

Berlin Battle Engravings: 34 Copperplates for the Emperors of China

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Berliner Schlachtenkupfer / Berlin Battle Engravings places the spotlight on the border-crossing story of several sets of copperplate-printed battle scenes commissioned by three emperors of Qing China during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Multidisciplinary and richly illustrated, this collaborative effort has produced a wonderful sourcebook for reading and teaching alike.

The subject matter of *Berliner Schlachtenkupfer / Berlin Battle Engravings* is such that it is surprising that there has not already been a book devoted in its entirety to it. The volume places at centre stage the copperplates used to print the battle scenes commissioned by the Qianlong, Jiaqing, and Daoguang emperors to celebrate military successes. The first set was a complex bespoke commission from France which involved Jesuit missionaries and multiple French parties as go-betweens, while the later sets were produced in the Qing imperial workshops. This volume, bilingual in German and English, addresses the surviving thirty-seven of the original eighty-eight printing plates, the vast majority of which are housed in the Ethnological Museum in Berlin (p. 11 for clarifications).

The volume begins with an introduction by museum curator Henriette Lavaulx-Vrécourt (pp. 10–31), which contextualises the copperplates with regard to the status of printing and visual representations of recent conflicts at the Qianlong court, before turning to address the plates held by the Ethnological Museum as objects. The introduction excavates handwritten acquisition and inventory records from the early twentieth century from the museum archives, and does not shy away from less comfortable aspects in their provenance, such as the fact that they were “probably stolen during the Boxer Rebellion and the occupation of Beijing” (p. 21). The remainder of the introduction addresses other material aspects of the plates, such as their size, inscriptions, and condition.

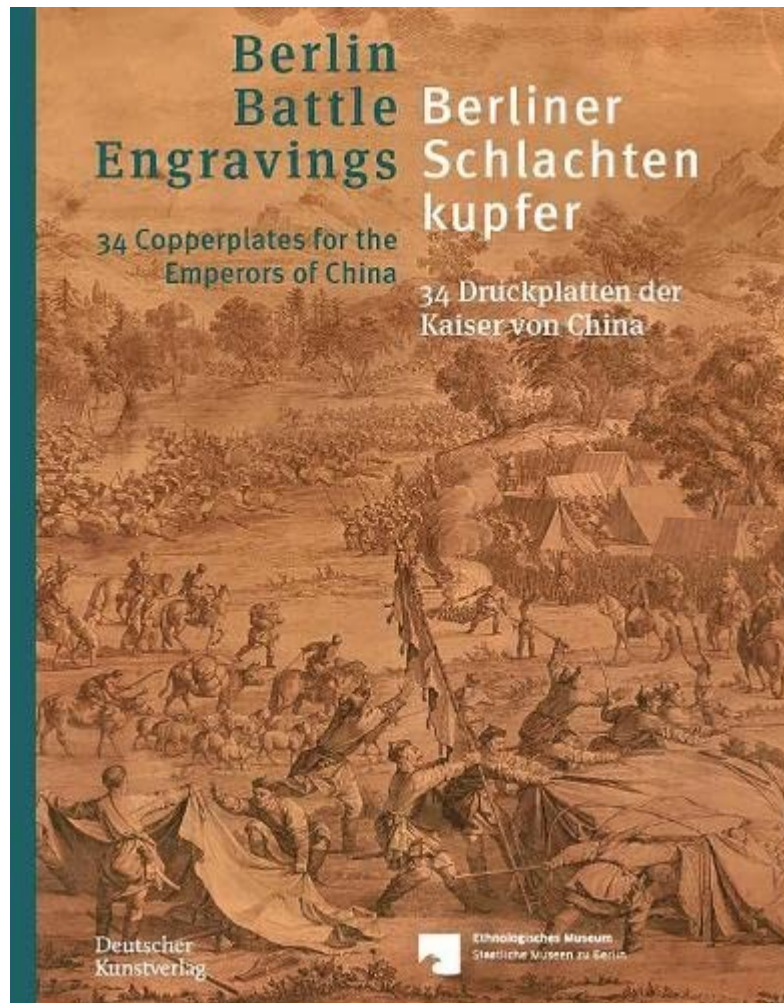
The next section, by Niklas Leverenz (pp. 32–101), covers the fascinating story of global exchange that gave rise to the “only works of art ever [commissioned] by a Chinese emperor from Europe” (p. 95). A seasoned expert in the Qianlong plates, Leverenz provides a wide-ranging and detailed origin story, beginning with the prehistory of hapless missionary Matteo Ripa’s copperplate experience under the Kangxi emperor, and broaching the painted ascendants of the print designs, the Qianlong emperor’s decision to consign the job to French copperplate artisans over British, the instructions sent to France by missionary court-painter-extraordinaire Giuseppe Castiglione, the communications between various French parties in the production process, and subsequent complications with the schedule. The reader is also provided with general information on copperplate-printing technology and practice, and in this regard the decision to include contemporaneous diagrams was a particularly nice touch.

In the final section (pp. 102–235), which comprises the second half of the volume, military historian Alexey Mikhailovich Pastukhov discusses the battle scenes depicted on the thirty-seven surviving copper printing plates, that is, including those in the holdings of other institutions. The copperplates are introduced chronologically and grouped according to the sets to which they belong, all having been produced to mark Qing success in a particular campaign. The discussion of each set begins with a

historical overview of the campaign, which is largely (but unavoidably) reliant on the Qing version of events, before proceeding to an explanation of the goings-on in the individual scenes. Links are drawn between the historical accounts and the battle manoeuvres depicted, and particular attention is given to dress, armour, and weaponry. Pastukhov also takes special care to point out discrepancies between the depictions and historical battles, for example, “here we see Qing soldiers and Gyalrong rebels in light summer clothing” when the battle in question occurred in the depths of winter (p. 133), and “[t]his print shows a completely fanciful depiction, since the battle of Huangguanzai happened in heavy rain which prevented the use of matchlocks” (p. 205). While such remarks may strike some readers as pedantic, their usefulness is twofold: they prime readers to engage with artistic choices made during the design process on the one hand, while serving as a gentle reminder of the potential limitations of these images as documentary sources on these historical conflicts on the other.

In what must have been a considerable typesetting challenge in light of the bilingual recto-verso format, the volume has managed to incorporate a commendably rich array of supporting images. This enables it to make the most of what distinguishes it from existing publications, namely that it “takes as its starting point” (p. 9) the surviving copper printing plates themselves as opposed to the well-studied images they were used to produce. This adds to the book’s value from a material culture and technological standpoint, and in that regard I particularly appreciated the decision not to artificially flip the mirrored plate image to match the prints, and occasions when the very precise verso-recto placement of plate and print produced the gleefully tactile reading experience of being able to throw off a print oneself simply by opening the pages of the book (e.g., pp. 116–117). It has to be said that these notoriously detailed battle scenes are such that only two-page spreads or a book of prohibitively large proportions could ever have done them justice. Nevertheless, I was pleased to see that this aspect has been carefully mitigated by the abundant provision of close-ups in aid of the textual discussion.

One major merit I will take the opportunity to highlight here is its broad usefulness for teaching purposes, certainly at the undergraduate level and possibly even earlier. Having used it in the art history classroom in the context of the roles of art at the Qianlong court, I was struck by how the book is situated at the intersection of several fields: comparative and global history, especially early modern exchanges of technology and culture; cross-cultural and culture-specific understandings and uses of art and design; museum studies and provenance; war and ethnicity. This book thus renders itself pertinent to variety of syllabi, either within an East Asian Studies curriculum or in wider Liberal Arts or Humanities courses. One particular asset of the book from a teaching perspective is its extensive and judicious selection of visual and textual primary material. In terms of primary texts, the authors have clearly dug deep. Alongside essential and predictable texts on the prints such as the initial commission from Jesuit courtiers and negotiations between the French court and copperplate production team come unexpected gems like a Dresden bookseller's account of the scramble for prints that had trickled out of aristocratic holdings onto the European market during the French Revolution (pp. 88–91). Related unabridged and in German and English translation, these primary texts make for many an engaging classroom exercise.



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Henriette Lavaulx-Vrécourt and Niklas Leverenz
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Die Publikation stellt erstmals das gesamte noch existierende Konvolut von Schlachten-Druckplatten der chinesischen Kaiser vor. Sie zeigen Szenen chinesischer Feldzüge zwischen 1755–1828. Von den ursprünglich 88 Druckplatten sind heute nur noch 37 bekannt, davon 34 im Ethnologischen Museum Berlin. Das Buch schildert die Provenienzgeschichte der Platten und beschreibt die Geschichte des Kupferstichs in China. Ferner wird der Entstehungsprozess der Druckplatten und die Motive auf den Schlachtenbildern im Detail erläutert. Die großartigen Kupferplatten, die Teil der Ausstellung im Wang-Shu-Raum des Humboldtforums sind, zeugen von der Missionsgeschichte in China, den Feldzügen und der

Politik chinesischer Kaiser, der transnationalen Kultur- und Handwerksverflechtung und letztendlich vom Kupferstichhandwerk an sich.

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