Three overarching themes defined 19th century China: domestic rebellion, foreign invasion, and governmental control (Fairbank, 187), each accented by flood and famine (Fairbank, 206). Professor Kathryn Edgerton-Tarpley explores this time of crisis with her essay “Picture to Draw Tears from Iron: The North China Famine of 1876-1879,” and uses illustrations from a collection of pamphlets created by Chinese philanthropists to ease the burden on the rural Chinese during Asia’s most lethal famine at the time (Edgerton-Tarpley, “Introduction,” 1).

Throughout the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the Chinese government began the slow process of assimilating Western modernization into its infrastructure (Fairbank, 217). However, the Chinese people struggled with incorporating the advancements of the present Western world while still keeping faithful to the Confucian teachings of the past (Fairbank, 219). This unease with foreign encroachment and constant political pressure resulted in numerous rebellions throughout the century, eventually ending in a full-blown war involving several foreign nations (Fairbank, 188). Professor Peter C. Perdue and researcher Ellen Sebring co-author an essay outlining the bloody conflict of “The Boxer Uprising” (1900-1901). Utilizing illustrations and photography from all sides to reflect how wide-swinging the world media portrayed this event (Perdue, “War & Siege”).

Edgerton-Tarpley and Perdue’s essays review a tumultuous 25 years of Chinese history, demonstrating how Chinese artists created depictions of these events intending to garner local support. By appealing to Chinese religious traditions and nationalist values with imagery that conveyed a struggling, yet resilient Chinese people, they evoked a strong emotional response from local and international viewers, bolstering their cause.

In both crises, the artists promote their cause through dramatic imagery, often accompanied by written descriptions or poetic laments to add needed context or further appeal for support from viewers (Edgerton-Tarpley, “Famine & Philanthropy,” 4). In the case of “The North China Famine,” artists created small pamphlets, seeking to create a body of work so emotionally impactful that even “people of iron” would be moved to supporting their cause (Edgerton-Tarpley, “Introduction,” 1). While some portrayals of famine overstated or fabricated depictions of real events to create a more emotional story, the intent of raising funds and support through local awareness did work, eventually raising over 2,500,000 taels toward the relief effort (Edgerton-Tarpley, “Mobilizing Relief,” 13).

A broad array of “shock tactics” and imagery pushed the public toward contributing to the relief effort (Edgerton-Tarpley, “Famine & Philanthropy,” 7). They often used imagery that appealed to local Chinese religious traditions and nationalist values by conveying the struggle and hardship of the Chinese people through illustrations of poor farmers selling their houses and family members, cannibalism, and suicide—conveying the desperation of the Northern Chinese while appealing to traditional Chinese family values (Fairbank, 18).

Another popular method employed was a religion based “merit system” (Edgerton-Tarpley, “Mobilizing Relief,” 8). This system rewarded the generous and penalized the greedy by giving or taking “merit points.” Rewarding those who contributed to the relief effort with great fortune later in life, appealed to Confucianist values of holy reward and retribution (Fairbank, 69).

To relay this message to local populations, the artists relied on the already established tradition of “New Years’ pictures” (nianhua) and word of mouth (Edgerton-Tarpley, “Reaching a New Audience,” 19). The intended response to these pamphlets was for money and support ended with an outpouring of support from national and international sources (Edgerton-Tarpley, “Reaching a New Audience,” 20).

During “The Boxer Uprising,” artists’ again promoted their cause through dramatic imagery, this time describing colorful and dynamic battles scenes (Perdue, “War & Siege,” 2). However, many of these portrayals exaggerated or wholly made up depictions of events to shed their side in a better light (Perdue, “War & Siege,” 10). The artists’ who portrayed the uprising 20 years after the famine, created grand interpretations of land and sea battles with the intent to represent a strong, resilient Chinese force and attract non-Christian nationals to their cause in the process (Perdue, “The View From China,” 2). However, as the majority of their target audience of rural Chinese were illiterate, they often had to convey this message with simple imagery and rhyming phrases (Perdue, “The View From China,” 2).

The artists favored a more gorilla approach toward advertising, using familiar motifs from traditional Chinese folk tales and operas, and integrating Western features set in humiliating positions to display motivating scenes of Chinese bravery and “heroic resistance” (Perdue, “The View From China,” 4). This type of imagery broadly appealed to the Chinese peoples’ nationalist political values of the late 19th century (Fairbank, 263). They distributed this propaganda and portrayals of battle using nianhua and the now popular newspapers like the Dianshizhai Huabao, spreading the word of their cause to rural towns and villages (Perdue, “The View From China,” 4). The intended response of this uprising marketing campaign was to evoke the general Chinese public into turning on foreign encroachment and establish a more robust national identity (Perdue, “The View From China,” 4).

While Chinese artists tended to focus inward, favoring a more nationalist movement, the international media took great interest in these crises. They created advertising of both illustration and photography that affirmed foreign superiority through the hyperbole of a weakened China (Edgerton-Tarpley, “Reaching a New Audience,” 20)(Perdue, “Occupation & Aftermath,” 2). Edgerton-Tarpley and Perdue’s essays demonstrate how Chinese artists created depictions of these events intending to garner local support by appealing to Chinese religious traditions and nationalist values, with imagery that conveys a besieged yet hardy Chinese people, evoking a strong emotional response from viewers on all sides.