

SINO-JAPANESE WAR

During the Meiji period (1868–1912), Japan endeavored to modernize itself after the western model and demonstrate its new military power by increasing its influence and territorial borders in Asia. The fight for dominance in Korea led in 1894/95 to a war with China, from which Japan emerged as victor.

The development of photography, new printing techniques, and the thematic and technical stagnation in the ukiyo-e continually decreased the demand for woodcuts during the Meiji period. Hence many artists, woodcutters and printers were unemployed. Reportage of the Sino-Japanese War offered them a new source of income.

The artists never visited the scenes of battle themselves, but traced the scenes out of their heads or at best from photographs. The realistic rendering of a battle was not foremost in their intentions. As in every war report, the focus here was on a one-sided, propagandist presentation of events, with the Japanese portrayed as heroes in the fight against the enemy.

Japan had long been regarded as China's "little brother". The war pictures aimed to put the country in a better light and demonstrate its new power. Thus Chinese soldiers are shown in traditional garb – here synonymous with "antiquated" – whereas Japanese soldiers wear western-style battle-dress and fight with fire-arms. The motifs are also selected to express Japanese dominance, and range from Chinese men lying on the ground in utter defeat, to Japanese soldiers or ships that fight alone and emerge as victors against all odds.