

Charles Denby and the Sino-Japanese War, 1894-1895

*Edited by David M. Silver**

Charles Denby, United States minister to China, served in that capacity from May 29, 1885, when he was appointed by Cleveland, until July 11, 1898, when he was removed by McKinley.

A highlight of his career was the role he played in bringing an end to the Sino-Japanese War, which began on August 1, 1894, and was ended by the Treaty of Shimonoseki, April 17, 1895, in which China recognized the independence of Korea, ceded Formosa, the Pescadores, and the Liaotung Peninsula to Japan, and agreed to pay 200,000,000 taels as indemnity. Russia, Germany, and France quickly brought about the return of the Liaotung Peninsula to China but permitted Japan to collect additional indemnity.

The letters quoted below, in which Denby wrote about the peace negotiations while the war progressed, are available to historians for the first time through the graciousness of Mrs. George Vyverberg of Indianapolis, whose daughter, Mary, recently was a student in one of my classes. Mrs. Vyverberg is a granddaughter of Charles Denby.

The letters were written to Thomas Edgar Garvin, 1826-1912, who was a prominent lawyer of Evansville, Indiana. Denby had read law in the office of Baker and Garvin at Evansville in the 1850's. The friendship between Denby and Garvin lasted throughout their lives.

Denby's official reports of the events in which he played such a prominent role are found in *Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States* for the years 1894 and 1895. Typical is his dispatch of late November, 1894, to Secretary of State Walter Q. Gresham: "I informed the ministers that I was advised by my Government that Japan would consider any direct overtures for peace made by China to her through myself."¹

Denby also described the negotiations briefly in a general account of his experiences in the Orient titled, *China and Her People*, published posthumously.²

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¹ *Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States*, 1894, Part I, 80.

² Charles Denby, *China and Her People* (2 vols., Boston, 1906).

Both in his official reports and in his book Denby's treatment of his negotiations with China and Japan is reserved and impersonal. In the private correspondence published below, Denby casts aside his reserve and relates the events in a chatty and highly informative manner to a close friend of long duration.

The first letter describes the significant role that Denby assumed as a negotiator, and the second relates his continuing efforts to bring the warring nations together and tells of the dangers faced by foreigners in Peking during the war.

I. Charles Denby to Thomas Edgar Garvin, November 24, 1894.

Peking Nov 24 1894

My dear Garvin

I suppose that long ere this you have returned from your trip to Europe. Although it deprived me of some days of your society, I hope you found it pleasant. My own journey to Peking was attended with no remarkable incident, and was altogether agreeable. I was received in Japan, and China, with all honor and consideration. It happened that the Emperor of Japan and his Court were at Hiroshima, so I missed some Court festivities. The Secretary of State regretted this circumstance. No where in my absence, either at home or abroad, did I meet with such genial hospitality as your own. No where was I so truly at home, or so much at my ease. Your kindness, and your good cheer, did a great deal to restore me to health. I cannot too earnestly thank Mrs Garvin and yourself, and Cunningham, Edgar, Dunkerson, Morris, and their dear wives, for their treatment of me, which could not have been more affectionate if I had been a member of your family. Will you please convey to each of them this expression of my gratitude?

It goes without saying that since I arrived I have been a prominent actor in the important affairs which are now transpiring.

The members of the Foreign Office found an article in one of our treaties by which the United States agreed to assist China to arrange matters in case any nation treated her "oppressively". They proceeded at great length to show that Japan had done so, and to invoke our mediation. I agreed to help China. Much wiring has been had to this end.

The final result came the 21st, when, at China's request, I made to Japan direct overtures for peace on the basis of the independence of Korea, and the payment of a war indemnity. I am now anxiously awaiting an answer which may terminate this war. It is exceedingly gratifying to me to have these two nations turn to us as intermediaries. My friends of the Yamen³ are grown up children, absolutely ignorant of international law, and they look to me as their teacher and guide.

They follow all my counsels, copy my papers, and send them, always interlarding them with compliments and thanks to the U S and to me personally. I am Supreme judge, attorney general, confidential adviser all in one. I would blaze with decorations and roll in presents, but, unfortunately, or otherwise, I can take nothing from China except her empty thanks. A man of your well known benevolence—having attained a position in which you no longer care to cut into a "fund"—will clearly appreciate the pleasure it gives me to practice high international law with two great countries for charity—and *nary* fee in sight!

Long ere you read these lines you will know the result of the labors of which you have now the inside. If peace comes I made it—if war goes on I have done my best to stop it. China exhorted foreign intervention. I told them to ask for peace themselves, and then I wired Japan as China's agent. I have made history all alone, and I hope I have made fame. Whatever betides I shall always find my chief delight in the society of you and yours.

Your loving friend

Charles Denby

Charley⁴ leaves Monday the 26th to find happiness I hope. He leaves me desolate, solitary, and full of sorrow—the first sorrow he ever caused me. He is a bright fellow, and he will brighten all your lives for a time.

II. Charles Denby to Thomas Edgar Garvin, March 22, 1895.

Peking March 22 1895

My dear Garvin

Your letter to me which seems to have caused you to think of mental telegraphy, by reason of my having written about the same date, was dated November 24th or nearly.

³ Official headquarters or residence of public officials in China.

⁴ Charles Denby, Jr., who assisted his father.

When I got your letter—which is the second, I think, you ever sent me—I was struck with the similarity of ideas to those expressed in mine.

You spoke of the employment of myself as negotiator between Japan and China almost in the same tone as I wrote thereof. I have often noticed that when after a long interval one writes to a friend he writes at the same time and the letters cross each other, but I have, also, often noticed that nothing of the kind happens.

It is quite natural that the same causes should operate on two persons apart from each other at the same time. I have sometimes tried to put the thing to practical uses and have always failed. However, I hope that this theory or some other will induce you to write again and often.

I have twice brought the two oriental nations [together] after very great and annoying labor. The first time the Chinese deceived me by substituting their own letters patent for those that I had prepared. The second time I took the precaution to wire to Japan copies of the letters in Chinese and English—and when they made some slight objections to the verbiage I wired them amended as suggested in the two languages. I hope Li Hung Chang⁵ will stick and that peace will result.

In many ways war annoys the foreigners in the Far East. My colleagues—all but one—have marines here. I have not brought mine up from Tientsin. Should the Japanese march on Peking I will order up marines to protect—not myself particularly—but the seventy or so Americans—men women and children who are at Peking. Our danger will come if at all from disbanded soldiers. Mean time Peking is perfectly quiet. A company of Chinese soldiers armed with spears and swords are at my gate—but they would probably run from a mob. I have received many thanks from the Chinese Government—among them an autographic letter from the Emperor—and much commendation from the foreigners for my efforts for peace. Several erroneous despatches by wire have been sent from Peking as to my utterances. Discredit all such—I wire nobody but the Dept and I do not talk. Love to all.

Yours sincerely
Charles Denby

⁵ Chinese leader with whom Denby was negotiating to bring about peace.