



## REPORT ON WAR PRINTS IN THE JAPANESE COLLECTION OF THE NÁPRSTEK MUSEUM, PRAGUE

Alice Kraemerová<sup>1</sup>

### Introduction

The end 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century was marked with a strong interest in distant cultures. The whole period can be characterized as a period of educational endeavours. During these years, a greater number of travellers and globe trotters travelled to China and Japan for the first time and brought back many items that illustrated and helped to explain the vastly different cultures of the Far East. The international exhibitions in the second half of the 19th century (One in London in 1862<sup>2</sup>, and others in Paris in 1876, 1878 and 1889) did the most to foster a more realistic understanding of China and Japan alike.<sup>3</sup> The house „U Halánků“ (now: The Náprstek Museum of the Asian, African and American Cultures) and its founder Mr. Vojta Náprstek<sup>4</sup> served as a source about life in faraway countries as well as progressive industrial technologies. General knowledge about both Japan and China was still very poor and, in part, romanticized. Though Japan quickly adopted European and American science and technology, societal organisation as well as literary and artistic trends, travellers to the Far East usually sought traditional things that were still untouched by Westernization. News about the contemporary Japanese political situation was presented to the public in daily newspapers only time to time and articles were usually translated from the English, German, French or American press.

<sup>1</sup> Curator of the Japanese and Korean collection of the Náprstek Museum, Prague, <http://www.aconet.cz/npm>, [kraemerova@seznam.cz](mailto:kraemerova@seznam.cz).

<sup>2</sup> Vojta Náprstek, the founder of the Náprstek Museum, also visited this exhibition and brought many new machines back to Prague which were meant to serve as a basis for the collection in the Industrial Museum which Vojta Náprstek originally intended to establish in Prague.

<sup>3</sup> Wichmann, Siegfried: *Japonisme, The Japanese Influence on Western Art since 1858*, Thames Hudson Ltd., London, 1981.

<sup>4</sup> Vojta Náprstek (1826–1894) surrounded himself with many outstanding personalities, among them also travellers, who he supported morally as well as financially. In return, they bestowed him with items of ethnographic and art value for the future museum collections. The Náprstek house was a center of culture, education and enlightenment in the second half of the 19th century.

When newspapers and journals brought reports of the coming war, they were similar to theatre reviews – very stand-offish and aloof. Nevertheless, news of the war provoked interest in various Chinese and Japanese phenomena as can be seen in various articles found in Vojta Náprstek's scrap books<sup>5</sup>. Newspapers and journals of that period published shorter or longer articles on Chinese and Japanese life, writing about subjects such as geisha, kabuki or nô theater, the school system, etc. The authors of these articles, for example Josef Kořenský<sup>6</sup>, were often travellers who had visited China and Japan.

Before military conflicts started on the Korean peninsula, detailed articles about both armies as well as prognosis about the result of the war had been published in daily newspapers<sup>7</sup>. Unanimously, all newspapers declared that victory would most likely belong to the Japanese army because of its highly organized and well-armed troops.

A similar situation was repeated ten years later. However, Czech newspapers of the time forecast possible future conflicts between Russia and Japan just as the Sino-Japanese war was ending. The 20th April 1895 issue of *Národní politika* (National Politics) announced the end of the Sino-Japanese war, but Russia had already started to attack Japan, protecting Russian interests in the Chinese mainland.

## Acquisition

The Japanese collection in the Náprstek museum has total number of 185 prints which relate to the Sino-Japanese and Russo-Japanese wars. From these, only 11 of the sheets depict the Russo-Japanese war. Among 174 prints of the Sino-Japanese war, two posters are also included.

As far as the collectors and chronology of acquisition are concerned, the majority of prints (115) were purchased (or maybe received) by Mr. Vojta Náprstek. Vojta Náprstek and his wife Josefa<sup>8</sup> purchased a significant number of valuable and interesting artifacts. Even today, a great number of the Japanese woodblock prints in the museum's collection bear the characteristic oval rubber-stamp imprint stating "Gift from Josefa Náprstková," or simply "Vojta Náprstek", which is also true in the case of the warprints. Those collected by V. Náprstek are stamped with "Vojta Náprstek" and some them have labels pasted on the back side which are written in German (55) and describe the battle depicted, author and publishing house. They belong to a series of 60 prints (5 prints are missing in the Náprstek collection: nos. 24, 28, 29, 46, 53), the backs of which were all labeled in German with complete explanations as shown on fig. no. 6:

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<sup>5</sup> The Náprstek Museum's library Scrap Book no. 45, China 2, 9/7/1881–4/10/1894; Scrap Book no. 46, China 3, 23/11/1894–7/6/1900, Scrap Book no. 85, Japan 2, 10/1/1891–11/12/1903. Vojta Náprstek organized and cutting out and collecting of articles from various newspapers and magazines. Library staff then pasted the articles into so-called Scrap Books and divided thematically and geographically.

<sup>6</sup> Josef Kořenský (1847–1938, director of a Prague grammar school, traveller) published an article on the Chinese school system in *Národní listy* (National Papers, a daily newspaper published between 1861–1941 in Prague) on 5th August 1894.

<sup>7</sup> E.g. *Národní listy* (National Papers), *Národní politika* (National Politics) and the articles were titled: The Korean Problem (*Národní listy* 24.7.1894), Chinese Armament (*Národní listy* 27. 7. 1894), Japanese Armament (*Národní listy* 28. 7. 1894), The Korean War (*Národní listy*, 29. 7. 1894, 1. 8. 1894, 3. 8. 1894), The Sino-Japanese War (*Národní listy* 5. 8. 1894). This is only for reference, articles in the newspapers are very interesting and their processing could comprise another theme.

<sup>8</sup> Josefa Náprstková (1838–1907) continued to collect items and to manage the activities after her husband's death.

No.6 (Inv.No. A 29 538):

Heftige Schlacht und glorreicher Sieg Japans bei Ping-yang (Korea.)

(September 1894)

Maler: Ginko; Xylograph: T. Sugiyama; Verleger: H. Ayabe.

Erklärung links anfangend: Hô, Oberbefehlshaber der Chinesen; Ma, Chines. General. Japan. Generale: Yoshimasa Osima; Gener. Tatsumi; Genr.-Major: Michitsura Nosu.

*/Fierce battle and famous Japanese victory near Pyongyang. (Korea.)(September 1894)*

*Painter: Ginkô, woodblock print: T. Sugiyama; publisher: H. Ayabe.*

*Explanation from the left: Hô, Chinese commander in chief; Ma, Chinese general. Japanese General: Yoshimasa Ôshima; General Tatsumi; brigadier general Michitsura Nozu/*

At the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century, there was nobody in the Náprstek Museum to read the signatures and red stamps of the authors, so small scraps of paper bearing the name of the author written in queer German-English spelling were pinned to many of the prints. On some of the prints, Czech and German inscriptions were written by hand with a pencil and/or pen: eg. Krieg am See, Krieg am Land, General Katajama am See, Krieg in Mükden, Yalû /*War at sea, War on land, General Katayama at sea, War in Mukden, Yalu/* etc. along with the remark ‘Na památku,’ (*In memory*) 25. 2. 1901. This indicates that Vojta Náprstek received the whole set from a friend as a visual documentation of Far Eastern affairs. Similarly, he purchased large posters in London depicting life in various parts of world. He strove to bring education and enlightenment to the Czech public in many fields.

The second numerous set of prints (49 pcs.) was originally a part of Joe Hloucha’s collection and as such was incorporated into the museum collections in 1955. Joe Hloucha’s (1881–1957)<sup>9</sup> intention, however, was not to educate; he was interested in woodblock prints as a collector of art, namely of Japanese art. Considering his life<sup>10</sup> and interests, he probably might have seen war prints in the Náprstek Museum where he enthusiastically helped to organize collections in the early 20th century. He was also very interested in men in arms and uniforms. Primarily, Hloucha considered himself a man of letters and in addition to other stories, wrote a short story called “The Festival of the Dead.”<sup>11</sup> This story was published in his book, *Memories of Japan (Vzpomínky na Japonsko)* in 1908. In this book he recalled his impressions from his Japanese travels. Another interesting story from the same book is called “Gunkan,” in which Hloucha describes his visit to a Japanese naval base, and in particular his tour of a Russian ship looted by the Japanese. His lack of enthusiasm for the westernisation of Japan went together with his admiration for the strength and prosperity embodied in the war ships.

Joe Hloucha bought 49 sheets of prints in Japan during his first visit in 1906. From these, 5 depict the Russo-Japanese war and all others deal with the Sino-Japanese war. He

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<sup>9</sup> The report on Joe Hloucha’s collection of war prints was prepared within the research project of the National Museum: “Personalities in Czech Science and Culture“ supported by the Czech Ministry of Culture (VVZ 300, MK 00002327202).

<sup>10</sup> Kraemerová, Alice a Šejbl, Jan: *Japonsko, má láska*, Praha, Národní muzeum 2007, a monograph on Joe Hloucha’s life and collections.

<sup>11</sup> The story narrates a festival held in honour of Japanese soldiers who had died in the Russo-Japanese war

did not, however, care to describe or to give any details about them. He labelled them as "war caricatures" (it was his way of commenting on improbable war scenes), and reasons why he purchased only these prints instead of others are not known. He also brought back two posters from Japan, printed lithographs from 1900, which were clearly propaganda of the Japanese army's great victory in the Sino-Japanese conflict.

Only 21 prints in the museum's collection were acquired from sources<sup>12</sup> other than V. Náprstek and J. Hloucha, six of them dealing with Russo-Japanese War.

### **Authors of war prints**

Whereas woodblock prints were extremely popular during the Tokugawa period (1600–1868), by the end of 19th century the situation in Japan had changed and colourful prints of courtesans, actors or warriors were no longer in vogue. Many woodblock print craftsmen changed profession and devoted themselves to colouring black and white photographs. However, though the art of photography was very popular, (as it was during the Russo-Japanese war ten years later) prints were used as a form of propaganda. The technology of prints was mastered to the utmost and the prints could be produced very quickly, which was an advantage. On the other hand, quick mass production had a strong impact on quality.

Short statistics include a quite wide range of authors, one of the most frequently mentioned being Watanabe Nobukazu – Yōsai<sup>13</sup>. 46 sheets of his prints can be found in the collection, out of which 2 are triplicates and 5 duplicates, due to the fact that these prints were acquired from at least three different sources. Another frequent author was Utagawa Kokunimasa; the collection includes 24 sheets of his, again among them 1 triplicate and 2 duplicates. Adachi Ginkō is another such author – 15 sheets of his, 1 triplicate and 1 duplicate, can be found in the collection. Toshikata Mizuno (14 sheets), Migata Toshihide (12 sheets), Ogata Gekkō (8 sheets, 1 being a duplicate) can also be counted among the most frequently represented authors in the collection. The other authors are represented by only a few pieces: Kobayashi Kiyochika (7), Fujiwara Shin'ichi (3 including 1 duplicate), Shūkō (4), Toshiaki (4), Toshimitsu (4), Shunsai Toshimasa (4 sheets, 1 triplicate), Ōkura Kōtō (3), Hōei (3), Kubota Maisen (2), Sawa Kujirō (2), Išikawa Yōshikazu (1), Shūen (2 identical copies), Kyōsai (1), Inoue Kichijirō (1), Kado (1), Nakagawa (1), Kōchō (1), Kunitora (1), Toyoharu Chikanobu (1), Baidō Hōsai (1). The rest are anonymous prints. Russo Japanese prints (11) include Watanabe Nobukazu, Kaneko, Amamine, Yasuda Hanpō and Taniguchi Kōkyō.

### **Some observations on the Náprstek Museum collection**

The Náprstek Museum collection can be considered unique because a majority (115) of the prints were acquired either by V. Náprstek in 1901 or by Joe Hloucha (49). They have never been never displayed and they are all well preserved. The collection includes

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<sup>12</sup> They were either transferred to the Náprstek Museum from regional museums or purchased from individual collectors in '70s and '80s of the 20th century.

<sup>13</sup> All authors lived and worked at the end of 19th century. The exact biographical data of many of them is not known.

almost all significant authors and images of supernatural cult heroes are represented from many angles.

In general, the portrayal of battlefields lacks variety: the Japanese soldiers are always organized, wear spotless black (infantry) or blue (navy) uniforms, are seen standing firmly, marching, riding horses or aboard huge vessels. In contrast, the Chinese soldiers wear colourful dresses instead of uniforms, are fleeing for their lives, throwing away historical weapons as they go. Chinese war ships are always smaller and quite primitive in comparison to Japanese ships. Japanese strategy is clearly depicted as highly organized, but Chinese soldiers are represented as being in complete chaos.

Painters found inspiration in the *mushae* prints of the end Tokugawa period and their war heroes are depicted in the same intimidating manner (e.g. the beard of general Nozu, which calls to mind the frightening masks of samurai warriors, fig. no. 6). Another source of inspiration were in fact *yakushae* prints which showed actors in the most exalted gesture – *mie*, as in hand-to-hand combat (see fig. no. 2). The third source of inspiration can be seen in the general Japanese esthetic taste, e.g. a full moon or beautiful landscapes can be seen in many prints. Woodblock prints served as an advertising media, as a sort of illustration of current events; the ideological impact is therefore more important than the actual depiction of war scenes in many of the prints. An example of this can be seen in the print depicting a fight which takes place under the waters of the sea, (see fig. no. 7) where a deep-sea divers fight with their samurai swords. Another example are pictures where fierce fire is painted as red lines which connect both sides and is reminiscent of children's play on square paper (see fig. nos. 3,4).

The war was very popular in Japan at that time and that was the reason why war prints were so numerous (many copies of about 3,000 different prints were published, which resulted in thousands of propaganda pictures)<sup>14</sup>. Since the end of World War II, however, the official Japanese doctrine speaks of a strong antipathy towards any war and tries to avoid any issues reminding the cruelties committed by Japanese troops on the mainland both at the end of the 19th century and several times during the 20th century. In this regard, the prints from the Sino-Japanese and Russo-Japanese war still represent a very sensitive theme in Japan.

If one is to speak of the most interesting scenes or outstanding authors found in the museum collection, Ogata Gekkō is certainly an author worth mentioning. He was influenced by the European style of painting, his prints evoking paintings rather than prints, and they distinguish themselves by portraying a different sort of perspective. His pupil, Ōkura Kōtō, specialized mainly in the depiction of the Russo-Japanese war but his style was reminiscent of his teacher's. A third author of prints, Adachi Ginkō, should be mentioned. His themes seemed to address Westerner tastes (see fig. no. 3), often showing Japanese soldiers in vivid action scenes. This brings up another point: all prints from the Tokugawa period had been aimed at a Japanese audience whereas these war prints targeted audiences abroad for the first time in order to promote the heroic deeds of Japanese soldiers and to show the power of the Japanese nation.

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<sup>14</sup> Glimpses of the Sino-Japanese War in Korea, <http://www.fathom.com/feature/>

<sup>15</sup> The silver is not pure silver but most probably metallic pigment made of "zinc-rich brass" – see [http://www.viewingjapaneseprints.net/texts/topictexts/faq\\_metallics.html](http://www.viewingjapaneseprints.net/texts/topictexts/faq_metallics.html).

## Forms and techniques

The prints found in the museum collection are mostly triptychs (approximate dimensions-width: 70–75 cm, height 32–37 cm). The dimensions of the simple ōban would have been insufficient for making the necessary colourful impact as state propaganda. There are also eight diptychs (38 609, 38 610, 38 611, 38 612, 38 613, 38 614, 38 615, 54 489 ) and a diptych (A 20 543) of which the third part maybe be missing. Three polyptychs serve as a sort of panoramatic view of battles (inv.no. A 29 578: 5 x ōban, A 29 601: 4 x ōban, 38 608: 6 x ōban). The last print mentioned also bears the inscription, in English: *The furious battle illustration of Japanese and Russian torpedo destroyers*, which indicates that it was produced as a propaganda leaflet to be used abroad. The English spelling is correct but the style of letters used in the writing is rather queer – e.g. as if they were reflected in a mirror.

War prints brought back the woodblock printing tradition that had been so popular and famous in the Tokugawa period, even if only for a short period of time. However, the prints needed to be printed and distributed quickly to fulfill promotion purposes and that profoundly affected the quality of the prints. Nevertheless, the perfect and victorious images of Japanese soldiers were often emphasised by an application of black urushi on the Japanese soldiers' black uniforms and vessels and silver pigment<sup>15</sup> highlighted their swords (see fig. no. A 29 529).

Prints from the Russo-Japanese war can be characterized similarly; there is not much difference in the style, though the paper used is different due to the improvements in the paper-making technologies that were used ten years later. If not for the inscriptions and different uniforms, the prints would be difficult to distinguish from prints depicting the Sino-Japanese war. These prints were produced less frequently during Russo-Japanese war, though, as photographs were becoming increasingly popular.

## Literature

Jukes, Geoffrey (2002): *The Russo-Japanese War 1904–1905*, Oxford, Osprey Publishing Ltd.

Paine, S.C.M. (2003): *The Sino-Japanese War of 1894–1895*, New York, Cambridge University Press.

Throwing Off Asia – see: <http://www.ocw.mit.edu/ans>

Glimpses of the Sino-Japanese War in Korea – see: <http://www.fathom.com/feature>

Japanische Kriegsgrafiken – see: <http://www.artelino.de/articles/>

Photographs by Jiří Vaněk



1. Toshikata Mizuno: Five Japanese soldiers set about one-hundred Chinese soldiers to flight near Chen river, colour woodblock print, 36,2 x 72,5 cm, 1894. Besides the real bravery of Japanese soldiers, old Chinese weapons can also be clearly indentified. (Inv. no. A 29 554).



2. Toshihide: Victory in Pyongyang and the taking of Chinese prisoners, colour woodblock print, 36,5 x 71,7 cm, 1894. Ōshima, Nozu, Tatsumi and Satō with other five soldiers standing in the back interrogating Chinese prisoners. Are the Chinese begging for mercy? (Inv. no. A 29 562).



3. Yoshikatsu: Sea battle on Yalu, September 17th, colour woodblock print 37,5 x 72,5 cm, 1894. The red links of shooting are very characteristic and all vessels are carefully named in the red frames. (Inv. no. A 29 567).



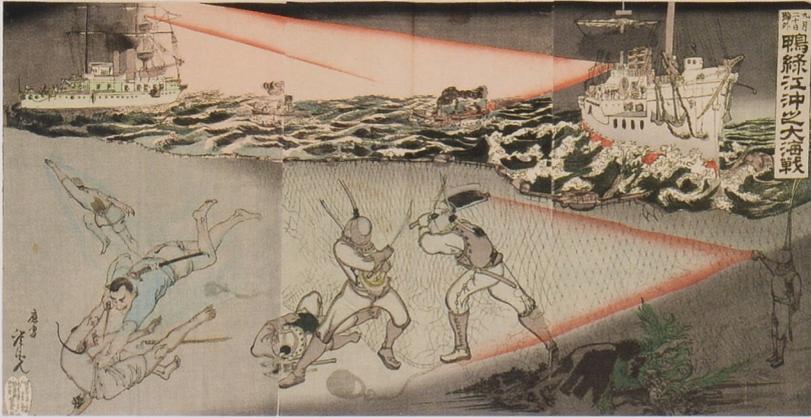
4. Kōchō: Sino-Japanese war – true depiction of attack at Ansong, colour woodblock print, 37,5 x 71 cm, 1894. Evidently an attempt to use European-style perspective and a very peculiar depiction of shooting. (Inv. no. A 29 526).



5. Watanabe Nobukazu: Our Army's Great Victory – the occupation of Mukden, colour woodblock print, 37 x 72 cm, 1894, silver swords and lacquered black uniforms. (Inv. no. A 29 529).



6. Adachi Ginkō: Picture of our great victory at Pyongyang, colour woodblock print, 36,5 x 72 cm, 1894. The beard of general Nozu reminds us of the famous face masks of samurai warriors that were designed to threaten the enemy. The same general is also depicted on, inv. no. A 29 560 though he looks quite different there. (Inv. no. A 29 538).



7. Toshimitsu: Great battle on Yalu, September 20th, colour woodblock print, 36,5 x 72 cm, 1894. Picturesque depiction of a fight under water. (Inv. No. 29 589)



8. Shūen: Picture of Chinese soldiers waiting in ambush (sniping), colour woodblock print, 36 x 73 cm, 1894. The Chinese soldiers have inscriptions identifying them on the back of their coats. (Inv. no. A 29 616)



9. Adachi Ginkō: Japanese secretary Sugiyama fighting with five Chinese in front of the telegraph office, 36 x 71 cm, 1900. (inv. nos. 38 601abc, 54 491, 38 600 abc).