

## CHAPTER 2: THE 1<sup>ST</sup> SINO-JAPANESE WAR

### 1. OUTBREAK OF HOSTILITIES AND COURSE OF THE CONFLICT

#### China sends troops to quell Donghak Peasant Revolution

China perceived Korea as a vassal state; Japan regarded Korea as an autonomous nation. Japan refused to accept China's claims of suzerainty and strived to remove the Chinese military presence from the Korean peninsula. Was there not some means to dispel the dense clouds hovering over Korea short of warfare between Japan and China?

The Donghak Peasant Revolution, the principal cause of the 1<sup>st</sup> Sino-Japanese War, was a peasant revolt that evolved into a political rampage. The revolution was, in essence, a domestic Korean problem. And that problem was complicated by the fact that the Donghak Party colluded with the Daewongun (who was desperate for an opportunity to displace Queen Min and her followers) and also with Yuan Shikai, the Chinese plenipotentiary.

The Chinese were unhappy that Russian Consul Weber's diplomatic prowess had enabled him to infiltrate the Korean court. Once again, they interfered in Korean affairs. Hoping to install a Conservative Party government, they secretly goaded the Donghak Party. As the Japanese had gotten wind of the behind-the-scenes Chinese machinations, they did not dare stand by and watch the revolution play out.

The Chinese were the first to send troops to Korea, on June 12, 1894. They immediately notified the Japanese, in accordance with the Convention of Tsientsin. But in the notice, the Chinese stated that they were doing so to protect their "vassal state," which contravened the basis of Japan's Korea policy. Japanese Foreign Minister Mutsu Munemitsu immediately protested: "We do not accept China's claim that Korea is its vassal." He then dispatched the same number of men to Korea as China had.

It is common knowledge that, on that occasion, the Japanese had proposed working together with China to reform Korean domestic affairs. Some historians claim that proposal was nothing but an excuse to commence hostilities. However, this point of view is embraced only by those who wish to portray Japan at all costs as a belligerent nation. At the heart of the Korean problem were corrupt politics and a backward society. That being the case, it made perfect sense for the Japanese to propose domestic reforms as a first step toward a solution.

The Chinese and Japanese had to break the deadlock over Korea, or Sino-Japanese relations would collapse. Mutsu was correct when he wrote the following.

I came to think that Japan must use Korean domestic reform as a barometer, knowing that the consequence would be either a deluge that would dispel the dense clouds, or a cloudless sky.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Mutsu Munemitsu, *Kenkenroku: A Diplomatic Record of the Sino-Japanese War, 1894-1895*, ed. and trans. Gordon Mark Berger (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983).

In terms of historical reality, it makes much more sense to interpret the above not as an excuse to go to war, but a proposal for domestic reform made in the faint hope that hostilities could be avoided.

### **“Japan seems to be very kindly disposed toward Korea”**

What were the thoughts of a high-ranking foreign official stationed in the Far East about this situation?

Payson J. Treat, an American authority on Far Eastern diplomatic history, issued the following report.

It is interesting to note how the views of the three American representatives were influenced by their environment. Mr. Denby, Chargé at Peking, reported, on June 26, that “the action of Japan is criticized here as hasty and unduly bellicose.” Mr. [John M.B.] Sill wrote, on the 29<sup>th</sup>, from Seoul: “I may add that Japan seems to be very kindly disposed toward Korea. She seems only to desire, once for all, to throw off the yoke of Chinese suzerainty, and then to assist her weak neighbor in strengthening her position as an independent state, by aiding her in such reforms as shall bring peace, prosperity, and enlightenment to her people, a motive which pleases many Korean officials of the more intelligent sort, and one which I imagine may not meet with disapproval in America.”<sup>2</sup>

Treat adds, “And Mr. [Edwin] Dun, at Tokyo, accepted the sincerity of Japan’s motives.”

This report indicates that the American envoy in Korea, having first-hand knowledge of the situation there, was more conversant with Japanese actions in Korea than his counterpart in China.

### **Korea’s status as vassal of China ends**

Japan dispatched Ōshima Keisuke to Korea on June 26 to urge King Gojong to institute domestic reforms. Since domestic reforms would involve restructuring the Korean government, China would necessarily lose its hold over Korea. With prompting from Yuan Shikai, the Korean government voiced strenuous opposition.

On July 3 Ōshima presented to the Koreans a five-page domestic reform proposal consisting of 26 articles. On July 20 he demanded the termination of the Chinese suzerainty and the withdrawal of Chinese troops, directing the Koreans to respond by July 22. (Once Yuan Shikai, who had been advocating policies that kept Korea under China’s thumb, got wind of Japan’s stringent policy demands, he secretly slipped out of Seoul, ending up in Tianjin on July 18.) The Korean government conferred with Tang Shaoyi, the diplomat who inherited Yuan’s position, and submitted a stopgap reply. But Ōshima found it unacceptable, and warned the Koreans that he would take military action if he did not receive a satisfactory response. On July 23 the Japanese

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<sup>2</sup> Payson J. Treat, *Japan and the United States: 1853-1921* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1921), 154.

military expelled Korean soldiers from Gyeongbok Palace. Queen Min and her family members fled, and the Daewongun, who had distanced himself from the court for quite some time, agreed to head the government upon Ōshima's request.

One of the first actions the Daewongun took was to announce the termination of the suzerainty relationship with China on July 25, and demand that Chinese troops stationed in Asan, to the north of Seoul, withdraw from Korea. He also was quick to start work on domestic reforms, the most challenging task for Korea, which I will discuss later.

### **Japanese triumph on land and sea**

First, I would like to provide a summary of the course of the war.

On July 25, 1894, the Japanese and Chinese navies engaged in hostilities off Pung Island, on the west coast of Korea. The Japanese soundly defeated the Chinese fleet. On the same day the famous *Kowshing* Incident occurred. I will write more about the Battle of Pung Island later.

On July 29, Japanese forces defeated the Chinese in a land battle at Seonghwan, Korea, and occupied Asan. On July 31 the Chinese Foreign Ministry notified Komura Jutarō, a Japanese diplomat serving in China, that China was severing diplomatic relations with Japan. On August 1 both Japan and China issued declarations of war.

The Japanese declaration describes how Japanese attempts to help Korea gain independence were stymied time and again by Chinese trickery.

Korea is an independent state. She was first introduced into the family of nations by the advice and guidance of Japan. It has, however, been China's habit to designate Korea as her dependency, and both openly and secretly to interfere with her domestic affairs.

(...)

Thereupon Japan advised Korea to reform her administration so that order and tranquillity might be preserved at home, and so that the country might be able to discharge the responsibilities and duties of an independent state abroad. Korea has already consented to undertake the task. But China has secretly and insidiously endeavoured to circumvent and to thwart Japan's purpose.<sup>3</sup>

The Chinese declaration reiterates the Chinese position.

Korea has been our tributary for the past two hundred odd years. She has given us tribute all this time, which is a matter known to the world.<sup>4</sup>

The two stances reflect the conflict between the progressives and conservatives.

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<sup>3</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/First\\_Sino-Japanese\\_War](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/First_Sino-Japanese_War) (retrieved 9/22).

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

Political strife in Japan, which had lasted for a full four years after the Meiji Constitution was promulgated, had subsided by the time the Imperial Rescript declaring war was issued. Japanese public opinion was wholeheartedly and unanimously in favor of going to war with China. The Chinese conviction that the Japanese were too preoccupied with domestic problems to engage in a foreign war turned out to be a gross miscalculation.

When the declarations of war came out, the Chinese turned to Pyongyang, hoping to prevent the Japanese from proceeding northward. But the Japanese attacked them from all directions, and on the evening of September 15, the Chinese suddenly raised a white flag outside their fortress, indicating their desire to surrender. However, this gesture turned out to be a ruse, an attempt to buy time and weaken the attack. That night the Chinese abandoned their fortress under cover of darkness. The Japanese occupied Pyongyang on September 16, and proudly hoisted the Japanese flag atop the captured fortress.

On September 17, the Japanese vanquished the Beiyang Fleet in the Yellow Sea.

In early October Japan's First Army, commanded by Gen. Yamagata Aritomo, crossed the Yalu River into Manchuria, and near the end of the month conquered Jiulian and Fenghuang. The Second Army, commanded by Gen. Ōyama Iwao, landed at Huayuankou on Liaodong peninsula and captured Jinzhou and Dalian Bay on October 24, and occupied Lüshun, purported to be impregnable, on November 1.

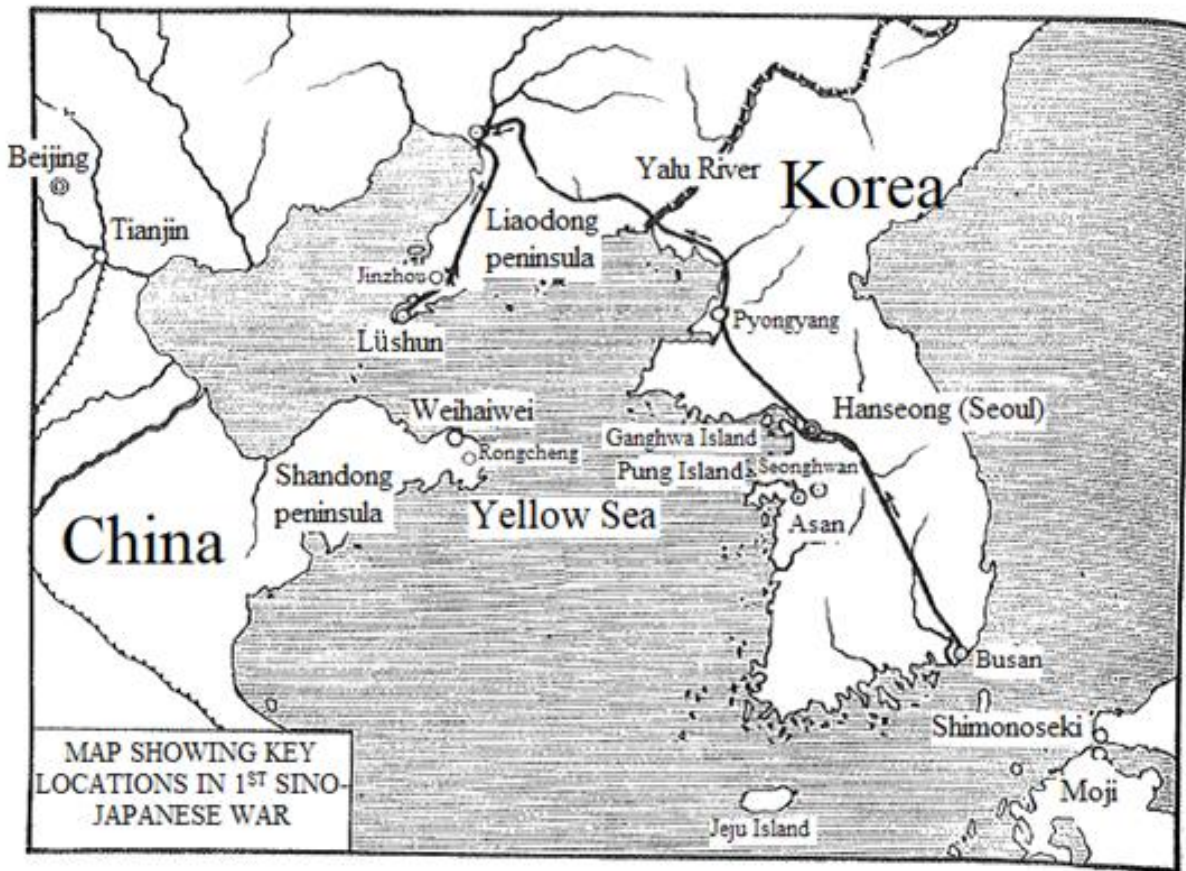
Because the Chinese had assembled the remnants of its fleet at Weihaiwei on the north coast of the Shandong peninsula, the Japanese decided to use a combined land and sea offensive. At the end of January 1895, part of the Second Army landed at Rongcheng Bay on the east coast of the Shandong peninsula, and occupied the battery at Weihaiwei after only one day's fighting. In early February the Navy used torpedoes to sink several Chinese vessels, including the *Dingyuan*, the enemy flagship. Since most of the Beiyang Fleet had been destroyed, Admiral Ding Ruchang, the enemy commander, raised a white flag in surrender on February 12. On February 17 the Japanese occupied Weihaiwei, China's sole military port, and confiscated several ships, including the *Zhenyuan*. With that, the Japanese had annihilated the Beiyang naval units.

Though Japan's victory was now assured, the First Army occupied Yingkou in early March, and then proceeded to defeat 20,000 Chinese troops at Tianzhuangtai. The First and Second armies then marched together to Peking, the capital.

The Chinese had been completely overwhelmed; peacemaking attempts, already in the offing, began in earnest.

### **The lies in Chinese history textbooks**

The Chinese have a habit of issuing formal objections to accounts of historical events in Japanese history textbooks. However, I would like to point out some astonishing Chinese distortions of events that occurred during the 1<sup>st</sup> Sino-Japanese War.



*Chinese History*, published by People's Education Press, is a primary school textbook. It includes accounts that describe the Battle of Pung Island, the *Kowshing* Incident, and the Battle of the Yalu River as follows.

(1) Battle of Pung Island; *Kowshing* Incident

On July 25 the Japanese Navy *suddenly attacked a Chinese transport ship* near Pung Island. (...) As a result, a merchant ship transporting soldiers was ambushed and sunk, and the soldiers on board (nearly 1,000 souls) lost their lives. [Italics supplied.]

(2) Battle of the Yalu River

On September 17 the Beiyang Fleet was returning to Lüshun, when it spied ships off in the distance *displaying American flags*. As the 12 vessels came closer, *all of them suddenly lowered the American flags and hoisted Japanese flags*, and proceeded to attack the Beiyang Fleet. Navy Commander / Admiral Ding Ruchang issued the order to return fire. [Italics supplied.]

These accounts could easily serve as models for fabricated history. They do not deserve the dignity of a rebuttal, but I feel the need to set the record straight.

The account in (1) is ostensibly a description of the Battle of Pung Island fought off Asan Bay in Korea. On the morning of July 25, 1894, a flying squadron from Japan's Combined Fleet consisting of three vessels (*Yoshino*, *Akitsu*, and *Naniwa*) encountered Chinese ships *Jiyuan*

and *Guangyi*. Flagship *Yoshino* prepared to exchange gun salutes and approached the two vessels, but the Chinese not only did not fire a salute, but also aimed their guns in preparation for battle, so Commander Tsuboi Kōzō assumed that the Chinese had already opened hostilities and sailed out to face them. At 7:52, when the opponents were within 3,000m of each other, *Jiyuan* opened fire. *Yoshino* immediately fired back; the other two Japanese ships followed suit. After a few minutes, the Japanese put *Jiyuan* to flight, and *Guangyi* went up in flames after running aground in shallow waters fleeing the Japanese. The claim that the Japanese attacked a Chinese transport ship without warning is, quite simply, a distortion of historical fact intended to portray the Japanese as cowards.

The authors of this textbook have borrowed bits and pieces of the facts of the *Kowshing* Incident to create their own distorted version. Here is what actually transpired.

As the cruiser *Naniwa* was in pursuit of *Jiyuan* on July 25, it encountered *Kowshing*, flying the British flag and crammed with Chinese soldiers. An inspection revealed that the vessel carried 1,200 Chinese troops, 14 guns, and ammunition. Using the ship of a neutral nation (in this case, the UK), to transport soldiers and weapons is in violation of international law in time of war. Therefore, Captain Tōgō Heihachirō issued an order to *Kowshing* to follow the *Naniwa*. The Chinese commander threatened the British captain, and refused to obey the order, even after four hours of negotiations. Left with no other option, Captain Tōgō issued “Danger” and “Abandon Ship” signals to the crew of *Kowshing*, and then sank it.

This incident sparked anti-Japanese propaganda in the UK, but the British Naval Court in Shanghai ruled that the action taken by *Naniwa* was right and proper. Moreover, the distinguished international jurist, Sir Thomas Erskine Holland, in a letter to the Times, wrote that *Naniwa* had acted in full accordance with international law in time of war.<sup>5</sup> The uproar in the UK gradually subsided. *Chinese History* makes no mention of China’s violations of international law. In fact, it mentions only that the Japanese attacked and sank *Kowshing*. It is obvious that the authors included only sections that were to their liking.

Even more surprising is the astonishing claim in (2), referring to the Battle of the Yalu River, that the Japanese fleet was flying American flags when it approached the Chinese fleet. Then, all of a sudden, the American flags were lowered, Japanese flags raised in their stead, and the attack on the Chinese ships commenced. I will hazard a guess that no one has ever heard of, much less witnessed, a phenomenon of this sort. It is as if the textbook authors were attempting a parody of the *Kowshing* Incident. One’s initial reaction to this invention of history is to burst out laughing, but this absurd drama is apparently officially recognized in China and passes for state-sponsored historical perception there.

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<sup>5</sup> Thomas Erskine Holland, *Letters to the Times upon War and Neutrality, 1881-1909: With Some Commentary* (1909) (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1914), 41-43.