it at once, probably discovering that all food had been removed. So they went on to the post station town of Fuzhuang where they stayed for a day, and then were chased out (Mar. 8, painting No. 3). Twenty miles later they

stopped at Fucheng where they held the fort for almost two months, but were painstakingly encircled until they broke out on May 5 (painting No. 4).

This time they went ten miles to the east to the Grand Canal town of Lianzhen where they were besieged ten long months (paintings No. 5, 6, 7, 8, 9) until they were subdued and their leader, Lin Feng-xiang, captured (painting No. 10, March 7, 1855).

Notice in paintings No. 5 to 10 the Grand Canal, the boat bridge, the walls, and the command post stockade. The view is from the north at 6 o'clock towards the south at 12 o'clock. Notice also the enlarged scale of the command post stockade in painting No. 10. Other items on the scene are similarly enlarged relatively in scale. Presumably the seated figure in the middle is Prince Sanga Rinsin and the kneeling man a rebel leader. The camels apparently came with the Mongol baggage train.

The artist seems to have been exposed to some Western style painting, perhaps in Canton. His work shows a quality of realism and gives a feeling of on the spot reporting. The uniforms, weapons, formations, and tactical maneuvers illustrate the Manchu and Mongol cavalry in lively action and the colors help to present a vividly realistic record hitherto unknown in the military history of China.

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List of names of places and persons.

Taiping Heavenly Kingdom 太平天國
Nanjing 南京
Beijing 北京
Tianjing 天津
Duliu 獨流
Sanga Rinsin 僧格林沁
Wangjiakou 王家口
Shuoheng 束城
Xianxian 獻縣
Fuzhuang 富莊
Fucheng 阜城
Lianzhen 連鎖
Lin Feng-xiang 林鳳祥