

THROWING OFF ASIA III

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

BY JOHN W. DOWER



Meiji Japan's "Westernization" culminated in a titanic war against Tsarist Russia that stunned the world and established Japan as a major imperialist power with a firm foothold on the Asian mainland. This unit draws on photographs and rare war prints from the Jean S. and Frederic A. Sharf Collection at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

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MIT VISUALIZING CULTURES

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Chapter One: Spoils of War

Japan's victory over China in 1895 transformed global power politics. It shocked the world, crippled China, triggered a new epoch of imperialist avarice in Asia, and set Japan itself on a course of expansion that only ended 50 years later with the country's devastating defeat in World War Two.

Before the war began, none of the Western powers anticipated or desired Japan's victory. As soon as the war ended, they moved quickly to make victory bittersweet for the jubilant Japanese.

Japan's immediate spoils from the war—set forth in the Treaty of Shimonoseki signed by the two countries on April 17, 1895—were extensive. China agreed to pay the victors a huge indemnity; to open seven new "treaty ports" to commerce; and to cede to Japan the Pescadores, Formosa (Taiwan), and a leasehold centering on Port Arthur at the tip of the Liaotung Peninsular.

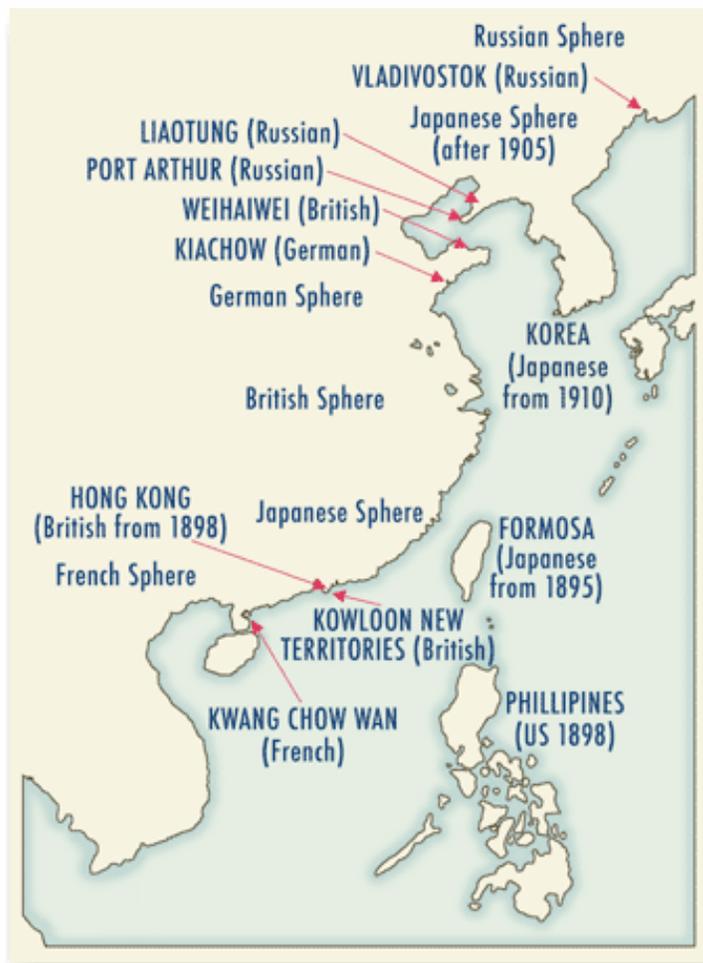
Six days after the treaty was signed, the Japanese abruptly learned that power politics was an even harsher game than they had anticipated. In the notorious "tripartite intervention" of April 23, Russia, Germany, and France declared that a Japanese position in Liaotung (which controlled access to Beijing as well as Manchuria) would further destabilize the situation in Asia. The Japanese had no choice but to give up this strategic prize. As a standard diplomatic history text (by Paul Clyde and Burton Beers) puts it, "Thus Japan, who had won the war, lost the peace."

That was but the half of it. If one goes on to ask who the big winners in this cynical business actually were, a reasonable answer would be: the non-belligerent Western powers themselves.

The Japanese did indeed still fare well. As compensation for pulling out of Liaotung, Japan received an increase in the already large indemnity China had agreed to pay. The final total (amounting to 330 million taels, or approximately “\$170 million gold” at the time) more than covered Japan’s war expenses.

Formosa remained in Japanese hands—its first colonial plum. And Chinese influence in Korea—the ostensible reason for going to war in the first place—had been eliminated.

For China, on the other hand, the war and subsequent indemnity were ruinous; and it was this that enabled the Western powers to demonstrate what “wealth and power” really amounted to in this age of carnivorous statecraft. China had financed the war largely through loans from the British. To pay the indemnity, it was forced to take out a succession of additional loans from Russia, France, England, and Germany—in return for which the foreign powers proceeded to extract territorial leaseholds and exclusive rights that



Map of foreign holdings and spheres of influence—1898 (and after).

essentially placed them in control of China’s railroads, mines, and harbors. The Western powers also welcomed the new “treaty ports” Japan had forced China to open as part of the Shimonoseki settlement, which enabled them to exploit the China market more freely than ever before.

This dismemberment took place between 1895 and 1898 and was known at the time by phrases such as the “scramble for concessions” and the “breakup” or “partition” of China. In a tastier metaphor, it also was referred to as “slicing the Chinese melon.” Russia, Germany, and France—who had instigated the “tripartite intervention” in the name of preserving China’s integrity—all seized this opportunity to carve off pieces of

China. Germany, for example, gained special rights in Kiaochow (Jiaozhou) and became preeminent in the Shantung peninsula. France focused on Kwangchow (Guangzhou) and the area bordering Indochina. Russia took over Port Arthur and the Liaotung leasehold and appeared poised to dominate Manchuria and Korea. (Port Arthur offered the ice-free “eastern” harbor Russia desperately desired.) British capital became dominant in the Yangtze valley through major concessions in Weihaiwei and Kowloon (Jiulong). By 1899, as Clyde and Beers observe, the foreign powers had “reduced strategic areas in China to semi-colonial status.”

The United States did not join in slicing the melon. Its policy, not fully articulated until 1899, was to call vaguely (and ineffectively) for an “open door” that would respect China’s integrity while maintaining a commercial market accessible to all. Simultaneously, however, and more pertinent in Japanese eyes, the United States had plunged into its own splendid little war and was lopping off its own colonial enclave in Asia. The war was the Spanish-American War, and the colonial prize—many thousands of miles away from Cuba, where hostilities had broken out—was the Philippines, which the United States seized from Spain in 1898 and subsequently subjugated at an enormous cost in Filipino lives.

The signal moment in the American takeover of the Philippines took place when Admiral George Dewey destroyed the Spanish fleet in Manila Bay. This was a stirring naval victory much like those Japan had savored in the Sino-Japanese War—and would soon savor again against Tsarist Russia—and it found an unexpected Japanese chronicler. Dewey’s victory was celebrated in a garish woodblock triptych that even bore an English title: “Battle of Manila, May 1, 1898.”

1898: America Moves into Asia

Three years after the Japanese victory over China, the United States attacked the Spanish fleet in the Bay of Manila and, after a long and bloody struggle against native resistance forces, took over as colonial overlords of the Philippines. The age of imperialism in Asia had now entered a new stage.



"Battle of Manila, May 1, 1898," artist unidentified (with details)

[res.54.160] Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

Confronted with these latest lessons in “Westernization,” Japan’s leaders redoubled their efforts to build a military capable of playing the power game more decisively. 10 years after instigating war against China, Imperial Japan initiated hostilities against Tsarist Russia with the goal, once again, of establishing hegemony in northeast Asia.

The Russo-Japanese War began in February 1904 and ended in September 1905. The battle zone overlapped with that of the earlier war, centering on Manchuria and surrounding seas (there was little actual fighting in Korea itself, although armies were deployed there). For the Japanese, taking on Russia had all the risk and drama that had been present in the war against China, and more. The stakes were higher. This time the enemy was not the moribund “Asia” that China had symbolized. Rather, it was one of the great powers that had descended on Japan in the 1850s and saddled it with the onerous unequal-treaty system.

This time the enemy was associated with the white, Christian, expansionist “West” itself.

The battles, moreover, were titanic and state-of-the-art. A Japanese armada of battleships, destroyers, cruisers, and torpedo boats initiated the war with a surprise attack on February 8 that drove Russia’s Far Eastern Fleet into the harbor at Port Arthur and blockaded it there.

(Japan formally declared war two days later.) Japanese armies fought their way through Manchuria and down the Liaotung Peninsula, eventually sinking the bottled-up Russian fleet from surrounding mountaintops with the largest artillery ever used in modern



The Russo-Japanese War began in February 1904 and ended in September 1905.

warfare to that date. In the Battle of Mukden early in 1905, a quarter-million Japanese confronted a Russian force of some 320,000 men. When the Russians sent their Baltic Fleet of 45 warships around the world to Port Arthur, Admiral Tōgō Heihachirō's combined force annihilated it off the Straits of Tsushima in one of the most celebrated victories in modern naval history. All told, around a million Japanese were mobilized for the war.

The Russo-Japanese War also had a greater overlay of tragedy for the Japanese than the war against China did, for victory was purchased with a heavy blood debt. In contrast to the Sino-Japanese War, where fatalities were surprisingly small, around 90,000 Japanese were killed in combat or by illness and bitter cold (Russian fatalities were even larger.) This was a sobering price to pay for finally establishing Japan as an independent, modern, imperialist nation. Until the end of World War Two, the anniversary of the Battle of Mukden was celebrated as Army Day (March 10) in Japan, and the anniversary of the Battle of Tsushima as Navy Day (May 27).

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Chapter Two: Old Media, New Enemy

The new levels of military technology displayed in this first major war of the 20th century had a counterpart in the way the war was visualized. The Russo-Japanese War attracted military and journalistic observers from throughout the world, and was widely depicted through both photographs in the mass media and something new on the scene: international picture postcards based on drawings, paintings, and cartoons as well as photos.

These new forms of popular visual communication extended to Japan, and in this milieu the role of woodblock prints was greatly diminished. Some of the artists who had distinguished themselves during the Sino-Japanese War turned to war prints again, joined by a small group of new illustrators. Only rarely, however, did their work convey the energy or inventiveness that had characterized renderings of the earlier war. The Manichaeian sense of “modern” Japan versus “old” Asia was missing. The novelty of adapting an old art form to depiction of modern violence was gone.

This fizzle of the woodblock print as a vehicle of popular “reportage” did not become apparent until a few months into the war. The attack on the Russian fleet at Port Arthur that initiated hostilities sparked a burst of war prints commemorating Japan’s opening victories, but long before the war ended this had dwindled to a trickle. When the war reached its climax with Admiral Tōgō’s stunning destruction of the Baltic Fleet at Tsushima over a year later, few prints were published in celebration. The market had all but disappeared.

There was more than a little irony in this. The woodblock prints that had played such a conspicuous role in propagandizing “throwing off China” had themselves fallen victim to the relentless forces of modernization. Their time had passed. They had abruptly become obsolete as a vehicle for visualizing the contemporary world.

Still, the dwindling number of prints that addressed the conflict with Russia show us more than just how ways of seeing the world were changing. They throw further light on racial identity in modern Japan, and on the glorification of war as well.

A print by Nobukazu published at the outset of hostilities in February 1904 conveys the great difference between the Russians and Chinese in Japanese eyes. Titled “Illustration of Russian and Japanese Army and Navy Officers,” this amounted to a fashion plate in which the antagonists emerge as mirror images of one another—comparable in bearing, in martial apparel, in their mustaches and beards, even in the generally rectangular

structure of their faces. Few such overarching impressions of similarity were ever seen in prints from the Sino-Japanese War.



Details reveal how closely Japanese officers (right) resembled Russian officers (left).



“Illustration of Russian and Japanese Army and Navy Officers” by Watanabe Nobukazu, February 1904



[2000.087]

Sharf Collection, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston



Kokunimasa, another old hand at war prints, also responded to the outbreak of hostilities with a few original scenes. As early as March 1904, he introduced what became a popular subject: a Japanese Red Cross battlefield hospital offering solicitous care to wounded Russians and Japanese alike. Japan’s humane treatment of Russian prisoners became a staple in all Japanese depictions of the war, including photographs and the new picture postcards.



“Russo-Japanese War: Great Japan Red Cross Battlefield Hospital Treating Injured” by Utagawa Kokunimasa, March 1904 (above, with detail, left, of Russians mistreating Asians)

[20 00.367] Sharf Collection,
Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

Kokunimasa’s contribution to this propaganda was to include an inset in his print depicting Russian troops behaving harshly toward Asian civilians. The point could hardly be missed: the Japanese were more chivalrous than the Western foe.

“The Humane Great Japanese Red Cross Medical Corps Tending to the Injured in the Russo Japanese War” by Gakyōjin, March 1904 (detail of Japanese caring for wounded Russian)

[2000.541] Sharf Collection, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston



Kokunimasa also produced an early and memorable symbolic rendering of the doom that lay ahead for the Russians, whose overland supply lines to the Far East were extremely long and extended through forbidding terrain. Inspired by a news report, he offered his audience a train full of Russian soldiers crashing through the ice on Lake Baikal, where tracks had been laid to carry troops to the front.



“News from the Russo-Japanese War: The Russian Railway Carriage Falling to the Bottom of the Frozen Lake” by Utagawa Kokunimasa, March 1904

[2000.068] Sharf Collection, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

Kiyochika, whose prints of the Sino-Japanese War were unsurpassed, responded to the outbreak of war with Russia with a few vigorous graphics. In one, a torpedo commands the scene as it streaks toward an enemy warship. Another Kiyochika print celebrates the death of Captain Hirose Takeo, who was officially designated a “military god” (*gunshin*) for his exploits during the blockade of the Russian fleet in Port Arthur (Hirose was killed while on a small craft searching for one of his men).



“Illustration of Our Torpedo Hitting Russian Ship at Great Naval Battle of Port Arthur” by Kobayashi Kiyochika, February 1904

[2000.074] Sharf Collection, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston



Captain Hirose of the Japanese Navy, one of the most celebrated heroes in the Russo-Japanese War, was killed on a dangerous mission while searching for one of his men who was missing.

“Navy Commander Hirose Takeo” by Kobayashi Kiyochika, 1904

[2000.542] Sharf Collection, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

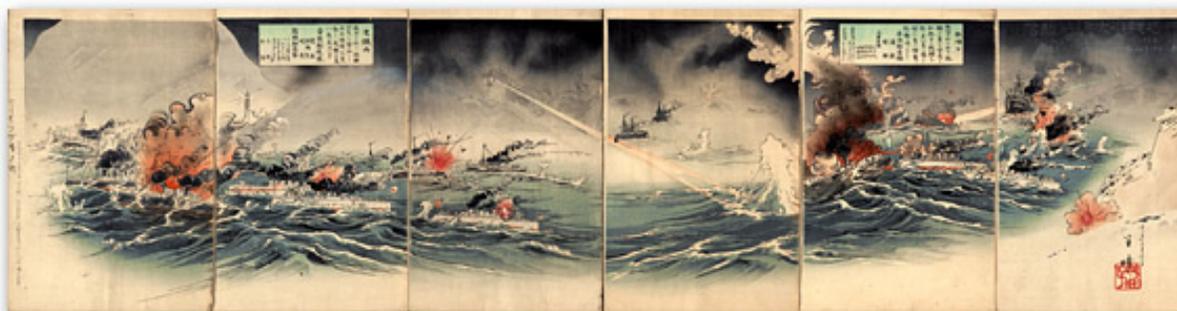
Yamada Hampō, an artist new on the scene who appears to have still been in his mid-teens, momentarily outdid the old master in terms of sheer innovation. In an unusual vertical triptych, Hampō created an underwater world where a torpedoed Russian warship sank through a field of floating mines.

*“Picture of the Eighth
Attack on Port Arthur. The
Flagship of Russia Was
Destroyed by the Torpedo of
Our Navy and Admiral
Makaroff Drowned”* by
Yasuda Hampō

[2000.070] Sharf Collection,
Museum of Fine Arts, Boston



Hampō also produced an early hexptych (six-block print) of “Japanese and Russian torpedo destroyers” engaged in “furious battle” in the opening clash outside Port Arthur.



*“Illustration of the Furious Battle of Japanese and Russian Torpedo
Destroyers outside the Harbor of Port Arthur”
by Yasuda Hampō, 1904*

[2000.072] Sharf Collection, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

This conformed to graphics familiar from the Sino-Japanese War, however, as did most war work by other artists as well. In naval prints, warships blew enemy vessels to smithereens. Blizzards whipped the ocean. Explosions burst like airborne flowers. Searchlights pierced night skies. “Death-defying” sailors in small craft engaged the enemy in turbulent seas.

“Illustration of the Great Naval Battle at the Harbor Entrance to Port Arthur in the Russo-Japanese War” by Rosetsu, February 1904

[2000.073] Sharf Collection, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston



“Naval Battle in the Japan Sea” by Getsuzō, 1905

[2000.451] Sharf Collection, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston



“A Righteous War to Chastise the Russians: The Night Attack of the Destroyer Force” by Shinohara Kiyooki, 1904

[2000.453] Sharf Collection, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston



“News of Russo-Japanese Battles: For the Fourth Time Our Destroyers Bravely Attack Enemy Ships Outside the Harbor of Port Arthur” by Migita Toshihide, March 1904

[2000.088] Sharf Collection, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston



“The First Blockade of the Entrance to the Harbor of Port Arthur on the Night of February 24, 1904” by Ōkura Kōtō, 1904

[2000.244] Sharf Collection, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston



“Illustration of How Outside Port Arthur Our Death-Defying Naval Squads, in Scrapped Vessels Disguised as Warships and under a Shower of Bullets, Bravely Destroyed Their Ships to Block the Entrance of the Harbor—In the Gray Dawn, February 25, 1904” by Kōkyo, 1904

[2000.067] Sharf Collection, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston





*“Harbor Entrance of Port Arthur: Russian Flagship Sinking at
Port Arthur” by Nitei, 1904*

[2000.063] Sharf Collection, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

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Chapter Three: New Heroes in Old Poses

Some themes and compositions were familiar, of course, because certain things did not change fundamentally. The soldiers and sailors of the Russo-Japanese War might have been younger brothers of men who fought in the Sino-Japanese War. The weaponry was but an upgrade in sophisticated destructiveness. Thus, Toshikata's heroic, almost statue-like 1894 depiction of sailors manning a big gun against the Chinese found natural reincarnation in an excellent 1904 print by Toshihide—where the naval artillery was a bit sleeker, but the ethos of mastering modern war remained unchanged.

Mastering Modern Warfare—Again

The big guns of modern warfare, manned by “Westernized” and highly disciplined fighting men, fascinated woodblock artists during the Sino-Japanese War and were reemphasized—often in almost identical form—in prints of the Russo-Japanese War.



“Lieutenant Commander Yamanaka, Chief Gunner of Our Ship Fuji, Fights Fiercely in the Naval Battle at the Entrance to Port Arthur” by Migita Toshihide, February 1904

[2000.75a-c] Sharf Collection, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

*“Japanese Warships Fire
on the Enemy near
Haiyang Island”* by
Mizuno Toshikata,
September 1894

[2000.380.13] Sharf Collection,
Museum of Fine Arts, Boston



One of the most dramatic renderings of the war on land came, unsurprisingly, from Kiyochika. Ornately titled “In the Battle of Nanshan Our Troops Took Advantage of a Violent Thunderstorm and Charged the Enemy,” this panoramic scene bristles with searchlights, explosions, and streaks of lightning—conveying a sense of both the vastness of the Manchurian landscape and the titanic nature of the struggle against Russia.



*“In the Battle of Nanshan Our Troops Took Advantage of a Violent Thunderstorm
and Charged the Enemy Fortress”*
by Kobayashi Kiyochika, 1904

[2000.239] Sharf Collection, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

Another of Kiyochika's battle prints introduces, over the portrayal of an infantry assault on an enemy fortress, a colorful picture-within-the-picture depicting Russian generals surrendering to the victorious Japanese commanders. As in Nobukazu's "fashion plate" of Russian and Japanese military uniforms, the two parties emerge as having much in common.



The inset reflects the sense of equality between Japanese and Russian officers that emerges so strongly in prints of the Russo-Japanese War.

“In the Battle of Nanshan Our Troops Took Advantage of a Violent Thunderstorm and Charged the Enemy Fortress” by Kobayashi Kiyochika, 1904 (inset detail, right)

[2000.077] Sharf Collection, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston



Like the naval war, however, depictions of the land war seldom went beyond recycling images introduced a decade earlier. In a sublimely unoriginal print by a little-known artist named Kyōko, for example, the familiar officer striking a Kabuki pose charges forward (right to left) flourishing his sword; the rising-sun-with-rays battle flag flutters in the wind; the gnarled pine has been replanted on the new battle site; the same crumpled enemy corpses litter the field, with a change of clothes. This is, the artist tells us, the occupation of Chongju.

“Illustration of the Russo-Japanese War: Our Armed Forces Occupy Chongju”
by Kyōko, March 1904

[2000.460] Sharf Collection,
Museum of Fine Arts, Boston



In a similarly derivative vein, Chikanobu reprised the attractive but now unexceptional image of a horseman and foot-soldiers in a driving blizzard. Toshihide, who had depicted muscular half-naked soldiers fording the Yalu in the Sino-Japanese War, had them popping out of the water again, 10 years older, to pummel the Russians. Yoshikuni resurrected a resolute infantryman standing on a corpse with an enemy soldier pleading for his life nearby.

“Anju Occupied by the Japanese” by Toyohara Chikanobu, March 1904

[2000.089] Sharf Collection,
Museum of Fine Arts, Boston



“News of Russo-Japanese Battles: Superior Private Ōhashi Keikichi of the Imperial Guard Infantry” by Migita Toshihide, 1904

[2000.059] Sharf Collection,
Museum of Fine Arts, Boston



“In the Battle of the Sha River, a Company of Our Forces Drives a Strong Enemy Force to the Left Bank of the Taizi River” by Yoshikuni, November 1904

[2000.472] Sharf Collection, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston



By the time Port Arthur fell in early 1905, not many print makers were still devoting themselves to the war. One unidentified artist who did celebrate this great victory offered a congested scene around the big guns that had mesmerized artists depicting the earlier capture of Port Arthur and Weihaiwei from the Chinese; but the vigor, panache, sense of breakthrough to a brave new world that animated those earlier war prints was nowhere in evidence.



“The Battle of Japan and Russia at Port Arthur—Hurrah for Great Japan and Its Great Victory,” artist unknown, 1905

[2000.356] Sharf Collection, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

A few of the new war prints involved outright and unabashed plagiarism from the earlier war. A depiction of the 1904 naval victory at Port Arthur, for example, turns out to be an almost exact copy of a Sino-Japanese War triptych by Ginkō. Only small details in the rendering of the enemy ships and flag distinguish the two works (plus a phrase in English on the plagiarized print reading “The Japanese blockaders fighting with great bravery at Port Arthur”). Similarly, an 1895 Toshihide print depicting “Captain Sakuma Raising a War Cry at the Occupation of the Pescadores” resurfaced in 1904 as “Russian Soldiers Fleeing to the North Bank of the Yalu River.” The emperor’s valiant fighting men—officer with his sword, bugler, advancing troops—are identical. The gnarled pine is identical. The corpse sprawled face upwards in the foreground is identical, too—with the notable exception of having been transformed from a Chinese into a Russian. Only in the left-hand panel of the triptych does the artist of 1904 (his name is given as Yonehide, and he seems to have materialized out of the blue and blessedly disappeared that same year) add his own fleeing Russians.

Recycling Sino-Japanese War Prints in the Russo-Japanese War

In the following two remarkable examples, woodblock prints purporting to depict sea and land battles in the Russo-Japanese War were literally lifted from prints produced during the Sino-Japanese War a decade earlier.



This Russo-Japanese War print (above) is virtually identical to Ginkō's Sino-Japanese War print (right). Only slight changes have been made to turn the Chinese warships into Russian vessels.



“Japanese Suicide Squads Fight Bravely in a Naval Battle at Port Arthur during the Russo-Japanese War,” artist unidentified, 1904 (top)

[2000.085] Sharf Collection, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

“Kabayama, the Head of the Naval Commanding Staff, Onboard Saikyomaru, Attacks Enemy Ships” by Adachi Ginkō, October 1894 (bottom)

[2000.380.14a-c] Sharf Collection, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston





In this purloined Russo-Japanese War print (above), the Sino-Japanese War model (left) has been altered by changing a Chinese corpse into a Russian and adding fleeing Russians in the left-hand panel.

“Japanese Forces Occupying Yizhou. Russian Soldiers Fleeing to the North Bank of the Yalu” by Yonehide, April 1904 (top)

[2000.467] Sharf Collection, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

“Picture of Captain Sakuma Raising a War Cry at the Occupation of the Pescadores” by Migita Toshihide, 1895 (bottom)

[2000.134] Sharf Collection, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

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Chapter Four: Shared Identities

Because the war prints petered out so quickly once it became apparent that the audience for popular graphics had shifted to photography and picture postcards, scenes of battlefield pandemonium are sparse compared to the earlier conflict with China. The relatively few such prints that have come down to us dwell predictably on Japanese triumph over an overwhelmed foe, and to a certain degree the Russians are ridiculed and denigrated as the Chinese had been. Russian corpses litter the battlefield. Japanese fighting men stomp on the enemy, run them through with swords, stab them with bayonets, club them with rifle butts. They also pick off smartly uniformed Russian cavalry with their rifles—something not seen in the Sino-Japanese War prints.

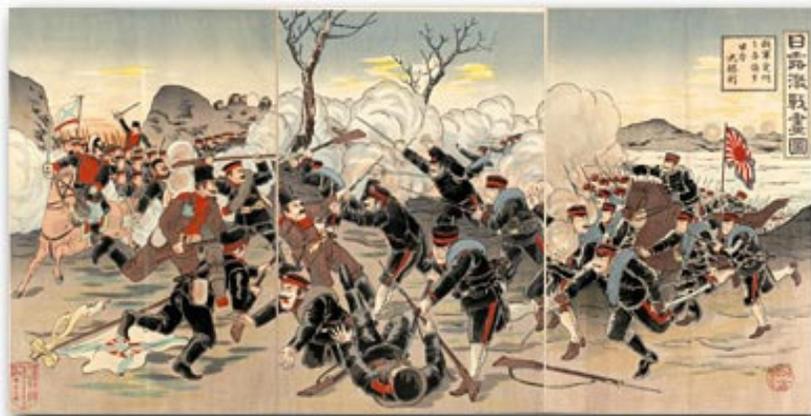
*“The Fall of Jinzhoucheng.
The Scene of Our Second
Army Occupying Nanshan
after a Fierce Battle” by
Banri, June 1904*

[2000.446] Sharf Collection,
Museum of Fine Arts, Boston



*“Illustration of a Fierce
Russo-Japanese War
Battle” by Kyōkatsu, May
1904*

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



*“Russo-Japanese War:
Brocade Pictures No.7” by
Itō Seisai, 1904*

[2000.464] Sharf Collection,
Museum of Fine Arts, Boston



*“Our Troops Win a Great
Victory after a Fierce Battle
at Jiuliancheng, Hamatang.
Depiction of the Death in
Action of the Russian Third
Marksman Division's
Commander, Lieutenant
General Kashtalinsky” by
Ohara Koson, May 1904*

[2000.456] Sharf Collection,
Museum of Fine Arts, Boston



At the same time, however, it is fair to say that the Russian enemy was also treated with a greater level of overall respect—a greater sense of equality and shared modernity—than had been accorded the Chinese. Nobukazu’s mirror-image fashion plate of Russian and Japanese officers (with which this section opened) is the perfect example of this, but such treatment was not exceptional. As occasionally happened in the Sino-Japanese War prints, denigration and respect might appear side-by-side in the same print. Nobukazu produced a vintage example of this, too, in his rendering of a melee in which brave cavalymen engage in one-on-one combat in the midst of streaking gunfire.



“Picture of Our Valorous Military Repulsing the Russian Cossack Cavalry on the Bank of the Yalu River” by Watanabe Nobukazu, March 1904

[2000.544] Sharf Collection, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

Even graphics depicting Japanese cutting down Russians often convey an impression of physical attractiveness as well as shared modern identity. This comes through strongly in a well-known celebration of the valor of “Lieutenant Shibakawa” by Getsuzō, where the tragic death of Shibakawa’s handsome young Russian adversary is really more striking than the hero’s dramatic pose. One of the most elegant and well-known Russo-Japanese War prints, also by Getsuzō, singles out the famous general Prince Kuropatkin as an almost perfect model of nobility and valor—charging forward on a handsome white horse to do battle even after his forces had been crushed.



“In the Battle of Nanshan, Lieutenant Shibakawa Matasaburō Led His Men Holding up a Rising Sun War Fan” by Getsuzō, 1904

[2000.448] Sharf Collection, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston



“The Battle of Liaoyang: The Enemy General Prince Kuropatkin, Having Tactical Difficulties and the Whole Army Being Defeated, Bravely Came Forward into the Field to Do Bloody Battle” by Getsuzō, 1904

[2000.450] Sharf Collection, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

In an April 1904 print titled "A Great Victory for the Great Japanese Imperial Navy, *Banzai!*", it is a bearded Russian admiral who holds center stage. He is doomed, clearly about to go down with his ship. But, again, his demeanor is brave and his fate obviously tragic. He is meant to be admired.



"A Great Victory for the Great Japanese Imperial Navy, Banzai!"
by Ikeda Terukata, April 1904

[2000.466] Sharf Collection, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

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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



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Chapter Six: Sources

Sources, followed by [Credits](#)

SELECT BIBLIOGRAPHY

Complementary Readings

For background reading and/or classroom assignment, teachers may find entries #1 and #2 below particularly useful.

1. Marlene Mayo, ed., *The Emergence of Imperial Japan: Self-Defense or Calculated Aggression?* (D. C. Heath, 1970). This collection of essays addressing Meiji Japan's emergence as an imperialist power includes a particularly valuable "Prologue" by Yoshitake Oka, from which several of the quotations in the Essay derive. Oka's concise essay is one of the best short overviews available of "Social Darwinist" and "Realist" thinking by late-19th-century Japanese.
2. Donald Keene, "The Japanese and the Landscapes of War," in Keene's *Landscapes and Portraits: Appreciations of Japanese Culture* (Kodansha International, 1971), 259-99. This essay by one of the most distinguished literary and cultural scholars of Japan is excellent for placing the woodblock prints of the Sino-Japanese War in the broader context of Japanese popular culture (and war enthusiasm) at the time. The essay has had several lives. See also Keene's "The Sino-Japanese War of 1894-95 and Its Cultural Effects in Japan," in *Tradition and Modernization in Japanese Culture*, Donald Shively, ed. (Princeton University Press, 1971), 121-75; also the 1981 Kodansha reprint of *Landscapes and Portraits*, which is titled *Appreciations of Japanese Culture*.
3. Shumpei Okamoto, *The Japanese Oligarchy and the Russo-Japanese War* (Columbia University Press, 1970). This scholarly analysis is the best account of the politics of the Russo-Japanese War on the Japanese side. It concludes with discussion of the riots that erupted in Japan when the terms of the "Portsmouth peace settlement" were made public.

4. Richard Hough, *The Fleet That Had to Die* (Ballentine, 1960). Although not at all essential to understanding the background of the war prints, this readable account describes the ill-fated journey of the Russian Baltic Fleet as it sailed around the world to Port Arthur, only to be destroyed by Admiral Tōgō in the Battle of Tsushima in 1905. Hough's narrative captures some of the flavor of the times on the (hapless) Russian side in a particularly colorful manner.

5. Henry D. Smith II, *Kiyochika: Artist of Meiji Japan* (Santa Barbara Museum of Art, 1988). This short (and hard-to-find) publication provides an overview of the greatest Meiji woodblock artist, whose war prints—particularly of the Sino-Japanese War—receive close attention in the present Web site.

Illustrated English-Language Publications of Meiji War Prints

"Throwing Off Asia" is at present the most densely illustrated and accessible treatment of Meiji woodblock prints focusing on the Sino-Japanese and Russo-Japanese wars. (The Essays alone include 165 prints, of which 111 depict the Sino-Japanese War and 34 the Russo-Japanese War.) There are four noteworthy published catalogs in English that feature the war images. These include prints not included in the MFA collection on which "Throwing Off Asia" is based, as well as interesting captions and commentaries.

6. *Impressions of the Front: Woodcuts of the Sino-Japanese War, 1894-95* (Philadelphia Museum of Art, 1983). Devoted entirely to prints of the Sino-Japanese War, this excellent catalog is based on the extensive collection of Meiji war prints at the Philadelphia Museum of Art. A total of 86 full-color prints are reproduced (in small format), accompanied by generous commentary. The arrangement is chronological rather than thematic or by artist, enabling the reader to follow the course of the war visually. Essays by Shumpei Okamoto (on the war) and Donald Keene (on the prints) enhance the value of this hard-to-obtain publication. *Impressions of the Front* also includes maps, a battle chronology, and a bibliography.

7. *The Sino-Japanese War (1894-1895)*, Nathan Chaikin, ed. (Bern, Switzerland: privately published, 1983). This sumptuous volume reproduces 92 prints of the Sino-Japanese War, primarily from the Geneva-based collection of Basil Hall Chamberlain, a famous turn-of-the-century British expert on Japan. The full-page reproductions include many in color, and editor Chaikin provides detailed commentary on both the prints and the military history of the war. Organization is chronological, rather than by artist or theme.

8. *In Battle's Light: Woodblock Prints of Japan's Early Modern Wars*, Elizabeth de Sabato Swinton, ed. (Worcester Art Museum, 1991). Based on Meiji war prints from the Sharf Collection (before that collection was donated to the Boston Museum of Fine Art), this catalog includes prints from both the Sino-Japanese War (53 plates) and Russo-Japanese War (27 plates). Within this, grouping is by artist. Brief captions and commentary accompany each print.

9. *Japan at the Dawn of the Modern Age: Woodblock Prints from the Meiji Era*, Louise E. Virgin, ed. (Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, 2001). This exhibition catalog celebrates the donation of the Jean S. and Frederic A. Sharf Collection of Meiji prints (on which this present "Throwing Off Asia" web site is primarily based) to the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. The catalog contains 77 color plates (22 depicting Meiji Westernization and the emperor, 39 on the Sino-Japanese War, and 16 on the Russo-Japanese War), with brief commentaries for each. Also included are essays by Donald Keene, Anne Nishimura Morse, and Frederic Sharf.

Illustrated Japanese Publications of Prints

10. KONISHI Shirō, *Nishikie—Bakumatsu Meiji no Rekishi* [Woodcuts—A History of the Bakumatsu and Meiji Periods], 12 volumes (Tokyo: Kodansha, 1977). This lively, large format, full-color collection of "brocade pictures" (*nishikie*) depicting current events between 1853 and 1912 includes volumes devoted to the Sino-Japanese War (vol. 11) and Russo-Japanese War (volume 12).

11. ASAI Yūsuke, ed. *Kinsei nishikie Sesōshi* [A History of Modern Times through Woodcuts], 8 volumes (Tokyo, 1935-36). This old collection, with extensive black-and-white reproductions, is a standard reference source.

Illustrated Collections

12. H.W. Wilson, *Japan's Fight for Freedom: The Story of the War Between Russia and Japan*, 3 volumes (London: Amalgamated Press, 1904-1906). This exceptionally lavish, large-format British publication totals 1,444 glossy pages and includes hundreds of photographs as well as excellent black-and-white reproductions of sketches and paintings by foreign artists. This is surely the best single overview of the type of war photography and serious war art that appeared regularly in British periodicals like the *Illustrated London News*. As the title indicates, the overall approach is favorable to Japan.

13. James H. Hare, ed., *A Photographic Record of the Russo-Japanese War* (New York: Collier & Son, 1905). This glossy, large-format, 256-page volume includes photographs by a number of cameramen (as well as a brief commentary on “The Battle of the Sea of Japan” by the influential American naval strategist A. T. Mahan). In comprehensiveness as well as clarity of the reproductions, this is an outstanding sample of the war photography of the times. (The same publisher produced another large-format volume on the war—titled *The Russo-Japanese War: A Photographic and Descriptive Review of the Great Conflict in the Far East*—that includes many of the same images, is also of considerable interest, but is of lesser technical quality.)

14. *Nishi-Ro Sensō* [The Russo-Japanese War] (Tokyo: Yomiuri Shimbunsha, 1974). This volume reproduces the distinctive and elegantly tinted photos of the American photographer Burton Holmes, whose war work deserves to be better known.

15. *Shashin: Meiji no Sensō* [Photos: Wars of the Meiji Period], Ozawa Kenji, ed. (Tokyo: Chikuma Shobō, 2001). This thick volume (270 pages) contains numerous black-and-white reproductions of photos of the Seinan civil war (1877) and the Sino-Japanese and Russo-Japanese wars.

16. *A Century of Japanese Photography*, John W. Dower, ed. (Pantheon, 1980). This is an English-language adaptation of an outstanding collection of prewar Japanese photography edited by the Japan Photographers Association and originally published under the title *Nihon Shashin Shi, 1840-1945* (Tokyo: Heibonsha, 1971). Three plates depict the Sino-Japanese War (plates 169-71) and twelve are photos from the Russo-Japanese War (plates 172-83). The latter include several truly classic images.

General Historical Texts

Teachers, students, and anyone else who wishes to pursue the history of Japan’s emergence as a modern nation further will find the following publications particularly useful as both general overviews and reference sources:

13. James H. Hare, ed., *A Photographic Record of the Russo-Japanese War* (New York: Collier & Son, 1905). This glossy, large-format, 256-page volume includes photographs by a number of cameramen (as well as a brief commentary on “The Battle of the Sea of Japan” by the influential American naval strategist A. T. Mahan). In comprehensiveness as well as clarity of the reproductions, this is an outstanding sample of the war photography of the times. (The same publisher produced another large-format volume on the war—titled *The Russo-Japanese War: A Photographic and Descriptive Review of the Great Conflict in the Far East*—that includes many of the same images, is also of considerable interest, but is of lesser technical quality.)

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17. *Kodansha Encyclopedia of Japan*. This outstanding encyclopedia exists in two editions: (1) a detailed 9-volume version (published in 1983 and containing over 10,000 entries, including extended essays by major scholars); and (2) an abridged and lavishly illustrated two-volume version titled *Japan: An Illustrated Encyclopedia* (1993). Anyone seriously interested in Japanese history and culture should have these reference works on hand. For this present web site, see in particular the entries on "Sino-Japanese War of 1894-95" (by Akira Iriye) and "Russo-Japanese War" (by Shumpei Okamoto).

18. Paul H. Clyde & Burton F. Beers. *The Far East: A History of Western Impacts and Eastern Responses, 1830-1975*, 6th edition (Prentice-Hall, 1975). Originally published in 1948, this standard "diplomatic history" remains a useful reference for sharp analysis as well as basic data.

19. Andrew Gordon, *A Modern History of Japan: From Tokugawa Times to the Present* (Oxford, 2003). This survey history by a leading scholar reflects the most recent research on modern Japan. (384 pages).

20. Mikiso Hane, *Modern Japan: A Historical Survey*, 2nd edition (Westview Press, 1992; originally published in 1982). Hane's great strength lay in his keen ear for the "voices" of people at all levels of Japanese society. (473 pages).

21. Kenneth B. Pyle, *The Making of Modern Japan*, 2nd edition (D.C. Heath, 1996). Originally published in 1978, this thoughtful overview has the additional virtue of brevity. (307 pages).

22. Peter Duus, *Modern Japan*, 2nd edition (Houghton Mifflin, 1998). Originally published in 1976, this is another reliable survey text. (376 pages).

23. Julia Meech-Pekarik, *The World of the Meiji Print: Impressions of a New Civilization* (Tokyo and New York: John Weatherhill, 1986). This is the standard introduction to Meiji prints in English.

Illustrated Periodicals

For American and British graphic responses to the Sino-Japanese and Russo-Japanese wars as these appeared in popular periodicals, the following weeklies are of particular interest:

Illustrated London News
Punch
Harper's Weekly
Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper

Credits

"Throwing Off Asia" was developed by Visualizing Cultures at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and presented on MIT OpenCourseWare.

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