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Statement of Purpose

positions offers a new forum of debate for all concerned with the social, intellectual, and political events unfolding in East Asia and within the Asian diaspora. Profound political changes and intensifying global flows of labor and capital in the late twentieth century are rapidly redrawing national and regional borders. These transformations compel us to rethink our priorities in scholarship, teaching, and criticism.

Mindful of the dissolution of the discursive binary East and West, *positions* advocates placing cultural critique at the center of historical and theoretical practice. The global forces that are reconfiguring our world continue to sustain formulations of nation, gender, class, and ethnicity. We propose to call into question those still-pressing, yet unstable, categories by crossing academic boundaries and rethinking the terms of our analysis. These efforts, we hope, will contribute toward informed discussion both in and outside the academy.

positions' central premise is that criticism must always be self-critical. Critique of another social order must be as self-aware as commentary on our own. Likewise, we seek critical practices that reflect on the politics of knowing and that connect our scholarship to the struggles of those whom we study. All these endeavors require that we account for positions as places, contexts, power relations, and links between knowledge and knowers as actors in existing social institutions. In seeking to explore how theoretical practices are linked across national and ethnic divides, we hope to construct other positions from which to imagine political affinities across the many dimensions of our differences. *positions* is an independent refereed journal. Its direction is taken at the initiative of its editorial collective as well as through encouragement from its readers and writers.

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reconsidering the 2006 MIT visualizing cultures controversy

13. Several colleagues in foreign languages and literatures of MIT echoed that sentiment.
14. We quote an alumnus from Houston, "In my eyes, these things certainly are NOT arts, and I feel they are insults and humiliations to the ART and, more importantly, they are huge disrespects and insults to millions of the victims and their families and offspring. I cannot believe that MIT, one of the most prestigious universities in the world, could allow to post such webpages with an appreciation of the war violence and discrimination over a whole race."
15. Monaghan. "Open Doors."

Optical and Cognitive Illusions:

The MIT Visualizing Cultures Controversy in Spring 2006

Benjamin A. Elman

In spring 2006, I was teaching a course for the history and East Asian studies departments at Princeton under the newly established rubric called "the sophomore initiative," an effort to prepare not yet declared history majors for the sorts of historical topics and issues they might deal with in their future junior research papers and senior theses. Both are still required of all Princeton undergraduates to graduate. During the course, the class and I stumbled on the MIT Visualizing Cultures controversy, and we were provided with an unexpectedly rich teaching moment that lasted for several weeks. The issues of historiography suddenly became very real and alive in the present, as we tried to integrate the materials and debates associated with the controversy in the class discussion.

We began by reading *The Travels of Marco Polo* and in the process looked at recent Danish images of Islam that have caused such a sensation. Marco

Polo's portrait of the "Sheik of the Mountain" and the latter's assassins reminded the class of the September 2005 Danish cartoons of Muhammad "posing" as Osama bin Laden.¹ Next we read European Christian accounts of Asia in the sixteenth century, a Europe on the threshold of imperialism, which we analyzed in light of Edward Said's "Orientalism." Our last project for the semester focused on the "First" Sino-Japanese War of 1894–95, an understudied topic until its recent centennial. Its climax came in winter 1895 with an unexpectedly easy Japanese conquest of the "Gibraltar of the Orient," Port Arthur (Luxunkou), the chief military base on the Liaodong Peninsula in southern Manchuria. The world press covered the Port Arthur campaign both as a great Japanese victory and simultaneously in light of troubling accounts by reporters of the *New York World* and *London Times* of atrocities committed by Japanese troops, which they called the "Port Arthur Massacre." Both Europeans and US citizens were groping toward a global movement to protect prisoners of war via an international agreement on prisoners' rights.

The Japanese army marched by land into Port Arthur from the north (as they would from Malaya to Singapore in 1941), avoiding a damaging frontal naval clash with the northern Chinese Beiyang Fleet under Li Hongzhang (1823–1901). Upon finding their captured troops allegedly butchered by the fleeing Chinese/Manchu forces, the crack Japanese army took their revenge on the surviving population at Luxunkou. The massacre at Port Arthur coincided with world press accounts of the Armenian massacres by the Ottoman Turks. As a result, both the United States and Great Britain considered for a time setting aside negotiations with Japan to end an era of unequal treaties and extraterritoriality vis-à-vis the Meiji government. Interestingly, patriotic Japanese captured the full brutality of Japanese military actions in their depictions of Japanese victories over the Qing army and navy on traditional woodblock prints.

For example, the most damaging of the controversial woodblock prints that touched off the MIT Visualizing Cultures controversy in Spring 2006 depicted Japanese troops beheading violent Chinese/Manchu prisoners of war (fig. 1). This violent image of Japan's flouting of the emerging global movement to protect prisoners of war was presented in Meiji circles as the rightful and terrible retribution Chinese and Manchu soldiers could expect if

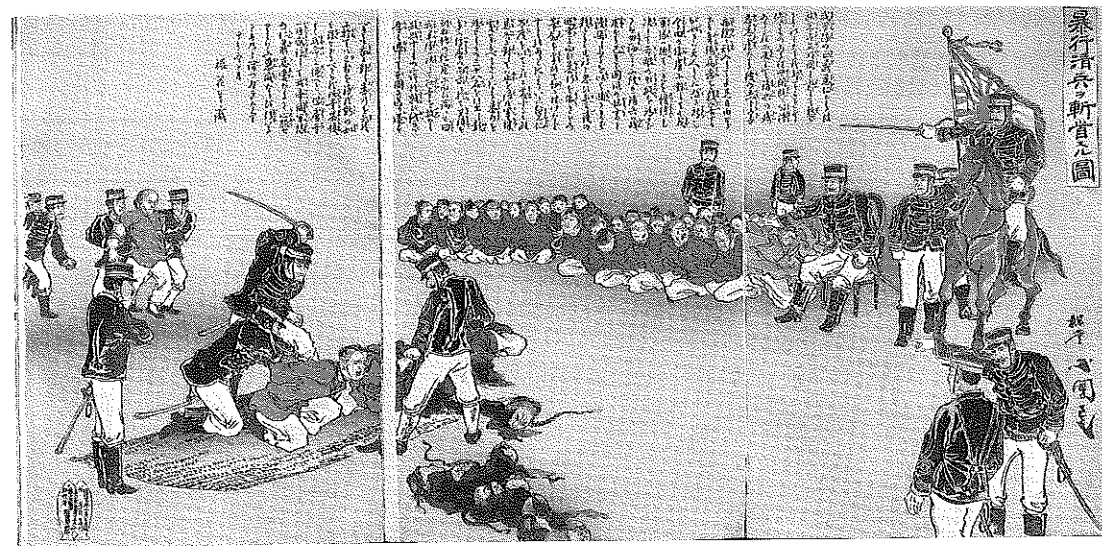


Figure 1 Illustration of the Decapitation of Violent Chinese Soldiers, by Utagawa Kokunimasa, woodblock print, triptych 35.5 x 72.3 cm (14 x 28 7/16 in.), published by Fukuda Hatsujirō, 1894

they caused trouble after their capture. The woodblock was never intended for a non-Japanese audience, much less the MIT website, or our eyes today.

After reading English-language newspaper accounts of the 1894–95 war, the class began an exercise to examine these graphically violent Japanese woodblock prints. They had been prepared as war propaganda, many of which appeared as more subdued "war pictures" in the *San Francisco Chronicle* (fig. 2) and elsewhere to describe the events in East Asia and the unexpected tide of Japanese military victories over the Manchu Dynasty. Since then, these colorful Japanese prints have been exhibited several times in the United States. Indeed, several catalogs of them have been published a number of times, but the prints had never before appeared together on a unified website.²

The class then turned to the integrated parts of the MIT website that Professors John Dower and Shigeru Miyagawa had prepared for viewing the woodblock prints. Dower and Miyagawa's goal was to use the prints as a website to better understand (1) Meiji Japan's attempts at "Throwing Off



Figure 2 "War pictures" in the San Francisco Chronicle, December 20, 1894, describe the events in East Asia and the unexpected tide of Japanese military victories over the Manchu Dynasty.



Figure 3 Great Sino-Japanese Battle at Fenghuangcheng, by Kobayashi Sakutarō, woodblock print, triptych, published by Toyohara Kuniteru III, 1894

Asia," (2) the conflicts between "Old China, New Japan," and (3) Japan's "Taking on Russia" in the 1904–5 war. The prints overall depicted chilling scenes at many war sites of Japanese troop brutality toward Manchu and Chinese forces, not just Port Arthur (fig. 3). As optical illusions, these images gained academic traction in Europe and the United States as part of a Meiji domestic and international campaign to present Japan as the dominant culture and nation in Asia; the publishers directed their artisans to present Qing China in these prints as a backward political and civilizational empire doomed to failure. This "failure narrative" for China and "success story" for Japan became the dominant two themes for understanding East Asia globally throughout the twentieth century.

The "great reversal" occurring between China and Japan in the early twentieth-first century, whereby the "rise of China" is replacing the "rise of Japan," lies in the background of the controversy over the late nineteenth-century Japanese woodblock prints displayed on the MIT website. To grasp the latter, we need new interpretations of the 1894–95 war that will redress the Japanese and global propaganda about the "rise of Japan" and the "fall of China" that engulfed the world press in this "Social Darwinian" era of



Figures 4 and 5 *Hurrah! Hurrah! For the Great Japanese Empire! Great Victory for Our Troops in the Assault on Songhwan*, by Akiyama Buemon, woodblock print, triptych 35.2 x 71 cm (13 7/8 x 27 15/16 in.), published by Mizuno Toshikata, 1894. Detail (fig. 5): World press covering the war from the Japanese vantage point at the Battle for Songhwan

scrambling empires. These views are still well cemented in our out-of-date textbooks describing modern Sino-Japanese relations solely in light of the aftermath of the “First” Sino-Japanese War, and they informed the MIT protesters. One of the Japanese woodblocks, for instance, depicted the world press covering the war from the Japanese vantage point (figs. 4 and 5).³

Chinese military defeats contributed to the popular perceptions of the failure of Chinese “self-strengthening” reforms (1865–98) under the Qing Dynasty. New public opinions appearing in the Chinese and missionary press shaped the emerging national identity and sense of crisis among Han Chinese, who increasingly opposed the Manchu regime. Disappointment with the military losses convinced many Chinese that the late nineteenth-century foreign affairs movement had “failed” and that more radical political, educational, and cultural changes were required to follow Japan’s lead in modernizing and coping with foreign imperialism. Euro-US missionaries and experts who aided in the Qing Dynasty’s scientific translation projects, which were used as textbooks in the arsenals and technical schools, now also thought that the Chinese nation, language, and culture were doomed (see further at the end).⁴

When we first learned that MIT had taken down the website for the woodblocks, I told the students that I thought it was likely that the Japanese right wing was displeased that the MIT site had included woodblocks glo-



Figure 6 *Lake Suwa in Shinano Province*, by Nishimuraya Yohachi, from the series *Thirty-Six Views of Mount Fuji*, woodblock print, 26 x 36.5 cm (10 1/4 x 14 3/8 in.), published by Katsushika Hokusai, c. 1830–31

rifying the violence of Japanese troops, thus presenting Japan in a negative light. Based on the images the class examined, we could see that the accusations that the Japanese, although incited, had perpetrated the “Port Arthur Massacre” by murdering some three thousand Chinese/Manchu innocents in winter 1895 were credible, particularly from the point of view of a Euro-United States then groping toward an international agreement for prisoners’ rights. The thrill of Japanese militarism was clearly the theme of these war representations, which were prepared by the inheritors of the arts underlying the traditional Edo-period woodblock prints (fig. 6).⁵ The same patriot-artists who created the war prints also produced more subdued versions as cartoons for Japanese children. My class noted that the “Port Arthur Massacre” during the “First” Sino-Japanese War deserved more attention, just as the “Nanjing Massacre” of 1937 has received so much attention since the “Second” Sino-Japanese War from 1931 to 1945.



Figure 7 Qing forces presented in defeat by the Japanese military victors as animals, sub humans, and primitives. *Captain Awata*, by Akiyama Buemon, Japanese, woodblock print, triptych 35.6 x 71.4 cm (14 x 28 1/8 in.), published by Mizuno Toshikata, 1895

Subsequently, we learned that the critical reaction of the overseas Chinese student community at MIT toward the website had led Professors Dower and Shigeru to take down the site voluntarily. To my mind, Professors Dower and Miyagawa had prepared the website to shed light on Japanese militarism and excessive patriotic exuberance, which arose after the unexpectedly easy victory of Japan (presented as “David”) over China (presented as “Goliath”). While I could understand the deep emotions that the Chinese students felt when their people were presented in defeat by the Japanese military victors as animals, subhumans, and primitives (fig. 7), the historical context that Professors Dower and Miyagawa enunciated to frame the Japanese depictions of violence and excesses was for my class educational. They will never think about Sino-Japanese relations since 1895 in the same way again. They quickly grasped the cognitive illusions that were inscribed in the war prints. As optical and cognitive illusions, which in this case served as “visual misrepresentations” intended to deceive,⁶ these images gained academic traction in Europe and the United States as part of a Meiji domestic and international campaign to present Japan as the dominant culture and nation in Asia. This “failure narrative” for China and “success story” for

Japan became the dominant two themes for understanding East Asia globally throughout the twentieth century.

Once the website was modified and back up at the end of the spring semester, the class used the controversy to debate the MIT presentation of the images that elicited the Chinese students’ anger. Although we now realized how such horrifying images could be misused, none of us blamed Professors Dower and Miyagawa for maliciously placing the images on their website. Because of my personal history, I know that I often look at Auschwitz pictures from World War II with an anguish similar to that of the Chinese viewing the depictions at Port Arthur and later at Nanjing. Of course, the Nazis were put on trial for war crimes, and Japanese generals were never charged with atrocities against the Chinese people. Nevertheless, we should not blame the MIT messengers as the legitimators of the horrors of the past. Dower and Miyagawa did their best to present the horrors of the Sino-Japanese and Russo-Japanese wars by showing how what was dreadful for the victims was turned into patriotic sport by the victors. Fortunately, we have Akira Kurosawa’s *Ran* and *Kagemusha*, both films about the brutality of warfare in the pre-Meiji era, to tell us vividly via another medium of the horrors of war for the post-World War II Japanese.

The MIT controversy was first reported on in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* on May 1, 2006. Although a number of us had already offered differing opinions on the controversy in the monitored precincts of H-Asia online, the *Chronicle’s* reporting proved to be one-sided and unnecessarily jingoist in favor of “American values.” The assigned reporter’s simple-minded conclusion in the May 19, 2006, issue that the “closed minds” of China had infiltrated the “open doors” of the United States only served to further disappoint the Chinese students who had voiced their misgivings about the MIT website.

The *Chronicle’s* summary of the debate at MIT presented none of its pathos and never addressed the power of the images themselves. Why present it as “brainwashed” overseas Chinese students versus “open-minded” US universities? What a curious way this was to dismiss Chinese student protest in the United States by blaming the protesters for their failure to adopt US ways! Were they reincarnations of Mao’s Red Guards? I wrote the *Chronicle* to remind its editors that expressing one’s opinion, including on

college campuses, was what the Constitution, the last I heard, permitted and encouraged. What was despicable about people who were horrified, rightly, by terrible images that the *Chronicle* never dared to publish, even when challenged to do so by follow-up letters to the editor? While I didn't agree with the minority of students who went out of bounds in their personal e-mail attacks on Professors Dower and Miyagawa, I was more disappointed that the *Chronicle* could only charge that the Chinese in the United States were a danger to free speech. In the end, the matter ended reasonably, and the MIT website went back up with added warnings to all viewers. The *Chronicle*, meanwhile, was left vicariously and rhetorically defending free speech. It was left above the fray, lacking even a proper defense of its own position.

Part of the problem is the role of wars in redirecting public opinion. Passions run high in victory but especially in defeat, and optical illusions find fertile soil in the cognitive dissonance that appeals to nationalism unleash. We see this in the impact of the Vietnam War on the United States in the 1960s and 1970s and in the contemporary impact of the Iraq War. Why was the "First" Sino-Japanese War so hot to handle in 2006 when the MIT site was first viewed by the Chinese students? I would suggest that we are in the midst of a sea change in the global perceptions of China and Japan during the twenty-first century, which are replacing a perennial perspective that had lasted from 1895 until today, namely, that the Japanese are the dominant power, culture, and people in East Asia. The rise of China since the late 1990s has challenged the preeminence of Japan in Asia, a preeminence that certainly began in the aftermath of the "First" Sino-Japanese War. The Chinese students at MIT wrongly felt that the MIT website condoned the violence of Japanese imperialism in China. Unwittingly, they were also reacting to the symbolism of a modern, triumphant Japan, which had been constructed in Japan in 1895, but which had then been uncritically read into the pre-1895 period at least as far back as the Opium War (1839–42). The US defeat of Japan in 1945 only temporarily changed such perceptions. By the 1960s and 1970s, the image of a vibrant "Japan, Incorporated" had revived.⁷

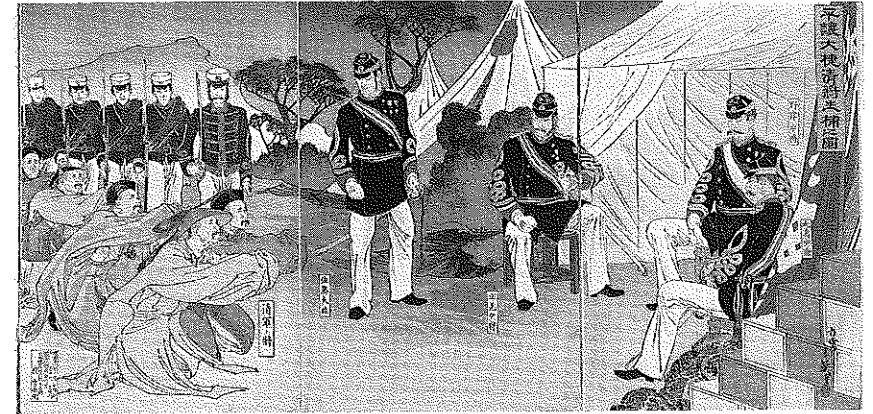


Figure 8 Illustration of Chinese Generals Captured Alive in the Great Victory at Pyongyang, by Tsutsumi Kichibei, woodblock print, triptych 35.5 x 72.3 cm (14 x 28 7/16 in.), published by Migita Toshihide, 1894

Warfare and the Refraction of Qing Reforms into Failure and Meiji Reforms into Success

The surrender of Qing forces to Japanese officers in the woodblock print depicting the Japanese capture of Qing generals (fig. 8) represents the first of a series of "optical illusions" that we must decipher and contextualize historically. When the Sino-Japanese War unexpectedly began on July 25, 1894, the foreign press in Shanghai generally predicted a Chinese victory, even after reports of initial Chinese losses. At the time, the Qing modern navy (sixty-five ships) ranked eighth in the world, compared to Japan's (thirty-two modern ships), which ranked eleventh. China's navy was superior in armor plating, armaments, and tonnage. Some thought that China's two German-built battleships were more powerful than the *Maine* and *Texas*, the United States Navy's largest warships. G. A. Ballard, vice-admiral in the British Royal Navy, believed the Beiyang Fleet in the 1890s was in serviceable condition and ready for action. Some later comparisons of the Qing and Meiji naval fleets have suggested that China could have won the sea war.

On land, however, the sixty battalions of the Chinese army in the north had serious organizational weaknesses. Only twenty thousand front-line

troops faced Japan's fifty-thousand-man army. The logistical weaknesses of the Qing army contrasted sharply with the subjective depiction by Japanese artists of the Manchu army's surrender to Europeanized Japanese officers at Pyongyang in northern Korea. Wearing immaculate black and white uniforms that mimicked German officers after the Franco-Prussian War of 1870, the Japanese officers remain standing or seated with no deferential bowing to their defeated enemies, who, dressed in traditional gowns and caps, revealed their backward, Chinese/Manchu ways in their flowing gowns, traditional hats, and in their kneeling on the ground to submit. The Japanese, a bowing culture even today, are represented falsely as Europeans who towered over their Chinese and Manchu counterparts. The traditional Chinese depiction of the Japanese as "dwarf" pirates (*woko* 倭寇) since the Ming Dynasty was thrown back in their faces. The unsoiled uniforms of the Japanese officers make it appear that the victory had been effortless.⁸

Chinese Surrender at Pyongyang

In 1894, China's navy was still divided into four units, namely, the Beiyang, Nanyang, Fujian, and Guangdong fleets. These four combined had about sixty-five large ships and forty-three torpedo boats. The strongest, the Beiyang Fleet, more or less equaled Japan's entire fleet. Chinese ships were equipped with more modern guns, but the navy lacked an adequate supply and transport system to take the offensive. The fleets took a defensive posture, which had contributed to defeat in the Sino-French War a decade earlier.⁹

These facts on the ground sharply contrast with the woodblock print by the Japanese artists, who depicted the surrender of the Chinese admiral in subjective and symbolic terms. Accompanied by his Western advisors, whom the Japanese apparently did not need on their side,¹⁰ the Qing admiral, in another print, bowed to the ramrod-straight Japanese (fig. 9). The latter received the Qing concession with mixed pride and contempt. The only honor that accrued from the Japanese side to the Chinese Admiral Ding Richang (d. 1895) was his subsequent suicide while under Japanese house arrest, thus placing him within the Japanese ideals of war honor and taking responsibility for failure (fig. 10).

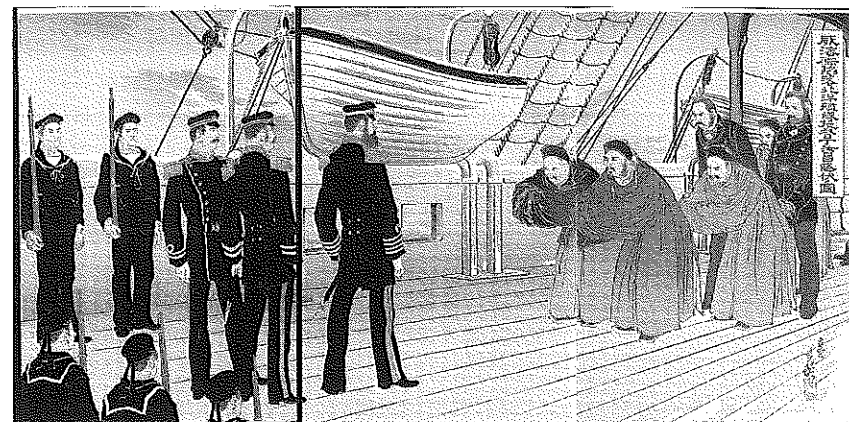


Figure 9 Surrender of the Chinese admiral in subjective and symbolic terms. *After the Fall of Weihaiwei the Commander of the Chinese Beiyang Fleet, Admiral Ding Ruchang Surrenders*, by Matsuno Yonejirō, woodblock print, vertical ōban triptych, published by Migita Toshihide, 1895

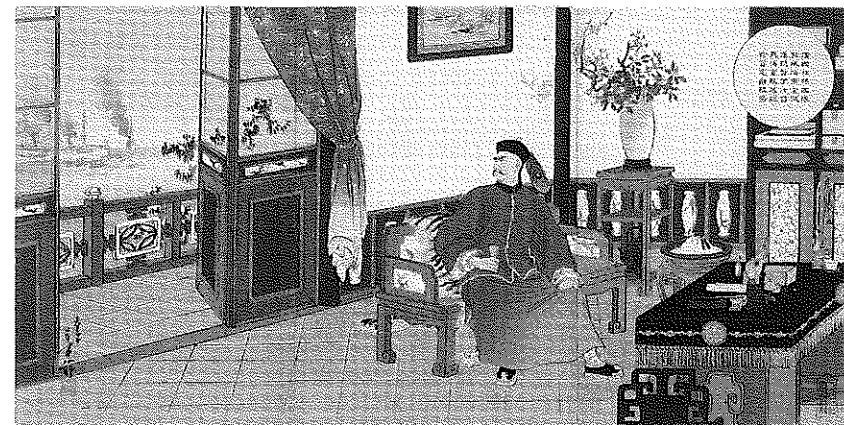


Figure 10 Chinese Admiral Ding Ruchang (d. 1895) contemplating suicide while under Japanese house arrest. *His Peiyang Fleet Having Been Annihilated at Weihaiwei, Admiral Ting Ju-Chang Kills Himself at His Official Residence*, by Akiyama Buemon, Meiji Period (1868–1912), color woodcut triptych, published by Mizuno Toshikata, 1895. Philadelphia Museum of Art: purchased with funds contributed by Peter A. Benoliel, 1976

General opinion among foreigners in Shanghai and Tokyo initially favored Li Hongzhang's fleet over Japan's. Although Japanese newspapers, magazines, and manga fiction were marked by exhilaration at the prospect of war with China, some Japanese were not confident of victory. The publicist Fukuzawa Yukichi (1835–1901) warned against over-confidence, for instance, although he agreed with Japan's just cause in spreading independence and enlightenment to Chosŏn Korea. The Meiji emperor was reluctant to begin hostilities. He refused to send messengers to the imperial shrines at Ise or to his father's grave to announce the war until the news of the initial Japanese victories was communicated to him. Japanese Diet members were also surprised at the easy victory.¹¹ Another British observer noted that Chinese crews engaged in the war were at half-strength, but salaries for full crews were paid to them.

The greatest contrast lay in the fact that Japan's navy was unified. In the end, Li Hongzhang's Beiyang navy fought the Japanese principally alone. Li had kept his fleet out of the Fuzhou battle at Mawei with France in 1884, and the southern Nanyang officers now got their revenge on the Northern Fleet by keeping their fleet out of war with Japan for the most part. It is highly unlikely the Meiji government would have initiated hostilities, or even a surprise attack, had they expected the Fuzhou Fleet to eventually join the fray.¹²

The Sino-Japanese War generated intense Japanese self-confidence after 1895. The Japanese navy was enhanced by the capture of twelve Chinese warships and seven torpedo boats during hostilities, which added significant tonnage to the Meiji Fleet. Moreover, Japanese industrialization accelerated after the Qing Dynasty was forced to pay a considerable indemnity to the Meiji regime. The Japanese government used the windfall to bankroll a massive rearmament program to address the Russian expansion on the borders of Northeast China. Korea and Taiwan were ceded to Japan and became colonies. The postvictory growth of the Japanese navy via the indemnity and captured ships notwithstanding, Japanese artists chose to depict the navy in the 1895 victory, emphasizing the size and scale of the ships. (fig. 11).¹³

The indemnity also meant that the Qing's huge payments to Japan could not be used to augment the dynasty's own reconstruction projects. The

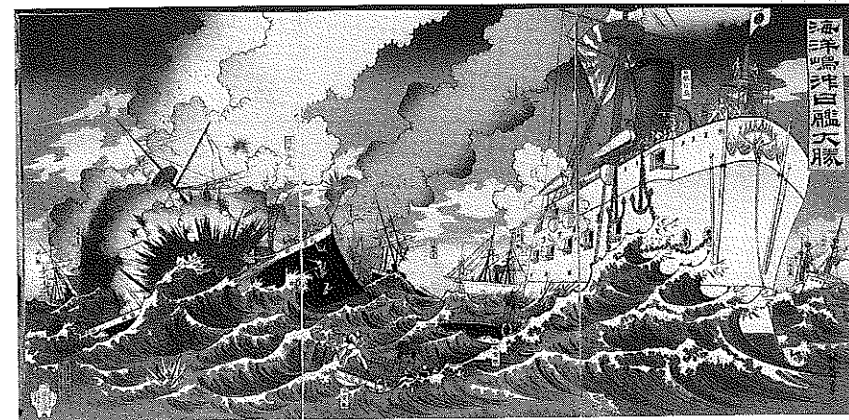


Figure 11 The mighty Yoshino battleship painted in victorious white. *Great Japanese Naval Victory off Haiyang Island*, by Sekiguchi Masajirō, woodblock print, triptych; 35.5 x 72.3 cm (14 x 28 7/16 in.), published by Nakamura Shūkō, 1894

Shanghai Arsenal and Fuzhou Shipyard in particular never recovered from the indemnities. If the Qing government was unable to integrate development so that innovative institutions reinforced each other before this, the added weight of Japanese and European imperialism after 1895 tipped the scales. The Qing reforms initiated in 1865 had even less chances of success under such political conditions.¹⁴

The Japanese woodblock version of the treaty-signing ceremony in 1895 (fig. 12) depicted Itō Hirobumi and Admiral Mutsu standing tall and dressed like European-style generalissimos, replete with medals and honors bestowed on them for their political and military contributions. The Chinese ministers, Li Hongzhang and He Dikei, were shown seated in traditional robes and primitive feathers in their caps. They appeared not to understand what was going on at the proceedings, in which they were represented by two US diplomats, one of whom was John Foster (1836–1917), who was the grandfather of the future diplomat John Foster-Dulles. The US diplomats stood by the sides of their Chinese bosses and fully represented them in the negotiations. In effect, the Japanese at the peace conference were dealing with like-minded Westerners and not the out-of-touch Qing delegates.¹⁵

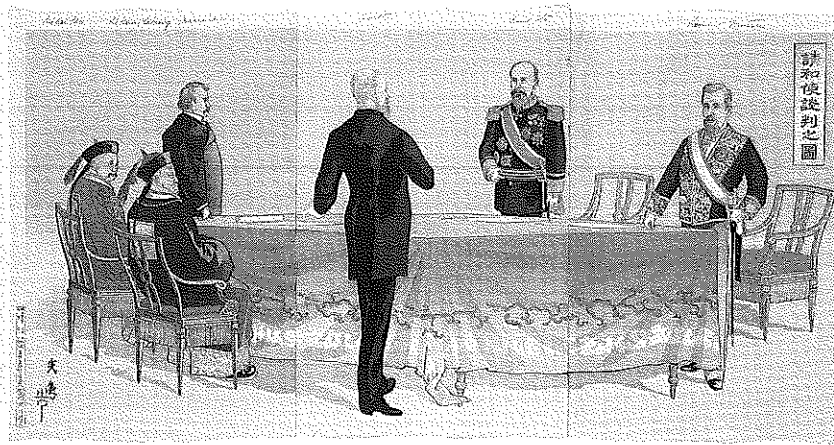


Figure 12 The Shimonoseki Treaty signing ceremony in 1895, depicting Ito Hirobumi and Admiral Mutsu on the right. The Chinese ministers Li Hongzhang and He Dikei were shown seated in traditional robes and primitive feathers in their caps. *Japanese Representatives Meet with a Chinese Peace Mission*, by Tsuchiya Kōitsu, woodblock print, triptych, published by Takekawa Seikichi, 1895

For the Japanese public, the victory developed into a key event that energized the newly emergent Meiji press and drowned out editorial debate over Japan's military role in Korea. Public rage and the Meiji emperor's personal anguish were also directed at the European powers for intervening on the side of China after the treaty was signed. When Russia later forced the Qing to lease the Liaodong Peninsula and Port Arthur to them, the Japanese were primed for war with Moscow over the fate of Manchuria. Public enthusiasm for military adventures increased as the dissemination of national news became a central feature of the Japanese press after 1895. There were by then 600,000 newspaper subscribers in Tokyo and Osaka alone. The Japanese victory over China reverberated throughout the country and demonstrated the preeminence of Meiji Japan in East Asia. The Japanese naval victory over Russia in 1904–5 cemented such national exuberance (fig. 13).¹⁶

Their forces defeated decisively on land and sea by the Japanese military in 1895, the Chinese people wearied of their Manchu rulers and traditional literati elites. Meiji Japan as the victor appealed to Chinese reformers and

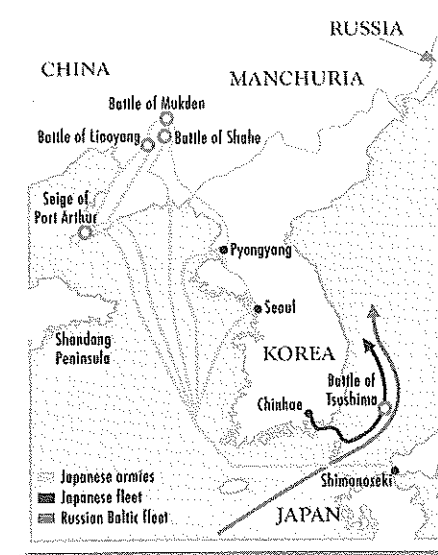


Figure 13 1904–5 Russo-Japanese War naval operations. See the original at Throwing off Asia III: Woodblock Prints of the Russo-Japanese War, ocw.mit.edu/ans7870/21f/21f.027/throwing_off_asia_03/index.html.

revolutionaries who sought to imitate Japanese policies and institutions. Subsequently, the nationalist revolutionaries who overthrew the Qing Dynasty in 1911 depicted themselves in native, populist Chinese woodblock prints (fig. 14) as Meiji-style patriots. They were dressed in modern uniforms and executed those who remained loyal to the Manchu regime, particularly those criminal elements who still shaved their heads and wore their braided queues to signal submission to their Manchu overlords.¹⁷

Reconsidering the Woodblock Prints as “Optical Illusions”

In their depictions of the Sino-Japanese War, Japanese woodblock artisans depicted Japan's military victory as a decisive cultural victory. Japan had left the backward Chinese, Manchus, and Koreans behind, or so it appeared at the time, and had become an important player among the global powers in Europe, notably, Germany, Great Britain, France, and Russia. Thus the woodblocks that so upset the Chinese graduate students were offensive not only for their military violence but also for their symbolic and cultural



Figure 14 A Chinese print depicting the cutting off of queues and heads by the Republic of China forces. Anonymous, *Execution of Three Major Criminals by Army Government*, woodblock print on paper, c. 1911. © East Asian Library and the Gest Collection, Princeton University

violence. They represented a modern Japan that had superseded China in the East Asian world.¹⁸

We see a similar cultural meaning in depictions of the Sino-Japanese War when we look at one of the recent images that Mark Tansey painted. His 1984 *Triumph of the New York School*, in particular, shows how different retrospective narratives can be constructed and read back into an image itself. Tansey's optical illusion depicts New York's artistic preeminence as a US military victory via superior World War II technology (above-ground tanks) over the backward and deleterious warfare style (horses and below-ground trenches) that maimed and killed millions of Europeans during the First World War. The image that sparked the MIT controversy had similarly presented Chinese/Manchu inferiorities when juxtaposed against Japanese military uniforms and military hardware. The Tansey painting also depicts Jackson Pollock and Willem de Kooning in their World War II fatigues, representing the modest "awe-shucks" attitude of US citizens as they accept

concessions of a furious Pablo Picasso and grim-faced Henri Matisse, who are forced to concede Paris's leadership in the art world to New York. Dressed in ridiculously pompous plumes and standing in the back, Salvador Dali seems oblivious to the entire event. Tansey's point—though tongue-in-cheek—is roughly the same as that of the Japanese woodblock printers of 1894–95. The cultural victory of New York over Paris in 1945, like that of Meiji Japan's victory over Qing China in 1895, grew out of a military victory whereby the stronger and superior moderns violently and once and for all thrust aside their backward and conservative predecessors.

The construction of Qing backwardness was a by-product of the Japanese victory in 1895. Thereafter, Japanese accounts of premodern Chinese art, literature, culture, economy, and politics focused on the infirm backwardness and fatal corruptions in taste and decadent values that the Manchu Qing Dynasty had exhibited in its demise. These views were so well articulated and widespread in the Meiji scholarly art world of Okakura Tenshin (1862–1913) and Ernest Fenollosa (1853–1908) that not only naïve Europeans and US citizens were influenced by this conceited Japanese cultural juggernaut. Chinese reformers and revolutionaries also memorized the Japanese lexicon detailing the Meiji defeat of Qing China on the battlefield and its triumph over Chinese values and taste in world opinion. One can hardly imagine the self-loathing of the Chinese after 1895 without a Japanese guidebook to Chinese backwardness.

Naitō Konan (1866–1934) and other Kyoto sinologists convinced their readers that China had seen better days a millennium earlier, which he described as an "early-modern" era. Meiji Japan, Naitō ingeniously argued, now built on the reformist legacy of the failed Song Dynasty (960–1280). The Song had been a precocious early modern Asian "Camelot," replete with precocious reformers, early-modern economists, and brilliant artists and poets. This view survives via Robert Hartwell and his disciples and is only mildly challenged in Western sinology. It represents the triumph of the "Oriental" past over its present poverty, which Japanese scholars were astute enough to translate into the first East Asian version of Orientalism vis-à-vis China.¹⁹

In fact, John Fryer (1839–1928), the Englishman who had tirelessly translated several scores of works on science and technology into Chinese while

laboring at the Jiangnan Arsenal's Translation Bureau, presumed that the Sino-Japanese War had proven that all efforts since 1865 to reform Qing China had failed. Fryer became a voice for China's doom: "Of course this looks to the gradual decay of the Chinese language and literature, and with them the comparative uselessness of my many years of labor. Their doom seems to be inevitable, for only the fittest can survive. It may take many generations to accomplish, but sooner or later the end must come, and English be the learned language of the Empire."²⁰ The triple evils of opium, stereotypical examination essays, and foot binding symbolized this failure. In the 1890s, Qing radicals and revolutionaries increasingly adapted the "three evils" campaigns to discredit the Manchu regime. The Boxer Rebellion of 1900 confirmed the fears of many such as the US missionary William Martin (1827–1916), who had translated Henry Wheaton's influential *Elements of International Law* into Chinese. In the 1868 preface for his *Elements of Natural Philosophy and Chemistry*, Martin had hoped to rescue "the intellect of the Chinese" from the "barren field" of belles lettres. Now he sounded shriller: "Let this pagan empire be partitioned among Christian powers."²¹

What the MIT Visualizing Cultures controversy in part represented was the Chinese students' rejection of the Meiji Japanese meta-narrative for the whole of East Asian history that began in 1895 and was then read into the past and future. The irony for US citizens was that the contemporary agents rejecting this very tired narrative were mainly People's Republic of China Chinese graduate students at MIT, Harvard, and other leading US universities. US professors had helped produce this Japanese master narrative uncritically for several generations, but they had not yet recognized that it was bankrupt.

The greater irony was for some of the Chinese students, however. The few who had spitefully attacked Professors Dower and Miyagawa for preparing the website presenting Japan as the dominant power in Asia failed to realize that the underlying Meiji narrative of Japanese cultural superiority over Qing China that they were attacking was accepted by both the nationalists (Guomindang) and the communists (Gongchandang) throughout the twentieth century. China's "failure" was a common presupposition in their all-out ideological war on Chinese traditional culture and civilization in the

1915–19 new culture movement and during the 1966–76 Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution.

The cultural violence that grew out of the "First" Sino-Japanese War thus served both Meiji Japan and modern Chinese political parties—the Guomindang and the Chinese communists—in their efforts to fashion a new China that would one day catch up with and surpass Japan. Using an old art form, Japanese printmakers created the Meiji woodblock prints to herald a new era after 1895. That art form now conveys an age of Japanese dominance in East Asia and the Pacific that is rapidly passing from view in the 2010s. The deeper analysis of the MIT controversy thus leads us away from the Meiji woodblocks to the Chinese students instead. They spoke for a twenty-first century in East Asia in which Japan's superiority over China in world opinion would be decisively cut down to size.

Professors Dower, Miyagawa, and I were able to look back on these events more sanguinely at the opening address I presented for the Edwin O. Reischauer Memorial Lectures, at the Fairbank Center for Chinese Studies, Harvard University, on April 13, 2011, which focused on "Undoing/Redoing Modern Sino-Japanese Cultural and Intellectual History." It was very moving to listen to Professor Dower as he explained his anguish over the controversy. Looking back on the controversy now with some eight years of hindsight, we can ask ourselves what critical perspectives we can develop to explain what happened in spring 2006, and why the controversy was handled reasonably well at MIT but discussed so poorly in the *Chronicle*. One thing is clear already: the medium of the global web and all of its avatars is an unpredictably empowering technology. It can enhance educational efforts, such as the ongoing MIT website to understand the transition from early-modern to contemporary East Asia. It can also lead to manipulation and misrepresentation when not carefully planned and orchestrated. The pain that Professors Dower and Miyagawa endured was undeserved, but to their great credit they persevered with the site, thereby improving its reception and expanding its educational forum globally.

In the end, the spring 2006 events surrounding the MIT East Asia website are a cautionary lesson in changing times: past events are not only viewed differently in the newer "presents" that we look back from; what art

historians call “parallax”; they also take on new meanings when our “present” view of the “past” becomes outdated and no longer has a “future.” East Asia will never be the same again in the twenty-first century. That is as true for us now as it was for Chinese, Manchus, and Japanese in 1895. The “rise of China,” along with the “rise of India,” may well be the new bookends for a historical myth of the twenty-first century around which we organize our scholarly findings for another generation. The “rise of Japan” versus the “fall of China,” however, is over as a historiographical fashion show.

Notes

- My thanks to Winnie Wong and to Andrew Watsky and Seiji Shirane for their comments.
1. Ronald Latham, trans., *The Travels of Marco Polo* (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin paperback, 1958), 70–73. See also Aurel Sari, “The Danish Cartoons Row: Re-Drawing the Limits of the Right to Freedom of Expression?,” *Finnish Yearbook of International Law* 16 (2006): 365–98.
 2. *Impressions of the Front: Woodcuts of the Sino-Japanese War, 1894–95* (Philadelphia: Museum of Art, 1983); Donald Keene et al., *Japan at the Dawn of the Modern Age: Woodblock Prints from the Meiji Era, 1868–1912* (Boston: Museum of Fine Arts, 2001).
 3. Benjamin Elman, “Naval Warfare and the Refraction of China’s Self-Strengthening Reforms into Scientific and Technological Failure,” *Modern Asian Studies* 38, no. 2 (2003): 283–326.
 4. Benjamin Elman, *On Their Own Terms: Science in China, 1550–1900* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), chapters 10–11.
 5. Kiyochika was perhaps the most famous woodblock print artist of Meiji Japan. His war prints of the Sino-Japanese War were widely viewed.
 6. When compared to M. C. Escher’s notion of an optical illusion as a specific genre of images, I use the more commonsense notion of seeing what was not really there, what economists such as Daniel Kahneman, Amos Tversky, and Robert H. Frank call a “cognitive illusion.” See Ralph Hertwig and Andreas Ortmann, “The Cognitive Illusion Controversy: A Methodological Debate in Disguise That Matters to Economists,” in *Experimental Business Research*, vol. 3, *Marketing, Accounting, and Cognitive Perspectives*, ed. Rami Zwick and Amnon Rapoport (Dordrecht, Netherlands: Springer, 2005): 113–30. I add the question of whether the intention to deceive is discernible within the illusion, which distinguishes it from just propaganda. My thanks to Winnie Wong for helping to clarify this distinction. See the home page of the official M. C. Escher website, published by the M. C. Escher Foundation and the M. C. Escher Company B.V., at www.mcescher.com/ (accessed September 27, 2014).
 7. All Chinese would accept, for example, that Japan was militarily superior to China from

1895 to 1945 and in economic power, as well as in science and technology, from 1945 until the end of the twentieth century.

8. See *North-China Herald*, July 27, 1894, 131, 152, and *Japan Weekly Mail*, August 25, 1894, 227. Foreign media accounts, which generally blamed Japan for the hostilities, are presented in S. C. M. Paine, *The Sino-Japanese War of 1894–1895: Perceptions, Power, and Primacy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 107–34, 138–40, 154–60. Paine (125, 141–44) summarizes the size of Chinese and Japanese sea and land forces in 1894. See also Marius Jansen, Samuel Chu, Shumpei Okamoto, and Bonnie Oh, “The Historiography of the Sino-Japanese War,” *International History Review* 1, no. 2 (1979): 191–227; and Bruce Elleman, *Modern Chinese Warfare, 1795–1989* (London: Routledge, 2001), 94–115. Japanese writers and painters also drew on Western Orientalist vocabulary and images of the Chinese and Japanese but inverted them to “Westernize” Japan and distance it from a “backwards” China. See Stefan Tanaka, *Japan’s Orient: Rendering Pasts into History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).
9. Zhang Xia et al., *Qingmo haijun shiliao (Late Qing Naval Sources)* (Beijing: Haiyang Chubanshe, 1982), 301–27; and John L. Rawlinson, *China’s Struggle for Naval Development, 1839–1895* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1967), 163–69. See also Donald Keene, “The Sino-Japanese War of 1894–95 and Its Cultural Effects in Japan,” in *Tradition and Modernization in Japanese Culture*, ed. Donald Shively (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1971), 132. Almost fourteen thousand men manned Japan’s naval fleet of thirty-two warships and twenty-three torpedo boats. Ten ships were built in Britain, and two in France. The *Yoshino* from Britain’s Armstrong’s shipyard was arguably the fastest vessel of its time when it was timed at twenty-three knots in 1893 trials.
10. Actually however, Western expertise at Yokosuka had been mandatory. See Takehiko Hashimoto, “Introducing a French Technological System: The Origin and Early History of the Yokosuka Dockyard,” *East Asian Science, Technology, and Medicine* 16 (1999): 53–72. Many of the Yokosuka experts first trained at the Fuzhou Shipyard.
11. *Japan Weekly Mail*, August 4, 1894, 130–31. See also Keene, “Sino-Japanese War,” 127, 132. Compare Shumpei Okamoto, “Background of the Sino-Japanese War, 1894–95,” in *Impressions of the Front: Woodcuts of the Sino-Japanese War, 1894–95* (Philadelphia: Museum of Art, 1983), 13. On Japanese media before the war, see also Paine, *Sino-Japanese War*, 134–40. Japanese newspaper reports claimed that Japan had defeated China despite China’s initial military superiority.
12. Elman, *On Their Own Terms*, 377–79. *Japan Weekly Mail*, August 4, 1894, 132, explains the importance of the naval war. See also Paine, *Sino-Japanese War*, 132–35, 158–63.
13. The 200 million *Kuping taels* handed over to Japan amounted to about 7.45 million kg of silver, which was equal to over US\$3.8 billion at current prices, or 6.4 times the Japanese government’s annual revenues. We saw above that the Japanese press initially downplayed Japan’s military superiority.

14. Paine, *Sino-Japanese War*, 265–66, 326–27.
15. Okamoto, “Background,” 16; and Keene et al., *Japan at the Dawn*. 112. See also Paine, *Sino-Japanese War*, 192–95, 247–93, 306–9. On Russian military developments, see J. N. Westwood, *Russia against Japan, 1904–05: A New Look at the Russo-Japanese War* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986).
16. Keene, “Sino-Japanese War,” 121–75. See James Huffman, “Commercialization and Changing World of the Mid-Meiji Press,” 574–79; and Giles Richter, “Entrepreneurship and Culture: The Hakubunkai Publishing Empire in Meiji Japan,” 591, both in *New Directions in the Study of Meiji Japan*, ed. Helen Hardacre and Adam Kern (Leiden, Netherlands: E. J. Brill, 1992).
17. See Hans J. van de Ven, “War in the Making of Modern China,” *Modern Asian Studies* 30, no. 4 (1996): 737–56. Paine (*Sino-Japanese War*, 64–66, 333–66) explains China’s failure to industrialize in light of cultural issues. Elleman (*Modern Chinese Warfare*, 102) continues to stress China’s scientific and technological inability to support a modern navy.
18. Allen Fung, “Testing the Self-Strengthening: The Chinese Army in the Sino-Japanese War of 1894–1895,” in “War in Modern China,” special issue, *Modern Asian Studies* 30, no. 4 (1996): 1007–31. Richard Smith, in “Foreign Training and China’s Self-Strengthening: The Case of Feng-huang-shan,” *Modern Asian Studies* 10, no. 2 (1976): 195–223, stresses the late Qing failure to train a modern officer corps. Fung reconsiders the “witch-hunt for the inadequacies of the Qing army and navy” after 1895. Fung focuses on the defeat of the Qing army in the Sino-Japanese War because Japanese land victories gave them a clear path to march on Beijing. This threat to the capital forced the Qing court to seek an immediate settlement of the war. In contrast to accounts in China that still accuse Li Hongzhang of cowardice for his policy of peace at any cost, Fung maintains that Qing armies were well equipped during the early stage of the war with Japan and that the Chinese field commanders were not incompetent. He refutes earlier claims that Qing land defeats in the Sino-Japanese War were due to the failure of the Chinese ordnance industry. Fung concludes that the primary explanations for Qing losses in the land war are (1) the better military training Japanese troops and officers received when compared to their Chinese counterparts and (2) the fact that Qing troops were decisively outnumbered by the Japanese at the major battles because the Japanese navy controlled the seas and the Qing could not land troops. I would add that the Qing court and its regional leaders underestimated the dangers of relying on European aid in an age of imperialism.
19. Victoria Weston, *Japanese Painting and National Identity: Okakura Tenshin and His Circle* (Ann Arbor: Center for Japanese Studies, University of Michigan, 2004). Dieter Kuhn’s *The Age of Confucian Rule: The Song Transformation of China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), monumentalizes this Japanese narrative. See, however, Stefan Tanaka, *Japan’s Orient*. The Japanese have been reinventing “China” for centuries.
20. Ferdinand Dagenais, *John Fryer’s Calendar: Correspondence, Publications, and Miscellaneous*

Papers with Excerpts and Commentary (Berkeley: Center for Chinese Studies, University of California, 1999), version 3, 1895: 4–6. On the eve of his departure to accept the Agassiz Professorship of Oriental Languages and Literature at Berkeley College, Fryer remained involved in China’s affairs. He publicly announced a competition for new age novels in Chinese that would enhance the morals of China. A new literature written in “easy and clear language with meaningful implications and graceful style” attracted Chinese reformers who called for a new culture in China, premised on the failure of traditional Chinese civilization. See Patrick Hanan, “The Missionary Novels of Nineteenth-Century China,” *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 60, no. 2 (2000): 440–41.

21. William Martin, *The Awakening of China* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1907), 177. See also Hanan, “Missionary Novels”; and Anonymous, “The New Novel before the New Novel,” in *Writing and Materiality in China: Essays in Honor of Patrick Hanan*, ed. Judith T. Zeitlin and Lydia H. Liu (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center—Harvard-Yenching Institute, 2003), 317–40.