

THROWING OFF ASIA II

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

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Chapter Three: "Old China, New Japan"

In contrast to Kiyochika's distinctive thematic compositions, many woodblock artists reveled in the tumult and chaos of the battlefield. They offered their audience riotous melees—congested spectacles that invite the viewer to scrutinize the scene, sort out the combatants, discover any number of intimate details. Sometimes the detail is so dense it is startling to be reminded that these popular artworks were usually tossed off in a matter of days.

Still, predictable patterns give order to this chaos. Discipline (the Japanese side) prevails over disarray (the Chinese). The sword-wielding Japanese officer and bayonet-thrusting infantryman are invariably present—and easy to locate, since their black uniforms contrast sharply to the flamboyant clothing and paraphernalia of the Chinese. The enemy's garments vary from battle to battle but are always colorful and frequently decorated with elaborate designs. Their headgear suggests that they employ many different haberdashers. In contrast to the ubiquitous rising-sun-with-rays military flag of the Japanese, Chinese banners and ensigns feature a range of designs. Sometimes the enemy employ archaic weapons such as a three-prong pike or trident. Here and there they carry old-fashioned round shields decorated with garish face-like designs. The braided queues worn by Chinese men often stretch out like ropes or snakes; sometimes they are coiled in a bun. In short, the Chinese are depicted as being riotous in every way—disgracefully so in their behavior, and delightfully so in their accoutrements.



*“Great Attack in Snow at Fort of One-Hundred-Foot Cliff Near Weihaiwei:
Illustration of Major General Odera’s Desperate Fight - Commander of the 11th
Brigade” by Utagawa Kokunimasa, February 1895*

[2000.102] Sharf Collection, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston



*“Chinese and Japanese Troops: Picture of a Fierce Battle at Gaiping”
by Nakagawa, February 1895*

[21.1540] Museum of Fine Arts, Boston



“Sino-Japanese War: The Fierce Battle on the Floating Bridge at Jiuliancheng” by Kobayashi Toshimitsu, October 1894

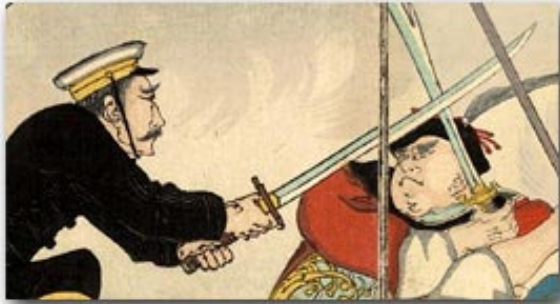
[2000.023] Sharf Collection, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

Heroic encounters between relative equals are not entirely absent from these depictions, however. A fairly typical rendering of a melee by Toshimitsu, for example, includes two swordsmen dueling to an uncertain finish. With comparable even-handedness, several quite spectacular prints by unidentified artists render individuals on both sides as almost mirror images of one another—faces frozen in Kabuki-like determination or similarly marked by rather individualized touches.



“Picture of Our Forces Bringing About the Fall of Pyongyang” by Kobayashi Toshimitsu, September 1894 (above, with detail, right)

[2000.380.03] Sharf Collection,
Museum of Fine Arts, Boston



“Great Rear Attack by Our Second Army at Weihaiwei,” artist unknown, February 1895 (with details of Chinese, left, and Japanese, right)

[2000.113] Sharf Collection, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston



“The Japanese Second Army Battles at Jinzhou” by Shuko, November 1894 (with details of Chinese, left, and Japanese, right)

[res.23.294]
Museum of Fine Arts, Boston





"Attacking Pyongyang, Our Troops Conquer the Enemy Fortress "
by Mizuno Toshikata, September 1894
(above, with details of Chinese, left, and Japanese, right)

[res.23.344], Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

Such suggestions of relative equality emerge especially clearly in depictions of combat between mounted officers. These figures stand out from the tumult around them by virtue of their horses alone, but this is not the only source of shared identity. On both sides these combatants were men of comparable rank, accomplishment, and ability.



In one print by an unidentified artist, a clash between two cavalrymen is actually turned into a spectator sport. Fighting men pause to watch, and a few Chinese have even climbed a tree to get a better view.



In the midst of battle a crowd has gathered to watch two cavalrymen in one-on-one combat. "The Battle of Mukden" by Shunsai Toshimasa, 1894

[res.23.312] Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

A few prints detach cavalry combat from the congestion of battlefield tumult and place it alone at stage center, occasionally even giving the names of Chinese generals involved.



“A Great Victory at Port Arthur” by Adachi Ginkō, November 1894

[PMOA.055] Philadelphia Museum of Art



“Sino-Japanese Pitched Battles: Two Generals Fighting at Fenghuangcheng” by Watanabe Nobukazu, November 1894

[2000.009] Sharf Collection,
Museum of Fine Arts, Boston



“Major Sakakibara Fights Fiercely to the South of Ximucheng” by Adachi Ginkō, January 1895

[21.1549] Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

The single most honorable Chinese singled out in the war prints, however, was not a mounted officer but an admiral—the venerable Ding Juchang, whose fleet was destroyed after hard fighting off Weihaiwei early in 1895. After surrendering in a courteous exchange of messages between the two sides, Admiral Ding Juchang committed suicide by taking poison. When the Chinese warship carrying his body left the harbor, the Japanese fleet dropped their flags to half-mast and fired a salute. Death by one's own hand held an honorable place in Japan's own warrior tradition, of course; be that as it may, several woodblock artists commemorated the admiral's death with respectful renderings. One of the best of these, by Toshikata, imagines Admiral Ding Juchang seated in an elegant room holding a cup of poison in his hand.



The most honorable Chinese opponent depicted in the Japanese war prints was Admiral Ding Juchang, who committed suicide after his fleet was destroyed in 1895. Here he is portrayed seated in an elegant room with a cup of poison in his hand.

“Admiral Ding Juchang of the Chinese Beiyang Fleet, Totally Destroyed at Weihaiwei, Commits Suicide at His Official Residence” by Mizuno Toshikata, February 1895

[IMP.44.74] Philadelphia Museum of Art

In another well-known print, Toshikata pitted his Japanese hero, “Captain Awata,” against a Chinese antagonist of no status but undeniably formidable strength—in this case, a giant on Taiwan whose weapon of choice was a halberd. In his treatment of this celebrated encounter, Toshikata portrays the Chinese foe with respect. More typical, however, was Toshihide’s rendering of the same duel, in which Awata administers the *coup de grâce* to a twisted figure collapsing from a lethal blow to the head—his straw hat flying through the air, clearly torn where Awata’s sword blade sliced through. (This is the same Captain Awata whom Kiyochika lovingly portrayed cleaving the enemy’s skull.)





These two prints of the same subject—a powerful Chinese with a halberd fighting Captain Awata on Taiwan—treat the enemy in completely different ways. In one (detail on right), he is a stalwart and heroic foe. In the other (detail on left), he collapses in grotesque defeat. “Captain Awata” by Mizuno Toshikata, 1895 (top)

[2000.440] Sharf Collection, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

“Picture of Captain Awata, Who Fights Furiously with His Celebrated Sword in the Assault on Magongcheng in the Pescadores” by Migita Toshihide, 1895

[2000.431] Sharf Collection, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston