

Teaching Through the MIT "Visualizing Cultures Controversy" in Spring 2006

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In spring 2006, I was teaching an undergraduate course for the History Department at Princeton under the then newly established rubric called "the sophomore initiative," an effort to prepare not yet declared History majors for the sorts of historical topics and issues they might deal with in their future junior research papers and senior theses. Both are still required of all Princeton undergraduates to graduate. We began by reading "The Travels of Marco Polo" and in the process looked at recent Danish images of Islam that have caused such a sensation. Marco Polo's portrait of the "Sheik of the Mountain" and the latter's assassins reminded the class of the Danish cartoons of Muhammad "posing" as Bin Laden.

Next we read European Christian accounts of Asia in the sixteenth century, a Europe on the threshold of imperialism, which we analyzed in light of Edward Said's "Orientalism." Our last project for the semester focused on the "First" Sino-Japanese War of 1894-1895, which is an understudied topic whose climax came in winter 1895 with an unexpectedly "walkover" Japanese conquest of the "Gibraltar of the Orient," Port Arthur (Luxunkou), the chief military base on the Liaodong Peninsula in southern Manchuria. The world press covered the Port Arthur campaign both as a great Japanese victory and simultaneously in light of troubling accounts by reporters of the *New York World* and *London Times* of atrocities committed by Japanese troops, which the reporters called the "Port Arthur Massacre." The Japanese army marched by land into Port Arthur from the north (as they would in Singapore in 1941), thus

¹ My thanks to Seiji Shirane for his comments and for his fall 2008-09 state of the field essay "Sino-Japanese Cultural Relations in the Late Meiji Period," prepared as a graduate student in the Princeton History Department for Professor Sheldon Garon.

avoiding a potentially damaging frontal naval clash with the core of the Northern Chinese Beiyang Fleet under Li Hongzhang (1823-1901). Upon finding their captured troops allegedly butchered by the fleeing Chinese/Manchu forces, the crack Japanese army took it out the surviving population at Luxunkou. The massacre at Port Arthur coincided with world press accounts of the Armenian massacres by the Ottoman Turks. As a result, both the United States and Great Britain considered for a time setting aside negotiations with Japan to end an era of unequal treaties and extraterritoriality vis-à-vis the Meiji government.

For example, the most damaging of the controversial woodblock prints that touched off the MIT Visualizing Cultures Controversy in Spring 2006 depicted Japanese troops beheading violent Chinese/Manchu prisoners of war (see the figure below).



This violent image of Japan's apparent flouting of the emerging global movement to protect prisoners of war was presented in Meiji circles as the rightful and terrible retribution Chinese

and Manchu soldiers could expect if they caused trouble after their capture. The woodblock was never intended for a non-Japanese audience, much less the MIT website.

After reading English language newspaper accounts of the 1894-1895 war, the class began an exercise to examine these unique Japanese woodblock prints prepared as war propaganda, many of which appeared as "war pictures" in the *San Francisco Chronicle* (see below) and elsewhere to describe the events in East Asia and the unexpected tide of Japanese military victories over the Manchu dynasty. Since then these colorful Japanese prints have been



exhibited several times in the United States. Indeed, catalogs of them have been published a number of times, but never before on a unified website.²

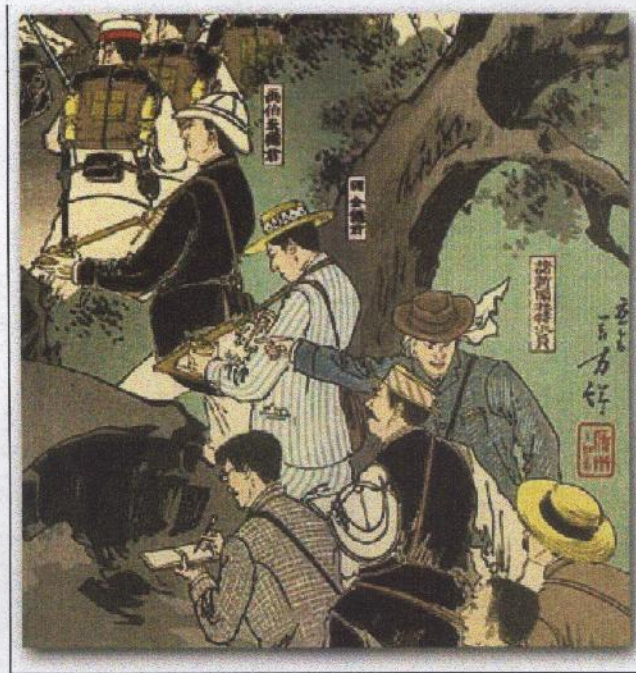
The class then turned to the integrated parts of the MIT website that Professors Dower and Miyagawa had prepared for viewing the woodblock prints. Their goal was to use the prints as a website platform to better understand: 1) Meiji Japan's attempts at "Throwing Off Asia;" 2) describing the conflicts between "Old China, New Japan;" and 3) Japan's "Taking on Russia" in the 1904-1905 War. The woodblocks overall depicted chilling scenes in many war sites of Japanese troop brutality toward Manchu and Chinese forces, not just Port Arthur (see the figure below depicting the battle at Fenghuangcheng). As "optical illusions," each of these images gained academic traction in Europe and America as part of a Meiji domestic and international campaign to present Japan as the dominant culture and nation in Asia; Japanese artisans presented Qing China in these prints as a backward political and civilizational empire doomed to failure. This "failure narrative" for China and "success story" for Japan became the dominant two themes for understanding East Asia globally throughout the twentieth century.

² *Impressions of the Front: Woodcuts of the Sino-Japanese War, 1894-95* (Philadelphia: Museum of Art, 1983); *Japan at the Dawn of the Modern Age: Woodblock Prints from the Meiji Era, 1868-1912* (Boston: Museum of Fine Arts, 2001).



We need new interpretations of 1894-1895 War that will redress the Japanese and world propaganda that engulfed the world press in this “Social Darwinian” era of scrambling empires about the “rise of Japan” and the “fall of China.” These views are still well-cemented in our out-of-date textbooks describing modern Sino-Japanese relations solely in light of the aftermath of the “First” Sino-Japanese War, and they informed the MIT protesters. One of the Japanese woodblocks, for instance, depicted the world press covering the war from the Japanese vantage point (see the two figures, one a close-up, both below on the battle at Songhwan).³

³ Elman, “Naval Warfare and the Refraction of China’s Self-Strengthening Reforms into Scientific and Technological Failure,” *Modern Asian Studies* 38, 2 (2003): 283-326.

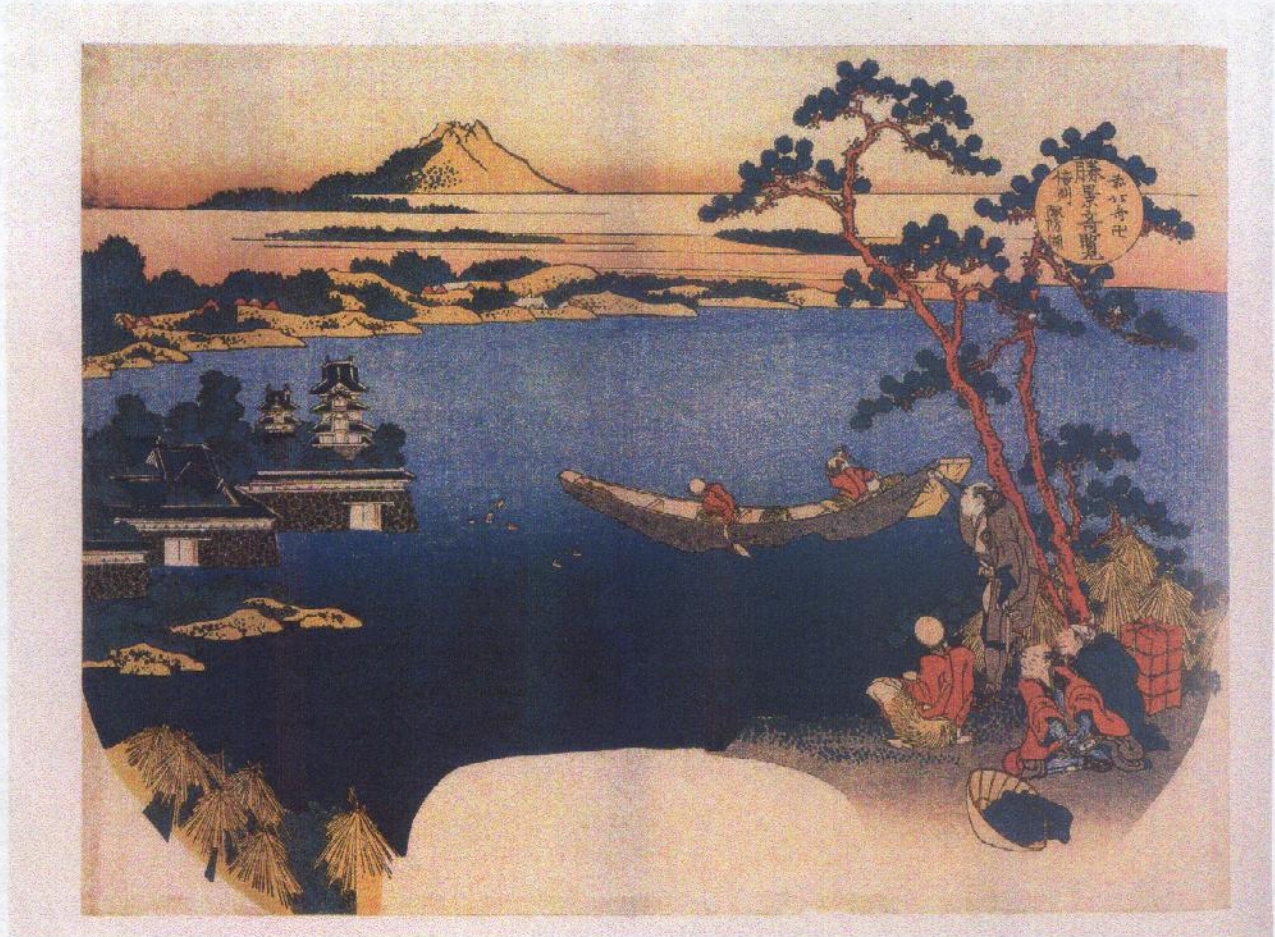


Chinese military defeats contributed to the transformation of official, elite, and popular perceptions of the Self-Strengthening reforms (1865-1898) under the Qing dynasty from success to failure. New public opinions appeared in the Chinese and missionary press that shaped the emerging national identity and sense of crisis among Han Chinese who increasingly

opposed the Manchu regime in power. Disappointment with the military losses convinced many Chinese that the late nineteenth century Foreign Affairs Movement had failed and that more radical political, educational, and cultural changes were required to follow Japan's lead in modernizing and coping with foreign imperialism. Qing military defeats contributed to the transformation of official, elite, and popular perceptions of the Self-Strengthening reforms. Euro-American missionaries and experts who aided in the Qing dynasty's scientific translation projects, which were used as textbooks in the arsenals and technical schools, now also thought that the Chinese nation, language, and culture were doomed (see further at the end).⁴

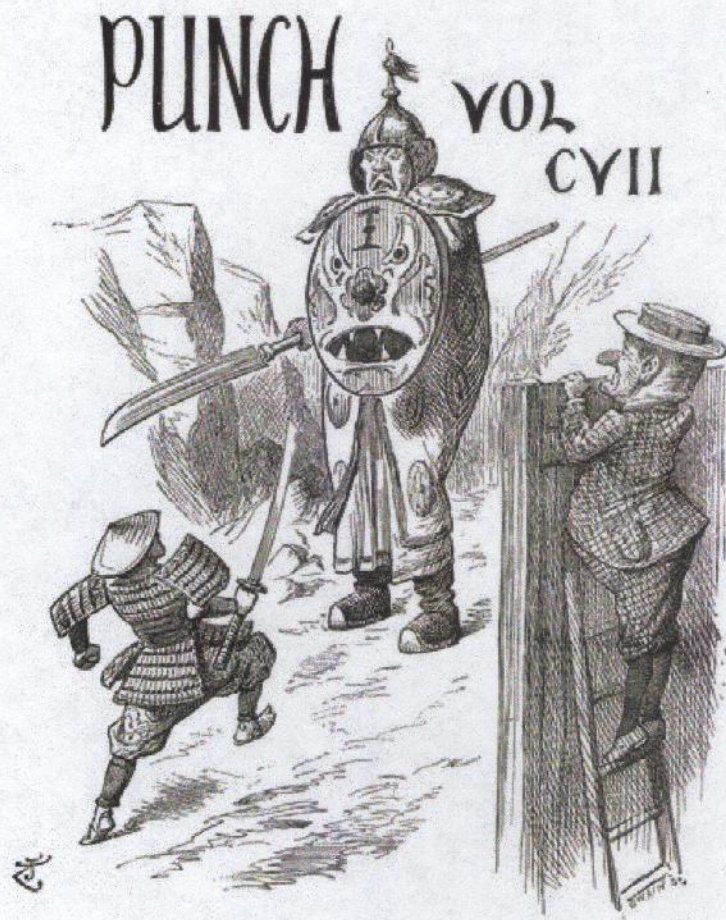
When we first learned that the MIT website for the woodblocks was down, I told the students that I thought it was likely that the Japanese right-wing was displeased that the MIT site had included woodblocks blindly glorifying the violence of Japanese troops, which presented Japan in a negative light. Based on the images the class examined, we could see that the accusations that the Japanese, although incited, had perpetrated the "Port Arthur Massacre" by murdering some three thousand Chinese/Manchu innocents in winter 1895 were credible, particularly from the point of view of a Euro-America then groping toward an international agreement for prisoner's rights. The thrill of Japanese militarism was clearly the theme of these war "snapshots," which were prepared by the same Japanese artists, carvers, and printers who produced the traditional woodblock prints that touched of the French impressionist's craze for depicting the Japanese arts in Western terms at the end of the nineteenth century (see Hokusai, "Viewing Lake Suwai" below).

⁴ Elman, *On Their Own Terms: Science in China, 1550-1900* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005), chapters 10-11.



In the war prints, the same artists became patriots who also produced more subdued versions as cartoons for Japanese children. My class noted that the “Port Arthur Massacre” during the “First” Sino-Japanese War deserved more attention, just as the “Nanjing Massacre” of 1937 has received so much attention since the “Second” Sino-Japanese War from 1931 to 1945.

Subsequently, we later learned that the critical reaction of the overseas Chinese student community at MIT toward the website had led to Professors Dower and Shigeru taking it down voluntarily. To my mind, Professors Dower and Miyagawa had prepared the website to shed light on Japanese militarism and excessive patriotic exuberance in Japan, which arose after the unexpectedly easy victory of Japan (presented as “David” in “Punch”) over China (presented as



LONDON:
 PUBLISHED AT THE OFFICE, 85, FLEET STREET,
 AND SOLD BY ALL BOOKSELLERS.
 1894.

Goliath—see the figure above). While I could understand the deep emotions that the Chinese students felt when their people were presented in defeat by the Japanese military victors as animals, sub-humans, and primitives (see the figure below), the historical context that Professors Dower and Miyagawa enunciated to frame the Japanese depictions of violence and excesses was for my class educational. They will never think about Sino-Japanese relations since 1895 in the same way again.



At the end of the spring semester, once the website was modified and back up, the class used the controversy to debate the MIT presentation of the images that elicited the Chinese students' anger. Although we now realized how such horrifying images could be misused, none of us blamed Professors Dower and Miyagawa for maliciously placing the images on their website. Because of my personal history, I know that I often look at Auschwitz pictures from World War Two with similar anguish that the Chinese viewed the depictions of their forbears at Port Arthur and later at Nanjing. Even if such feelings are justified, however, we should not blame the messengers as the legitimaters of the horrors of the past. Dower and Miyagawa did their best to present the horrors of the Sino-Japanese and Russo-Japanese Wars by showing how what was dreadful for the victims was turned into patriotic sport by the victors. Fortunately, we have Akira Kurosawa's "Ran" and "Kagemusha" to tell us vividly via another medium of the horrors of war for the post-World War Two Japanese.

The MIT controversy was first reported on in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* on May 1, 2006. Although a number of us had already offered differing opinions on the controversy in

the monitored precincts of H-Asia on-line, the *Chronicle's* reporting proved to be one-sided and unnecessarily jingoist in favor of "American values." The assigned reporter's simple-minded conclusion in the May 19, 2006, issue that the "closed minds" of China had infiltrated the "open doors" of the United States only served to further disappoint the Chinese students who had voiced their misgivings about the MIT website.

The *Chronicle's* summary of the debate at MIT presented none of its pathos and never addressed the power of the images themselves. Why present it as "brainwashed" overseas Chinese students versus "open-minded" American universities? What a curious way this was to dismiss Chinese student protest in America by blaming the protesters for their failure to adopt American ways! Were they reincarnations of Mao's Red Guards? I wrote the *Chronicle* to remind them that expressing one's opinion was what the Constitution, the last I heard, permitted and encouraged, especially on college campuses. Why were they despicable students? What was despicable about people who were horrified, rightly, by terrible images that the *Chronicle* never dared to publish, even when challenged to do so by follow-up letters to the editor. While I didn't agree with the minority of students who went out of bounds in their email attacks on Professors Dower and Miyagawa, I was more disappointed that the *Chronicle* could only charge that the Chinese in the United States were a danger to free speech. In the end, the matter ended reasonably, and the MIT website went back up with added warnings to all viewers. The *Chronicle* meanwhile was left vicariously defending free speech rhetorically.

Looking back on the controversy now with over two years of hindsight, however, we should still ask ourselves what critical perspectives we can develop to explain what happened in spring 2006, and why the controversy was handled reasonably well at MIT but discussed so

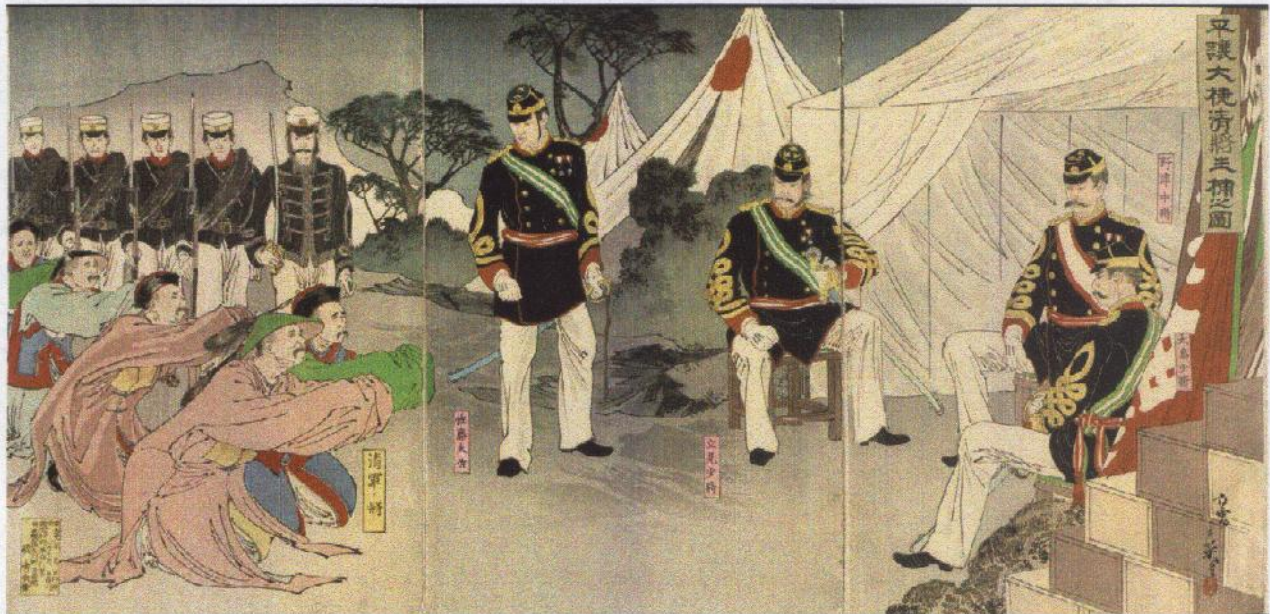
poorly at the *Chronicle*. Part of the problem is the role of wars in redirecting public opinion. We see this in the impact of the Vietnam War on the United States in the 1960s and 1970s and in the contemporary impact of the Iraqi War. Why was the “First” Sino-Japanese War so hot to handle when the MIT site was first viewed by the Chinese students? I would suggest that we are in the midst of a sea change in the global perceptions of China and Japan during the twenty-first century, which is replacing a perennial perspective that had lasted since 1895 until today, namely that the Japanese are the dominant power, culture, and people in East Asia. The rise of China since the late 1990s has challenged the preeminence of Japan in Asia, a preeminence that certainly began in the aftermath of the “First” Sino-Japanese War. The Chinese students at MIT certainly felt that the MIT website condoned the violence of Japanese imperialism in China. Unwittingly perhaps, they were also reacting to the symbolism of a modern, triumphant Japan, which had been constructed in Japan in 1895, but which had then been uncritically read into the pre-1895 period at least as far back as the Opium War (1839-1842).⁵

Warfare and the Refraction of Qing Reforms into Failure and Meiji Reforms into Success

The surrender of Qing forces to Japanese officers in the woodblock print below represents the first of a series of “optical illusions” that we must decipher and contextualize historically. When the Sino-Japanese War unexpectedly began on July 25, 1894, the foreign press in Shanghai generally predicted a Chinese victory even after reports of initial Chinese losses. At the time, the Qing modern navy (65 ships) ranked eighth in the world, compared to

⁵ All Chinese would accept, for example, that Japan was superior militarily to China from 1895 to 1945 and in economic power, as well as in science and technology, from 1945 until the end of the 20th century. My thanks to Seiji Shirane for his suggestions.

Japan's (32 modern ships), which ranked eleventh. China's navy was superior in armor, armaments, and tonnage. Some thought that China's two German built battleships were more powerful than the Maine and Texas, the United States Navy's largest warships. G. A. Ballard, Vice-Admiral in the British Royal Navy, believed the Beiyang fleet in the 1890s was in serviceable condition and ready for action. Some later comparisons of the Qing and Meiji naval fleets have suggested that China could have won the sea war.



On land, however, the sixty battalions of the Chinese army in the north had serious organizational weaknesses. Only twenty thousand front-line troops faced Japan's 50,000 man army. The logistical weaknesses of the Qing army contrasted sharply with the subjective depiction above by Japanese artists of the Manchu army's surrender to Europeanized Japanese officers at Pyongyang in northern Korea. Wearing immaculate black and white uniforms that mimicked German officers after the Franco-Prussian War of 1870, the Japanese officers remain standing or seated with no deferential bowing to their defeated enemies, who, dressed in traditional gowns and caps, revealed their backward, Chinese ways in their clothing and in their

form of submission. The Japanese, a bowing culture even today, are represented falsely as Europeans who towered over their Chinese and Manchu counterparts. Their unsoiled uniforms make it appear that the victory had been effortless.⁶

Chinese surrender at Pyongyang

In 1894, China's navy was still divided into four units, namely the the Beiyang, Nanyang, Fujian, and Guangdong fleets. These four combined had about 65 large ships and 43 torpedo boats. The strongest, the Beiyang fleet, more or less equaled Japan's entire fleet. Chinese ships were equipped with more modern guns, but the navy lacked an adequate supply and transport system to take the offensive. The fleets took a defensive posture, which had contributed to defeat in the Sino-French War a decade earlier.⁷

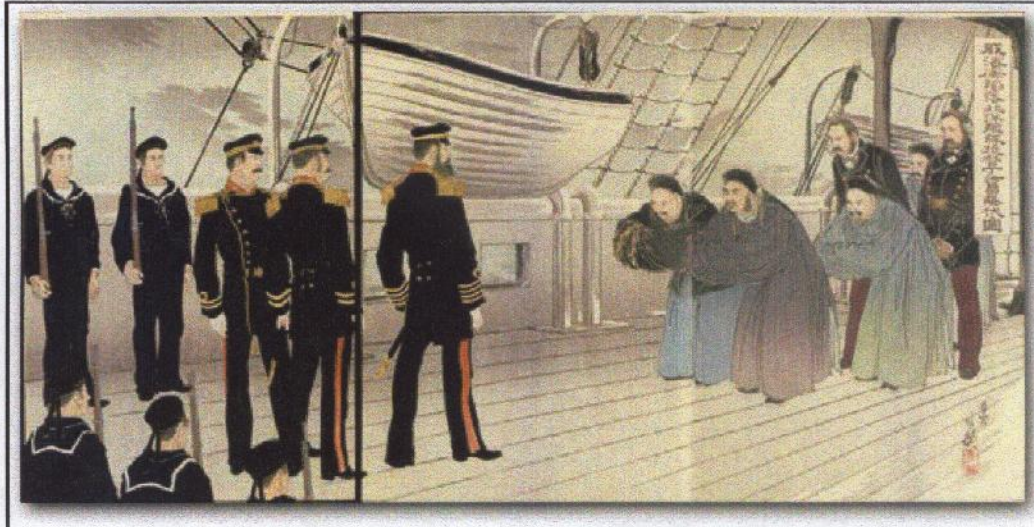
These facts on the ground sharply contrast with the woodblock print by the Japanese artists, who depicted the surrender of the Chinese admiral in subjective and symbolic terms.

⁶ See *The North-China Herald*, July 27, 1894, pp. 131, 152, and *The Japan Weekly Mail*, August 25, 1894, p. 227. Foreign media accounts, which generally blamed Japan for the hostilities, are presented in S. C. M. Paine, *The Sino-Japanese War of 1894-1895: Perceptions, Power and Primacy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 107-134, 138-140, 154-160. Paine, pp. 125, 141-144, summarizes the size of Chinese and Japanese sea and land forces in 1894. See also Marius Jansen, Samuel Chu, Shumpei Okamoto, and Bonnie Oh, "The Historiography of the Sino-Japanese War," *International History Review* 1, 2 (April 1979): 191-227, and Bruce Elleman, *Modern Chinese Warfare, 1795-1989* (London; New York: Routledge, 2001), pp. 94-115.

Japanese writers and painters also drew on Western Orientalist vocabulary and images of the Chinese and Japanese but inverted them to "westernize" Japan and distance it from a "backwards" China. My thanks to Seiji Shirane's suggestions on this point; see Stefan Tanaka, *Japan's Orient: Rendering Pasts into History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

⁷ Zhang Xia et al., *Qingmo haijun shiliao* (Beijing: Haiyang chubanshe, 1982), pp. 301-327, and John L. Rawlinson, *China's Struggle for Naval Development, 1839-1895* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967), pp. 163-169. See also Keene, "The Sino-Japanese War," p. 132. Almost 14,000 men manned Japan's naval fleet of 32 warships and 23 torpedo boats. Ten ships were built in Britain, and two in France. The *Yoshino* from Britain's Armstrong's shipyard was arguably the fastest vessel of its time when it was timed at twenty-three knots in 1893 trials.

Accompanied by his Western advisors, whom the Japanese did not depict and thus apparently did not need on their side,⁸ the Qing admiral in the image below bowed to the ramrod straight-

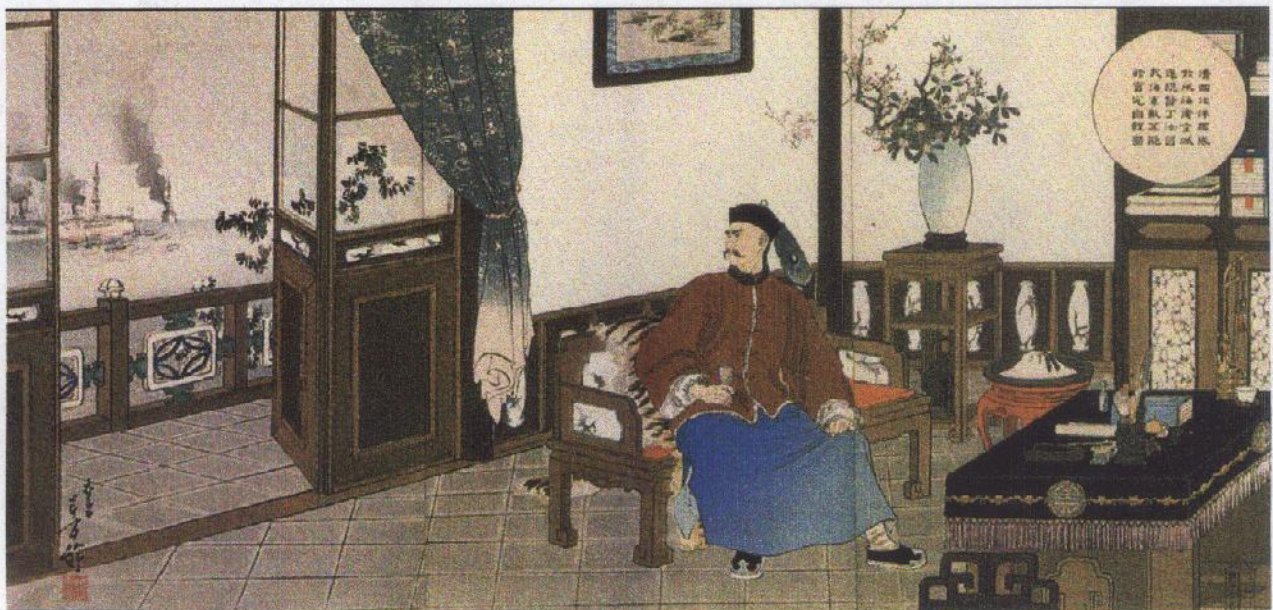


backboned Japanese. The latter received the Qing concession with mixed pride and contempt. The only honor that accrued to the Chinese Admiral Ding Ruchang (d. 1895; see small picture below) from the Japanese side was his subsequent suicide while under Japanese house arrest, thus placing him within the Japanese definition of war honor and how to appropriately respond to and take responsibility for failure.

⁸ Actually however, Western expertise at Yokosuka had been mandatory. See Takehiko Hashimoto, "Introducing a French Technological System: The Origin and Early History of the Yokosuka Dockyard," *East Asian Science, Technology, and Medicine* 16 (1999): 53-72. Many of the Yokosuka experts had first trained at the Fuzhou Shipyard.



Below: Admiral Ding contemplates suicide



Yet general opinion among foreigners in Shanghai and Tokyo had initially favored Li Hongzhang's fleet over Japan's. Although Japanese newspapers, magazines and fiction were marked by exhilaration at the prospect of war with China, some Japanese were not overly confident of victory, however. The publicist Fukuzawa Yukichi (1835-1901), warned against overconfidence, for instance, although he agreed with Japan's just cause in spreading

independence and enlightenment to a Korea. The Meiji emperor was reluctant to begin hostilities. He had refused to send messengers to the imperial shrines at Ise or to his father's grave to announce the war until the news of the initial Japanese victories was communicated to him. Japanese Diet members were also surprised at the easy victory.⁹

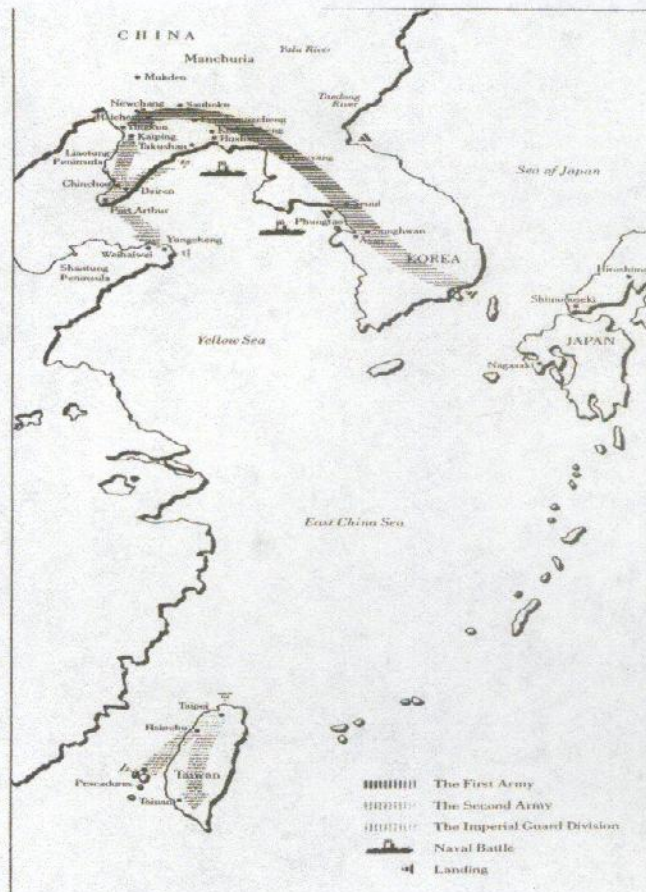
Another British observer noted that Chinese crews engaged in the war were at half-strength, but salaries for full crews were paid. The greatest contrast lay in the fact that Japan's navy was unified. In the end Li Hongzhang's Beiyang navy fought the Japanese principally alone. Li had kept his fleet out of the Fuzhou battle at Mawei with France in 1884, and the southern Nanyang officers now got their revenge on the Northern Fleet by keeping their fleet out of war with Japan for the most part.¹⁰

With the political and economic opening of Korea as the key dispute, hostilities commenced when the first encounter between Chinese and Japanese ships occurred on July 25th at Fengdao. China's two warships proved no match against an unprovoked attack. The Chinese naively honored what they thought were the required rules of etiquette in warfare, i.e., the Japanese were expected to declare war before initiating hostilities. After Fengdao, the Qing Northern Fleet tried to defend the Chinese coast from Weihaiwei and Port Arthur to the mouth of Yalu River and finally declared war on Japan on August first (see map below).¹¹

⁹ *The Japan Weekly Mail*, August 4, 1894, pp. 130-131. See also Keene, "The Sino-Japanese War," pp. 127, 132. Compare Shumpei Okamoto, "Background of the Sino-Japanese War, 1894-95," in *Impressions of the Front: Woodcuts of the Sino-Japanese War, 1894-95* (Philadelphia: Museum of Art, 1983), p. 13. On the Japanese media before the war see also Paine, *The Sino-Japanese War*, pp. 134-140. Japanese newspaper reports claimed that Japan had defeated China despite China's initial military superiority.

¹⁰ Elman, *On Their Own Terms*, pp. 377-379.

¹¹ *The Japan Weekly Mail*, August 4, 1894, p. 132, explains the importance of the naval war. See also Paine, *The Sino-Japanese War*, pp. 132-135, 158-163.



Subsequently, the Japanese naval raid at Weihaiwei stunned the Qing court, while Li Hongzhang stalled and made excuses. Weihaiwei and Port Arthur controlled the entrance to Bohai Bay and the sea approaches to Beijing. The main Beiyang fleet gathered at the mouth of the Yalu where a major naval battle with Japan commenced on September 17th. It was arguably the first great naval battle employing steam-powered fleets.¹² Technology alone was not the

¹² Some accounts claim the Chinese Northern fleet had fourteen warships led by two ironclad ships. Others claim the Chinese had only ten vessels. *The Japan Weekly Mail* claimed eleven Japanese ships faced twenty Chinese. See Okamoto, "Background of the Sino-Japanese War," p. 13. Compare Paine, *The Sino-Japanese War*, pp. 178-192, 197-198. Each side had twelve ships in the clash. China had the advantage in armor and weight in a single salvo, while Japan had a decided advantage in speed of ships and total amount of metal thrown in a sustained exchange

key determinant. Japan, for example, could not match China's two major battleships. Japan proved to be superior in naval leadership, ship maneuverability, and the availability of explosive shells. With hindsight, assuming that Qing and Meiji strategic decisions remained the same, it was clear that the speed and rapidity of fire of Japan's ships were more important at Yalu than the weight of the Qing vessels and their superior armor.¹³

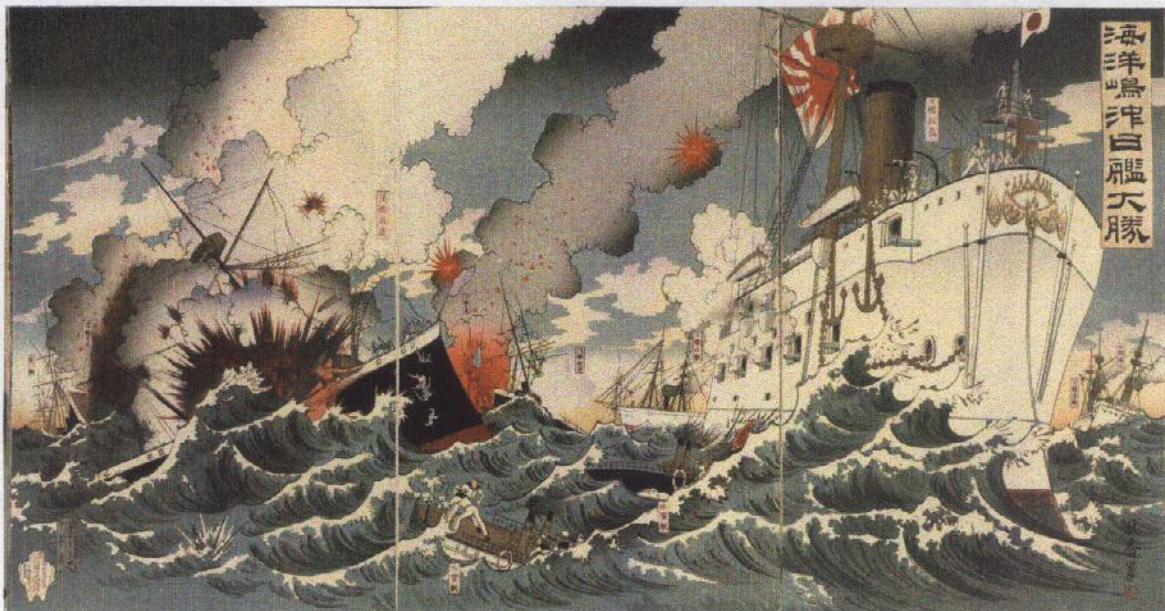
Shore engagements continued after the battle at the Yalu as the Japanese took advantage of their unexpectedly decisive victory at sea to launch a land war that allowed the Japanese First Army to occupy Pyongyang and then cross the Yalu to enter China at the Manchurian border. In addition, Japanese cryptographers had since June 1894 decoded Li Hongzhang's military communications. The Japanese Second Army, formed in September 1894, landed on the Liaodong Peninsula and took Port Arthur. The poor command structure of the Beiyang Fleet and the lack of a court martial system made it impossible to place blame on any Qing officers or allocate reward properly.¹⁴

of salvos. Japan had more quick-firing guns that could fire three times more weight in shells than China's larger guns could.

¹³ Rawlinson, *China's Struggle*, pp. 169-174, 201. From smaller guns, Chinese fired 482 shots and registered 58 hits, 22 on one ship. They also launched 5 torpedoes without hits. China scored about 10% of her tries. The Japanese, on the other hand, with their rapid-firers scored about 15% of their tries. In addition, the Chinese were hampered by shortages of ammunition especially for her bigger guns. Some were filled with cement, e.g., the one that struck the Matsushima and the two that passed through the Saikyo. This suggests that there were serious corruption problems in Li Hongzhang's supply command.

¹⁴ Rawlinson, *China's Struggle*, pp. 174-197, and Paine, *The Sino-Japanese War*, pp. 194-195, 206-222, 228-238. See also Yoda Yoshiie, "Jûkyûseiki kôhan ni okeru Nisshin ryôgoku no shokusan seisaku ni tsuite," *Shakai kagaku tôkyû* 12, 3 (March 1967): 1-38. See also Louise Virgin, "Japan at the Dawn of the Modern Age," in *Japan at the Dawn of the Modern Age: Woodblock Prints from the Meiji Era, 1868-1912* (Boston: Museum of Fine Arts, 2001), pp. 66-72, 86. The Qing personnel system was unpredictable and far from impartial. Many Chinese captains and officers simply committed suicide. No one dared to question the command structure or demand a board of review independent of the navy.

The Sino-Japanese War generated intense Japanese self-confidence after 1895. The Japanese navy was enhanced by the capture of twelve Chinese warships and seven torpedo boats during hostilities, which added significant tonnage to the Meiji fleet. Moreover, Japanese industrialization accelerated after the Qing dynasty was forced to pay a considerable indemnity to the Meiji regime. The Japanese government used the indemnity as a windfall to bankroll a massive rearmament program to address the Russian expansion on the borders of northeast China. Korea and Taiwan were ceded to Japan and became colonies. Rather than the indemnity, the Japanese woodblock carvers chose instead to emphasize the size and scale of their navy for their victory in 1895, rather than admit to the windfall profits in money and captured ships gained from the war (see image below of the victorious Yoshino battleship).¹⁵



¹⁵ The 200 million Kuping Taels handed over to Japan amounted to about 7.45 million kg of silver, which was equal to over US \$3.8 billion at current prices, or two to three times the annual Japanese government's revenues. We have seen above that the Japanese press initially downplayed Japan's military superiority.

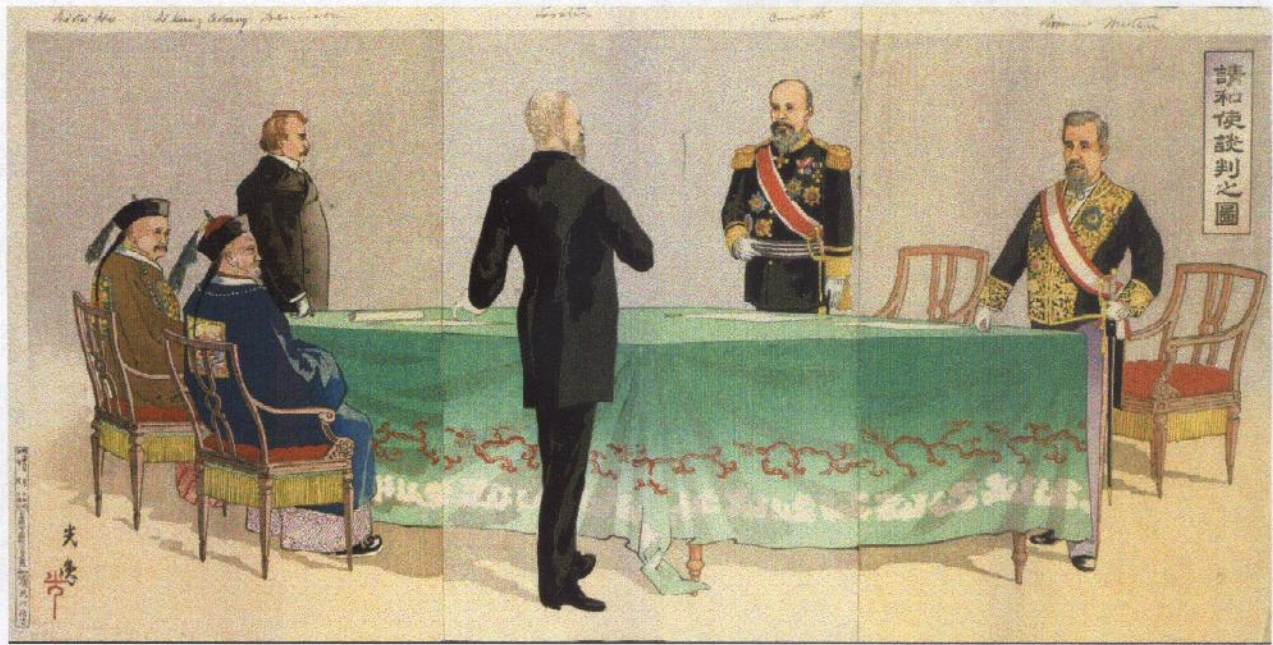
The indemnity also meant that China's huge payments to Japan could not be used to augment the Qing dynasty's reconstruction projects. The Shanghai Arsenal and Fuzhou Shipyard in particular never recovered from the indemnities. If the Qing government was unable to integrate development so that innovative institutions reinforced each other before this, the added weight of Japanese and European imperialism after 1895 tipped the scales. The Qing reforms initiated in 1865 had even less chances of success under such political conditions.¹⁶

As shown below, the Japanese woodblock version of the treaty signed in 1895, depicted Itō Hirobumi and Admiral Mutsu standing tall as European-style generalissimos who dressed and looked like their European counterparts, replete with medals and honors bestowed on them for their political and military contributions. The Chinese ministers, Li Hongzhang and He Dikei, were shown seated in traditional robes and primitive, if not feminine feathers, in their caps. They appeared not to understand what was going on at the proceedings, in which they were represented by two American diplomats, one of them, John Foster (1836-1917) in particular, was the grandfather of the future John Foster-Dulles, diplomat extraordinaire after Korean War ended in the early 1950s. The Americans stood to the sides of their Chinese bosses and fully represented them in the negotiations. In effect, the Japanese at the peace conference were dealing with the like-minded Westerners and not the out of touch Qing delegates.¹⁷

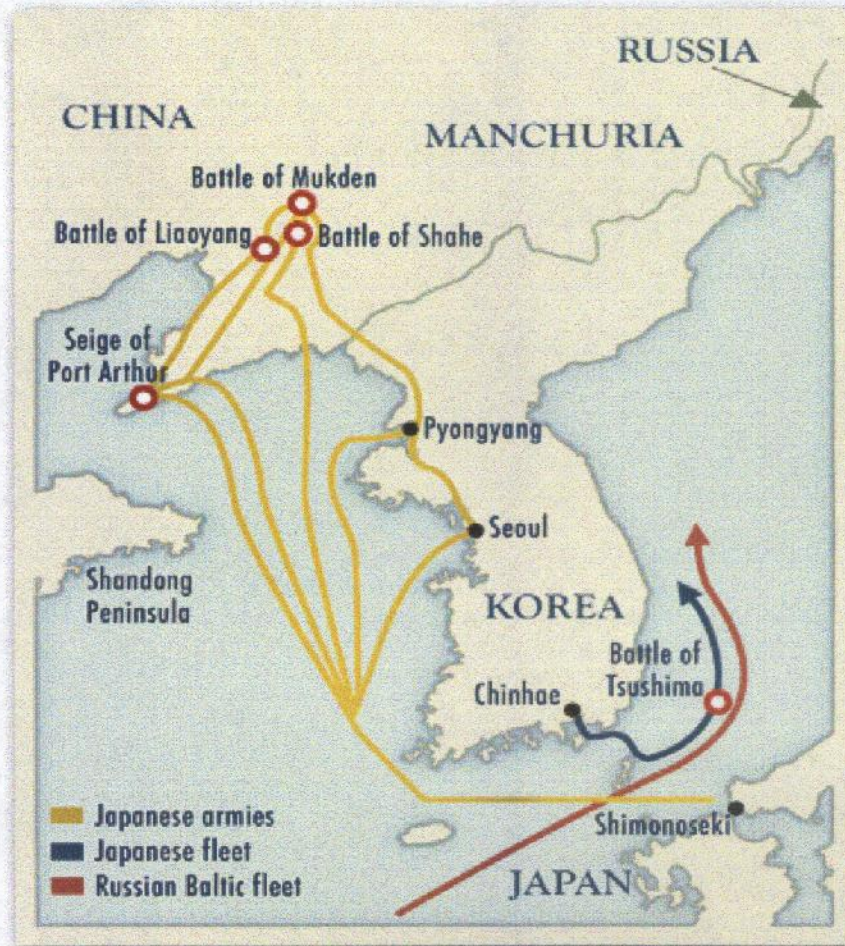
The Treaty of Shimonoseki:

¹⁶ Paine, *The Sino-Japanese War*, pp. 265-266, 326-327.

¹⁷ See Okamoto, "Background of the Sino-Japanese War," p. 16, and Virgin, "Japan at the Dawn of the Modern Age," p. 112. See also Paine, *The Sino-Japanese War*, pp. 192-195, 247-293, 306-309. On Russian military developments, see J. N. Westwood, *Russia Against Japan, 1904-05: A New Look at the Russo-Japanese War* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Macmillan, 1986).



For the Japanese public, the victory developed into the key event that energized the newly emergent Meiji press, and drowned out editorial debate over Japan's military role in Korea. Public rage was also directed at the European powers for intervening on the side of China. When Russia later forced the Qing to lease the Liaodong Peninsula and Port Arthur to them, the Japanese were primed for war with Moscow over the fate of Manchuria. Public enthusiasm for military adventures became a common feature when the dissemination of the national news became a central feature of the Japanese press after 1895. There were by then 600 thousand newspaper subscribers in Tokyo and Osaka alone. The Japanese victory over China reverberated throughout the country and demonstrated the preeminence of Meiji Japan

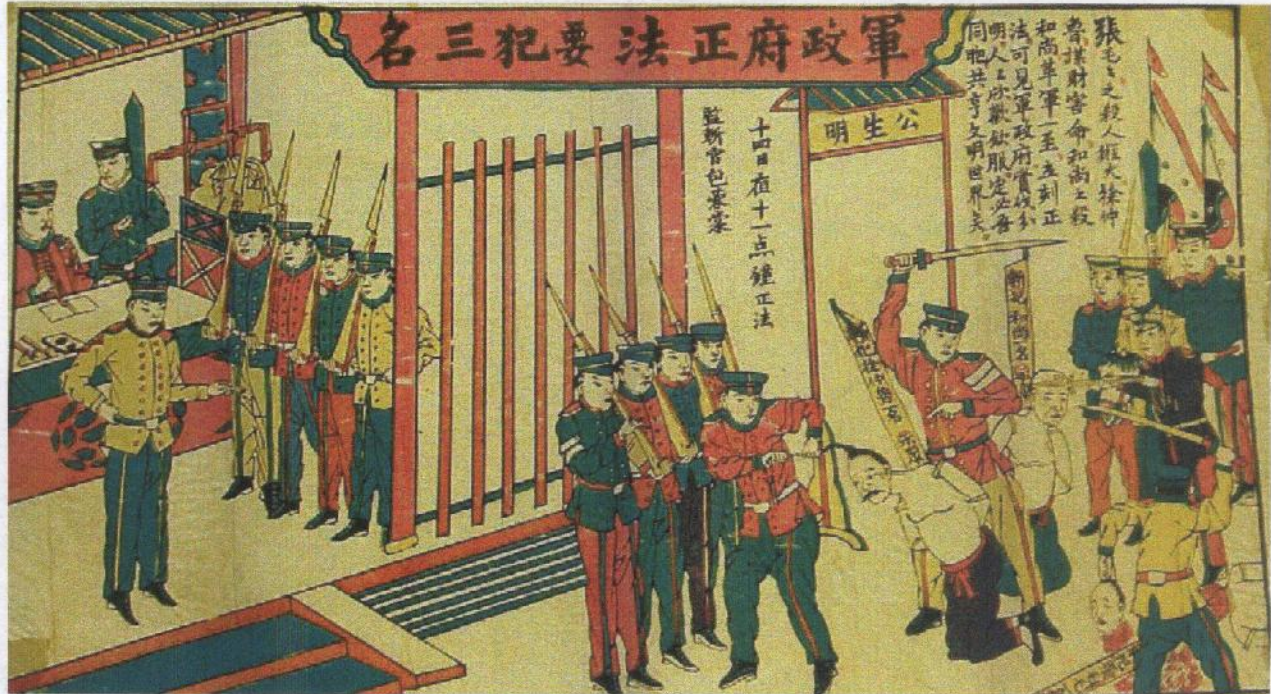


in East Asia. The Japanese naval victory over Russia in 1904-1905 cemented such national exuberance (see map above).¹⁸

Subsequently in 1911, the Nationalist revolutionaries who overthrew the Qing dynasty in 1911 depicted themselves in native Chinese woodblocks (see image above) as Meiji-style patriots who dressed in modern uniforms and executed those who remained loyal to the

¹⁸ See Keene, "Sino-Japanese War," pp. 121-175. See also James Huffman, "Commercialization and Changing World of the Mid-Meiji Press," pp. 574-579, and Giles Richter, "Entrepreneurship and Culture The Hakubunkai Publishing Empire in Meiji Japan," p. 591, both in Helen Hardacre and Adam Kern, eds., *New Directions in the Study of Meiji Japan* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1992).

Cutting off Queues and Heads by the ROC forces (Princeton Firestone Library).



Manchu regime, particularly those who still shaved their heads and wore their braided queue to signal submission to their Manchu overlords. Euro-American missionaries and experts who had aided in the Qing dynasty's scientific translation projects, which were used as textbooks in the arsenals and technical schools, now also thought that the Chinese nation, language, and culture were doomed.¹⁹

Reconsidering the Woodblock Prints as "Optical Illusions"

In their depictions of the Sino-Japanese War, Japanese woodblock artisans depicted Japan's military victory as a decisive cultural victory. Japan had left the backward Chinese and Koreans behind, or so it appeared at the time, and had become an important player among the

¹⁹ See van de Ven, "War in the Making of Modern China," pp. 737-756. Paine, *The Sino-Japanese War*, pp. 64-66, 333-366, explains China's failure to industrialize in light of cultural issues. Elleman, *Modern Chinese Warfare*, p. 102, continues to stress China's scientific and technological inability to support a modern navy.

global powers in Europe, notably, Germany, Great Britain, and France. Thus the woodblocks that so upset the Chinese graduate students who viewed them on line were not only offensive for their military violence. They were also offensive for their symbolic and cultural violence. They represented a modern Japan that had superseded China in the East Asian world.²⁰

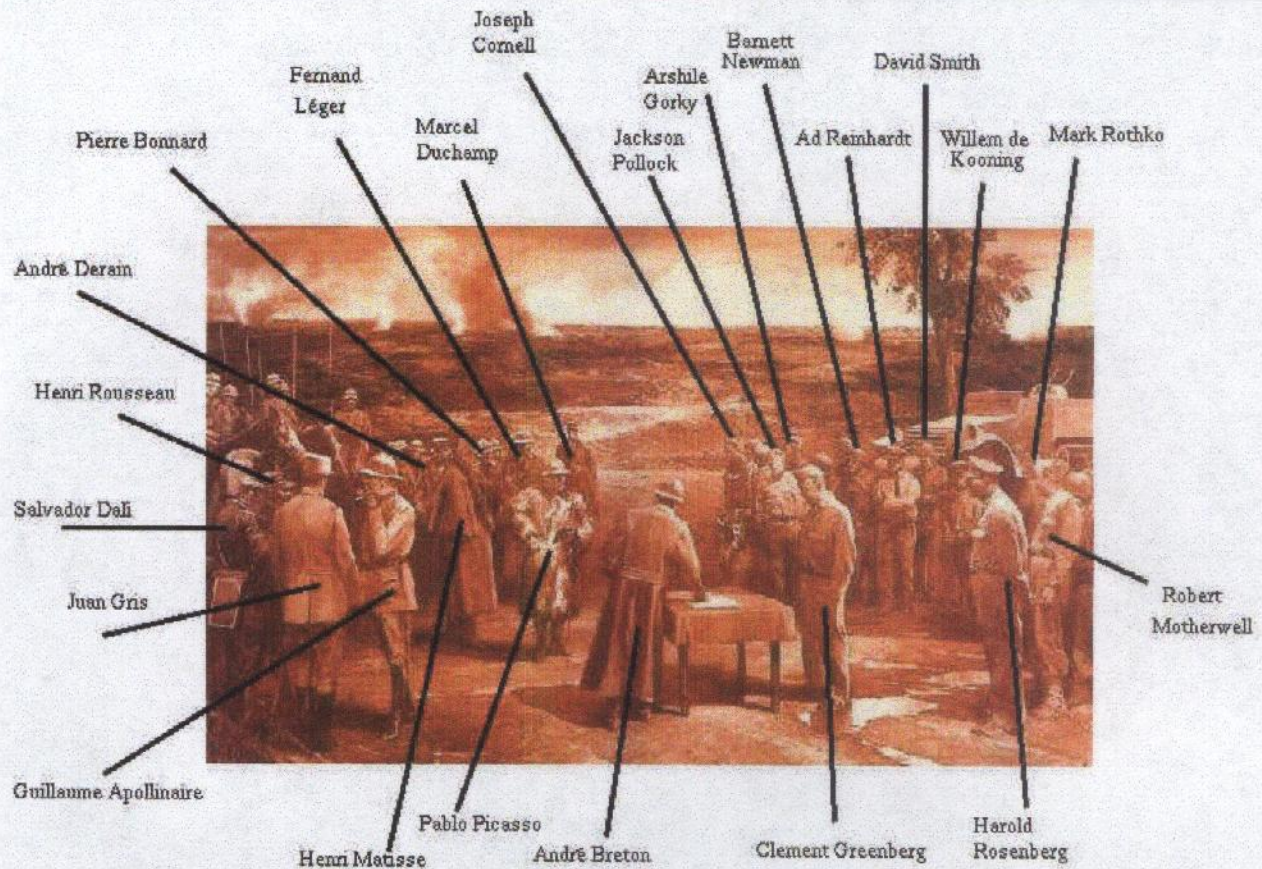
We can read a similar cultural and historical meaning into it when we look at one of the post-modern painter Mark Tansey's images. His 1984 painting entitled "Triumph of the New York School," in particular, presents New York's artistic preeminence as an American military victory via superior World War Two technology (above ground tanks) over the backward and deleterious (below the ground trenches) warfare style that had maimed and killed millions of Europeans during the First World War. In their WWII fatigues, Jackson Pollock and Willem de

²⁰ Allen Fung, "Testing the Self-Strengthening: The Chinese Army in the Sino-Japanese War of 1894-1895," *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol. 30, No. 4, Special Issue: War in Modern China (October 1996): 1007-1031. Compare Richard Smith, "Foreign Training and China's Self-Strengthening: The Case of Feng-huang-shan," *Modern Asian Studies* 10, 2 (1976): 195-223, which also stresses the late Qing failure to train a modern officer corps. Allen Fung reconsiders the "witch-hunt for the inadequacies of the Chinese army and navy" that ensued after 1895. Fung focuses on the defeat of the Chinese army in the Sino-Japanese War because Japanese land victories gave them a clear path to march on Beijing. This threat to the capital forced the Qing court to seek an immediate settlement of the war. In contrast to accounts in China that still accuse Li Hongzhang of cowardice for his peace at any cost policy, Fung maintains that Chinese armies were well-equipped during the early stage of the war with Japan and that the Chinese field commanders were not incompetent. He refutes earlier claims that China's land defeats in the Sino-Japanese War were due to the failure of the Chinese ordinance industry. Fung concludes that the primary explanations for China's losses in the land war are: (1) the better military training Japanese troops and officers received when compared to their Chinese counterparts; and (2) the fact that Qing troops were outnumbered by the Japanese at the major battles. I would add that the Qing court and its regional leaders underestimated the dangers of relying on European aid in an age of imperialism.

Mark Tansey, "The Triumph of the New York School" (1984).



Kooning represented the modest "awe-shucks" attitudes of the Americans in accepting the pompous concessions of a furious Pablo Picasso and grim-faced Henri Matisse, who are forced to concede the leadership in the art world to the Americans. Dressed in ridiculous plumes and standing in the back, Salvador Dali seems oblivious to the entire event. Tansey's point--though tongue-in-cheek--is roughly the same as that of the Japanese woodblock printers of 1894-1895. The cultural victory of New York over Western Europe in 1945, like that of Meiji Japan's victory over Qing China in 1895, grew out of a military victory whereby the stronger and superior moderns have violently and once and for all thrust aside their backward and conservative predecessors.



The construction of China's backwardness after the Sino-Japanese War was a by-product of the Japanese victory in 1895. Thereafter, Japanese accounts of pre-modern Chinese art, literature, culture, economy, and politics focused on the infirm backwardness and fatal corruptions in taste and decadent values that the Manchu Qing dynasty had exhibited in its demise. These views were so well articulated and wide-spread in the Meiji Japanese scholarly art world of Okakura Tenshin (1862-1913) that not only naïve Europeans and Americans were influenced by this pretentious, Japanese cultural juggernaut. Chinese reformers and revolutionaries also memorized the Japanese lexicon detailing the Meiji defeat of Qing China on the battlefield and its triumph over Chinese tastes in world opinion. One can hardly imagine the self-loathing of the Chinese after 1895 without a Japanese guidebook to Chinese backwardness.

Indeed, the Japanese invention of the Song dynasty by Naitō Konan (1866-1934) and other Kyoto scholars as an early modern Orientalist dreamscape, replete with precocious reformers and brilliant artists and poets, survives only mildly challenged to this day in Western sinology via Robert Hartwell and his disciples. This view represents the triumph of the Chinese past over its present, which only the Japanese were astute enough to recognize at first, the first East Asian version of Orientalism vis-à-vis China.²¹

In fact, John Fryer (1839-1928), the man who had tirelessly translated several score of works on science and technology into Chinese presumed that the Sino-Japanese War had proven that all efforts since 1865 to reform Qing China had been a failure. Fryer became a voice of doom for China's future:

Of course this looks to the gradual decay of the Chinese language and literature, and with them the comparative uselessness of my many years of labor. Their doom seems to be inevitable, for only the fittest can survive. It may take many generations to accomplish, but sooner or later the end must come, and English be the learned language of the Empire.²²

²¹ Dieter Kuhn's *The Age of Confucian Rule: The Song Transformation of China* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), monumentalizes this Japanese narrative. See, however, Stefan Tanaka, *Japan's Orient: Rendering Pasts into History*.

²² Ferdinand Dagenais, *John Fryer's Calendar: Correspondence, Publications, and Miscellaneous Papers with Excerpts and Commentary* (Berkeley: Center for Chinese Studies, University of California, Berkeley, 1999), Version 3, 1895: 4-6. On the eve of his departure for California, however, Fryer remained involved in China's affairs. He publicly announced a competition for new age novels (*xin xiaoshuo*) in Chinese that would enhance the morals of China. This appeal for a new literature written in "easy and clear language with meaningful implications and graceful style" attracted the interest of reformers who called for a new culture in China, premised on the failure of traditional Chinese civilization.

The triple evils of opium, stereotypical examination essays, and footbinding symbolized this failure. In the 1890s, Qing radicals and revolutionaries increasingly adapted the three evils campaigns to discredit the Manchu regime. The Boxer Rebellion of 1900 confirmed the fears of many missionaries such as William Martin. In the 1868 preface for his *Elements of Natural Philosophy and Chemistry*, Martin had hoped to rescue "the intellect of the Chinese" from the "barren field" of *belles lettres*. Now he sounded shriller: "Let this pagan empire be partitioned among Christian powers."²³

What the MIT Visualizing Cultures Controversy in part represented was a public rejection of the Meiji Japanese meta-narrative for the whole of East Asian history that began in 1895 and was then read into the past and future. The irony for Americans was that the contemporary agents of rejection of this very tired narrative were mainly PRC Chinese graduate students living in the halls of MIT and other leading American universities where that Japanese master narrative had been reproduced uncritically for several generations by American professors. The greater irony was for some of the Chinese students, however. The few who had maliciously attacked Professors Dower and Miyagawa for preparing the website presenting Japan as the dominant power in Asia failed to realize that the underlying Meiji narrative of Japanese cultural superiority over Qing China that they were attacking was accepted by both the Nationalists and the Communists in their all-out ideological war on Chinese traditional

²³ William Martin, *The Awakening of China* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1907), p. 177. See also Patrick Hanan, "The Missionary Novels of Nineteenth-Century China," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 60, 2 (December 2000): 440-441, and Anonymous, "The New Novel Before the New Novel," in Judith T. Zeitlin and Lydia H. Liu, eds., *Writing and Materiality in China: Essays in Honor of Patrick Hanan* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center for Harvard-Yenching Institute, 2003.) pp. 317-340.

culture and civilization in the 1915-1919 New Culture Movement and during the 1966-1976 Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution.

The cultural violence that grew out of the First Sino-Japanese War served not just Meiji Japan but also both modern Chinese political parties--the Guomindang and the Chinese Communists--in their efforts to fashion a new China that would one day catch up with and surpass Japan. Japanese artisans carved the Meiji woodblock prints to herald a new era after 1895 using an old art form. That art form now conveys an earlier age of Japanese dominance in East Asia and the Pacific that is rapidly passing from view in 2009. The deeper analysis of the MIT controversy thus leads us away from the Meiji woodblocks to the Chinese students instead. They spoke for a twenty-first century in East Asia in which Japan's superiority over China in world opinion would be decisively cut down to size.