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# The introduction of copper-engraving into China

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## PAPER

Copper-printing has been known in China for a long time; prints from copper seals date back to the 3rd century BC, and at the end of the Song dynasty and during the Yuan dynasty paper money was printed from copper-plates - a practice which revolutionised world economy later on. Copper-printing was also used for books, and the latest and largest venture of this kind was the Imperial Encyclopedia *Gujin tushu jicheng* of 1726, consisting of 10,000 chapters all printed from movable type.

In contrast, copper-engraving was introduced into China by European artists. The first example seems to be the famous series of 36 vistas of the Bishu shanzhuang, the imperial summer resort at Chengde, North of Beijing. The emperor himself had selected these views, and assigned them poetical names consisting of 4 characters. The illustrations, with imperial poems, were printed in 1712 by the xylographic method but the emperor was eager to see them reproduced by copper-plates. Therefore he ordered Father Matteo Ripa (1692-1746) to do so. This was an arduous task as Ripa so far was only familiar with copper-engraving from the theoretical point of view, and he had to experiment a great deal. Nevertheless he managed. In his memoirs he said: "After I had finished the engraving of the 36 vistas of the imperial villa at Jehol [Rehe] in Tartary and made first prints, I handed them over to His Majesty who was very pleased with them and ordered that a good number of copies should be printed for distribution amongst his sons, nephews and other nobles." (p.463) The printing took place in 1714, in an edition of at that time 70 copies for the emperor. The printer was a certain Zhan g Kui.

While this impressive work testifies both to the wide interests of the Kangxi emperor and to the skill of Father Ripa there is another angle to it. When Ripa visited Britain in 1724, he brought a copy of the prints with him as a present, and this seems to have triggered the growing interest in Chinese gardening in Europe during the 18th century - even before Denis Attiret and William Chambers published their influential treatises on the subject.

Another pioneer work of copper-engraving was the imperial atlas of China comprising the cartographic efforts of the Jesuit fathers and offering the most detailed and thorough survey of the empire in 44 maps.

The engraver was again Father Ripa; the printing seems to have been finished by 1719. As the original copper-plates were preserved in the Mukden palace, a new edition in 41 maps was published in 1929 under the title *Manhan hebi Qing neifu yitong yudi bitu*. Ripa's atlas was the source for d'Anville's well-known *Nouvel Atlas de la Chine* (Paris 1737) which was the authoritative work of its kind for the 18th century. The atlas was revised in 1760 to include Dsungaria which had just been conquered, and Siberia. As the tradition of the Kangxi period had fallen into oblivion, again a missionary, this time the Jesuit Michel Benoist, was ordered to execute the engraving. He trained Chinese craftsmen, and in 1770 the atlas was printed in 104 sheets, in an edition of 100 copies. As the Chinese co-workers had to get accustomed to the new technique it is hardly surprising that the engraving is less careful than the earlier work. The copper-plates were found in Beijing in the 1920s, and a new edition was struck off in 1931, of this *Xiefang Qianlong shisanpai ditu*.

The most impressive work produced by copper-engraving, however, is a series of monumental scenes of the military campaigns of the Qianlong emperor, with the first series as the high-point. Already during the military activities in Dsungaria and Eastern Turkestan, 1755-1759, the emperor had ordered sketches from individual battle sites and scenes to be taken, and in 1760 the court painters had turned them into 16 huge silk-paintings which were hung in a newly constructed hall of fame on the palace ground, the Ziguangge. When the emperor had seen battle engravings by the Augsburg artist Georg Philipp Rugendas (1666-1743) he wished to see his battle paintings also engraved in copper. He therefore ordered his court painters Giuseppe Castiglione (Lang Shining), Denis Attiret (Wang Zhicheng), Ignaz Sichelbart (Ai Qimeng) and Giovanni Damasceno Sallusti (An Deyi) to prepare sketches for the engravings, which they did in 1764 and 1765. The emperor then issued a decree:

"I wish that the 16 pictures of the victories which I gained during the conquest of the country of the Dsungars and the neighbouring Mohammedan areas and which I had painted by Lang Shining and the other European painters who are in my service in the city of Beijing will be sent to Europe where the best artists are to be selected to perfectly and completely transfer these pictures on to copper-plates. I herewith order that the price for this work shall be paid without any delay. I wish that the first ships to leave for Europe shall be selected to forward the first four of these pictures. [...] I wish that the task shall be executed with the utmost speed, and after 100 copies of the engravings have been struck off, they shall be sent to me with the plates. Regarding the remaining 12 pictures I order that they be sent by three different routes to Europe, four each way. This decree shall be fulfilled carefully." The emperor's decree was accompanied by a letter of Giuseppe Castiglione in French and Italian as he did not know whether the engraving would take place in Italy or in another country: "Letter of Brother Joseph Castiglione, written from Peking on July 13, 1765, to the illustrious President of the Academy of Painting. Although the emperor's decree which is enclosed with my letter by his order, should suffice for the artist who will be assigned the task to make the engravings, to stick carefully to the originals, I believed I should recommend two things to you, in order not to leave anything for the emperor to be desired, and because of the fame of the European artists. For once, when the pictures are engraved by the needle or by acid, care should be taken that they are represented on the copper-plates with the utmost and most gracious delicacy, and that the artist proceeds with the greatest correctness and precision which a work requires that will be presented to such a great emperor.

For the second, if after having struck off the number of copies permitted by the imperial decree, the plates should appear used or worn, they have to be retouched and repaired before being sent to China, so that additional copies to be struck off in this country, will be as beautiful as the former."

The decision on where to send the pictures rested with the governor of Guangzhou. Father Lefebvre convinced him that copper-engraving was at its peak in France, and then the Hong merchants were ordered to take care of the further procedure. Even the contract with the French representatives has been preserved: "Pan Tongwen and other Hong merchants in Guangdong declare themselves responsible and give an order to Ganzhili [?La Gannerie] and Wujialang [?Vauquelin], heads of the trade for the kingdom of France. Their Excellencies, the Governor and the Superintendent of Customs have communicated an imperial decree to transmit four pictures which represent the victories gained in the countries of the Dsungars and the Mohammedan tribes to have them engraved in copper. With accompanying letter we

send:

- 1 sheet, original sketch by Lang Shining: The encampment is taken by a ruse by Ayusi.
- 1 sheet, original sketch by Wang Zhicheng: The battle of Ar\_ul.
- 1 sheet, original sketch by Ai Qimeng: The inhabitants of Ili show their submission.
- 1 sheet, original sketch by An Deyi: The battle of Qurman.

[...] Now 5000 taels silver piaster are paid as an advance. If this does not suffice, the balance will be paid on arrival of the copper-plates. If the ships meet accidents, the costs of the work and the shipping will be covered by our office. [...]" The contract then gives detailed instructions in agreement with the decree.

When the imperial decree reached Marquis de Marigny, Director-general of the Imperial Buildings and Director of the Imperial Academy of Painting, on Dec. 31, 1766, he commissioned Charles Nicolas Cochin (1715-1790), of the Académie royale de peinture et sculpture with the execution of the project. As artists were selected, among others, Augustin de Saint-Aubin, Jean-Philippe Le Bas, B. L. PrevÔt and Jacques Aliamet. The copper-plates were ordered from England. As the French paper manufactures did not have paper of the desired format, a paper-merchant was ordered to make it to custom, and this was called Grand Louvois. Cochin chose Beauvais for the printing, on the grounds that he was "the only one who can be completely trusted, both regarding his talents as well as his honesty which is well-known." The work proceeded slowly; everything had to be done to highest quality standards, and some of the pictures, especially the one by Sallusti, needed careful editing. Nevertheless, the work was finally completed, and the last prints reached Beijing in 1775. The Hong merchants paid 204,000 livres as compensation. In Beijing imperial poems to accompany each plate, a n imperial preface, and a postface by the court officials were printed on separate sheets as blockprints. There are also a number of sets which have the poems written directly on the engravings (e.g. copy in the British Museum). A few copies remained in Europe but were so rare that Isidore Helman, a disciple of Le Bas reproduced the series in reduced size and quality, with the addition of four further illustrations, under the title *Batailles et conquêtes de l'empereur de la Chine*. This is also very rare nowadays, but has for years provided the main (partly confusing) information on the subject.

These 16 engravings are not only a landmark in the history of Chinese art, they also testify to the direct artistic cooperation between China and Europe in the 18th century. It has been a stereotype that China was only interested in itself and detested the foreigners - here the emperor himself proved quite the contrary.

The emperor was so pleased with the efforts of the Paris artists that he wanted to see also the pictures of his further military exploits engraved on copper-plates. Therefore the following series were etched in copper, although by Chinese craftsmen, and apparently directed by the court missionaries: see Survey overleaf.

So we can see that altogether 88 copper-plates were engraved, of a size of appr. 90 x 50 cm.

They are quite detailed, and while sometimes showing a rather phantastic background, the proceedings are, at least for the Chinese side, quite trustworthy. We know from the way these engravings were made that they may be considered historical documents:

- The emperor had ordered sketches to be made directly after the events; artists (today we would call them 'war photographers') were present to record the proceedings, or their results. In addition, also meritorious and brave officers were to be portrayed on the spot. The latter sketches were turned later on into both bust portraits and almost life-size pictures to accompany the large battle-pictures in the hall of fame. Portraits for 235 such officers were made altogether as far as we know. On the battle pictures of the first series the individual Chinese combattants are identified by name; e.g. the famous warrior Macang carries his name (in Manchu script) on his quiver. The charcoal drafts for these paintings carried

name-slips pasted in as is known from copies formerly owned by Kuroda Genji. On the much reduced engravings, however, the individuality of each person could not be preserved.

Also, both the mentioned new cartographical survey as well as the records of the campaigns published in Chinese and in Manchu under the title of *fanglue / bodogon-i bithe* provided the necessary additional framework for the court artists. The description of the Eastern Turkestan campaign came out in 1772 as *Pingding Jungaer fanglue* (172 chapters).

- We are in a position to judge also some technical details of the engravings as, by accident, the Berlin Museum of Ethnology has in its possession 34 original copper-plates, three of them belonging to the first (Paris) series, and three (without text) to the second Eastern Turkestan series which is the best of those engraved in China. The grain of the latter is much more delicate than that of the Jinchuan series which shows that at that time the Chinese artists were still clinging to their woodcut technique. The latter shows a few technical peculiarities as L. Ledderose has pointed out: The picture is not engraved but hammered in, and the plates consist actually of two layers soldered together. Also, the text does not seem to be part of the engravings but was added later.

Last not least there is another important Chinese copper-engraving from the 18th century, namely a set of 20 views of the Xiyulou, the European buildings which formed part of the imperial summer palace, Yuanmingyuan, and which is currently partly under reconstruction. They were done by disciples of Castiglione in 1783, and they prove now invaluable to the reconstruction project.

While part of the history of copper-engraving in China belongs to art history, it is extremely relevant to the history of printing and illustration as well. While paper and printing were developed in China and spread westward, at least this special technique went the other way round.

