

2 “Ningbobang”, the Ningbo Merchant Community

On November 19, 1868, departing from Ningbo by water, Richthofen headed north for Zhoushan Archipelago (boasting one of ‘China’s Four Buddhist Mountains’). Then on June 13, 1871, he visited Ningbo again, planning to descend to Tiantai County (noted for its scenic and sacred mountains).

This time he remained interested in roaming the city of Ningbo, with more in-depth observation, because “since my last visit, I have known China quite well, but this time I am going to explore its subtleties with a different perspective”.

He poured much ink to record what he observed about the “Ningbobang (prominent figures with Ningbo origins)”. — “Ningbo used to be the shipping center for trade between Fujian and the North (Shanghai, Shandong, and Tianjin). But its position as a shipping hub faded, due to the advent of steamboats. Nevertheless, Ningbo’s commerce was not lagging due to the entrepreneurship of Ningbobang, with flourishing handicrafts of all kinds, whether of furniture, wood-carving, or mats or jewels, all of which are famous.”

-- “The influence of the Ningbo people in Shanghai is phenomenal. The great majority of the men engaged in ship-related work as well as sailors are from Ningbo, and there are even more of them doing small business, a practice commonly found in Jewish traders, who were famous for business acumen. While Guangzhou merchants favor big business, demanding high price for their goods as the Europeans did, Ningbo merchants prefer self-sufficient small business with modest profits. Many of them were popular as compradors or ship suppliers. Ningbo migrants in Shanghai total about 40,000, and almost all of them make a home in this European-style city. The locals in Shanghai seem to be no match for the Ningbo people at all.” This is among the earliest depictions of the “Ningbobang” merchants by foreign scholars.

While wandering around Ningbo, Richthofen also paid special attention to the arts, noting the numerous painting workshops along the streets, “which crafted the scroll paintings that the Chinese often love to hang on the walls of their homes”.

Richthofen saw as many as 30 to 40 painting workshops, but they all painted from stencils. “They were all youngsters between 14 and 18 years of age, who traced the outlines of the stencils matted underneath with delicate lines on flimsy paper, after which they were handed over to one painter to color the clothes and another to color the faces of the figures. The original drawings often seem to be earlier masterpieces. However, as they were traced so many times, and the traced copies were iterated repeatedly as stencils, the final product would deflect markedly from the original. Complementing the paintings, there are also stores specializing in framing-making that leave one in awe.”

Richthofen’s description is accurate, as demonstrated by the commercial paintings exported abroad from the area along Ningbo’s Chejiao Street and Shibao Alley.



The old image showcases partly view of Dongqian Lake.

3 Xuedou Temple and Qianzhangyan

Perhaps drawn by the fabulous impression of his previous visit to Yinjiang Bridge, Richthofen once again hired a boat to Yinjiang Town and trekked to Xuedou Mountain (in Ningbo’s Fenghua District) at 4:00 a.m. the very next day after arriving in Ningbo.

Richthofen had heard about this dominant Buddha mountain for a long time and had read descriptions of it by early foreign travelers; he had always been eager to pay a visit. In his impression, “it is a favorite destination for Shanghai travelers, because you can’t find such a romantic and picturesque landscape within a two-day trip from Shanghai.”

On the way to Xuedou Mountain, Richthofen recorded the geological changes and vegetation in detail, reflecting his professionalism as a geologist. At 7 p.m. that night, the group finally arrived at Xuedou Temple. To his great surprise, the price of staying overnight at the temple was “as high as that of a first-class room in a European metropolis”.

Richthofen also left many remarkable records on wonderful scenes at Xuedou Mountain. “One of the major attractions (of the Xuedou Temple) is that there are many small waterfalls around it, under which one can bathe and tailor-make the volume of the cascade. But what truly makes the temple memorable is the numerous massive waterfalls around it. The most famous one comes from a small stream in the basin of the Xuedou Valley and converges into a large one, then cascading down a 125-meter-high porphyritic cliff. This signature waterfall, picturesque and abundant in flowery vegetation, is exceptionally gorgeous when viewed from the mountains.” What he described is undoubtedly Qianzhangyan (Thousand-Fathom

Rock) Waterfall.

Richthofen and his group walked to the bottom of the waterfall and preceded down to Tingxia Village. From there they took a bamboo raft to the mouth of the river and then changed to a small boat to start their journey to Tiantai County.

For the second time, Richthofen stayed in Ningbo for a total of five days. Unlike other travel journals, he kept a very detailed record of his observations of Ningbo’s rock quality throughout, helping readers to understand more about the landscapes and customs of Ningbo during the late Qing Dynasty (1840-1912) from the perspective of a foreign geographer. If you are intrigued and wish to delve deeper into his narratives, the Chinese version of this book is also available.



The old image of Qianzhangyan (Thousand-Fathom Rock) Waterfall.

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