

Japan & the Mongol Empire – the 13th Century



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Introduction

Japanese and Mongol connections have been rather intriguing. Unlike the volume of clearly documented facts relating to Japan's strong and ancient connections with China, Korea, and India, to which added on in the Middle Ages were the Western powers, the documented material appears to be relatively scant in relation to Mongolia. Less information may also be a basis for more intrigue. A fascinating story that I heard was that the creator of the largest contiguous empire the world has known – Mongol Emperor Genghis Khan – was in fact the Japanese samurai Minamoto-no-Yoshitsune, who after falling into disfavor with his brother the Shogun in the 12th century, went into hiding to northern Japan. While the commonly accepted record is that Yoshitsune was assassinated while in refuge, the more romantic theory is that he had made the crossing into Siberia and surfaced in Mongolia.

While it is beyond the scope of this article to examine the veracity of the romantic versions of Japan's fascination with Mongolia, we shall have a look at an event that is documented as having had considerable impact on Japan.

Enoshima

About 50 kilometers from central Tokyo are the towns of Enoshima and Kamakura. The latter is usually a must on the tourist circuit, being home to numerous temples and shrines, backed by lovely hills that slope towards Sagami Bay. It is also filled with the usual tourist spots of attractive eateries and memorabilia stores. Sagami Bay borders the Shonan coastline to its north, the Miura Peninsula to its east and the Izu Peninsula to its west, all of which are upscale resort areas and surfers' paradise. Enoshima is about 8 km up along the coast from Kamakura. Rather less known than the famous landmarks of Kamakura, and in walking distance of the surfers' shacks and main lane in

Photo 1: Author



Memorial of five Mongol Emissaries at Joryuji Temple

Enoshima, is the small 16th century temple of Joryuji. This temple houses the remains of five emissaries of the Mongol Empire who were deputed by Kublai Khan with a polite threat to the Japanese Shogun to accept Mongol supremacy (*Photo 1*). The Shogun's Regent, Hojo Tokimune, had responded by doing away with both the request and the hapless men at the nearby Tatsunokuchi execution ground over which stands today the landmark Ryukoji Temple of Enoshima.

The Mongol Empire Eyes Japan

Around the year 1260, Kublai Khan became the emperor of the vast Mongol Empire that stretched across Eurasia from eastern Europe to the Pacific coast, founded by his grandfather, Genghis Khan. Seven or eight years after consolidating his power within the ruling family, Kublai Khan decided to set his sights on Japan. The reasons for this move are still under debate, ranging from a fervent desire to control the trade links that were very strong between Japan and the southern Song dynasty of China, to sheer curiosity about a country that was shrouded in mystery. Whatever the reasons might have been, there was a challenging adventure involved, as the hundreds of years of global Mongol domination had never involved a sea crossing. With the Korean Peninsula also under the tutelage of the Mongol Empire, Kublai might have thought that this would be an appropriate time to attempt reaching Japan, being now just a hop, skip and jump from the Asian mainland.

The First Invasion

Kublai seems to have offered the proverbial olive branch for a start. From 1268, he commissioned a series of envoys to carry proposals of submissive cooperation to Japan. The overtures from Kublai simply received no response. Kublai decided to launch his first maritime attack in 1274 from the port of Busan in Korea – the closest point on the Asian bulkhead to the Japanese archipelago. There was an initial success. The invaders ravaged the Japanese islands of Tsushima and Iki, before achieving landfall on the Japanese mainland in Hakata and fighting their way to the nearby provincial capital of Dazaifu. However, fortunes suddenly turned when one of their senior commanders was seriously wounded by a samurai arrow. Fearing that they would not be able to sustain the attack, the invaders decided to retreat, perhaps to re-group with reinforcements on a later date. The invaders'

declining fortunes took a further nose-dive on the return with almost half their fleet getting destroyed in a sudden storm.

Despite the fiasco, Kublai may have thought that the attack would be a sufficient warning to now attain the supplication of the Japanese. He resorted again to his peaceful overture of sending envoys in 1275 and 1279. On both occasions, the emissaries were given short shrift under the orders of the Shogunate, the first delegation meeting its end at the Tatsunokuchi execution ground in Enoshima and the other on the beaches of Hakata itself, depriving the visitors of even the 1,000 km road trip to the capital of the Shogun.

The Kamakura Shogunate

The Shogunate with its headquarters at Kamakura was founded around the year 1185 by Yoritomo of the Minamoto clan, following their victory over the Taira clan in a major civil war. It was the first time in the history of Japan that the center of power had shifted 500 km eastwards from the imperial capital regions of Kyoto and Nara. As history would unfold, at least until the present day, the move seems to have become irrevocable with both power and the economy concentrated in Tokyo.

Yoritomo had married into the Hojo clan during his early years of exile ordered by the Taira in the Izu Peninsula, which happened to be the Hojo clan's homeland. This matrimonial connection would in the course of time effectively lead the Hojo clan to strategically maneuver and out-manuever the Minamoto shoguns of Kamakura, so much so that within a few decades they became the de facto administrators ruling on behalf of the military government. They were appointed as hereditary Regents by the Shogun. Thus, while there was in name the Emperor in Kyoto and the Shogun in Kamakura, the country was in the hands of the Hojo clan who had also shifted their base to the Shogunal seat in nearby Kamakura. By the time of the eighth Regent, Hojo Tokimune, in 1268, the Shogun had become a rather irrelevant nominal entity.

As Regent, the 17-year-old Tokimune had his hands full, handling internal mutinies, riots, and other civil disturbances. However, the largest dark cloud in his eyes that was looming on the horizon was that of the Mongol Empire. With emissary after emissary being sent with veiled threats, he may have been in a flux on how to respond, resulting in mute silence. Yet another version of this theory is that despite the urging of nobles and even of the Imperial Court in Kyoto to accept Kublai's overtures, Tokimune's youth and stubbornness made him have the emissaries sent back empty-handed. The truth is probably somewhere in-between the two versions.

When Kublai Khan's forces landed in Hakata in 1274, the local samurai put up a strong fight, yet they were not a match for the invading Mongols, who had relatively modern methods of warfare at their command. The event considerably worried Tokimune. He was certain there would be a second attack by the Mongols and started raising the defences of the country in the region of Hakata Bay in Kyushu. He had a 20-km-long, 2-meter-high wall built along the coast (parts of the wall are preserved on the western side of present day Fukuoka city) and had the samurai forces in the area strengthened,

taking the assistance of neighboring domains. Of these the most notable was the powerful Matsura clan.

The Coastline & the Matsura Navy

The northern coast of Kyushu faces the straits that separate the Japanese mainland from the Asian bulkhead in South Korea. At its narrowest the distance is about 100 km, with the Japanese island of Tsushima roughly halfway in-between. On a clear day, from Tsushima one can see the mountains forming the backdrop to the South Korean port city of Pusan. As the crow flies, the northern Kyushu coastline itself stretches for about 100 km from Fukuoka city in the east to Hirado city in the west, but the actual land distance is greater as there are fissures forming several peninsulas and bays. While most of the peninsulas are hilly terrain, the coast off Hakata Bay is relatively flat, making it an easier target for militaries with not so pacific intentions. Further, then as now, the area was the most populated and richest in Kyushu. It was home to a sub-shogunate provincial capital at Dazaifu, which is today within the city limits of Fukuoka, Kyushu's largest city and Japan's fifth-largest metropolis.

The Matsura clan had their headquarters at the western end of the straits, at Hirado. They were known for their naval prowess and efficient administration, so much so that even after the collapse of the Taira whom the Matsura supported in the *Genpei* civil war of 1180-85, the Minamoto-led Shogunate felt it wise to let them rule undisturbed. This decision would prove to be an apt one in the interests of the country (something which political parties of today would do well to learn from, about giving precedence to national interest over personal feuds) a century later when the Mongol Empire attacked Japan. The Matsura Navy was an effective naval force which had at different periods in the 900-year history of the clan controlled fishing, trade, piracy, and coastal defence. Their headquarters at Hirado were in a vantage location, being right at the entrance to the Tsushima Straits. It was hilly and one of these hilltops overlooking the seas was a perfect site for locating the Hirado Castle of the Matsuras (*Photo 2*).



Hirado town; the castle is visible at the far hilltop on the right.

The Second Invasion

In 1281, as predicted, Kublai Khan launched a second attack on Japan. Events of significance had occurred in the seven years since the first attack of 1274, notably that Japan's long-time trading partners – the Song dynasty in southern China – had fallen to the

Photo 3: Author



View of Takashima Island from Karatsu Peninsula

Photo 4: Author



To the Excavation Site

Photo 5: Author



The Resurrection Project

Yuan dynasty in northern China which had been established by the Mongol Empire in 1271 headquartered in Beijing. Accomplishing control over the whole of China was at last a dream fulfilled for Kublai Khan. The achievement may have enthused the Great Khan to expand his portfolio further, for in addition to Japan there were militaristic attempts on Southeast Asia.

The Mongol strategy for the second attack seems to have been to make a two-pronged approach towards the northern Kyushu coast. One fleet would take the shorter route as in 1274 from Busan to Hakata and the other – utilising the combined forces of the recently captured southern Song – proceed from China with a huge fleet towards Hirado. The two fleets would reinforce each other close to the northern Kyushu coast. The first fleet arrived quickly and went about its work of massacring Tsushima and Iki again, following which they either decided to wait for a rendezvous – which would never happen – or simply decided to try and attack the Hakata coast as before, without real success. While there are different accounts on this and what exactly happened is not very clear, the blockade with sporadic attacks is supposed to have lasted a few months. The end-result was that after the southern fleet finally arrived, nemesis awaited the invaders near the island of Takashima, roughly halfway between Hirado and Hakata, off the Karatsu Peninsula.

Just as in the first invasion, a sudden storm developed in the straits, unleashing havoc on the giant Mongol fleets. Only a few ships made it back to the Asian mainland. Many others were doomed to watery graves just off the Japanese coast. The thousands of mostly Korean and Chinese men of the Mongol fleets who made it to the Japanese mainland were caught and executed, barring the men from southern China who were spared, being former trading partners and were perceived as being victims of the Yuan occupation.

The words of Simon Duncan beautifully summarize the second invasion *vis-à-vis* the first one (“Formative Memory: the Thirteenth-Century Mongolian Invasions and their Impact on Japan”, *Insights from Asia*, *Kyoto Journal*, April 26, 2017):

“The second Mongolian invasion of Japan was like a sequel to a blockbuster movie; bigger in scale, larger cast, bigger budget, and the same director (Kublai Khan). Some well-loved characters returned, with a few new twists in the tale but also a lot of similarities. Even the main locations were retained, and the ending was eerily similar.”

The island of Takashima is part of Matsuura city at the northeastern end of Nagasaki Prefecture. It lies in Imari Bay and access to it is either by a 25-minute ferry ride from a quiet fishing town on the southern edge of the bay or by way of a road bridge about 40 km further northeast, which connects the island to the Karatsu Peninsula in adjoining Saga Prefecture. Takashima is a luscious verdant hilly island and the view from a hillside rest stop just before the approach to the bridge is one of absolute rural peace and calmness, belying the fact that an event of enormous proportions for Japan had occurred here less than eight centuries earlier (*Photo 3*). Excavations in recent years in the waters just off the island have uncovered large numbers of artifacts and ships’ parts that clearly are remnants from the Mongol fleet(s). A section of the bay has been demarcated marking the excavation zone and researchers hope that at some time in the future they would have collected enough material to re-create a typical ship of the fleet (*Photos 4 & 5*).

Takashima also has sites memorializing the war dead and even a recreational Mongol theme park called *Mongol Mura* (Mongol Village) on the top of a hill. The small theme park stopped operating in 2016, but one can still walk through the open grounds which have been recreated to represent the vast pastures of the Mongolian plateau studded with replicas of round Mongolian *ger* which were the erstwhile accommodation offered by the park for visitors who wished to stay over. Needless to add, there was even a restaurant – now closed – serving Mongolian fare. From the elevation, one receives a panoramic view of the sea including the islands of Iki and Tsushima on a clear day. One can visualise the spectacle of the Mongol fleets of thousands of ships approaching menacingly and finally meeting their end at the bottom of that very hill. Takashima today is a testimony to the creativity and sensitivities of the Japanese to embark on a project that could combine business initiative with laying the souls of the tens of thousands who perished in 1281 at rest (*Photos 6 & 7*).

The Spiritual Impact

Returning to Tokimune and the years post the first invasion of 1274. While he had correctly embarked on the mission of fortifying Kyushu, his worries did not leave him. He was desperate to strengthen his weakening spirit. He had heard about a Zen master in southern Song China who was said to have defied the Yuan invasion

Photo 6: Author



Memorial for the war dead on Takashima Island; a statue of the Goddess of Compassion is just visible through the leaves on the left.

Photo 7: Author



View of the bay from Mongol Mura, Takashima Island

Photo 9: Godot13 Smithsonian Institution, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons



First 1 Yen currency note, 1873

in 1275 with complete equanimity. Tokimune's mind was made up: he was going to earnestly request this master to grace his land.

The Reverend Mugaku Sogen arrived in Kamakura c. 1279 as a revered guest of Tokimune. It is interesting to visualise the first moment when the two met. It would have most certainly been a spiritual encounter and may have even occurred in sheer silence. For Tokimune, his master had arrived; his worries would have evaporated and his spirit been uplifted.

The Rinza sect of Zen Buddhism was already established in Kamakura and Tokimune had the master lodged at the head temple of Kenchoji nearby. He would visit the master often. Of course, his worries would keep returning every now and then. The master would instil wisdom in the samurai with the words “*Baku-bon-no*” meaning, “*After you finish preparing for something (in this case, the battle), don't worry too much. Over-thinking will only make you crazy. It will not help you at all. Your agony is produced by your own mind*” (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mugaku_Sogen).

After the war of 1281, Tokimune requested his master to establish a Zen monastery for the repose of the souls of all the people who had perished on both sides of the conflict. The temple of Engakuji was built with Mugaku Sogen as its founding head priest. The Regent wished the temple to be a center of Zen for the whole country and urged samurai across the land to sincerely learn and follow the

practice in their daily lives. On April 20, 1284, Tokimune decided to take the tonsure and become a Zen monk. He died later that day and was commemorated at Engakuji. Mugaku Sogen would live for another two years. The master passed away at Kenchoji and his tomb is on the hill that forms the backdrop of Engakuji. It is as though the master continues to offer wisdom to his disciple to this day at Engakuji. Of further significance is the fact that Engakuji also enshrines a sacred tooth relic of the Buddha, supposed to have

Photo 8: Author



Shrine of the Sacred Relic with the Hill of the Tomb of Mugaku Sogen

been gifted in the 12th century by one of the Song emperors of China to the Kamakura Shogun (Photo 8).

The Aftermath

The Mongol Invasions had outright failed in their mission to supplicate Japan. The invasions – especially the second one – were of no ordinary scale and given the Mongol Empire's performance record across Asia in over-running other kingdoms, the grand finale could be considered as a miracle for Japan. Off and on, across the periods that followed in Japan's history, the event would either not be discussed or would be used to depict Japanese invincibility – notably during the late 19th and early 20th centuries in the years leading to the two World Wars. The usage of national currency notes began in Japan in 1873 and the first series of the 1 Yen note depicted the Mongol Invasion (Photo 9).

Conclusion

One may arrive at a conclusion from this article that all was peaceful in Japan, her neighbors in Asia, indeed the Eurasian continent, with peaceful trade going on until the Mongol Empire stomped its way through lands that were not theirs. This was not the case. Battles and wars were happening everywhere and even amongst those peoples who were invading or were invaded there was considerable difference of opinion on the issues involved and approach to be taken. The Tsushima Straits (also known as the Korean straits) between Japan and Korea, as well as the Yellow Sea between China and Japan were witness to piracy, battles, and skirmishes between these countries, but were also great channels for the peaceful exchange of trade, culture, literature, art, religion, and spirituality. Such is the tale of mankind. Mankind will be better off if it strives to remember that while battles may be lost or won, there is no winner in any war. As civilization evolves, one hopes that the voices of peace, equanimity, and universal belongingness grow ever stronger. **JS**

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