

# Japanese Civilization (Part 9)

## – A World Order Dominated by the Gun –

By Kawakatsu Heita

Photo: Osaka Castle Museum



### Japan and China Disarm as Europe Enters the Age of Great Military Powers

Europe's world domination was made possible by a military revolution in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. This military revolution consisted of three elements: the development of firearms, the strengthening of fortresses and the expansion of armies. The 300 years from 1500 to 1800 are referred to as the beginning of the "modern era" (the post-medieval era) in European history. These three centuries started with the military revolution from around the beginning of the 16<sup>th</sup> century and ended with a political revolution in France (the French Revolution), an economic revolution in Britain (the Industrial Revolution) and a cultural revolution in Germany (such as Goethe, Beethoven and Hegel) at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

During this whole period, there were only about 30 years without war in Europe. Expenditure on arms clearly reflects the zeal with which modern Europe used military force and pursued military expansion. In the 1650s, mili-



Guns played a crucial role at the Battle of Nagashino in 1575

tary spending accounted for 90% of England's expenditure, 75% of Louis XIV's expenditure in France, and 85% of Peter the Great's expenditure in Russia. The main cause of the expansion of armaments in Europe was the deep-seated rivalry between the Hapsburg family and the French monarchy. This rivalry became entan-

gled with religious antagonism between Protestants and Catholics, involving the whole of Europe in war. These wars spilled out beyond the borders of Europe, developing into a struggle for domination of the seas. The sea war spread from the Mediterranean Sea to the Atlantic Ocean, Caribbean Sea and Indian Ocean, in the course of which



the European nations forcibly expanded their territories. By the dawn of the latter part of the modern era in 1800, they possessed 35% of the world's territory, and by World War I 84% of the world was under European rule.

In *The Military Revolution: Military Innovation and the Rise of the West, 1500-1800*, Geoffrey Parker, a leading authority on modern European military history, pithily states that the "greatest export of modern Europe was violence." Peoples all over the world were at the mercy of European nations driven forward by the military revolution. Nevertheless, it is particularly noteworthy that the East Asian world represented by the two great civilizations of Japan and China, never fell under European hegemony. Although European nations succeeded in controlling certain parts of East Asia, such as Macao and Hong Kong, they were not allowed to rule the region as a whole.

What was the reason for this? Parker leaves this as an insoluble mystery, describing China and Japan as the "immovable kingdoms." When China and Japan finally succumbed to the pressure from the Western powers and opened their doors in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, they were both considerably inferior to the Western powers in terms of military strength. This military inferiority seems beyond doubt, but closer examination reveals certain curious facts. In the Opium War (1840-42), British navy warships continuously bombarded Guangdong from 74 cannons for two hours with absolutely no effect: the walls of the city had been built to withstand bombardment by 32-pound cannons.

During the attack on Beijing in 1860, the British army came to realize that the city walls were impregnable, moving General Norris to comment that the "walls of Beijing are as thick as they are high." Since firearms had originally been invented in China, this is hardly surprising. The explanatory text of a surviving picture scroll of the Mongol invasions of Japan (1274 and 1281) shows that the Chinese troops used guns. China underwent a gunpowder era lasting several centuries, during

which city walls all over China were designed to withstand cannon attacks. The firearms invented in China found their way to Europe, where they were developed into muskets and later introduced to Japan in 1543. This musket was called the Tanegashima gun after the island of Tanegashima where it was initially introduced. By the second half of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Japan had become the world's biggest producer and user of firearms, and by the end of the Sengoku (Warring States) period (1467-1568) it had become a greater military power than any European country, possessing military techniques that were at least the equal of those of Europe. Yet the attitudes of Europe and Japan to firearms came to be almost diametrically opposed as Europe forged ahead with the use, improvement and enlargement of guns, while Japan moved in the direction of restriction and reduction of armaments. By 1800 Japan was no longer a military power. Japan's national policy during the Meiji period (1868-1912) was encapsulated in the slogan *fukoku kyohei* (Enrich the country and strengthen the military), and of course firearms were the material basis for strengthening the military.

Both China and Japan could have become military powers in the early modern era if they had been so inclined, but both pursued a path of disarmament that can only be described as the abandonment of the gun. Why did they choose this path?

### **The Dramatic Change of Course from Expansion to Reduction of Armaments**

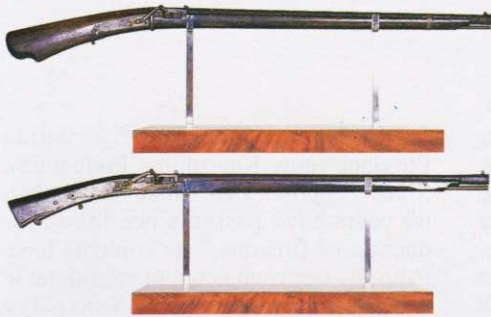
The first encounter of the Japanese with guns was also their first encounter with Europeans. According to most textbooks, guns were first brought to Japan in 1543 by Portuguese whose ship was washed ashore on the island of Tanegashima. However, there is some room for doubt about this version of events and in the academic world a fierce debate continues. The primary source in Japan concerning the introduction of firearms is *Teppo-ki* (History of firearms) written by the Buddhist

priest Nanpo Bunshi of Satsuma Province (now Kagoshima Prefecture). Since *Teppo-ki* states that "more than 60 years have passed since the introduction of firearms," its contents have naturally been subjected to considerable debate. *Teppo – Denrai to Sono Eikyo* (Firearms: Their Introduction and Influence, Shibunkaku, 1991) by Hora Tomio provides a balanced and comprehensive account of the many points of contention.

The account of the introduction of firearms given in *Teppo-ki* is basically as follows. On Aug. 25, 1543, a large foreign ship of uncertain provenance arrived in the bay of Nishimura on Tanegashima island. One of the crew was a man called Goho – with whom the Japanese could communicate in writing. The crew included foreign merchants, one of whom was named "Murashakusha" and another "Kirishitadamota" (Christopher or Antonio da Mota). They had with them fearsome objects called guns, which the Lord Tokitaka, the feudal master of Tanegashima, purchased for a high price without complaint. Tokitaka ordered his retainers to learn from the foreigners how to prepare gunpowder and had them replicate the gun barrel. But the breech of the gun was fastened with a bolt with a screw attached, and the Japanese at that time did not know how to make screws. A man named Yatsuita Kinbei learned this screw-making technique from foreigners who came the following year, and the Japanese at last succeeded in making a prototype gun. Thus, nearly one year after the introduction of firearms, the Japanese were able to manufacture firearms in large numbers. Soon afterwards, Sugino Myosan, a priest from Negoro Temple in Kii Province (now Wakayama Prefecture), came to Tanegashima seeking firearms. Tokitaka gave him one gun and taught him how to use it. Tachibanaya Matasaburo – a merchant from Sakai, later stayed on Tanegashima for one or two years to learn how to make firearms and was nicknamed "*Teppo* (Gun) *Mata*" upon his return. The use of firearms subsequently spread not



Photo: Tanegashima Tokikuni / Tanegashima Development Center



*Hinawaju (matchlocks): the one above was introduced to Japan by the Portuguese and the one below was the first gun produced domestically by Yatsuita Kinbei*

only to the Capital Provinces (the five provinces surrounding the ancient capitals of Kyoto and Nara) and Kansai in western part of Japan but also to Kanto in the east. The explanation concludes by praising Tokitaka's achievement: "Tokitaka acquired firearms from the European visitors, learned about them, and spread this knowledge throughout the five home provinces and seven circuits."

It is also known that the ship washed ashore on the coast of Tanegashima island was a junk captained by Ochoku and that the name Goho mentioned in the account in *Teppo-ki* was the pen name of this Ochoku, who came from Anhui Province in China and was the chief of a band of Japanese pirates based in the Goto islands in Hizen Province.

However, it is still not clear whether the firearms that came to Japan were made in Europe or in East Asia (Malacca), and the debate still continues as to whether those who brought them were Portuguese, Chinese or even the Japanese pirates themselves. It has also been argued that the year of their introduction was not 1542, not 1543.

The firearms introduced to Japan were called *hinawaju* (matchlocks) after the firing device or *Tanegashima-ju* (Tanegashima guns) after their place of origin. In addition to Negoro Temple and Sakai mentioned above, Kunitomo in Omi Province (now Shiga Prefecture) developed into an important gun-producing area. The materials used to make the gunpowder indispensable for firearms were saltpeter, sulfur and charcoal, and the pirate chief Ochoku made enormous profits bringing saltpeter from China and Siam (now Thailand) to Japan. The first record of the use of

firearms is an account of a gun battle in 1549, six years after the introduction of firearms, between the Shimazu army from Satsuma and the Kimotsuki army from Omi. Not surprisingly, the production and use of firearms rapidly expanded in the turbulent Sengoku period. In the battle between Oda Nobunaga and the army of the temple fortress

Ishiyama Honganji, as many as 8,000 guns were used. And in the famous Battle of Nagashino in 1575, three units of 1,000 musketeers each in the Oda-Tokugawa army routed Takeda's mounted knights when they fired simultaneously on them. This historic episode has become known throughout the world through its depiction in Kurosawa Akira's film *Kagemusha*. In Japan's invasions of Korea in 1592 and 1597 led by Toyotomi Hideyoshi, the Japanese army advanced so rapidly and conquered the Korean peninsula so overwhelmingly that it was likened to the invasion of a "no man's land." The Korean army was powerless in the face of the musket.

In the Sengoku period, Japan became known abroad as a mighty military power, but in the Edo period (1603-1868) the development of this technology came to a halt. When Commodore

Matthew Perry's "black ships" appeared off the coast of Japan in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, each domain hastened to improve its firearms, but time was not on their side. After the opening of Japanese ports to foreign trade in 1854, the Japanese rushed to purchase arms and ammunition from the foreigners and devoted their energies to the import of firearms.

Japan thus underwent radical transitions from expansion to reduction of armaments, and once again to military expansion. What lay behind Japan's disarmament in the early Edo period?

### The Abandonment of the Gun and Reversion to the Sword in Tokugawa Japan

Japanese history textbooks all mention the introduction of firearms and the Battle of Nagashino in which musketeers displayed their decisive power. More detailed reference works also describe how Japanese castles developed in response to the rapid diffusion of guns. Mountain castles were replaced by castles built on plains or low plateaus, moats were enlarged, stone foundations were built higher, surrounding walls were made thicker, and the indentations in the forts were increased. In addition to the practical

Photo: The Tokugawa Art Museum



*Sword Mounting for Tachi (Long Sword), scattered aoi crests and scroll designs, maki-e lacquered scabbard decorated with gold openwork, mother-of-pearl and precious stones (Edo period, 17<sup>th</sup> century. Owned by Tokugawa Yoshinao, First Lord of Owari)*





The painting of a forge in the Edo period

aspect of facilitating the use of firearms, the donjon (main tower), containing a lookout post, command post, repositories for weapons, food and other provisions, and the living quarters of the lord of the castle, became the nucleus of each region and the symbol of its unity. The development of firearms also resulted in the expansion of the scale of warfare and an increased emphasis on infantry tactics, which in turn led to the separation of the peasant and warrior classes as samurai recruited as soldiers took up separate residence from peasants in castle towns. This clearly shows the extent to which Japanese society was reorganized according to the "gun standard."

In the second half of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Japan succeeded in mass-producing firearms and developing into a military power that was recognized by the Europeans who frequented neighboring regions as at least their equal. For some reason, however, Japan then proceeded to abandon the firearms that had such a great influence and reverted to the sword. Have any Japanese historians focused on the renunciation of firearms rather than their introduction? As far as this author is aware, this fact and its significance are not mentioned in any history textbooks in Japan. In fact, it was an American historian, Noel Perrin, who drew attention to it. Perrin wrote: "Long before this, the Japanese had done something unprecedented in world history. Almost four centuries earlier, they had abandoned their study and development of firearms in the Tokugawa era, a long period of peace that has never been enjoyed by any other major country in the world. As far as I know, these circumstances are unique in the history of technology. Now that mankind is trying to control nuclear weapons, Japan's historical experiment should be a model for the whole world, providing vital encouragement for us in this endeavor." As a young man, Perrin served as a soldier in the Korean War. When the U.S. (U.N.) army advanced to the Chinese border, he learned that the Japanese army had reached the same border several centuries earlier, making use of the most

advanced weapon of the time: guns. This was completely different from the American stereotyped image of the "two-sworded samurai," leading Perrin to wonder why the samurai had not used guns. Almost 30 years later, he published a brief study entitled *Giving Up the Gun: Japan's Reversion to the Sword, 1543-1879* (Boston: David R. Godine, Publisher, 1979), which caused quite a stir when it first came out. Nevertheless, Japanese specialists in the history of firearms responding coolly to Perrin's study, curtly dismissing it by pointing out a few minor factual errors.

It seems to be an immutable law that the two great revolutions in the history of weapons are the inventions of completely new types of weapon: firearms and nuclear weapons. In the second half of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Japan was the only non-Western country to succeed in the mass production of weapons and even became the biggest user of firearms in the world. Particularly in the tumultuous Sengoku period, during which Japan was riven by constant civil wars, it had been conclusively demonstrated that the sword was powerless against the gun; yet the Japanese gave up the gun and reverted to the sword. A development that ought never to have occurred in military history thus took place in Japan. The importance of this cannot be emphasized enough. Perrin gives the following three reasons for Japan's decision to revert to the sword even though it possessed the materials and know-how to develop the new weapon: (1) Japan wanted to re-estab-

lish the code of ethics that had been lost through the use of guns; (2) foreigners had come to perceive Japan as a strong country that would be impossible to invade; and (3) the Japanese felt contempt for a Western culture based on the unholy trinity of guns, Christianity and commerce. Although each of these contains an element of truth, this explanation still does not seem entirely satisfactory.

Since a nation's existence depends on its preparedness for war, it is surely implausible to explain such a decision solely in terms of a people's ethical or aesthetic outlook. All nations have recourse to force as a means of physical compulsion, but there is surely more than one philosophy of government through which nations control (military) force. It is therefore important to compare Japan's theory of disarmament with the philosophy of military expansion espoused by the nations of Europe, while keeping in mind the case of neighboring China, the foreign country with which Japan was most closely related. **JJTI**

(Continued in Part 10)

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