The Sino-Japanese War, 1894–1895

On July 25, 1894, the Akitsushima, Naniwa, and Yoshino, three Japanese naval cruisers, fired on and sank the Kowshing, a British merchant vessel chartered by the Qing government to transport Chinese soldiers to reinforce the Beiyang Army units garrisoned at Seonghwan, outside the Korean port of Asan, who had been deployed to help suppress the Donghak peasant rebellion. Within mere days of this naval engagement, the Qing empire would be at war with Meiji-era Japan over control of Joseon-dynasty Korea.

The Sino-Japanese War of 1894–1895 was the result of two decades of struggle between the Qing empire and Japan for influence over Korea. Although the Joseon dynasty was one of the earliest “tributary” states of the Manchu Qing, the peninsular kingdom remained largely independent until the 1870s. In 1876, the Japanese forced the Korean court to sign the Treaty of Ganghwa, which declared Korea an “independent state”—an obvious attempt to undermine Qing suzerainty—and opened three ports to Japanese commerce. Nevertheless, Li Hongzhang, the powerful Governor-General of Zhili and Superintendent of Trade for the Northern Ports, revived Qing influence in Korea by convincing King Gojong (r. 1863–1907) to pursue moderate self-strengthening reforms. Those reforms led to military clashes between reformers and conservatives in Korea, as well as several popular uprisings, that brought Qing and Japanese troops into the country in the early 1880s. To prevent the outbreak of war, Li Hongzhang and Ito Hirobumi negotiated the Convention of Tianjin in 1885, which stipulated that neither country would send soldiers into Korea without informing the other. Korea remained peaceful until the religiously-inspired Donghak (Eastern Learning) peasant movement seized much of the southwest and started towards Seoul in early June 1894. In response, King Gojong requested Qing intervention. Within days, 2,500 Beiyang Army troops landed to suppress the rebellion. The Qing government claimed to have notified the Japanese, but the Japanese denied it; 8,000 Japanese soldiers landed soon thereafter. Although the rebellion quickly dissipated, Japanese troops refused to withdraw and, on July 23, they occupied Seoul, kidnapped King Gojong, and installed a pro-Japanese government. War was officially declared on August 1, 1894.

Although it was widely believed in the international community that the Qing would win the war, the Japanese quickly seized the offensive and drove the Qing forces toward Pyongyang and then resoundingly defeated them on September 15. Two days later, the Imperial Japanese Navy destroyed most of
the Beiyang fleet at the Battle of the Yalu River. The remaining significant battles in the war, at Dandong (October), Port Arthur (November), Weihaiwei (February 1895), and Yingkou (March), were all clear Japanese victories. By late March 1895, the northern and southern approaches to Beijing lay open to the Japanese. The Treaty of Shimonoseki ending the war was signed on April 17, 1895.

The Japanese victory in the Sino-Japanese War transformed East Asia. The Qing court lost its influence over Korea, had to cede Taiwan and the Pescadore Islands to Japan, and faced strident calls for major reforms to stave off dynastic collapse; Korea, now officially “independent,’ briefly became an “empire” before becoming a formal colony of Japan in 1910; and Japan emerged from the war as a self-confident imperialist power. The war and subsequent Treaty of Shimonoseki also upset the delicate balance of power among the Western imperialist powers in China and proved to be the background for the infamous scramble for concessions.

August 1, 1894

Korea has been a tributary to the Great Qing dynasty for the past two hundred years and more, presenting tribute to us yearly in acknowledgement thereof, which is a fact known to all the nations of the earth. Within the past dozen or so years, however, that kingdom has often been visited by interior dissensions and disturbances, and our Throne having regard for the welfare of the smaller State, has repeatedly sent troops to Korea to suppress them. We even placed troops at the capital of that kingdom in order to be ever present to give it protection. In the middle of the 4th moon of the present year (May, 1894) Korea was again disturbed by an insurrection of local bad characters, and the King of that country requested us to send troops to aid him in suppressing them. As matters were becoming serious we immediately instructed Li Hongzhang to despatch the aid desired. Our troops had only but to arrive at Asan when the bad characters fled and scattered about like the stars. At that time the Woren (Japanese) without any reason whatever, added a number of their troops and suddenly entered Seoul.1 Subsequently the number of these troops was reinforced up to over ten thousand, and then the Korean King was forcibly compelled to alter the form of government of the country, and every movement of the Japanese tended to show that they desired to raise trouble,

1 “Woren” 倭人 was a derogatory term used by Chinese to refer to the Japanese, it literally means “dwarf people.”