

THROWING OFF ASIA II

WOODBLOCK PRINTS OF THE SINO-JAPANESE WAR (1894-95)

BY JOHN W. DOWER

Chapter Two: Kiyochika's War

The energy and artistic skill of the best war prints are all the more remarkable when we keep in mind the haste of their composition. Some sense of the impressive nature of this accomplishment can be gleaned by an overview of prints by Kiyochika, the most esteemed of these artists, who is calculated to have produced more than seventy triptychs during the brief ten months of the Sino-Japanese War. Kiyochika's impressions of the front ranged from the lyrical to the atrocious, sometimes even bringing these two extremes together.

War Prints of Kobayashi Kiyochika

Kobayashi Kiyochika (1847-1915) was by far the greatest woodblock artist of the Sino-Japanese War. The prints by him in this "gallery" are all introduced in this section.





In Kiyochika's war, a cavalry officer stands before a horse in a quilted blanket, a rowboat buried in slabs of ice by his feet, and observes troops crossing a frozen river in the pale glow of dawn. We can almost feel the numbing cold. In a comparably crisp winter scene, three officers stand around a telescope on a snow-buried bluff at Weihaiwei, looking down on a Chinese fleet in the harbor that they will soon destroy. (Kiyochika's early-morning colors here and elsewhere often show a Western influence art historians have called "Turneresque," after the English master of painterly light.)



"The Army Advancing on the Ice to Attack Weihaiwei"
by Kobayashi Kiyochika, 1895

[2000.417] Sharf Collection, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston



"Picture of Advance Disposition of Troops at Weihaiwei"
by Kobayashi Kiyochika, 1895

[2000.420] Sharf Collection, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston



"Our Scout Reconnoiters the Enemy Encampment near the Yalu River" by Kobayashi Kiyochika, 1894

[2000.380.28] Sharf Collection, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

In other Kiyochika prints, a blizzard whips across an army regiment almost invisible in the blinding snow; one must look twice to see the crouching figures. Campfires pierce the dead of a winter night as a shadowy mounted figure pauses before a tent where, as we know from the Red Cross flag, the wounded are being tended. An exhausted officer asleep on the front dreams of returning as a hero to his family back home.



"Illustration of the Attack and Occupation of Tianzhuangtai" by Kobayashi Kiyochika, 1895

[2000.250] Sharf Collection, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston



"Braving the Bitter Cold, Our Troops Set Up Camp at Yingkou"
by Kobayashi Kiyochika, 1895

[2000.419] Sharf Collection, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston



"Illustration of the Attack and Occupation of Tianzhuangtai"
by Kobayashi Kiyochika, 1895

[2000.250] Sharf Collection, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

Occasionally, Kiyochika “quotes” himself with a subtlety worlds apart from the repetitive figures and themes found in prints by less accomplished artists like Toshikata. In another winter scene, for example, officers in heavy overcoats (one mounted on another horse with a quilted blanket) are posed in falling snow before a shadowy line of soldiers with their rifles held upright like a picket fence. Another print depicts a naval officer wading ashore from a rowboat that had delivered him from a shadow warship. Behind him, sailors hold their long oars perfectly upright in the light fog—much like the rifles in the snowstorm. A depiction of high-ranking officers questioning local Chinese informants after a snowstorm frames the deceptively serene scene in a rainbow.



*“Illustration of the Landing and Advance to Weihaiwei”
by Kobayashi Kiyochika, 1895*

[2000.418] Sharf Collection, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston



*“Illustration of General Nozu Moving Forward and Taking a
Look at Liaoyang in Clearing Weather After Snow”
by Kobayashi Kiyochika, 1895*

[2000.178] Sharf Collection, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

Kiyochika brought the same adroit touch to combat scenes, and several of his battlefront prints are classic expressions of the mystique of Japan’s destiny as a modernizing power in a backward Asian world. In a dramatic rendering of an injured cavalry officer (Captain Asakawa) and his aide surrounded by the foe, three dead Chinese lie in pelting rain as the officer steps over his dead mount while his mortally wounded aide leads his own horse forward for Asakawa to ride. The slanting rainfall evokes pre-Meiji woodblock masters such as Hiroshige, but the scene itself is pure Kiyochika.



*“Picture of the Hard Fight of the Scout Cavalry-Captain Asakawa”
by Kobayashi Kiyochika, January 1895*

[2000.180] Sharf Collection, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

A similarly somber atmosphere permeates Kiyochika’s rendering of “Harada Jūkichi” scaling the Hyonmu Gate in Pyongyang (the subject of one of the Toshikata prints introduced earlier). Here the moon looks down on the hero standing high on a rampart. At his feet lies a slain foe who is not merely garbed in an old-fashioned tunic, but also barefoot—as strong (and subtle) a statement of backwardness as one can imagine. As fire rises in the distance behind him, Harada gazes over a vast and almost empty vista, prickled with tiny starbursts of light, which occupies half the print. He might almost be looking to the future.



"Defying a Shower of Bullets, He, Alone, Opened Hyonmu Gate"
by Kobayashi Kiyochika, 1894

[2000.412] Sharf Collection, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

The big guns and spectacular explosions of modern warfare dazzled the woodblock artists, and Kiyochika met the challenge of portraying this with particular verve. Japanese fighting men throw their arms up in victory upon capturing the huge Chinese cannon at Weihaiwei. In a dramatic rendering of the artillery on the warship *Matsushima* (which took heavy damage in a battle near the end of 1894), a sailor dying by the gun is consoled by being told that victory is assured. A sequence of prints depicting the "Great Victory in the Battle of the Yellow Sea" revels in men fighting through heavy enemy bombardment, artillery fire bursting like fireworks in a night sky, the sea itself turned into a gigantic explosion.



"Picture of Our Armed Forces Occupying Ryuko Island"
by Kobayashi Kiyochika, March 1885

[2000.251] Sharf Collection, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston



"In the Battle of the Yellow Sea a Sailor Onboard Our Japanese Warship Matsushima, on the Verge of Dying, Asked Whether or Not the Enemy Ship had been Destroyed" by Kobayashi Kiyochika, October 1894

[2000.109a-c] Sharf Collection, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston



*“Our Forces’ Great Victory in the Battle of the Yellow Sea -
First Illustration” by Kobayashi Kiyochika, October 1894*

[2000.380.15] Sharf Collection, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston



*“Our Forces’ Great Victory in the Battle of the Yellow Sea -
Second Illustration” by Kobayashi Kiyochika, October 1894*

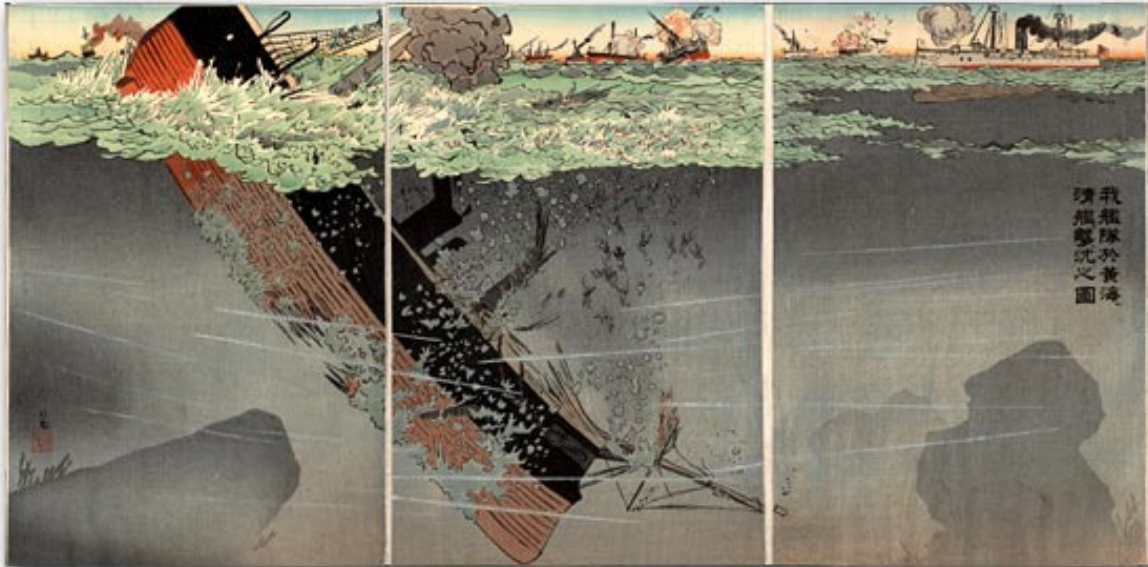
[2000.380.16] Sharf Collection, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston



*“Our Forces’ Great Victory in the Battle of the Yellow Sea - Third
Illustration: The Desperate Fight of the Two Warships Akagi and Hiei”
by Kobayashi Kiyochika, October 1894*

[2000.380.17a-c] Sharf Collection, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

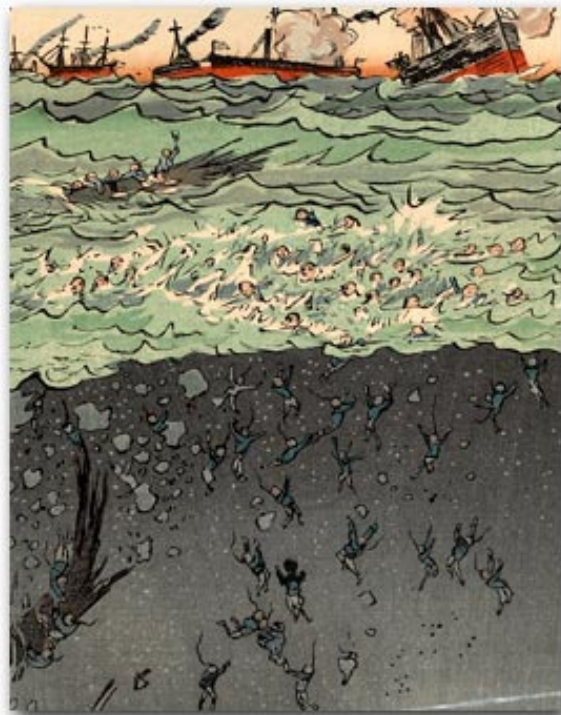
In another print of the naval war, Kiyochika let his imagination run wild. His subject was the cruiser *Zhiyuan*, which sank near the mouth of the Yalu River. Where most prints imagined the Japanese annihilating their opponents on choppy seas, Kiyochika’s doomed vessel is already underwater, plunging to the bottom with tiny drowned figures floating suspended in the brine. Standing in almost giddy contrast to this is a startling depiction of sailors cheering the sinking of a Chinese warship on the deck of their small torpedo boat. Amid turbulent waves, they are already drinking in celebration and obviously getting sloshed in more ways than one.



“Picture of Our Naval Forces in the Yellow Sea Firing at and Sinking Chinese Warships” by Kobayashi Kiyochika, October 1894 (above, with detail, right)

[2000.380.22] Sharf Collection,
Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

Tiny rag-doll-like Chinese drown in the sea as a Chinese ship plunges to the bottom. A typical example of the almost reflexive dehumanization of the enemy found in many of the war prints.





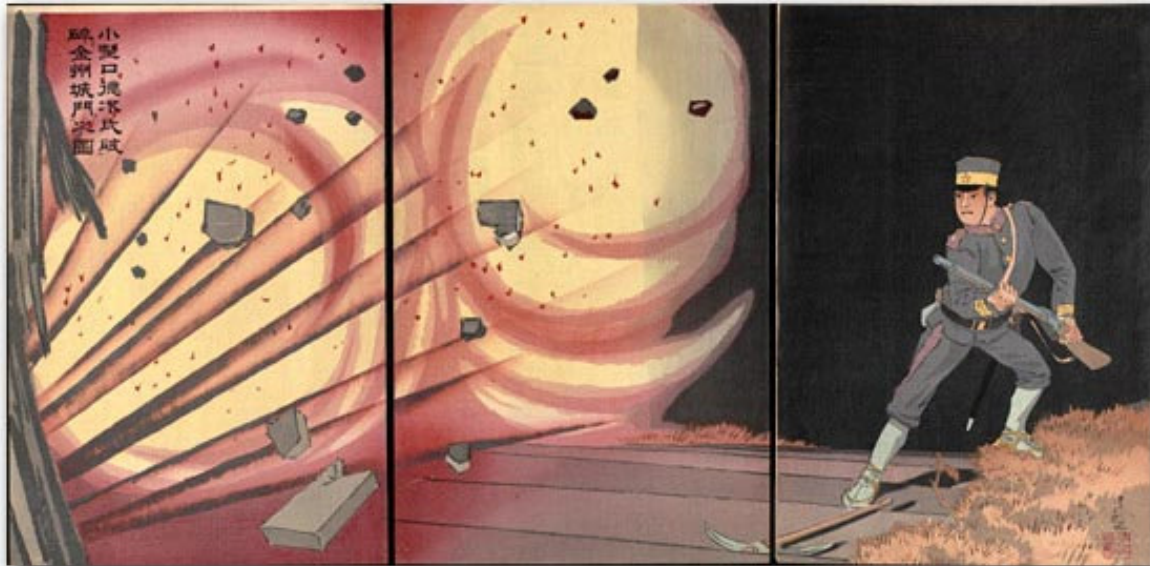
“Our Torpedo Sinks the Enemy Warship Dingyuan at the Battle of Weihaiwei” by Kobayashi Kiyochika, February 1895 (above, with detail, left)

[2000.104a-c] Sharf Collection,
Museum of Fine Arts, Boston



In this unexpectedly droll print, sailors on a torpedo boat enjoy a celebratory drink in the midst of battle. The military discipline celebrated in most war prints seems hardly in evidence here—although drinking on deck in turbulent seas probably conveyed an appealing aura of bravado all its own.

Many Kiyochika prints convey a cartoon quality that foreshadows the manga usually associated with Japanese popular culture after World War Two. (Devotees of manga history point to the graphics of the Sino-Japanese War as a decisive turning point). Dynamite and artillery barrages explode in red, orange, and yellow fireballs. Enemy figures become flattened into cartoonish black silhouettes, and picked off by Japanese riflemen as if they were targets in a shooting gallery. Japanese infantry creep along the ground against a beautifully stylized dusk sky, half men and half almost invaders from another world.



*“Onoguchi Tokuji Destroying the Gate at Jinzhoucheng”
by Kobayashi Kiyochika, 1894*

[2000.230] Sharf Collection, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston



*“Illustration of the Attack at the Site of the Hundred Foot Cliff”
by Kobayashi Kiyochika, 1895*

[2000.011] Sharf Collection, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston



*“Scene of the Land-based Battery Attack on Weihaiwei”
by Kobayashi Kiyochika, February 1895*

[2000.254] Sharf Collection, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston



*“Picture of Our Second Army Landing at Jinzhoucheng and
Bombarding the Enemy Camp” by Kobayashi Kiyochika, 1894*

[2000.380.33] Sharf Collection, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston



*“Picture of Our Elite Forces Capturing the Pescadores Islands, Taiwan”
by Kobayashi Kiyochika, December 1894*

[2000.422] Sharf Collection, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston



*“Illustration of the Second Army's Assault on Port Arthur”
by Kobayashi Kiyochika, 1894*

[2000.414] Sharf Collection, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston



"Picture of Our Armed Forces Winning a Great Victory After a Fierce Battle at Pyongyang" by Kobayashi Kiyochika, October 1894

[2000.229] Sharf Collection, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

Kiyochika's highly aesthetic and romanticized war ends not merely in righteous slaughter but in the sheer pleasure of delivering death. In one vigorous print, his action-figure hero, camouflaged with straw, bayonets a Chinese in the back so ferociously the victim is lifted high in the air. In another rendering of impressive technical accomplishment, where Kiyochika captures a sense of the whirlwind turbulence of a dusty battlefield, the routed foe, in brilliant cobalt tunics, simply leap out as grotesque and pitiful—cringing, begging for mercy, tumbling up-side-down.



*“Scouting Out the Enemy Situation near Tianzhuangtai”
by Kobayashi Kiyochika, about 1894*

[2000.021] Sharf Collection, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston



*“Picture of Captain Asakawa on Horseback at Battle”
by Kobayashi Kiyochika, January 1895*

[2000.181] Sharf Collection, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

Perhaps the single most appalling woodblock celebration of the Sino-Japanese War is also Kiyochika's. It depicts victorious Japanese forces blowing trumpets and raising their arms to heaven in a *banzai* cheer while standing on a mound of Chinese corpses.



*Banzai for Japan!: The
Victory Song of Pyongyang”
by Kobayashi Kiyochika,
October 1894 (above, with
detail, left)*

[2000.026] Sharf Collection,
Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

*This is one of many prints in
which, perhaps predictably,
the celebration of victory is
inseparable from the
grotesque dehumanization of
the fallen foe.*

In a series of single-block prints (as opposed to the usual triptych), Kiyochika offered a "Mirror of Army and Navy Heroes" that, as usual, paid tribute to real-life individuals. Typically, his heroes ran a gamut of settings—in this instance, from a wise admiral calmly reading a newspaper to "Captain Awata" cleaving the skull of his foe with his sword. Between these extremes, the artist's heroes included a soldier kind to Chinese civilians and a blinded sailor reverently touching one of the big guns that had brought victory to the Japanese side.

Kiyochika turned his hand to outright cartooning as well. His contributions to a wartime series called "Hurrah for Japan: One Hundred Selections—One Hundred Laughs" include Japanese soldiers shaving the wooden head of a Chinese man with a wood-plane, laughing at a Chinese man frightened by a snowman, and attacking a terrified Chinese sick man in a bed. Other woodblock cartoons by Kiyochika ridiculing the Chinese were issued under titles such as "Pig in a Serious Condition Series: The Sino-Japanese War" and "Dance of Cowardice Series: The Sino-Japanese War." Another Kiyochika cartoon depicts that most universal expression of martial ardor: children playing war games. Here the "Chinese" are prisoners of war.
