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The Making of the Sino-Japanese War on Paper: a study of the news coverage of
the war by the North China Herald

INTRODUCTION

Mr. Philip Graham, the former publisher of the Washington Post once remarked, “Journalism is the first rough draft of history.” The purpose of this paper is to investigate a “first rough draft” of the Sino-Japanese war (1894-1895) through the study of the coverage of the conflict by the North China Herald (NCH), a major English language publication based in Shanghai from the second half of the 19th century till the first half of the 20th. As a newspaper which also served as a medium to announce the latest circulars from the British Supreme Court and the Consulate based in China, the NCH is an important resource for the historian to understand the viewpoint on the war from the British Empire, a major power active in the Far East during the late 19th century.

The war was of utmost importance as it marked the shifting of the balance of power in East Asia with China ceding its role as a leading force in the region to

Japan. The attitude of the NCH reflected that shift in real time. As the publication covered the conflict, the tone of the newspaper turned from being cautiously optimistic about the Chinese war effort to realizing the utter corruption and vulnerability of the Qing dynasty. It also went from being dismissive and contemptuous towards the Japanese to awe and even fear.

This study will proceed as follows: it will investigate the attitude of the NCH through analyzing some of the comments made in the publication from the beginning of the Korean political crisis that led to the war in May 1894 until the signing of the Shimonoseki which marked the defeat of China in April 1895. The paper will go through the newspapers in chronological order and particular emphasis will be placed on the differing attitudes towards China and Japan and who they shifted as the war progressed.

Three broad stages could be divided upon careful study: I.) The Hopeful Stage (May 1894 to the 19th October 1894 Issue): during this time the NCH was positive on China's role in maintaining the peace in Korea and also her military strength. II.) The Realization Stage: this period (26th October 1894 Issue to 15th February 1895 Issue) marked a conspicuous change in the NCH's attitude towards China from hopeful to one of contempt and despair. It was at the beginning of this stage that the Chinese military defeats in Korea and the sea battle off of the Yaloo Coast became clear for the publishers in Shanghai. III.) The Final Stage: by this

time (22nd February 1895 Issue to 19th April 1895) the NCH made no pretense there was any hope for the revival of China under the Qing Dynasty. It therefore placed an emphasis on the rise of Japan and how the European Powers must reckon with this ascent. Obviously, the demarcation was not as clear as the NCH was living through the war as events unfolded. However, the intention of this study is to elucidate the shifting attitudes of the British publication and this approach could serve as a way for that purpose.

I. The Hopeful Stage (May 1894 to the 19th October 1894 Issue)

Our study would begin with the 25th May 1894 Issue where the NCH reported Viceroy Li Hung-chang's visit to Weihaiwei and the publication remarked that "The ships (of the Beiyang fleet) are in excellent order."¹ This illustrated a positive attitude from the NCH on the naval power of China and the sentiment would continue until later military defeats were realized.

Echoing NCH's positive attitude on the Beiyang fleet, it was also praising of its creator and leader Li Hung-chang. On the 8th June 1894 Issue, the NCH described Li as follows: "HE the viceroy, despite his years, entered into the arduous task of inspection with heart and soul and with his proverbial energy."²

¹ "Wei Hai Wei (From a Correspondent)", *North China Herald*, Vol. 52, No. 1399 (May 25, 1894):802.

² "The Viceroy Li's Inspection", *North China Herald*, Vol. 52, No. 1401 (June 8, 1894):883.

This effort did not go to waste as the NCH reported that "the discipline of the crews seems to be of the first order and the cleanliness and smartness of the ships, material and men, leaves nothing to be desired."³ Such positive comments were also extended to the naval ports that guarded the ships when they were parked at the forts. The NCH further elaborated with this comment: "Whoever has had the opportunity of visiting the present naval stations at Port Arthur, Tailienwan and Weihaiwei nine years, or even six years ago, could not but admire the wonderful changes effected and the extent of work carried out in so short a time with regard to powerful forts, dock yards, work-shops and armories."⁴ Such observations would lead the foreign correspondents a confident sentiment towards the Qing naval strength that would be tested in the upcoming conflict.

Because such professionalism was observed in the Beiyang fleet, the 15th June 1894 Issue remarked that the "Chinese navy would have to be seriously reckoned with in war."⁵ Partly due to the lack of clarity in the situation in Korea and also that of the war intentions of Japan, the NCH when commenting the Tonghak crisis in Korea during that time, said that there was "no reasonwhy

³ "The Chinese Naval Manceuvres", *North China Herald*, Vol. 52, No. 1401 (June 8, 1894):904.

⁴ "The Chinese Naval Manceuvres", p.904.

⁵ "Li Hung-Chang's Tour of Inspection", *North China Herald*, Vol. 52, No. 1402 (June 15, 1894):925.

the present trouble should not be promptly over."⁶ Such prediction would prove to be off the mark by a wide margin.

While the Korean government was faced with the Tonghak rebellion, both the Qing and the Japan were sending troops to the country to put down the revolt. Qing's intention was merely for peacemaking while Japan designs for total war with China. As the NCH became cognizant of Japan's intentions for war, the publication asked rhetorically in its 22nd June 1894 Issue why the "number of troops sent (by Japan) is unnecessarily large."⁷ Furthermore, the NCH would like to see Japan's attempt to create a larger conflict suppressed. The newspaper made a strongly worded comment as follows: "we should like to see the Powers chiefly interested in the Far East uniting in forbidding Japan to carry on the perpetration of this outrage on the peace of the East."⁸

The newspaper was fearful of Japanese ambitions because of the apparent thirst for battle in the general population of the country. While observing what was going on in the Japanese media, the NCH remarked that it made them fearful "that all speakers and writers in Japan seem to be rejoicing in the opportunity now given to the country to assert itself in Korea."⁹ Since there was much conflict happening within Japanese domestic affairs, the NCH concluded that the Japanese would

⁶ "The Trouble in Korea", *North China Herald*, Vol. 52, No. 1402 (June 15, 1894):927.

⁷ "China, Korea, and Japan", *North China Herald*, Vol. 52, No. 1403 (June 22, 1894):966.

⁸ "Japan's Attack on Korea", *North China Herald*, Vol. 52, No. 1404 (June 29, 1894):1008.

⁹ "The Situation in Japan", *North China Herald*, Vol. 52, No. 1404 (June 29, 1894):1008.

rather have a "foreign war instead of a civil one."¹⁰ In these comments, the reader could observe that the NCH was very suspicious of Japanese intentions and expressed strongly negative comments on its thirst for conflict. Moreover, even though Japan claimed to go to Korea to help "modernize the country", the NCH sharply pointed out that "this move of Japanese government seems to find no favour in the eyes of the very people they "have come to protect."¹¹

On the contrary, the NCH was very positive on the quality of the crew in the Beiyang fleet. The newspaper praised the naval officers by commenting that "as gunners, the Chinese make excellent marksmen; they are fond of their guns."¹² Outside opinion at times were negative on the naval leadership to which the NCH came to their defense, as the newspaper wrote that in "an emergency, where name and country is at stake, will bring out, we are fully persuaded, much latent and unknown strength in the Chinese naval officer"¹³ Here one could observe the differing attitudes the NCH had on Japan and China and it seemed that it was overwhelmingly pro China.

As the conflict continued to intensify, the NCH in its 6th July 1894 Issue commented that "war cannot be avoided."¹⁴ Then in the 13th July 1894 Issue, the

¹⁰ "Japan's Attack on Korea", p.1008.

¹¹ "The Troubles in Korea", *North China Herald*, Vol. 52, No. 1404 (June 29, 1894):1031.

¹² "The Peiyang Squadron", *North China Herald*, Vol. 52, No. 1404 (June 29, 1894):1009.

¹³ "The Peiyang Squadron", p.1009.

¹⁴ "Japanese Intentions", *North China Herald*, Vol. 53, No. 1405 (July 6, 1894):10.

publication pressed on with its disapproval of Japan's war intentions by writing that "Japan would have the sympathy of the Foreign Powers, if she were now willing to pick a quarrel with China."¹⁵ Throughout the period, the NCH was clear that the burden of the cause of the conflict laid with the Japanese. The newspaper was also forthright with attacking its media peer on its 20th July 1894 Issue by pointing out that "the Japan Mail does not hesitate to minister to the vain-gloriousness of the Japanese."¹⁶ This coupled with Japanese conflict intentions painted a picture of aggressive barbarism of the Japanese government and its newspaper publications.

While Japan attempted to join the world stage as a civilized power like the Europeans, the NCH attacked Japan for "deliberately defying every rule and canon of international law by invading the country of a friendly power."¹⁷ However, the publication was also aware of the difference in attitudes between Japan and China when it came to modernization their own country. The newspaper wrote that "whatever her fault, Japan unquestionably stands for advancement and progress, China – on the other hand, for old-world and ancestral ways."¹⁸ This comment would prove to be clairvoyant on the outcome of the war with China's old-world and ancestral ways leading to her utter defeat.

¹⁵ "The Situation", *North China Herald*, Vol. 53, No. 1406 (July 13, 1894):51.

¹⁶ "The Japan Mail and Crisis", *North China Herald*, Vol. 53, No. 1407 (July 20, 1894):81.

¹⁷ "The Corea Embroglio", *North China Herald*, Vol. 53, No. 1407 (July 20, 1894):108.

¹⁸ "Outports, Japan", *North China Herald*, Vol. 53, No. 1407 (July 20, 1894):94.

Continuing with its journalistic desire to search for the party on the right, the NCH in its July 28th 1894 Issue pointed out that it “cannot see that China is in any way responsible.”¹⁹ However right the country maybe, China was amateurish in its foreign power endeavors, to which the NCH lamented that “Chinese foolishly allowed the King of Korea to make treaties as an independent sovereign.”²⁰ Such diplomatic mistake led to the conflict that was happening and China was ultimately to pay the price for its failure. As the hostilities intensified between Chinese and Japanese troops in Korea, the NCH was confident in the military abilities of the China army. Commenting on the battles in Suigen, the NCH wrote that “General Nieh possesses the full confidence of his superiors and his troops.”²¹ Nieh was the Qing general who engaged the Japanese in the beginning of the war in Korea and was known for his courage of which the NCH was praiseworthy. The publication was positive on the Chinese army at this stage of the war as it commented that the Qing soldiers were “superior to the Japanese in physique.”²²

However, the NCH pointed out a potential problem of the lack of drilling in the Qing army, which would later prove to most important reason for its demise. The NCH wrote that it was “possible to replace their (Qing army) antiquated weapons with those of European construction, but absolutely impossible to force

¹⁹ “The Emperor of China”, *North China Herald*, Vol. 53, No. 1408 (July 27, 1894):126.

²⁰ “The Emperor of China”, p.126.

²¹ “The Chinese Expedition”, *North China Herald*, Vol. 53, No. 1408 (July 27, 1894):132.

²² “The Chinese Expedition”, p.132.

upon them the spirit of our modern military education in the slightest degree.”²³

Furthermore, the Qing army had “no engineering corps.”²⁴

In contrast, the publication observed that the Japanese military was “equipped and armed as well as the best armies of the West.”²⁵ This observation is echoed by an adept contemporary general as recalled by Jeffery M. Dorwart in his paper “The Pigtail War”. Dorwart recounted that “In 1879 General Ulysses S. Grant.....had predicted that Japanese troopers were so well trained and armed that 10,000 of them could march.....across China.”²⁶ As such, the newspaper wrote that there “cannot be a doubt that latter would win the first battles.”²⁷ However, the NCH was still hopeful for China as she speculated that the country was in the “position to be able at any time to send millions of raw material of soldiers into the field.”²⁸ Such prediction would turn out to be a gross overestimation of China.

As the hostilities intensified in Korea, a formal war was proved to be inevitable and in the 3rd August 1894 Issue, the NCH reported that “China and Japan declared war on each other on the 1st of August.”²⁹ Continuing with its sentiments partial towards China, the publication reported that the country’s

²³ “China’s Armies”, *North China Herald*, Vol. 53, No. 1408 (July 27, 1894):150.

²⁴ “China’s Armies”, p.151.

²⁵ “Japan’s Armies”, *North China Herald*, Vol. 53, No. 1408 (July 27, 1894):151.

²⁶ Jeffrey M. Dorwart, *The Pigtail War: American Involvement in the Sino-Japanese War of 1894-1895*, (University of Massachusetts Press, 1975), 99.

²⁷ “Japan’s Armies”, p.152.

²⁸ “Japan’s Armies”, p.152.

²⁹ “The Declaration of War”, *North China Herald*, Vol. 53, No. 1409 (August 3, 1894):165.

declaration was “a dignified document.”³⁰ Coming from a third-party standpoint, the newspaper firmly stated that “no impartial person who can deny that the war has been forced on China by Japan.”³¹ Furthermore, the NCH praised the diplomatic actions undertaken by Li Hung-chang. The publication rhetorically asked, “Viceroy Li’s conduct towards Japan has been irreproachable; how then is Japan’s attack on China justifiable?”³² Such was NCH attitude towards Japanese belligerence and the reader could conclude that it was disproving of its actions.

NCH’s negative sentiment towards Japan was mainly caused by her navy’s “sinking of Kowshing, a British steamer.”³³ The ship was a registered under British jurisdiction and as such the NCH would be partial towards its safety. The steamer was carrying Chinese soldiers to Corea and the publication Japan, by attacking a ship of a third country unprovoked was “guilty of an act of barbarity.”³⁴ Moreover, as the soldiers were “struggling in the water, the Japanese fired on them with their machine guns”³⁵ and made “no attempt to save lives.”³⁶ Further confirming the NCH’s belief that the Japanese were acting like barbarians, the newspaper reported that “Mr. Osborne, British consulate was attacked by the Japanese in Seoul.”³⁷

³⁰ “The Declaration of War”, p.165.

³¹ “The Declaration of War”, p.165.

³² “The Declaration of War”, p.166.

³³ “The Sinking of the Kowshing”, *North China Herald*, Vol. 53, No. 1409 (August 3, 1894):171.

³⁴ “The Sinking of the Kowshing”, p.171.

³⁵ “The Sinking of the Kowshing”, p.171.

³⁶ “The Kowshing Affair”, *North China Herald*, Vol. 53, No. 1409 (August 3, 1894):172.

³⁷ “The Sinking of the Kowshing”, p.167.

Contrasting its attitude towards the Japanese, the NCH was firmly on the Chinese side and when learnt of the military success of the Qing army in Korea, the newspaper had a tone of rejoice by reporting that the Chinese “did wonderful havoc amongst the Japanese”³⁸ in Yashan.

The NCH also took the opportunity to attack the lack of independence of the Japanese media by reporting that the Japan Mail had to cooperate with “recent effort to win approval for Japan’s unscrupulousness in muzzling her press in order to ensure the dispatch of troops without much outcry.”³⁹ This however stood in contrast with Stewart Lone’s account of the Japanese media during the war as he stated that “wartime censorship of the press appears to have been very light compared to the later years.”⁴⁰ It would be up to the reader to decide on the state of affairs of the media independence in Japan during this conflict given the qualitative nature of the issue.

The NCH continued to express its negative sentiment towards the Japanese in the 10th August 1894 Issue by stating that they could “hardly accord (their) sympathy in the present struggle to Japan as the representative of western civilization.”⁴¹ In the newspaper’s opinion, the actions of the Japanese so far were

³⁸ “The War”, *North China Herald*, Vol. 53, No. 1409 (August 3, 1894):174.

³⁹ “Outports, Japan”, *North China Herald*, Vol. 53, No. 1409 (August 3, 1894):179.

⁴⁰ Stewart Lone, *Japan’s First Modern War: Army and Society in the Conflict with China, 1894-95*, 100.

⁴¹ “The Sinking of the Kowshing”, *North China Herald*, Vol. 53, No. 1410 (August 10, 1894):210.

not in accordance with its desire to become a world power like the Europeans. To further its point that the Japanese government was in the wrong for being the instigator of the conflict, the NCH pointed out that the war was not popular within Japan. Regular men were reluctant to go to war and as such, the newspaper wrote that the “consequence was many Japanese committed suicide to escape the conscription.”⁴² Moreover, the war was hurting commerce and the NCH reported that “35,000 unlucky Japanese are now in enforced idleness”⁴³ because of the lack of trade with China.

The publication was firm to predict that the Japanese lacked the resources for a prolonged conflict it wrote that “the Japanese army will never stand a winter campaign in Korea.”⁴⁴ With the intention to point out how far the Japanese were behind from the Western powers, the NCH pointed out that “European clothing does not suit the men”⁴⁵ and that they would freeze as a result.

Contrasting the NCH’s opinion that the European outfits were inappropriate for the Japanese, Donald Keene recalled that “the (Japanese) newspapers were filled with.....prints depicting fearless Japanese troops routing terrifying Chinese

⁴² “Events in Japan”, *North China Herald*, Vol. 53, No. 1410 (August 10, 1894):239.

⁴³ “Events in Japan”, p.239.

⁴⁴ “The Japanese in Korea”, *North China Herald*, Vol. 53, No. 1410 (August 10, 1894):240.

⁴⁵ “The Japanese in Korea”, p.240.

set the tone for the descriptions.”⁴⁶ For the Japanese, western uniform signified discipline and in contrasts the Chinese were depicted “in screaming reds, blues, purples and greens”⁴⁷ which would “suggest primitive taste, if not barbarity.”⁴⁸ Japanese discipline and methodical approach to war would prove to be the key ingredient of its success which the NCH would come to appreciate and praise. Its uniform, one could speculate, was a visual manifestation of such virtues.

Extending its negative attitude towards the Japanese, the NCH in its 17th August 1894 Issue defended China’s use of the word “Wo” which meant dwarf inoffensive. The NCH commented that “Wo is much used by the Japanese in the mythological histories”⁴⁹ and that “Wo” need not be “a contemptuous expression.”⁵⁰ The journalistic tone of the NCH seemed to be all-encompassing when it came to making a point regarding its sentiments towards a nation. While it was on China’s “side”, it would defend her even in the nature of the description she used on her enemy. Such attitude would change markedly as China faced total military defeats. The NCH also praised that “the Chinese are becoming accustomed to international politics is shown by the language now employed in

⁴⁶ Donald Keene, “The Sino-Japanese War of 1894-95 and Its Cultural Effects in Japan”, *Tradition and Modernization in Japanese Culture*, (Princeton University Press, 1971), 137.

⁴⁷ Donald Keene, 138.

⁴⁸ Donald Keene, 138.

⁴⁹ “The Name of Japan”, *North China Herald*, Vol. 53, No. 1411 (August 17, 1894):250.

⁵⁰ “The Name of Japan”, p.250.

these documents.”⁵¹ This was a powerful affirmation that China could be within reach of Western civilized diplomacy.

The NCH again was pessimistic on Japan’s military abilities by point that that “it is doubtful if Japan’s resources will last out if the war is prolonged.”⁵² Moreover, the newspaper described Japan as “pretend(ing) to be civilized”⁵³ but would take actions that “even a South American Republic would not dare to do.”⁵⁴ Such was the strength of the NCH’s opinion on Japanese barbarity that it wrote that it was “about time for European powers to step in and tell the Japs something about the way civilized soldiers are governed.”⁵⁵ In contrast, the NCH was joyful for any interpolation of the possibility of Chinese military strength. It commented that during the battle when Chinese were marching onto Seoul, there were “8,000 Japanese and 2,000 Chinese and the fact that many Japanese were wounded speaks well for the Chinese.”⁵⁶

Despite the NCH believed that the Chinese was in the right, it made no pretense of the state of her political system. In the 24st August 1894 Issue, the NCH recognized that the “Chinese government is rotten through and through.”⁵⁷ Be that

⁵¹ “The Name of Japan”, p.250.

⁵² “Shanghai in Danger”, *North China Herald*, Vol. 53, No. 1411 (August 17, 1894):259.

⁵³ “Outports, Corea”, *North China Herald*, Vol. 53, No. 1411 (August 17, 1894):263.

⁵⁴ “Outports, Corea” (August 17, 1894), p.263.

⁵⁵ “Outports, Corea” (August 17, 1894), p.263.

⁵⁶ “Outports, Corea” (August 17, 1894), p.263.

⁵⁷ “Foreigners and the War”, *North China Herald*, Vol. 53, No. 1412 (August 24, 1894):293.

as it may, the NCH was praiseworthy of the Qing government as it report that “China have done her utmost....to preserve the good-fellowship of nations.”⁵⁸

The NCH, at this stage was not hesitant to report Japanese military difficulties, as it stated that “several suicides have already occurred among the Japs and they are very low-spirited indeed.”⁵⁹ In contrast, in the next issue published on 31st August 1894, the NCH pointed out that “Chinese are reported to be in excellent spirits”⁶⁰ and that there was “no question about the province of Pyengan being in the hands of the Chinese.”⁶¹ Such was the confidence NCH had on the Qing military. Also on the same issue, the NCH described the financial difficulties of Japan to illustrate how she would not be able to sustain a prolonged war. The newspaper reported that the “rate of exchange (for Japanese currency) is 1,700 cash for paper note (2 months ago, the rate of exchange was 3,500 cash to the dollar”⁶² and that the “fall in Japanese money has been very great.”⁶³ Monetary collapse was able to explain many failures in regimes during wartime and the NCH seem to be implying this consequence for Japan.

The NCH was still hopeful of the Chinese military as its attitude was reflect on its writing in the 7th September 1894 Issue. The newspaper commented that "if

⁵⁸ “China and the Powers”, *North China Herald*, Vol. 53, No. 1412 (August 24, 1894):322.

⁵⁹ “Outports, Corea”, *North China Herald*, Vol. 53, No. 1412 (August 24, 1894):305.

⁶⁰ “The War”, *North China Herald*, Vol. 53, No. 1413 (August 31, 1894):344.

⁶¹ “Outports, Corea”, *North China Herald*, Vol. 53, No. 1413 (August 31, 1894):349.

⁶² “Outports, Corea” (August 31, 1894), p.349.

⁶³ “Outports, Corea” (August 31, 1894), p.349.

once thoroughly roused, the Chinese will make a long fight, and will grow stronger as they go on."⁶⁴ This would be in response to the vanity of Japan's reason to go into war; namely to reform Korea. The NCH was not convinced of Japan's intentions and the publication stated that "no greater farce has ever been seen than this attempt by Japan to hoodwink the civilized world into believing her mission in Korea."⁶⁵ The NCH's picture of Japan was still one of belligerent barbarity at this stage.

As the conflict continued and there seemed to be no positive news from the Chinese military, the NCH remarked in its 14th September 1894 Issue that "China.....characteristically made no preparation."⁶⁶ In contrast, "all foreign military authorities spoke in the highest terms of the Japanese army, and our own naval men commend most highly the Japanese sailors."⁶⁷ Even though the NCH did not approve of Japan's war intentions and actions, it could not be admit the efficiency of the country's military machine.

Be that as it may, it continued to find the light in the Chinese war efforts as it defended the Beiyang's fleet's lack of action as it commended that the "Fabian

⁶⁴ "The English Mail Papers", *North China Herald*, Vol.53, No. 1414 (September 7, 1894):393.

⁶⁵ "A Wonderful City: Taiyuanfu", *North China Herald*, Vol. 53, No. 1414 (September 7, 1894):408.

⁶⁶ "The War", *North China Herald*, Vol. 53, No. 1415 (September 14, 1894):425.

⁶⁷ "The War" (September 14, 1894), p.425.

policy he (Ting) is pursuing is the right one."⁶⁸ Moreover, the NCH speculated imminent trouble for the Japanese army as the “movement of the Korean and Chinese forces will leave Japanese troops to expect to “find themselves between the two fires when the great battles take place.”⁶⁹ The newspaper was forthright in pointing out that Japanese soldiers in Korea were “depressed”⁷⁰ as they were “losing men every day.”⁷¹ Horrible news of Chinese troop casualties were noticeably absent during this stage.

NCH’s optimism in the Chinese military began to wane with the defeat of the Chinese army in Pingyang and also the inconclusive sea battle off the coast of Yaloo (Huang Hai) in mid to late September. On the 21st September 1894 Issue the NCH reported the Japanese “capture of Pingyang. Twenty thousand Chinese were killed, wounded and taken prisoners, the Japanese loss being only thirty killed and two hundred and seventy wounded.”⁷² The newspaper praised Japan for possessing the “latest achievements of modern military science,”⁷³ though it still attempted to find a some light in the Chinese military by stating that “the men

⁶⁸ “The War” (September 14, 1894), p.425.

⁶⁹ “The War”, *North China Herald*, Vol. 53, No. 1415 (September 14, 1894):434.

⁷⁰ “Outports, Corea”, *North China Herald*, Vol. 53, No. 1415 (September 14, 1894):441.

⁷¹ “Outports, Corea” (September 14, 1894), p.441.

⁷² “The Capture of Pingyang”, *North China Herald*, Vol. 53, No. 1416 (September 21, 1894):477.

⁷³ “The Great Victory at Pingyang”, *North China Herald*, Vol. 53, No. 1416 (September 21, 1894):477.

(Chinese).....are as good material as a general could want”⁷⁴; the their failures were due to having had “little drill or discipline.”⁷⁵

The newspaper also went into detail on the conclusions of the Yaloo coast naval battle where they reported the “Chinese losing the Kingyuen”, “Chikyuen” “and the Chaoyung and Yangwei” both “run ashore.”⁷⁶ On the other side, the “Japanese lost....four large vessels.”⁷⁷ The newspaper speculated that the Japanese “ammunition must have begun to fail”⁷⁸ and they “began to retreat to the eastward.”⁷⁹ The sea battle was thus inconclusive from the news presented at the time as outsiders were not aware of the damage done the Beiyang ships.

The relative success of the Chinese navy versus its army could be observed from the difference in the availability of information for international scholars. As Samuel Chu recounted on the historiography of the war, he pointed out that “there are fewer sources for the study of the army...because almost no foreign personnel, who might have provided eyewitness accounts, were attached to the Chinese army, as was the case with the Chinese navy.”⁸⁰ The lack of sources also meant that the

⁷⁴ “The Great Victory at Pingyang”, p.477.

⁷⁵ “The Great Victory at Pingyang”, p.477.

⁷⁶ “Naval Battle at Yaloo”, *North China Herald*, Vol. 53, No. 1416 (September 21, 1894):478.

⁷⁷ “Naval Battle at Yaloo”, p.478.

⁷⁸ “Naval Battle at Yaloo”, p.478.

⁷⁹ “Naval Battle at Yaloo”, p.478.

⁸⁰ Marius B. Jansen, Samuel C. Chu, Shumpei Okamoto and Bonnie B. Oh , “The Historiography of the Sino-Japanese War”, *The International History Review*, Vol. 1, No. 2 (April 1979):203.

level of professionalism in the army was lower than that of the navy and the relative failure of the former was therefore observed.

The NCH further elaborated on the Qing's total defeat in Korea in the 28th September 1894 Issue as it recounted that "at Pingyang a large number of Chinese escaped to the north"⁸¹ and that "Japanese are marching towards the sacred city of Moukden."⁸² On the other hand, the NCH praised the actions of the Chinese leaders by specifying that the "Empress-Dowager has proved herself again what she always has been, a patriotic and able lady."⁸³ The NCH reported that a "sum of three million taels, accumulated by the Empress Dowager, has been ordered.....to be sent to the Treasury"⁸⁴ which showed the resolve of the Chinese leadership in its war efforts. Such actions were proved to be futile in the face of later military defeats.

The publication at the stage had still not altered its hope for some kind of Chinese military success as illustrated in the 5th October 1894 Issue that in the Battle of Pingyang, "Coreans have joined the Chinese army in large numbers."⁸⁵ The Qing army's popularity should have had a positive effect on the Qing's war effort that that proved to be false. The NCH did not pull its punches when it came

⁸¹ "Summary of News", *North China Herald*, Vol. 53, No. 1417 (September 28, 1894):510.

⁸² "Summary of News" (September 28, 1894), p.510.

⁸³ "Summary of News" (September 28, 1894), p.513.

⁸⁴ "The War", *North China Herald*, Vol. 53, No. 1417 (September 28, 1894):535.

⁸⁵ "Outports, Corea", *North China Herald*, Vol. 53, No. 1418 (October 5, 1894):563.

to discrediting the Japanese side of the story by reporting that “the mere fact that any report, promise, or statement originates from Japanese official sources constitutes a reason for discrediting it.”⁸⁶ This total disapproval would take a sharp turn when the war went completely in favor of the Japanese.

Despite the military failures of the Chinese thus far, in the 12th October 1894 Issue, the NCH was still eager to point out any slight incompetence on the part of the Japanese war effort by stating that they “have failed to follow up any of their successes.”⁸⁷ The NCH also wrote that the “Chinese were in no way inferior to the soldiery of civilized nations”⁸⁸ and that they “have proved themselves at least the equals of the Japanese.”⁸⁹ However, the NCH had to acknowledge the successes of the Japanese were due to them being “far ahead of his bigger brother in drill and discipline.”⁹⁰

II. The Realization Stage (26th October 1894 Issue to 15th February 1895 Issue)

As the general community became aware of the utter incompetence of the Chinese military, the tone of NCH took a steep turn and adopted a generally dismissive attitude towards any of China’s actions. This was contrasted by its

⁸⁶ “QUAE Fuerunt Vitia, Mores Sunt”, *North China Herald*, Vol. 53, No. 1418 (October 5, 1894):580.

⁸⁷ “The Situation”, *North China Herald*, Vol. 53, No. 1419 (October 12, 1894):589.

⁸⁸ “The War”, *North China Herald*, Vol. 53, No. 1419 (October 12, 1894):596.

⁸⁹ “The Fall of Pingyang”, *North China Herald*, Vol. 53, No. 1419 (October 12, 1894):620.

⁹⁰ “The Fall of Pingyang”, *North China Herald*, Vol. 53, No. 1419 (October 12, 1894):620.

approval of the Japanese war effort. Though still admitting that China was in the right in terms of being on the right in the conflict, the country's incompetence and corruption caused much disappointment to the writers of the newspaper. Japanese actions, however unlawful in the eyes of the editors, could somehow be reconciled by its effectiveness. As it has always been the case in history: might is right and the NCH's change in attitude certainly proved the accuracy of the statement.

In the 26th October 1894 Issue, the NCH reported that the "China has been humiliated and the great superiority of Japan irrefutably assert."⁹¹ The Chinese "military system has become.....a gigantic sham"⁹² and "the profession of arms is ungracious and undeserving of honor."⁹³ This was a marked difference from the comments in the same publication from just a month ago. The reason of the lack of fighting ability and discipline of the Chinese army was given in the next issue published on 2nd November 1894. Describing the financial situation of the soldiers, the newspapers reported that the "Sitan" regiments of Kirin cavalry who had not been given a cash of pay for the past seven months"⁹⁴ and that the Sheng division "had been paid a month in advance.....when they really ought to have been given

⁹¹ "The Possibility of Peace", *North China Herald*, Vol. 53, No. 1421 (October 26, 1894):680.

⁹² "What the War May Bring Forth", *North China Herald*, Vol. 53, No. 1421 (October 26, 1894):680.

⁹³ "What the War May Bring Forth", *North China Herald*, Vol. 53, No. 1421 (October 26, 1894):680.

⁹⁴ "The Cause of the Reverse at Pingyang", *North China Herald*, Vol. 53, No. 1422 (November 2, 1894):740.

three months' pay."⁹⁵ The lack of morale was due to overdue salary payments which could only be a symptom of the corrupted Chinese political system as a whole.

The military defeats had a spillover effect in Chinese public opinion as the 9th November 1894 Issue reported that the "Chinese here believe that China has been practically betrayed by her highest officials."⁹⁶ The soldiers' lack of pay had also had an effect on their conduct and the NCH remarked that "behavior of Chinese troops (is) dreaded by the people and the officials alike."⁹⁷ This is in stark contrast from the public opinion on the opposite side as the newspaper reported that the Japanese "have won a victory more brilliant still over Europe."⁹⁸ This was recounted from the French mail published on 28th September 1894. By this stage of the war, the conduct and corruption of the Chinese army had turned public and NCH's opinion against it.

In the 16th November 1894 Issue, the NCH was forthright in stating that they were "deliberately pro- Chinese, for the adequate reason that we deemed China to be in the right."⁹⁹ However, the newspaper lamented that the failure of the Qing

⁹⁵ "The Cause of the Reverse at Pingyang", *North China Herald*, Vol. 53, No. 1422 (November 2, 1894):740.

⁹⁶ "Winter", *North China Herald*, Vol. 53, No. 1423 (November 9, 1894):757-58.

⁹⁷ "The War", *North China Herald*, Vol. 53, No. 1423 (November 9, 1894):766.

⁹⁸ "The French Mail Papers", *North China Herald*, Vol. 53, No. 1423 (November 9, 1894):767.

⁹⁹ "The Situation in the North", *North China Herald*, Vol. 53, No. 1424 (November 16, 1894):805.

army had “filled the friends of China....with despair.”¹⁰⁰ NCH’s true intentions were exposed when it wrote that “our trade with China....is our chief interest”¹⁰¹ and that the British could “better trade at any time with the Chinese than we can with the Japanese.”¹⁰² Such is the true reason as to why the NCH had been for the Chinese side but this had to be shifted in the face of the total defeat of the Qing military.

Continuing on with the theme that the Chinese defeat was complete and total in nature, the NCH in its 7th December 1894 Issue commented that it was China who lost rather than Japan was winning. The publication wrote, "China is in such a state of corruption and internal collapse that might have been conquered with a feather."¹⁰³ The behavior of the Qing army was also barbaric as the NCH reported that "the native Manchurians are decidedly in favor of the Japanese"¹⁰⁴ because their conduct was more civil as compared to the Chinese soldiers. In Manchuria where the war was happening in a place called Chefoo, the newspaper remarked that Japanese soldiers found their comrades which have "fallen into the hands of the Chinese, and been decapitated, and dismembered."¹⁰⁵ Such violent acts committed by Qing soldiers were instrumental to the change in the NCH’s attitude towards

¹⁰⁰ “The Situation in the North” (November 16, 1894), p. 805.

¹⁰¹ “Some Truths”, *North China Herald*, Vol. 53, No. 1424 (November 16, 1894):807.

¹⁰² “Some Truths” (November 16, 1894), p. 807.

¹⁰³ “The Other Side of the Question”, *North China Herald*, Vol. 53, No. 1427 (December 7, 1894):917.

¹⁰⁴ “Japaned-China”, *North China Herald*, Vol. 53, No. 1427 (December 7, 1894):924.

¹⁰⁵ “Outports, Chefoo”, *North China Herald*, Vol. 53, No. 1427 (December 7, 1894):927.

being more positive on Japan as well. In addition to superior conduct, the efficiency of the Japanese war effort had also come into favor with the NCH and other foreign observers. As the publication reported that the Japanese' advances to Port Arthur "were carried out with admirable method and precision."¹⁰⁶

In the 14th December 1894 Issue, the NCH detailed the reasons behind the military failures of China by commenting that the system had “dishonest generals who lack the very elements of military knowledge, and who take advantage of their position to rob the soldiers.”¹⁰⁷ Such deficient in skill and morals would naturally lead to an army without fighting power. The NCH also made a comparison between China and Japan that was resolute. The newspaper remarked: “every quality which in the individual constitutes morality and in the aggregate patriotism, the Chinese ruling class has shown itself to be as deficient as the Japanese are proficient.”¹⁰⁸ Their observations of the Chinese were vindicated by the actions of its military. The NCH reported that “Kung Taotai and the Chinese Generals took a junk which was lying prepared for them to escape as soon as hostilities commenced”¹⁰⁹ in Port Arthur. Such cowardice and irresponsibility were contrasted by the humane actions of the Japanese soldiers, as the newspaper that

¹⁰⁶ “The War”, *North China Herald*, Vol. 53, No. 1427 (December 7, 1894):941.

¹⁰⁷ “China and Japan”, *North China Herald*, Vol. 53, No. 1428 (December 14, 1894):964.

¹⁰⁸ “War and Peace”, *North China Herald*, Vol. 53, No. 1428 (December 14, 1894):966.

¹⁰⁹ “Peking”, *North China Herald*, Vol. 53, No. 1428 (December 14, 1894):973.

“the Chinese killed their own wounded before leaving- in contrast to the Japs caring for them”¹¹⁰ in the battle field.

The war would continue to be unfavorable for the Chinese as the best soldiers were the ones in Korea. With them defeated in Pingyang, the Chinese had to train new soldiers as the war was going on. This was confirmed by Allen Fung’s research which wrote that “Chinese government was forced to mobilize troops which were far less well-equipped and far less 'reformed': the Green Standard, the lianjun, and even raw recruits.”¹¹¹

Additional ludicrous behavior on the part of the Qing army was reported again in the 21st December 1894 Issue where the NCH found out that “the special body of troops commanded by Kung Taotai himself also began to (loot from) the dockyard money vaults.”¹¹² Such was the desperation of the state of the Qing army which the NCH and other foreign observations found despicable. Whatever sympathy that was left of the Chinese was to disappear.

This sentiment was reflected in the 4th January 1895 Issue when the NCH reported the massacre of Chinese civilians by Japanese soldiers in Port Arthur. The newspaper remarked that there were “accounts of alleged mutilation and cruelty

¹¹⁰ “Tientsin”, *North China Herald*, Vol. 53, No. 1428 (December 14, 1894):975.

¹¹¹ Allen Fung, “Testing the Self-Strengthening: The Chinese Army in the Sino-Japanese War of 1894-1895”, *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol. 30, No. 4, Special Issue: War in Modern China (October 6, 1996):1028, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/312957> (Accessed December 15, 2014).

¹¹² “The War”, *North China Herald*, Vol. 53, No. 1429 (December 21, 1894):1021.

perpetrated by the Japanese upon defenseless and unresisting Chinese civilians in the captured Port.”¹¹³ Such atrocities unfortunately were brushed aside by the NCH and they were “inclined, too, to give (the Japanese) the benefit of the doubt.”¹¹⁴ What a difference a few months of Chinese military incompetence had made upon the sentiments of the NCH: from denouncing Japanese belligerence as barbaric to giving the perpetrators of a massacre of civilians a benefit of the doubt.

This sentiment of approval of the Japanese was further elaborated in the 11th January 1895 Issue where the NCH remarked that Japanese “achievements during the present, and has thereby won for herself a respect on the part of Europe which she did not previously enjoy.”¹¹⁵ Then on the next issue published on 18th January 1895, the NCH attempted to make sense of the ascent of Japan by contrasting her culture with that of China’s. The newspaper stated that even though the Japanese learnt from the Chinese, it was “not the China of the Sung...Ming that they imitated so faithfully. It was the China of the six dynasties and of the earlier and later Tang period. That was the poetic age of China, when she was less petrified, conservative and anti-foreign.”¹¹⁶ Because the China in that period was supposedly more liberal according to the NCH, Japan was able to modernize with “her

¹¹³ “The Japanese at Port Arthur”, *North China Herald*, Vol. 54, No. 1431 (January 4, 1895):5.

¹¹⁴ “The Japanese at Port Arthur” (January 4, 1895), p.5.

¹¹⁵ “The Japanese Press”, *North China Herald*, Vol. 54, No. 1432 (January 11, 1895):25.

¹¹⁶ “The Growth of Japan”, *North China Herald*, Vol. 54, No. 1433 (January 18, 1895):71.

acceptance of the Western regime.”¹¹⁷ This embrace had obviously shown in their military operations which have earned them respect from European Power as well as the NCH.

By the publication of the NCH on 8th February 1895, the battle in Weihaiwei was at its most intense stage where the Japanese attacked the injured Beiyang fleet from Qing forts that they had taken over. The newspaper while writing on the performance of the Beiyang fleet remarked that “the ironclad Chenyuen behaved splendidly...(and)..Japanese losses must be pretty severe.”¹¹⁸ The Chinese navy had performed more courageously and with more dignity than the army during the war and this was reflected in the coverage by NCH.

Despite the Beiyang’s officers’ best efforts, Weihaiwei fell to the hands of the Japanese and the NCH reported in the 15th February 1895 Issue that the two main battleships of Beiyang “Tingyuen and Chenyuen were torpedoed on Tuesday night.”¹¹⁹ Along with the suicide of Ting, these events marked the complete annihilation of the Beiyang fleet. The NCH was forthright with stating its disappointment on the commandment of the fleet by complaining that the “movements of the Chinese fleet have throughout the war been so utterly and

¹¹⁷ “The Growth of Japan” (January 18, 1895), p.71

¹¹⁸ “The Chinese Fleet”, *North China Herald*, Vol. 54, No. 1436 (February 8, 1895):171.

¹¹⁹ “The Fall of Weihaiwei”, *North China Herald*, Vol. 54, No. 1437 (February 15, 1895):215.

incomprehensibly imbecile.”¹²⁰ Without much reference to the cowardice of the naval officers, the statement was aimed more at the leadership of Li than on the frontline officers. One could infer from the differing tone the newspaper took between the Qing army versus the Beiyang naval that the publication was not indiscriminately anti-Chinese. Moreover, much attention should be given to assessing the quality of the Beiyang naval officers. Dismissing their competence along with the cowardly land officers and other Qing officials may not be entirely fair on these foreign educated professional sailors.

With the fall of Weihaiwei, there is little hope that China could continue with the war and she sent envoys to Japan to sue for peace. Due to their low rank, the Japanese refused them as the representatives. For such action from the Chinese, the NCH resolutely deplored Chinese diplomatic efforts by commenting that “not once has she (China) kept her word and fulfilled her undertakings.”¹²¹

III. The Final Stage: (22nd February 1895 Issue to 19th April 1895)

By this stage, the war was practically over with the result being a complete defeat for China. The NCH would take the attention away from the Qing Empire and focused more on the diplomatic consequences of Japan’s victory and also the possible ramifications of the rise of this Oriental island country.

¹²⁰ “The Contending Fleet”, *North China Herald*, Vol. 54, No. 1437 (February 15, 1895):214.

¹²¹ “The Envoys of ‘Peace’”, *North China Herald*, Vol. 54, No. 1437 (February 15, 1895):223.

The first two Chinese envoys were rejected by the Japanese and in the 22st February 1895 Issue the NCH firmly stated that due to his experience and status, Li Hung-chang “was the only man who at the present crisis can obtain peace at all.”¹²² In the 1st March 1895 Issue, the publication once again praised the effectiveness of the Japanese war effort by stating that “the mode of conducting the Japanese operations made great impression upon these (European) experts.”¹²³ Moreover, the newspaper reported that there was “considerate treatment accorded to the prisoners by the Japanese.”¹²⁴ The behavior of the Japanese army in the beginning part of their expansion came in stark contrast from that of their actions during the Second World War. One could not be speculate that these humane actions were but to give an illusion of their magnanimity in order for them to enter the world stage as a major Power.

In the 22th March 1895 Issue, the NCH made a speculation that Japan would become “a power, which if left unchecked now, will end in European influence in the East.”¹²⁵ This prediction would prove to be spot on as events unfolded into the 1930s and 1940s. Then in the 29th March 1895 Issue the NCH reported the assassination attempt on Li Hung-chang in Shimonoseki and the newspaper

¹²² “Viceroy Li as Envoy to Japan”, *North China Herald*, Vol. 54, No. 1438 (February 22, 1895):264.

¹²³ “The Capture of Weihaiwei”, *North China Herald*, Vol. 54, No. 1439 (March 1, 1895):321.

¹²⁴ “The Capture of Weihaiwei” (March 1, 1895), p. 321.

¹²⁵ “The Revival of Oriental Power”, *North China Herald*, Vol. 54, No. 1442 (March 22, 1895):418.

believed that it was “the direct result of inflammatory writing”¹²⁶ and as such continued to warn on the extreme patriotism of Japan. The publication that made a vivid metaphor for the situation in China by stating that “the country is one vast jelly.....the injury to one part is not felt at the other extremity of the vast mass”¹²⁷ and in the 5th April 1895 Issue, it likened the total military defeat of the Qing as everything “went down like a house of cards.”¹²⁸ The absolute desolate nature of the NCH’s description of the Chinese system could only be explained by the disappointment they experienced while observing the course of the war.

Finally, the NCH reported the details of the terms in the Treaty of Shimonoseki in the 19th April 1895 Issue, which were overwhelmingly favorable to the Japanese to the point that would lead to uproar from the European Powers. The NCH observed that “Russia has also declared her hand and the real crisis has evidently arrived.”¹²⁹ This speculation proved to be accurate as soon after the treaty was signed, “Germany and France, the Russians joined in a Triple Intervention after the Treaty of Shimonoseki was signed in April 1895, which forced the Japanese to withdraw from the strategic Liaodong Peninsula in exchange for an additional

¹²⁶ “The Attack on Li Hung-chang”, *North China Herald*, Vol. 54, No. 1443 (March 29, 1895):457.

¹²⁷ “Peking”, *North China Herald*, Vol. 54, No. 1443 (March 29, 1895):472.

¹²⁸ “The Problems of China’s Fall”, Vol. 54, No. 1444 (April 5, 1895):504.

¹²⁹ “A Possible Result of the Negotiations”, *North China Herald*, Vol. 54, No. 1446 (April 19, 1895):582.

payment from the Qing government.”¹³⁰ Moreover, less than a decade after this war, Russia entered into hostilities with Japan over the influence on Manchuria and Korea. The NCH was indeed correct when it remarked in 1895 that the conflict had only “shift the scene and alter the cast.”¹³¹

Conclusion

This paper seeks to investigate the North China Herald’s coverage of the Sino-Japanese War (1894 to 1895) and the emphasis was on the evolution of the newspaper’s differing sentiment towards the Japanese and Chinese as the hostilities unfolded. A marked shift in the attitude was observed. As the war began, the newspaper was generally optimistic of China’s military strength and also its moral superiority. As she was repeatedly and utterly defeated by the Japanese, the NCH shifted its tone to disproving of the country’s military abilities and praising that of its opponent. Finally the publication likened the ineffectiveness of the Qing Empire to a jellyfish and speculated on the effects of the rise of the Japanese Empire. Such was the change in opinion within ten months. As Sun Tzu remarked, “War is of vital importance to the state. It is a matter of life and death, a road either to safety or to ruin. Hence it is a subject of inquiry which can on no account be

¹³⁰ Benjamin A. Elman, “Naval Warfare and the Refraction of China's Self-Strengthening Reforms into Scientific and Technological Failure, 1865-1895”, *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol. 38, No. 2 (May, 2004):321, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3876516> (Accessed December 15, 2014).

¹³¹ “A Possible Result of the Negotiations” (April 19, 1895), p.582.

neglected.”¹³² Unfortunately the Qing government neglected, compared to the Japanese, the importance of military training and preparation. Because of this defeat, the Chinese were plunged into a state of ruin for the ensuing decades. The NCH was present to observe and verbally illustrate that key turning point.

¹³² Victoria Charles, Tzu Sun, *Temporis: Art of War*. (New York, NY, USA: Parkstone International, 2012), 7-8 (Accessed March 20, 2015, ProQuest ebrary).

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