

# THE MERCENARY MANDARIN

HOW A BRITISH ADVENTURER BECAME A  
GENERAL IN QING-DYNASTY CHINA

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**BLACKSMITH BOOKS**

*The Mercenary Mandarin*  
ISBN 978-988-13765-4-1

Published by Blacksmith Books  
Unit 26, 19/F, Block B, Wah Lok Industrial Centre,  
37-41 Shan Mei Street, Fo Tan, Hong Kong  
Tel: (+852) 2877 7899  
*www.blacksmithbooks.com*

Edited by Samuel Rossiter

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## FOREWORD

I'm not sure *exactly* when I first heard about the Miao Rebellion. I do know that I was very, very drunk.

It was springtime in southwestern China's Guizhou province and the Sisters' Meal festival was in full swing. Thousands of Miao girls had descended from outlying villages on the small country town of Taijiang, dressed in jackets that they'd spent years embroidering in beautiful, nit-picking detail for this very event. Defying the historic Chinese norm of arranged marriages, the girls were hunting for husbands, and everything was display and competition. Proud mothers made sure that their daughters looked their best, fixing complex hairdos in place with fluorescent pink combs or, more traditionally, long silver hairpins shaped like writing brushes. Groups danced in concentric circles in the town square, the men playing long gourd pipes and banging drums, the girls jingling as they stamped to the beat underneath huge assemblages of silver necklaces and headpieces. They sang flirty, dirty songs to one another in a strange falsetto. There were buffalo fights between bulls in the surrounding paddy fields, drawing a mostly male crowd, dragon-boat races on the river for the young men to show off their strength and lantern fights at night along the main street, where village teams attempted to torch their opponents' giant paper dragons with hand-held fireworks. Much collateral damage was inflicted on the crush of spectators.

Away from the noise and crowds, suitors tried to find a private moment to present their favourite girl with a packet of sticky rice wrapped in a lotus leaf. If she fancied the man, it would be returned with a pair of chopsticks inside; if she didn't, there would be only one chopstick or

– insultingly – a pickled chilli. Either way, sweet rice wine would be needed to celebrate or drown sorrows, and it was being consumed in vast quantities. Miao are hospitable people and outsiders at the event were dragged cheerfully into the chaos; before even entering the town I'd been stopped by a roadblock of women in festival dress and handed a buffalo horn full of wine. Knowing that if I touched the goblet I'd have to drain it, I put my hands behind my back and waited for a mouthful to be poured in. But buffalo horns are not designed for Westerners; my big nose bumped into the edge and my shirt got a soaking. "Make him do it again!" cheered a young policeman, eager to capture the moment on film. Several attempts later the policeman had his photos and I was let through into Taijiang, fuzzy-eyed and reeking of spirits. The party lasted three days.

At some point in the proceedings, somebody must have mentioned the rebellion. I had no memory of the event but later on found it written down in my notebook: "Zhang Xiumei, statue, Miao war". Details resurfaced slowly from the murk. Zhang had led the Miao in an uprising against the Chinese government during the mid-nineteenth century. He had been captured at Xianglu Shan, "Incense-burner Mountain", and beheaded. Locals still climbed the hill each year in his honour and now there was talk of erecting a statue to him at Taijiang, his hometown. I also dimly recalled being harangued with inebriated insistence about how three million people had been killed in the war. *Three million?* Even today, there are only nine million Miao in all of China. At the time, three million might have been half the total population of Guizhou province, an unimaginable slaughter. So why hadn't I heard about it before?

Guizhou made a big impression on me, not least because in over ten years of regular visits to China, the Sisters' Meal was the first time I had ever had out-and-out, unadulterated fun. And if continually returning to a country that I didn't enjoy much sounds perverse, ask anyone from that time what they thought of China and you'd find that it wasn't a matter of like or dislike. The word everybody used was "interesting", usually prefaced by "very" or even "incredibly". On my first visit in 1985, China

was just opening up, having been closed to independent travel for over thirty years, and both foreigners and Chinese were rediscovering each other through a fog of mutual ignorance and confusion. Information about anywhere other than major historic sites was most likely gleaned from pre-war literature, now hopelessly outdated. Right through the 1990s Westerners were still barred from parts of the interior whose military value – or embarrassingly impoverished living conditions – made them sensitive, but these bans were slowly lifting. If you were lucky or determined enough (patient negotiators could sometimes charm travel permits for closed areas from local authorities), it was possible to become the first foreigner in decades to be allowed into a region. The boundaries to exploration hadn't yet been set. For somebody who was hooked on the whole thrill of travel for its own sake, “enjoyable” wasn't the point.

China was, however, very hard work. My first trip was crushingly unromantic. I spoke no Chinese; few people spoke English. The cities were grey, depressing, outrageously polluted and gritted with coal dust; the food was terrible; the hotels were miserably cold, disturbingly mildewed and determined not to accept foreign guests. Mao Zedong had been dead barely nine years and his doctrine that Westerners were intrinsically evil still held sway, so hotel staff wanted nothing to do with us. Every single night involved hours of arguing with receptionists before they would reluctantly admit that yes, this was a hotel, and beds were available. Out on the streets the general public were often far too interested, congregating around you in mildly aggressive, jostling crowds whose members jabbed fingers and pulled at your clothes as they discussed your more bizarre features at point-blank range. My hairy arms seemed to be a particular wonder. Toilets were a nightmare; men would wander in, gape at the sight of a foreigner squatting over the porcelain (there were never any doors on the stalls), then rush off to get their friends so that all could laugh and point at your anatomy. I used to hide behind newspapers.

Then there were train journeys. Three-hour struggles for tickets were the norm, fighting the whole time to hold your place in the scrum of a queue. Sometimes police would be employed to keep order, which they did by lashing out with steel whips at everybody within reach. If you made it to the window, requests for tickets – to anywhere, on any

date, at any time, in any class – would be routinely rejected by surly, hostile staff whose rudeness had to be experienced to be believed. As state employees their jobs and wages were secure however little work they did, so customers were seen as unwelcome irritations to days otherwise spent pleasantly chatting and drinking tea with their friends. Thanks to them, *meiyou* – “don’t have” – was the first Chinese word many foreigners learned. I soon gave up even trying to buy seats this way and resorted to the black-market touts who flocked like vultures outside train stations, gladly accepting their fifty percent mark-up and hoping that the tickets they sold me weren’t fake. The trains themselves were so overcrowded that there were often platform riots – smashed windows, punch-ups, blood – in the rush to get aboard the “hard seat” compartments, where you were lucky if there was even standing room. Privacy was an impossible luxury: from dawn to dusk people would turn up to gape and practice their English, rummage through your bags, and demand your attention. China is as large as Europe or the US and with trains of the time topping barely 60km per hour, journeys often took days.

The other major headache involved Foreign Exchange Certificates, or FEC. China naturally had a single currency, the yuan, but this was issued in two types of banknotes. Renminbi – literally, “Peoples’ Money” – was for the general population, while foreigners were issued with FEC notes. Renminbi and FEC had the same face values and were theoretically interchangeable, but as imported luxuries such as washing machines and televisions could only be paid for in FEC, there was a huge underground demand for them. Naturally, people hoarded FEC, refusing to accept payment in anything else but fobbing you off with Renminbi notes in change. You ended up with huge wads of cash that was almost impossible to spend.

Of course there were highlights too. My first sight of the Terracotta Army outside of Xi’an, the eerie ranks of life-sized, grey-brown figures emerging from the clay as if they’d been real people fossilized by some ancient disaster. The Great Wall on a clear Spring day, snaking to the horizon across rugged hills, where a young George Michael, taking time off from his groundbreaking gig in Beijing, paid me a huge compliment by complaining loudly to his entourage of photographers that I didn’t

look like a *Wham!* fan. There was also a memorable evening spent wrestling with fellow customers for a seat in the famous Quanjude Peking duck restaurant, one of the few worthwhile places to eat in the capital at the time. The management had squeezed in as many tables and chairs as possible, and the limited floor space was packed to bursting with salivating masses waiting their turn. Exposure to train travel stood me in good stead. The trick was to squeeze in behind a diner who was finishing their meal and, the moment they started getting up to leave, to push them sideways and sit down in their chair before anyone else beat you to it.

But on balance, I have never left another country with such an overwhelming sense of relief as I left China in 1985, almost running onto the plane and swearing I would never, ever, ever return. Yet like many people, I found that China had wormed its way under my skin. I'd like to say that this was because, in retrospect, I had been intrigued by glimpsing a completely alien view of the world and had begun to appreciate the depth of the country's history, culture, and art, or that I was hooked by the challenge of learning the language. To be honest, it was probably a combination of rose-coloured spectacles and simple bloody-mindedness. I returned for my honeymoon of all things, and then a few years later began making regular visits as part of my career as a travel writer. After a low point following the crushing of student protests at Tiananmen Square in 1989, living conditions in China seemed to improve with every trip. As the government released its hold on industry and employment, the economy grew competitive and staff in shops and hotels suddenly became attentive and helpful. Widespread TV ownership made Western faces a familiar sight; people were still curious, but you no longer drew oppressive crowds. Food, accommodation and transport infrastructure improved dramatically; FEC were abolished; travel restrictions began to evaporate; people became more open, confident and friendly. They even put doors on the toilet stalls. By the time the Sisters' Meal festival in 1999 came about, bloody-mindedness had paid off and I was finally having fun.



Meanwhile, the three million dead in Guizhou deserved some research and I soon discovered why the war rated barely a mention in most history books. Nineteenth-century China wasn't short of civil conflicts with astoundingly large body counts. The biggest of them all, the Taiping Rebellion, saw between twenty and forty million people killed, depending on whose estimates you believed. Then there was the Nian Uprising, the Tungan Revolt – during which China considered abandoning its entire northwestern frontier – and a Muslim uprising in Yunnan, possibly totalling another twenty million casualties. And these were just the major events. The Miao Rebellion, confined to one corner of a remote province and whose dead were mostly from ethnic minorities, was easily lost amongst this tally.

A hunt through library bookshelves turned up just one work in English about the war, *Insurgency and Social Disorder in Guizhou: The "Miao" Rebellion 1854–1873* by Robert Jenks. This painted a clear, concise picture of the causes and progress of the uprising, all gleaned from contemporary Chinese records which my limited grasp of the language prevented me from reading. And I was especially intrigued to discover that there had been a surprising first-hand witness to the war: one William Mesny, from the island of Jersey, who had spent five years in the Chinese military fighting against the Miao. Footnotes added that Mesny later rose to the rank of general and, between 1895 and 1905, published his experiences in a weekly magazine, *Mesny's Chinese Miscellany*.

At this stage the internet was relatively undeveloped – no Wikipedia, Facebook or Twitter – but even so a quick online search uncovered a whole website dedicated to Mesny, set up by a distant relative in Canada. This revealed that William had spent his entire adult life in China, arriving at Shanghai in 1860 aged eighteen and dying in the Yangzi port city of Hankou, not long after the end of the First World War. His employment as a Westerner in the Chinese forces wasn't unique in itself – Americans, Belgians, Germans and other British had served too – but few had written much about their exploits. Mesny's *Miscellany*, on the other hand, ran to an enormous four volumes and some two thousand pages. Originals were rare collectors' items but scans of the entire work were made available for free through the website. I ordered a set and sat down to read.

At first glance the *Miscellany* seemed disappointingly dull, obsessed with dissecting the precise meanings of long-redundant Chinese phrases, titles and professions, interspersed with diatribes on the importance of “progress” and urging investment in mining, railways and steamship navigation. The layout seemed bewilderingly random too, and the only section that really caught my eye was Mesny’s serialisation of his exploits, entitled the “The Life and Adventures of a British Pioneer in China”. Mesny had arrived in the country to find central China occupied by the Taiping rebels, with Imperial forces only just beginning to gain the upper hand. The main trade artery, the Yangzi River, was blockaded and inland cities were desperately short of provisions; there was money to be made as a smuggler, though the chances of being captured or killed by either side was high. Mesny took the risk, narrowly avoided being murdered by government troops and ended up as a prisoner of the Taipings. He survived, joined the customs service, grew bored, and ran off to fight the Miao in Guizhou. Accumulating military rank and decorations, he spent the following two decades roaming the country and witnessing, either directly or through their aftermaths, nearly every major rebellion in nineteenth century China. By now the conservative Qing dynasty was losing its grip on the country and progressive factions were eager to hire foreign experts who could teach them about the modern world. Several of China’s most famous statesmen had employed Mesny, ignoring at their peril his visionary advice on battle tactics, the modernisation of infrastructure and foreign policy. Further larding the tale were his romances with Chinese women, which had resulted in two marriages. Finally settling down in Shanghai in the mid-1880s, his fortunes had slowly declined and he ranted bitterly against the people whom he felt were responsible. How much of all this was true was anybody’s guess, but Mesny had clearly enjoyed a very full life.

These personal revelations were fascinating enough, but then so were many other things about China. And I found it hard to obsess about history, when the whole point of China in the 1990s seemed to be the pace of change. I couldn’t understand Westerners who were still harping on about the misery, chaos and destruction inflicted by Chairman Mao during the 1960s when the country had clearly long since abandoned

Mao's attempts to dismember society with his Red Guards and Cultural Revolution, embracing instead the philosophy of his successor, Deng Xiaoping. "Poverty is not Socialism", Deng had declared in 1992, "To get rich is glorious". His words had sparked a free-market boom and in the rush for personal wealth China was fast forgetting the past, or at least erasing any physical evidence of it. In the frenzy to modernize and be considered an equal by the rest of the world, entire cities were being rebuilt from the ground up, inflicting far more damage to historic remains than the Cultural Revolution had ever achieved. As the country became one huge construction site, the national soundtrack was one of sledgehammers and pneumatic drills. Every year the Chinese public vote for the written character that best encapsulates current trends; my favourite for the entire period since 1985 would be 拆, *chai*, demolish. You saw the symbol painted up everywhere, often on buildings less than a decade old; citizens dreaded waking up to find it daubed on their front door by a local authority eager to clear yet more homes out the way for another monster shopping mall. All this activity kept the country employed and the economy raging, but it became the norm for so long that you wondered – would China ever be finished?

And so I carried on working as a travel writer, turning out guidebooks, articles, and a cookbook. Extended stays in China carried me right around the country, improving my knowledge of the language and all things Chinese while turning me into a generalist with many fields of interest but few in-depth skills. This wasn't necessarily a bad thing. Chinese culture is like a ball of wool with loose ends poking out all over. You get attracted to one strand and begin pulling on it, only to find it linked to another, then another, then another. Despite the ball of wool being infinitely long and tangled, you slowly gain insights into how the separate strands connect, and attain an appreciation of the whole.

During this period my mental dossier on Mesny remained open and eventually things built up to critical mass, a point where I needed to read through the *Miscellany* again. This time I felt a growing personal connection as it dawned that I had, over the intervening decade,

unwittingly footstepped almost all of Mesny's journeys around China. From his descriptions I now recognised several of the villages and battle sites where he campaigned during the Miao war; I had even written about some of the very temples and guildhalls which he visited. Although widely travelled, he had – like me – spent a great deal of time in the southwestern Chinese provinces of Guizhou, Guangxi, Sichuan and Yunnan, seeing them open up to the outside world after years of isolation. I also wondered about one of the *Miscellany's* recurrent themes: that Mesny had played a pivotal role in nineteenth-century Chinese history by convincing at least one influential official to attempt Western-style modernisations on a grand scale. No other books seemed to have taken this claim seriously but, if true, Mesny surely deserved wider recognition and it was exciting to suddenly realise that I was qualified to investigate. The idea of writing a Mesny biography took shape.

Biographers are always at the mercy of their subjects. People tend to leave behind records of the most interesting parts of their lives, omitting the boring and embarrassing bits and generally presenting themselves in the way they want to be remembered. Mesny was no exception and I could see from the start that my perspective would be very limited if I relied on the *Miscellany* alone, which was opinionated and episodic and ended fourteen years before his death. By this time it was 2010 and the internet was no longer in its infancy; the trouble now was filtering the overload of information which echoed between sites. Months spent surfing through thousands of Mesny-related hits paid off, however. Online searches of archive indexes turned up the existence of unpublished manuscripts, notebooks and maps, Mesny's will, some photographs, a few letters and even one of his calling cards. The first of his two major journeys across China was made in company with the explorer William Gill, who had penned a two-volume account of their trip called *The River of Golden Sand*. In the 1880s Mesny himself had produced a book, *Tungking*, about the violent scuffle between France and China over control of northern Vietnam. Between 1870 and the mid-1880s, Mesny had also written scores of anonymous articles for contemporary English-language newspapers, whose value lay in providing honest, on-the-spot opinions

of key events which he might have later revised in his favour for the *Miscellany*. There was certainly enough to be getting on with.

At this point I was brought down to earth by the discovery that other biographies of Mesny already existed. The earliest, based on an interview with his father, filled a lengthy column of *The West Briton and Cornwall Advertiser* from November 1883; it was lively reading but seemed to conflate several events. The second, a short entry in George Balleine's *Biographical Dictionary of Jersey*, was cobbled together in the 1940s from the *Miscellany* and family recollections, and suffered from being totally uncritical of either. But by far the most comprehensive was *A Jersey Adventurer in China*, a hundred-page account of Mesny's life which appeared in a 1992 journal of the Hong Kong Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society. Its author, Keith Stevens, obviously knew not only a great deal about Mesny but also about nineteenth-century China. Was another biography likely to add anything new?

On reflection, this only made it easier to choose the direction that my own take on Mesny's life should follow. I wasn't about to compete with Keith Stevens' detailed analysis of Mesny the man, in which he had unravelled the *Miscellany's* complex, often contradictory web of autobiographical material. From it Mesny emerged as a not entirely successful chancer, spending most of his life milking a reputation for bravery and resourcefulness gained very early on in his exploits. Stevens felt that Mesny had intended the *Miscellany* – written decades after his glory days – as a platform for reviving a fading self-image, in which Mesny was never shy of touting his own position at the centre of events, his famous contacts, his specialist insider knowledge, and his many awards. While not arguing with any of these conclusions, I was more interested in the details of Mesny's adventures, capitalizing on my two definite skills: research, and a solid knowledge of travel in China. Nobody had yet pieced together the many contemporary documents relating to Mesny's life outside of the *Miscellany*, and by doing so I could retrace his journeys across the country to the borders with Central Asia, Tibet, Vietnam and Burma, searching for evidence of his presence, colouring in detail, and comparing the hardships of the road. Understanding his travels and the people he met would, of course, involve providing context

by framing a solid history of nineteenth-century China, but with feet in both the Western and Chinese worlds, Mesny's life story was well-placed to provide a balanced view of the times. It seemed that I would have to knuckle under at last and study the past.

Back in the present, my career as a travel writer seemed increasingly doomed. Even as the internet blossomed, making it ever easier to chase down the details of Mesny's life, guidebook sales were withering as travellers opted instead to harvest information about their destinations for free off the web. Within weeks of deciding to write about Mesny, a book I had been about to research on Hong Kong was cancelled, leaving me with a plane ticket and six months of spare time. Hong Kong had been one of Mesny's first ports of call after reaching China in 1860, and he had spent almost a year there. I was off.