

THROWING OFF ASIA II

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

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Chapter Three: "Old China, New Japan"

When all was said and done, denigration ruled the day when it came to portraying the Chinese foe. As the prints so graphically reveal, moreover, such disdain frequently carried both a harsh racist charge and an undisguised edge of pure sadism. The devil, as always, is in the details. The Chinese are slashed with swords; skewered with bayonets (often run through from behind, as in Kiyochika's showing); shot at close range; beaten down with rifle butts; strangled; crushed with boulders; pounded with oars while floundering in the sea. They tumble off cliffs and warships like tiny rag dolls. In one print, a civilian caught in battle lies crumpled on the ground with a still-open parasol on his corpse, conspicuous once again by his gaudy and (in Japanese eyes) outlandish clothing.

It is particularly sobering to keep in mind that this was not on-the-scene "realism." The woodblock artists worked largely out of their own imaginations, tailoring this to news reports from the front. They were commercial artists catering to a popular audience, and this was the war Japanese wished to see.

Admiral Ding Juchang, the Chinese generals on their horses, the occasional battlefield enemies treated as just as human as the Japanese are exceptions that prove the rule. The prototypical Chinese is grotesque. His face is contorted, his body twisted and often turned topsy-turvy, his demeanor in most cases abject. Battlefield scenes routinely include cringing foe pleading for their lives—even while making clear that the emperor's stalwart heroes should and would pay no heed to such cowardice. The braided queue becomes, in and of itself, a mark of backwardness and inferiority; in more than a few battle scenes, Japanese stalwarts grasp this while dispatching their victim. (Pulling Chinese men by their "pigtail" was also a favorite image among American and English cartoonists until the overthrow of the Manchu dynasty in 1911, after which this hairstyle was no longer mandatory for ethnic Chinese males.)

The Devil in the Details

Although woodblock artists did not personally visit the battle front, their war prints routinely ridiculed the Chinese and depicted Japanese fighting men committing extraordinary acts of violence against them. Clearly this was the war Japanese at home wished to see.





Chinese prisoners of war, usually bound with thick rope, also drew attention. Ōkura Kōtō imagined “Captain Higuchi” (lionized for picking up a Chinese child on the battlefield) confronting three such captured Chinese—a particularly suggestive scene, combining as it did denigration of the “old” China with chivalrously rescuing “young” (or future) China, and all this in front of a piece of heavy artillery. Toshihide and others similarly dwelled on Chinese officers kneeling in supplication before their captors.



“Captain Higuchi, A Fierce Warrior, Ready to Lay Down His Life for Mercy’s Sake at Fort Motianling” by Ōkura Kōtō, January 1895 (detail)

[2000.179] Sharf Collection, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

Many of the basic themes of Japanese war propaganda are combined in this print. The disciplined and victorious Japanese stand before the machinery of modern warfare in their Western-style uniforms, while Chinese prisoners in old-fashioned garb—symbols of backward “old Asia”—kneel before them.

Captain Higuchi’s rescue of a Chinese infant (a widely trumpeted story in Japan) represents more than just Japan’s ostensible benevolence. Japan, as this propaganda would have it, is actually saving China’s future by forcing it into the “modern” age.



“Illustration of Chinese Generals from Pyongyang Captured Alive” by Migita Toshihide, October 1894 (detail)

[2000.380.08]

Sharf Collection, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston



“Illustration of Our Righteous Army Capturing Money and Prisoners,” artist unidentified (detail)

[2000.380.05]

Sharf Collection, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

Kokunimasa offered a harsh “Illustration of the Decapitation of Violent Chinese Soldiers” that included a lengthy inscription. The benevolence and justice of the Japanese army, this text explained, equaled and even surpassed that of the civilized Western nations. By contrast, the barbarity of the Chinese was such that some prisoners attacked their guards. As a warning, the Japanese—as depicted in the print—had beheaded as many as 38 rebellious prisoners in front of other captured Chinese. The Rising Sun military flag still fluttered in one panel of Kokunimasa’s print; the stalwart cavalry officer still surveyed the scene; the executioner still struck the familiar heroic pose with upraised sword. The subject itself, however, and severed heads on the ground, made this an unusually frightful scene.



*“Illustration of the Decapitation of Violent Chinese Soldiers”
by Utagawa Kokunimasa, October 1894 (detail)*

[2000.380.07] Sharf Collection, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

The long description on this particularly grisly scene contrasts the “civilized” behavior of the Japanese to the “barbarity” of the Chinese—and as an example of the latter tells how Chinese prisoners rebelled against their captors and were executed as a warning to other Chinese.

This is an extraordinary declaration given the atrocious nature of the graphic. At the same time, it is perfectly in accord with the rhetoric of Western imperialists of the time, who similarly portrayed their brutal suppression of peoples in other lands as part of a “civilizing mission.”

The derision of the Chinese that permeates these prints found expression in other sectors of popular Japanese culture. The scholar Donald Keene, for example, has documented how popular prose, poems, and songs of the war years took similar delight in lampooning the “pumpkin-headed” Chinese and making jokes about their slaughter. (It was around this time that the pejorative Japanese epithets *chanchan* and *chankoro* became popular, amounting to a counterpart to the English-language slur “chink.”)



“Orientalism:” A sample of Western racial stereotypes of the Sino-Japanese War, as seen in cartoons (and texts) from the British weekly magazine Punch.

Even today, over a century later, this contempt remains shocking. Simply as racial stereotyping alone, it was as disdainful of the Chinese as anything that can be found in anti-“Oriental” racism in the United States and Europe at the time—as if the process of “Westernization” had entailed, for Japanese, adopting the white man’s imagery while excluding themselves from it. This poisonous seed, already planted in violence in 1894–95, would burst into full atrocious flower four decades later, when the emperor’s soldiers and sailors once again launched war against China. Ironically, the Japanese propaganda that accompanied that later war involved throwing off “the West” and embracing “Pan-Asianism”—but that is another story.