

THROWING OFF ASIA III

WOODBLOCK PRINTS OF THE RUSSO-JAPANESE WAR (1904-05)

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Chapter Five: Asia's New Overlord

Although Japan's army and navy won many battles against the Russians, the war did not end in overwhelming Japanese victory as it had a decade earlier. Both sides were physically and financially near exhaustion, and peace came in the form of a negotiated settlement brokered by U.S. president Theodore Roosevelt. At a peace conference held in the unlikely locale of Portsmouth, New Hampshire, Russia agreed to pull back from Manchuria and Korea, and Japan gained its long-desired strategic foothold on the Asian continent, centering on Liaotung and all of southern Manchuria. (Korea was annexed as a Japanese colony five years later, in 1910.) To the astonishment and fury of Japanese back home, there was no lucrative cash indemnity such as has been extracted from China in the earlier war—a decision agreed on at Portsmouth that provoked widespread rioting in Japan.

In theory, Imperial Japan had finally “thrown off Asia” and joined the great and “modern” imperialist powers. And, indeed, the decade that followed saw Japan join the victorious nations in World War One and eventually participate in the postwar peace conference—seated as one of the so-called Great Powers and helping decide both how to govern and how to divide up the world.

In actuality, of course, Japan had not thrown off Asia at all. Victory over Russia confirmed the nation's position as overlord of northeast Asia—and more. It also heightened the “race feeling” Lafcadio Hearn had already observed and warned about in the wake of the earlier victory over the Chinese. A single-sheet woodblock print published shortly after the war conveyed this with unusual forthrightness. Titled “Allegory of Japanese Power,” it portrayed a Japanese man in everyday traditional clothing (*kimono*, *haori* coat, white *tabi* socks, and wooden clogs) kicking away a cowering Chinese man and a fearful Westerner—presumably a Russian, but who could say for sure?

“Allegory of Japanese Power: Japanese Man Kicking a Cowering Chinaman and a Fearful Westerner,” artist unidentified

[2000.458] Sharf Collection, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

