

The Dynamism of Early Modern Japan: Rethinking Japanese Civilization

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0. Early modern Japan progressed and rose to power concurrently with Western Europe

Even now, pitiful Asian countries with strong anti-Japanese sentiments (Communist China, South Korea, and North Korea) refer to Japan and Japanese people using derogatory terms. They are unable to form their own identities without distorting and fabricating history based on national policies that show contempt for Japan. In the postwar era, anti-Japanese, left-wing historians have acted in concert with this, based on their stereotypical historical views of Japan's class system. They describe early modern Japan as an insular, binding feudalistic system, where peasant farmers suffering under harsh exploitation and oppression comprised over 80% of the population – an uncivilized country of darkness and poverty.

However, we must be amused by their ignorance and delusion. In recent years, serious-minded experts have conducted empirical research to clarify that these left-wing historians' image of early modern Japan – seen through this ideological lens – differs greatly from the real circumstances.

This essay highlights the actual conditions in early modern Japan based on the results of such research.

The anti-Japanese countries in Asia are bound by Confucianism, which turns its back on the dynamism of social evolution. Content with the self-righteous concept of the “Hua-Yi distinction” based on Chinese superiority, they have remained arrogant and ignorant of the wider world. While these countries indulged in indolence for many years – a time of intellectual laxness and medieval (or ancient) stagnation – Japan grew into a major military, economic, educational, and cultural power. From when Japan was heading towards unification in the mid-16th century Sengoku Period to the Edo Period 300 years later, Japan continually and ceaselessly transformed itself based on the traditions of its characteristic, fundamental civilization.

People say that world history begins with the Mongol Empire, and the Mongol cavalry conquered most of the Eurasian continent in the 13th century. They built an unprecedented global empire atop vast wastelands heaped with corpses.

Akira Imatani, an expert in medieval Japanese political history, wrote a book entitled *Feudalism in the History of Civilization: An Historic Legacy That Brought About Modernization* 「封建制の文明史観 近代化をもたらした歴史の遺産」 (PHP Shinsho), which utterly overturns the common belief that feudalism was the root of all evil. Imatani says there were three regions that fiercely drove back invasions by the seemingly invincible Mongol army: the Mamluk Sultanate based in Egypt, Japan (the Far East), and finally Germany in Western Europe (the Holy Roman Empire). Based on these historical facts, Imatani states:

Central Eurasia, which was entirely subjugated by the Mongol army, was long an area with powerful bureaucracies, including China and Persia. This mostly overlaps with the region branded as “Oriental Despotism” by historian Karl August Wittfogel in his later years. In contrast, Japan, Western Europe, and Egypt had feudal systems at that time, with strong enough military force to repel the Mongol cavalry. [...] It is clear that modernization (for instance, estates general and public companies) and industrial capitalism did not appear in areas conquered by the Mongol Empire, but rather from feudal systems.

As suggested by some including the late cultural anthropologist Tadao Umesao, the late commentator Shoichi Watanabe, and intellectual Kanji Nishio, early modern Japan can rightly be called a “superpower.” Located at the opposite end of the Eurasian continent from Western Europe, Japan and Western Europe progressed and rose to power concurrently.

1. Japan was the first country to successfully mass-produce matchlocks

Japanese people first encountered gunpowder in 1274 during the Mongol invasions, in the form of ceramic grenades called “*tetsuho*.” They were not powerful enough to influence the state of the war, but the Japanese side was unused to these weapons, and their loud explosions and flashing lights made the Japanese horses half-crazed and uncontrollable. Then, approximately 270

years after this nightmarish *tetsuho* experience, Japanese people once again gazed in wonder at the mighty weapon of gunpowder.

In 1543, Portuguese people arrived on Tanegashima island on a Ming Chinese junk that was blown off course. The Portuguese had matchlocks, and the young Tanegashima Tokitaka, the lord of the island, purchased two guns at great cost because he was awestruck at seeing them demonstrated. He ordered blacksmiths in his domain to reproduce the guns, and made his vassals learn how to manufacture gunpowder. About one year later, the Tanegashima, Japan's first domestically produced matchlock, was completed. The manufacturing process spread to Negoro in Kii, Sakai in Senshu, and Kunitomo Village in Omi, which became major gun production centers.

Among these, Sakai was an autonomous city governed by an assembly of almost 40 wealthy merchants. They hired mercenaries to defend the city, which was surrounded by moats, until it surrendered to Oda Nobunaga in 1570. It was a major base of international trade that prospered due to its dealings with Ming China, Ryukyu, and the *nanban* trade (“*nanban*,” meaning “southern barbarian,” referred to the Portuguese and other Europeans). Luís Fróis, a missionary from the Society of Jesus who was granted audiences with Oda and Toyotomi Hideyoshi, describes Sakai's prosperity as the “Venice of the Orient” in his *Historia de Japam* (*Complete Translation of Fróis' Historia de Japam 1: Demise of Shogun Yoshiteru and the Free City of Sakai – Oda Nobunaga Volume 1* [完訳フロイス日本史 I 将軍義輝の最期および自由都市堺 | 織田信長篇 I], translated by Kiichi Matsuda and Momota Kawasaki, Chuo Bunko).

In addition to the excellent *tatara* furnace iron manufacturing technologies handed down since ancient times, as well as forging technologies for making Japanese swords with the world's sharpest edges, Sakai was the location of the world's first mass production of matchlocks. This used an assembly-line system with standardized barrels, stocks, mechanisms, screws, and other components. At that time, overseas craftsmen made matchlocks entirely by hand, one by one. Moreover, Japanese craftsmen did not just copy these guns; they persistently and repeatedly improved them for greater power, and even developed the concept of rain-covers.

The superiority of Japanese-produced matchlocks was described by American historian Alfred W. Crosby in his book *Throwing Fire: Projectile Technology Through History* (translated by Chieko Ozawa, Kinokuniya Company). He writes, “Their harquebuses were bigger in caliber and had more dependable trigger mechanisms than the European ones, and little cowls to protect the match from rain and conceal its glow at night.”

During the Sengoku Period, military commanders, feudal lords of *shoen* manors, and powerful local clans across Japan competed to introduce the latest weapons. In addition to the three previously mentioned locations, swordsmiths and blacksmiths in various areas competed against each other at matchlock production.

It is said there were over 300,000 domestically produced matchlocks in Japan in the 1550s – less than 20 years after the gun arrived in Japan – and over 500,000 at the end of the 16th century. This was significantly larger than the total number of guns throughout Europe. These excellent Japanese matchlocks were also exported to Europe via the *nanban* trade.

Matchlocks served a key role in defeating the medieval “old regime” and opening the door to a new era that led to modern times.

2. Oda was a revolutionary war leader

Oda led a revolutionary war in Japan based on the slogan of “*tenka fubu*” (ruling the world by force of arms). He accomplished this by effectively utilizing weapons, including introducing huge numbers of guns (a new type of weapon) and using them in volley firing.

It is widely known that the allied Oda/Tokugawa forces, commanded by Oda, systematically used large quantities of guns in the 1575 Battle of Nagashino on the plain of Shitaragahara. They annihilated the cavalry of Takeda Katsuyori, which was feared as invincible. In recent years there is some doubt that the Oda/Tokugawa forces actually carried out a three-stage attack in which they divided the 3,000 guns into three groups and fired them continuously, but it is certain that they efficiently employed large numbers of guns while making skillful use of dry moats and anti-cavalry barriers. Takeda also had several hundred guns at hand, but he decided to use the traditional battle tactic of sending the cavalry to break through the enemy's front lines before any guns were fired. For this reason, the Takeda forces suffered an ignominious defeat when many renowned military commanders were killed by the ready and waiting guns of the Oda/Tokugawa army.

Oda's complete victory was due to his adroit usage of many guns, as well as the overwhelming difference in arms strength. Experts estimate the Takeda army numbered around 15,000 troops, while the Oda army was more than twice as large with roughly 38,000 soldiers.

Fifty years before the Battle of Nagashino, the Battle of Mohács in southern Hungary was rather like the prototype of this Japanese battle. It took place on a plain near Mohács on the right bank of the Danube river.

In 1526, Suleiman I of Ottoman Turkey – an advanced military nation that built an empire spanning Asia, Africa, and Europe – led a large army of around 60,000 troops from the capital city of Istanbul to invade Mohács, with the aim of expanding his European territory. The army included approximately 10,000 powerful Janissaries (elite guards under the emperor's immediate control) who were skilled at using matchlocks, and around 300 cannons. The Ottoman army lined up their cannons and connected

them with iron chains that served as anti-cavalry barriers. Gunners were stationed behind the cannons in a battle formation for carrying out a two-stage attack with single-shot matchlock muzzleloaders. Their adversary, the Kingdom of Hungary's army, was roughly the same size as the Ottoman army. Led by the young King Louis II, it had a cavalry of almost 30,000 with reinforcements from the Habsburgs (his relatives), Transylvania, and Bohemia.

Louis II fought vigorously, taking the decisive action of leading the cavalry against the invaders without coordinating with his reinforcements. However, this was unsuccessful. The Hungarian army suffered a massive defeat, and roughly 20,000 people including the king were killed. The deaths in the Ottoman army were around one tenth those of the Hungarian side. The two-stage matchlock attack – which continued after the systematic firearm usage and simultaneous cannon bombardment – annihilated the strongest cavalry in Western Europe. This battle was a major turning point in early modern military history.

After its victory in the Battle of Mohács, the Ottoman army occupied Buda, the capital of Hungary. It laid siege to Vienna, the capital of the Holy Roman Empire, three years later, which sent fear into the hearts of Christians throughout Europe.

In other words, the Battles of Mohács and Nagashino were extremely similar despite their different sizes. Oda welcomed the Portuguese Jesuits because he wanted to place checks on the Buddhist religious organizations and because he was interested in *nanban* civilization. Oda may have asked the Portuguese about warfare tactics in their region, and it is possible they told him about the Battle of Mohács.

But even without this information, it was likely not difficult for the prodigious Oda to independently come up with this efficient way of using firearms.

Oda was not just well versed in military strategy; his revolutionary war was supported by astounding reforms. These included the establishment of a standing army through the separation of samurai and farmers (which was mostly completed by Toyotomi, who took over Oda's unification project); the large-scale reorganization of the army into various branches (including spear, bow, and gun units); the selection of people for high offices based solely on merit, regardless of pedigree or lineage; the construction of sturdy castles that could withstand firearms; the abolition of checkpoints; and the abolition of the medieval trade guilds (which had special commercial rights) to establish free markets and stimulate the distribution of goods.

In addition, Oda did not allow religious organizations to hold political authority resembling feudal lords. He showed no leniency, not even to the prestigious Hieizan Enryakuji temple or the powerful Ishiyama Hongan Temple. By allowing freedom of religion, he had the modern ideology of the separation of church and state. He did commit some brutal acts that were quite un-Japanese in character, such as the sieges of Mount Hiei and Nagashima (when he killed rebellious groups backed by the Jodo Shinshu sect of Buddhism). However, Oda's ideology is affirmed by the fact that he prevented tragic religious warfare in which countrymen fight against each other, like the French Wars of Religion and Thirty Years' War in Europe. The Shimabara Rebellion, which took place in the early Edo Period during the reign of Tokugawa Iemitsu (the third *shogun*), was a large-scale insurrection by local residents who were suffering under tyrannical, crushing taxes. Christianity was merely an ideology used to unify a wide range of different people, and it is hard to say that this rebellion was a religious war.

Oda was certainly a genius at developing a new age, but unfortunately he died violently at Honno Temple in a coup led by his vassal Akechi Mitsuhide, without seeing his dream of a unified Japan come true. Toyotomi, who defeated Mitsuhide to claim vengeance and also defeated his rival Shibata Katsuie, was the one who successfully carried out his master Oda's national unification project. Toyotomi was appointed *kanpaku* (regent) and then *daijō-daijin* (chancellor of the realm) by the Imperial Court. He conducted a nationwide land survey and called for a sword hunt. He fully unified Japan and built its foundation as a unified state in the early modern (and modern) eras.

3. Japan was a military superpower

What was Japan's military strength like at the end of the 16th century? Toyotomi mobilized roughly 220,000 soldiers in his Kyushu Campaign in 1587. Three years later, at the Siege of Odawara, there were about 220,000 land troops and about 40,000 members of the Kuki and Mori navies. After Japan was unified, the total number of troops available for mobilization was between 500,000 and 600,000, making Japan a military superpower on the same level as Ming China or the Ottoman Empire.

The Han Chinese played leading roles in the Ming Dynasty, which defeated the former empire ruled by the Mongols. Its height of prosperity was during the era of the Yongle Emperor in the early 15th century. Ming China sent troops to the Mongolian Plateau and gained control over the Tatars and Oirats (the remaining powers). It built the Great Wall, and made Annam, Joseon Korea, and Burma into vassal states. It also showcased its imperial military power over a wide range with seven expeditions by Zheng He's fleet, including the South China Sea, Indian Ocean, Arabian Sea, and Red Sea. At that time, China's total military force numbered more than two million land troops, and it was truly a military superpower. However, at the end of the 16th century, the emperor was incompetent, and the eunuchs held the real power. Repeated infighting took place between factions, and the government fell into deeper turmoil. Moreover, China's national power waned due to invasions by nomadic tribes in the northern part of the country and invasion and pillaging by Japanese pirates on the South and East China Sea coasts. At that point, it had an actual military force roughly equal to or less than that of Japan's.

Just like Oda, from the start Toyotomi did not accept the China-centered "Hua-Yi distinction." After Japan was unified, he

wanted to become the supreme ruler of the world. First, he planned to conquer Ming China. He also demanded tribute from the Korean king during his Kyushu campaign in 1587. Like a reverse version of the Mongol invasions of Japan, Toyotomi attempted to make Joseon Korea the guide for his continental invasion. Korea refused, leading to the Imjin War. The year before this war, Toyotomi also demanded allegiance from the governor of Portuguese India, the king of Spain, and the Philippines.

Toyotomi launched two invasions of Korea, in 1592 and 1597. He mobilized roughly 200,000 soldiers for the first invasion, mainly from western Japan, and approximately 140,000 for the second invasion. However, there were over one million soldiers stationed at the headquarters in Nagoya, including troops from eastern Japan and Toyotomi's retainers.

When the Japanese army first invaded Korea, the Korean army had no guns, merely an unorganized, inferior mix of weapons. Morale was also low. Around 20 to 30% of the Japanese expeditionary force possessed guns. No one could oppose the Japanese army. They quickly gained control of the capital city, and the Korean king fled for his life with just a few comrades while the citizens threw stones at him. When the Japanese advance guard reached the border with Ming China, the Ming reinforcements finally launched a counterattack, which stopped the steady advance. However, the Ming soldiers' matchlocks had shorter ranges and were weaker than the Japanese ones. The Ming swords were also shorter than the Japanese swords, and the Japanese army overpowered them even in hand-to-hand combat.

There were some things that did not go as planned, including many Korean guerillas in addition to the Ming army. The Korean navy waged a desperate counteroffensive, and there were issues with the arms, ammunition, and provision supplies. However, the Japanese expeditionary force was unquestionably superior.

All of the Japanese soldiers withdrew when Toyotomi died. However, it is possible that the world map would be significantly different today if Toyotomi had remained healthy for another five or six years.

At the end of the 16th century, it is estimated that Japan had a population of 15 million, Ming China of 150 million, Joseon Korea of five million, Spain and Portugal of 10 million (Philip II was the king of both), the Netherlands of 1.5 million, and the Kingdom of England of four million.

Ming China was no longer the nation it had been in the past, and was headed towards decline. In contrast, the unified, early modern Japan had ample national strength and was one of the world's foremost military superpowers. Korea ended up in ruins due to Toyotomi's invasions and the lax military discipline of the Ming army it invited into the country. Ming China, which had provided reinforcements to this vassal nation, also fell into a financial crisis caused by war expenditures. This accelerated the pace of its downfall, together with the Qing conquest of China.

4. Toyotomi's plan to conquer Ming China was also aimed at preventing further Mongol invasions

Some theorize that Toyotomi's plan to subjugate Ming China was not merely due to a lust for conquest or domination. Commentator Takanori Irie wrote an essay on this fascinating theme, entitled, "Why Did Hideyoshi Send Troops to Korea?" 「秀吉はなぜ朝鮮に出兵したか」 (*Global Japanese History 1* 「地球日本史 1」 edited by Kanji Nishio [Fusosha Publishing]).

Irie says the most significant historical events in East Asia from the early 15th century to the end of the 16th century were Zheng's expeditions in the Indian Ocean and Toyotomi's Imjin War. Toyotomi's perception of the world, which inspired his unprecedented actions, was also influenced by the Spanish and Portuguese missionaries' plan to conquer China.

In his essay, Irie gives detailed information about the Christian missionaries' military movements as described in historian Koichiro Takase's *Research on the Christian Era* 「キリシタン時代の研究」.

According to this book, the missionaries repeatedly sent proposals to their home countries, seemingly wavering about the usage of military force to convert China into a Christian country. They also said many times that conquering China would be as simple as Spain's subjugation of the Aztec and Incan Empires in Central and South America. Toyotomi also believed it would be easy to overcome Ming China, probably due to this Spanish and Portuguese information.

The essay is based on sources such as documents kept in the Archivio Historico in Rome. Among the missionaries who recommended the conquest of China, the superior of the Japanese missionary and Jesuit visitors knew Toyotomi quite well.

Their general view was that the armed conquest of Japan would be difficult because it was a country of great military prowess, and also that it would not provide as much profit as China. The missionaries saw advantages to an alliance with Japan for their goal of subjugating China. These documents say the missionaries recommended sending Portuguese ships to aid the conquest of China after Toyotomi's unification of Japan (the king of Spain was also the king of Portugal at that time).

In June 1587, Toyotomi was residing in Hakata during his Kyushu Campaign when he summoned Gaspar Coelho, the superior of the Jesuit mission in Japan, to an audience. Toyotomi had met Coelho two years before at Osaka Castle, when Toyotomi said he wanted to purchase two large ships with sailors. At that time, a plan was approaching a conclusion in Manila for Spain to dispatch troops to China. Christian *daimyo* (feudal lords), such as Matsura Takanobu of Hirado and Konishi Yukinaga, told the governor-general of Manila they would send troops to Siam or Ming China.

Coelho pretended to go along with Toyotomi's request. He took a heavily equipped fusta ship, which is of no use in open sea voyages, to meet Toyotomi in Hakata, as if to demonstrate its might. (Fusta are small, shallow ships with one or two masts and jib sails, powered by oars.) Takayama Ukon, Konishi, and others feared the church as a whole would suffer misfortunes because of

this erratic action, so they recommended that the fusta be given to Toyotomi. However, Coelho refused. Enraged, Toyotomi embarked on his persecution of Christians immediately after.

According to a different document, Toyotomi could not overlook the fact that the fusta's oars were manned by Japanese slaves in chains. Moreover, Toyotomi knew the truth about these missionaries through the negotiations for which they served as intermediaries – for example, destroying temples and shrines in the territories of the Christian *daimyo* in Kyushu and building churches for the missionaries, or exchanging 50 female Japanese slaves for one cask of saltpeter (the main ingredient in gunpowder). The Christian *daimyo* donated parts of their territories to the *nanban* missionaries. By visiting these sites, Toyotomi knew that arms and ammunition were secretly stored in the seminaries of these settlements.

Toyotomi had directly glimpsed the secret faces of these missionaries, and he found them intolerable. As the ruler of Japan, his persecution of Christians was a natural step to take. Still, this led to the collapse of the plan to overthrow Ming China together with Spain. After the ocean-going ship supply lines were cut off, Toyotomi had no choice but to invade Ming China via an overland route through Korea. Toyotomi surmised that, if Ming China was ruled by Western Europe, it would absolutely pose a threat to Japan greater than the Mongol invasions. Toyotomi may have been motivated to send troops to Korea because he thought he should gain control over China by himself before Japan was invaded by Spain.

Irie's evaluation is that, if this is the truth, it means Toyotomi already had an Asian strategy similar to modern Japan's administration of Korea and Manchuria.

Japan and Spain had wildly different views regarding their alliance. Toyotomi thought it would be sufficient to reward Spain for the alliance by granting freedom to the Christians doing missionary work in China after its subjugation. In contrast, the Spanish side saw the Japanese army as nothing but mercenaries, like those in Siam. Therefore, even if the alliance had succeeded, it likely would have collapsed sooner or later and the two sides would have opened hostilities. Luckily or unluckily, the two great Western and Eastern rivals of Philip II and Toyotomi both died in September 1598, as if they had planned to do so, and the confrontation between them never occurred.

5. Early modern Japan was an economic superpower

From the Sengoku Period on, Japan was one of the world's prominent producers of gold and silver. For example, Iwami Ginzan Silver Mine in Shimane Prefecture (a UNESCO World Heritage Site) produced one third of the world's total silver during its heyday from the second half of the 16th century to the early 17th century. Besides Iwami Ginzan, Ikuno Silver Mine in Hyogo was under the direct control of several successive rulers: Oda, Toyotomi, and Tokugawa Ieyasu. It was directly operated by the new government after the Meiji Restoration, when it upheld Japan's promotion of industry for modernization.

Gold was also produced in fairly large amounts from the Sengoku Period, including famous mines such as Echigo Kinzan, Sado Kinzan, Izu Kinzan, and Kai Kinzan. There were many other gold and silver mines dotted across Japan as well.

In *Global Number Ones in Japanese History* 「日本史の中の世界一」 (edited by Hidemichi Tanaka, Ikuhosh Publishing), the late Sakae Tsunoyama, an economic historian, says Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations* (1776) formed the mainstream economic view that national wealth is equal to productivity. Up until then, bullionism and the related mercantilism occupied the dominant positions. According to the concept of bullionism, Tsunoyama says the world's major economic powers in the 16th century were Spain and Japan. But how did Spain – a country that produced no silver domestically – come to acquire large amounts of silver, earning the moniker “The empire on which the sun never sets?”

After Christopher Columbus “discovered” America in 1492, Spain moved south on the new continent. It found silver in Mexico during its exploration and territorialization. In South America, Spain overthrew the Incan Empire (1533) and plundered vast amounts of silver, by which it became an economic power. The silver mine in Potosí, discovered in 1545, was said to have the biggest silver deposits in the world.

Potosí is located in a basin roughly 4,000 meters above sea level in the Andes Mountains in today's Bolivia. At one time, it was the highest city in the world occupied by people. With an elevation exceeding Mount Fuji, Potosí is an arid, barren place with sparse oxygen where little grass grows. Small amounts of hand digging continue today for the purpose of tourism, but when this area was ruled by Spain, the mine's total silver production totaled 45,000 tons.

However, Potosí was referred to as a “hell on earth,” an ominous “mountain that eats men.” The brutal Spanish conquerors took the indigenous people as slaves and forced them to labor without sufficient food. They were exploited and worked to death in the unhygienic, dangerous, dark mine shafts. When the number of indigenous people declined rapidly, the Spanish imported black slaves from Africa. The lives of eight million people were “eaten” by this mountain. The emaciated indigenous and black slaves chewed coca leaves while working under the merciless swords and whips of the Spanish. They fought against terror while struggling with hunger, fatigue, and drowsiness. The ore they chiseled out was transported via narrow tunnels. While repeating this process, many workers died from malnutrition, toxic fumes, mine dust, altitude sickness, overwork, cave-in accidents, and other causes.

Friar Bartolomé de las Casas wrote *A Short Account of the Destruction of the Indies* (translated by Hidefujii Someda, Iwanami Bunko) in 1542 on the atrocious deeds of the Spanish conquerors, which defy description. Just reading about these acts is unbear-

able, including feeding indigenous people to dogs, chopping up unresisting natives for sport, burning them alive, and cutting unborn children from the wombs of their mothers. Las Casas wrote frankly of the exploitation and slaughter of these gentle natives by the Spanish conquerors who traveled the New World on horseback under the pretense of Christianity and civilization.

As evidenced by the Crusades that started at the end of the 11th century, there are no *Homo sapiens* as savage and ruthless as the white Christians who believe they are chosen by God and will be forgiven for any way they treat “heathens.” They are truly white barbarians.

During the 16th and 17th centuries, most of Japan’s vast wealth (silver) flowed overseas via the *nanban* trade to purchase raw silk, silk goods, and other items. However, large amounts of silver were also stored in the country, and these reserves were what produced the Edo culture and civilization of autonomy and maturity.

Tsunoyama outlines these circumstances as follows:

The Tokugawa Shogunate inherited the *jokamachi* (castle town) construction plan by Oda and Toyotomi. It invested huge amounts of wealth in major public-works projects to renovate the Japanese archipelago. In addition to the Shogunate and *daimyo*, private investment from merchants and landowners was also used to build unique *jokamachi* across Japan, including the two major cities of Edo, the center of government with a population of over a million people, and Osaka, a riverside city with many merchants. They built Nikko Toshogu in the east and Kyoto’s Nijo Castle in the west. They also established road networks, irrigation, channels for water transportation, waterways, and new rice fields, in addition to changing river flows and building flood-control works. The main projects were mostly completed by the end of the 17th century. However, silver production was running dry at the same time, bringing an end to Japan’s prosperity as the world’s top economic power. We cannot forget that this development boom led to a thriving urban, common culture that still exists today, mainly in Edo and Osaka. These are all legacies from when Japan was the world’s top economic power in the 16th and 17th centuries.

With a population of more than one million people, Edo was the world’s top metropolis in the early 18th century. It was followed by Peking, Paris, London, Osaka, and other cities. London overcame Edo in the 19th century when Britain was the first country to undergo the Industrial Revolution, and many people moved to the cities.

6. Left-wing historians have a mistaken historical view of “poor farmers”

The Edo Period was a feudal society with an established class system (“*shinokosho*,” or the “four occupations”), in which peasant farmers were the second-highest occupation after the *bushi* (warrior) class. However, Marxist, left-wing historians have depicted the peasant farmers of the Edo Period in a stereotypical way for the long years of the postwar period. They say peasant farmers were tormented with oppressive tax systems (including land taxes), and that their staple foods included millet and other grains because they could not eat sufficient amounts of the rice they grew. Finally, this image is being repudiated by empirical research in recent years.

First, the term “*shinokosho*” did not exist during the Edo Period. Unlike other hierarchies, including Britain or the Indian caste system, Edo social status was fundamentally based on occupation, not lineage. The *shinokosho* categories were equal, except for some high-ranking warrior families like the *daimyo* or retainers of noble families. The actual Edo class system had three categories of social status: *bushi*, *hyakusho* (farmers), and *chonin* (townspeople). “*Hyakusho*” referred to people who lived in villages. This category was not limited to actual farmers, but also included professions such as blacksmiths, carpenters, woodworkers, shipping industry workers, and fishermen. “*Chonin*” referred to the various occupations of people living in *jokamachi*, except for *bushi*. A blacksmith was a *chonin* if he lived in a *jokamachi*. People had a fair degree of freedom to move between these three classes.

For instance, the forefather of the Mitsui Zaibatsu financial conglomerate quit his position as a *bushi* and became a merchant. Mitsui Takatoshi, an ancestor of the Mitsui Zaibatsu founder, retired as a *bushi* and started a pawnshop and liquor store in Ise-Matusaka in the Keicho Era. During the turbulent Meiji Restoration, Katsu Kaishu negotiated with Saigo Takamori, the commander of the government forces approaching Edo, to achieve the bloodless capitulation of Edo Castle. Kaishu safeguarded Edo from wartime destruction while also assuring the honorable survival of the Tokugawa Clan, his masters. Kaishu’s great-grandfather was a poor farmer from Echigo who was blind. This man came to Edo, became a loan shark officially authorized by the Shogunate, obtained enormous wealth, and purchased the rank of *kengyo* (the highest rank given to blind people). He also bought *gokenin* ranks so his descendants could become Shogunate vassals.

Left-wing historians and media figures constantly ignore historical facts while viewing this era through the lens of their dogmatic historical views. They have decided that Edo peasant farmers were just like the serfs of Imperial Russia. These people cling to their “poor farmer” viewpoint, just like they believe the time before and during World War II was a dark age of military rule.

However, the real circumstances were quite different. Based on a range of empirical research, Tsuneo Sato, a doctor of agriculture, casts doubt on the poor farmer viewpoint.

During the Edo Period, all land taxes were paid in village denominations. Land surveys served as the basis for cadastres. With some exceptions, land surveys were completed for most Shogunate and domain territories in the second half of the 17th century, and the numbers remained unchanged for roughly 200 years. The products of vigorous economic activities by farmers were not

reflected in cadastres from the latter half of the 17th century. During this period, progress in agricultural technology improved land productivity and led to more advanced planting methods (including methods for growing two crops). Field utilization rates rose; cash crops such as cotton, rapeseed, dyer's knotweed, and safflower were introduced that were more profitable than rice; and the agricultural product processing industry made it possible to increase added value, including products like sake and miso. Wages rose through commerce, with some people working away from home or as day laborers.

As a result, as the end of the Edo Period approached, there were many villages with a low actual land tax ratio of 20% or 10% (“Doubts About the Poor Farmer Viewpoint” 「貧農史観への疑問」 by Tsuneo Sato in *Global Japanese History 2* 「地球日本史 2」).

Agricultural books helped drastically boost the productivity of Edo agriculture. According to Sato, these books mainly recorded agricultural technologies. Many appeared from the Genroku Era in the second half of the 17th century to the Kyoho Era in the first half of the 18th century. They were written all over the Japanese archipelago, and these publications have been confirmed from Mutsu Province in the north to Ryukyu in the south.

If the Edo peasant farmers lived in serious poverty, it is difficult to believe that pilgrimages would have been in vogue across the nation, including to Ise, the 88 temples of Shikoku, and Mount Fuji.

So, how did foreigners see the peasant farmers and other common people of this time?

Willem Huyssen van Kattendijke of the Royal Dutch Navy is regarded as the man who trained Japan's modern navy. After arriving in Nagasaki in September 1857 on the *Kanrin Maru*, a battleship ordered by the Shogunate, he became the second commandant of the Nagasaki Naval Training Center, where he taught navigation, gunnery, measuring, and other topics to Shogunate retainers including Kaishu and Enomoto Takeaki. Van Kattendijke stayed in Nagasaki for six years, during which he visited Kagoshima, Tsushima, Hirado, Shimonoseki, and Fukuoka. In his memoirs, *My Days at the Nagasaki Naval Training Center* 「長崎海軍伝習所の日々」, he describes the common people as follows:

The general prosperity of this country is the greatest evidence of its good fortune. The *hyakusho* and day laborers all have sufficient clothing. At least in Nagasaki, even the lower classes have sufficient food to eat. [...] As far as I can see, the lower classes in Japan have greater personal freedom than any other nation in the world. Their rights are respected to an astounding degree. [...] The upper-class *bushi* are slaves to social rules and customs, but in contrast, the *chonin* have personal freedom. This freedom is so great that no country in Europe can compare. [...] The laws are strict, but judgement is impartial and there is no danger as long as one esteems these laws, regulations, and customs.

(*Vestiges of a Bygone Era* 「逝きし世の面影」 by Kyoji Watanabe, Heibonsha Library)

7. Early modern Japan was a world-class culture

Edo Japan was open to the world at four locations, including Dejima in Nagasaki. Still, free international exchange and trade was prohibited at the civilian level. A uniquely Japanese culture, sciences, technologies, and credit economy system blossomed during this time. These were all advanced, and many exceeded the global level of the times.

Kabuki is still known across the world as a renowned Japanese performing art for the general public. Its origin is the Kabuki dance performed by Izumo no Okuni at Shijogawara on the Kamo River in Kyoto during the early Edo Period. It developed with overwhelming support from the *chonin* class. The Kabuki craze spread to farming villages (*noson*) as well, and “Noson Kabuki” appeared around Japan from the mid-Edo Period to its close. Small, permanent theaters were built near village shrine groves and highway routes. Farmers practiced this art during the slack seasons, and enjoyed performing on several special days throughout the year.

In the mid-17th century, the civil administration of Tokugawa Tsunayoshi (the fifth *shogun*) brought about industrial development, and the affluent *chonin* served as the foundation for the flowering of the Genroku culture. During this era, a new culture was created by *chonin* in Osaka and Kyoto who gained economic power. Representative examples are Ihara Saikaku and Chikamatsu Monzaemon, who created many masterpieces in the fields of popular fiction, Kabuki, and puppet theater.

In Edo, Matsuo Basho developed the *renga* poetry form into *haikai* (*haiku*), and was later praised as one of the most famous poets in this genre. After World War II, *haiku* – the shortest type of fixed-form poetry – was reevaluated across the world, and today these poems are written in many different languages. According to former Ambassador to Ukraine Mutsuo Mabuchi, a junior high school textbook in Ukraine (a pro-Japanese country) devotes dozens of pages to Matsuo and *haiku*.

Ukiyo-e woodblock prints, which had major influence on the French Impressionists, were also established in this era.

There were wide-ranging, world-class accomplishments in the natural science field as well. One is *wasan* (Japanese mathematics), exemplified by the renowned mathematician Seki Takakazu. He successfully developed a high-grade type of mathematics, including formulating his own algebra and suggesting the theory of determinants before prominent Western mathematician Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz.

Miyazaki Yasusada, who authored the *Complete Treatise on Agriculture* 「農業全書」 (known as the “bible of agriculture”) and was celebrated as a master in this field, was also active in the Genroku Era. Looking at medical care as well, the first successful surgery under general anesthesia was performed by surgeon Hanaoka Seishu in the early 19th century, nearly 50 years before

this was accomplished in Europe or the United States.

Also worthy of mention is Hanaoka's contemporary Ino Tadataka, who underwent a great deal of hardship to create the first detailed map of Japan. In the second half of the 18th century, British, American, and Russian warships arrived in Japan's coastal waters. In particular, coastal defense became a pressing issue for the Shogunate after Russian vessels were frequently seen near the Yezo area. Ino had studied *wasan* and astronomy, and he dreamed of measuring one degree on a meridian to learn the size of the earth. The Shogunate asked him to survey Yezo, and he used Hakodate as the starting point in his survey along the southeast coast. He utilized the traverse method and various types of equipment to measure angles and distances. On level ground he used a device called a "*ryoteisha*," and in complex terrain he used rope to measure distances. The distance he walked in his surveying work was roughly the same as the distance around the earth, and he accurately calculated the length of one degree on the meridian as well. After his death, the Shogunate's calendar bureau used Ino's actual measurements to produce the *Dainihon Enkaiyochi Zenzu* 「大日本沿海輿地全図」, a map of Japan also referred to as the "Ino Map." Its precision astounded Western specialists who came to Japan at the end of the Edo Period. It also led to the "Siebold Incident," in which Philipp Franz von Siebold tried to take this map out of Japan, a prohibited act.

The Ino Map is evaluated as follows in the *Special Edition: New History Textbook* 「新装 新しい歴史教科書」 (Jiyuusha) by Seishiro Sugihara et al.: "The Ino Map exemplifies Ino's high level of *wasan* skill, his dedication to actual proof in scientific inquiry, and his indomitable spirit that was undaunted by difficulty."

Tanaka Hisashige, nicknamed "Karakuri Giemon" and the "Edison of Japan," was a genius inventor who worked from the end of the Edo Period to the Meiji Period. He founded Shibaura Engineering Works (the predecessor of Toshiba Corporation's heavy electric machinery division), Japan's first civilian equipment factory. As a young man he built *karakuri* dolls using hydraulic pressure, gravity, air pressure, and other techniques. His masterpieces include dolls that shoot bows, write, and hold cups. Afterwards, he became interested in Western clocks, so he studied Western astronomy and mathematical principles. He made an astronomical clock expressing a Buddhist outlook on the universe, as well as a wondrous timepiece that only had to be wound once a year. Tanaka became interested in defense technologies after the arrival of Commodore Matthew C. Perry, so he created steamship models and started developing and manufacturing reverberatory furnaces and Armstrong Guns. Tanaka was without question a prodigy of machine technology who helped lay the cornerstone of Japan as a major technological power.

With a population exceeding one million people, Edo was the world's largest city at the beginning of the 18th century. Osaka prospered as the "world's kitchen," a distribution center for various products from across Japan including rice, soy sauce, sake, and cotton. The various domains had storehouses in Osaka, and they contracted merchants to sell both the rice paid as taxes and local specialty products. The goods that were brought to Osaka were then transported to Edo via ships.

The Dojima Rice Exchange was opened in Osaka in 1730, and rice was sold using certificates indicating ownership. Two types of transactions were performed: spot and futures. In the latter type, the purchaser could pay a deposit followed by the rest of the balance. This made the Dojima Rice Exchange the first market in the world where futures trading took place, and the concept of financial derivatives was born there.

8. The world's top literacy rate, cultural standards, and morality

In 1865, Heinrich Schliemann achieved his long-held dream of excavating the ruins of Troy. He also stopped by Japan on his tour around the world. He visited Yokohama, Edo, Hachioji, and the surrounding regions – areas protected by Shogunate guards – and he later described his surprise at the high level of Japanese education in his travel journal, *La Chine et Le Japon au Temps Présent* (translated by Kazuko Ishii, Kodansha Gakujutsu Bunko): "Education is more advanced than civilized European nations. In China and other Asian countries, women are neglected and left in complete ignorance. However, in Japan both men and women can read and write in *kana* and *kanji*."

More than 300 years earlier, missionary Francis Xavier was the first "*nanban*" to arrive in Japan in the mid-16th century. In his letters, he wrote as follows about the high cultural standard of the Japanese people:

The people of this nation have the supreme position among any nation that has been discovered. I don't think we will ever find other non-Christians who are more exemplary than the Japanese. They are friendly, and in general are virtuous with no ill will. They have an astoundingly strong desire for honor, which they value above all else.

(*Complete Letters of Saint Francis Xavier 3* 「聖フランシスコ・ザビエル全書簡3」 [translated by Yoshinori Kono, Heibonsha])

The *Guanzi* states, "When the granaries are full / They will know propriety and moderation. / When their clothing and food is adequate. / They will know the distinction between honor and shame." (*Guanzi: Political, Economic, And Philosophical Essays From Early China - A Study and Translation*, translated by W. Allyn Rickett). As this text describes, cultural standards and morality are generally sustained by stable livelihoods and education.

All of the people Xavier encountered in Japan were not members of the upper class. This suggests that Japanese people had a high cultural standard and level of refinement, in the truest sense, even during the Muromachi Period. Various types of testimony state that Japan was already the world's most educated nation at that time.

During the “Pax Tokugawana” in the 260 years of the Edo Period, the *bushi* were required to be leaders accomplished in both literary and military arts, as well as capable administrators. The literacy rate in the *bushi* class was almost 100%. *Bushi* children studied at *hanko* (clan schools), of which there were roughly 280 across Japan. These schools produced many outstanding talents. *Hanko* were like public institutions, while the Shoheizaka School in Kanda Yushima (an educational and research institution under the direct control of the Shogunate) was the equivalent of a national institution. It started the tradition of the University of Tokyo, the University of Tsukuba, and Ochanomizu University.

Besides the *hanko*, there were also highly distinctive private schools around the country in various fields, including Sinology, Shingaku, Japanese literature and culture, Eastern and Western medicine, Dutch studies, *wasan*, astronomy, calligraphy, painting, and other disciplines. These private schools numbered around 1,500 at the end of the Edo Period, and there were absolutely no status or class restrictions on their founders, teachers, and students. Many of the private school founders and students promoted the Meiji Restoration and became leaders of the new, unified nation-state in the Meiji Period.

The children of commoners, including *chonin* and peasant farmers, mainly engaged in practical learning at nearby *terakoya* (temple schools). The previously mentioned *Special Edition: New History Textbook* explains how education was conducted at these schools:

Terakoya taught subjects such as reading, writing, arithmetic, morality, social studies, geography, history, etiquette, and industry. Girls also studied needlework and flower arrangement. *Terakoya* stressed the cultivation of virtue – they educated students on the importance of filial piety, honesty, and controlling one’s mind. They also devoted efforts to mastering etiquette such as honorific language, speech, posture while studying, and table manners. Textbooks were referred to as “*ouraimono*,” of which more than 7,000 types survive today. *Terakoya* teachers were called “*tenarai shisho*,” and were completely devoted to teaching. Across the country, one third of the teachers were female.

There were over 15,000 *terakoya*, where commoners were educated during the Edo Period, across Japan. People such as Buddhist monks and masterless samurai opened up their temples or homes and became teachers. Large *terakoya* in Edo and Osaka had from 500 to 600 students. Girls and boys matriculated at age seven or eight, and completed their studies in four or five years.

In this era, both the *bushi* class and commoners boasted the highest school attendance and literacy rates in the world. The percentage of children who voluntarily attended *terakoya* (which were not compulsory education) was over 50%, and was 80% in Edo alone. Incidentally, the percentage of school attendance in major British industrial cities was just 20% at that time.

Religionist Suzuki Shosan and intellectual Ishida Baigan played major roles in cultivating the moral sense and professional ethics of the common people during the Edo Period.

Suzuki served under the Tokugawa Clan before becoming a Buddhist monk in the early Edo Period. He preached that each person should devote themselves seriously to their duties as a way of practicing their faith, and said there were no ranks in occupations. Suzuki was the first person in the world to develop a Buddhist type of professional ethics that applied to all people. Around the same time, John Calvin preached the professional ethics of capitalism from a Protestant viewpoint, but Calvin’s views were limited because he believed in predestination, the idea that God decides who to save, regardless of their efforts or practices.

In the first half of the 18th century, Ishida, a thinker and ethicist who founded the Shingaku (“Ishida Shingaku”) movement, made greater contributions to improving the Japanese people’s ethics than even Suzuki. He was active during the time of Tokugawa Yoshimune (the eighth *shogun*). Ishida’s Shingaku, also called “Dotokukyo,” provided a simple view of practical ethics that greatly inspired the common people from the mid- to late Edo Period. Ishida Shingaku waned temporarily during the Meiji Period when the slogan “*bunmei kaika*” (“civilization and enlightenment”) was popular, but it still survives today and is recently being reevaluated. Ishida Shingaku referred to Shinto, Buddhist, and Confucianist teachings, and asked people to refine their spirits while practicing the three primary virtues of honesty, frugality, and diligence.

Watanabe holds Ishida Shingaku in high esteem, and states that it should be included in the history of world religions:

Ishida Shingaku’s good teachings for refining the human spirit also exist in Buddhism, Shinto, and Confucianism. This is the relativization of religion. We can say that Ishida Shingaku occupies a truly unique position in the history of world religions because it improved ethics by relativizing other religions. It stems from the characteristic sensitivity of the Japanese people, who express the heart as a *magatama* jewel.

(*Thriving Edo, the Top City in the World* 「世界一の都市 江戸の繁栄」 by Shoichi Watanabe, WAC)

9. The Pax Tokugawana paradox

As I have described, early modern Japan was definitely a superpower, not a country worthy of contempt.

After winning the Battle of Sekigahara in 1600, Ieyasu attained the position of unifying leader in 1603 and founded the Shogunate in Edo. He defeated the Toyotomi Clan in the Summer Campaign of the Siege of Osaka in 1615, and then established laws decreeing rules for the *daimyo* and solidifying the position of the Shogunate. In this way, he became the top ruler of Japan. During the era of Iemitsu (the third *shogun*), the official attendance service was established, solidifying the system of the Shogunate and domains. The Shimabara Rebellion occurred during Iemitsu’s rule, leading to the strengthening of Christian persecution and the start of rules about the relationships between temples and the families supporting them. Foreign ships from countries other

than the Netherlands and Qing China were also prohibited from entering Japanese ports. In 1641, the Dutch East India Trading Company's base was moved from Hirado to Dejima in Nagasaki. The Shogunate required this office and the Chinese in Nagasaki to submit certain documents about the circumstances in their countries, by which it monopolized trade and foreign information. This structure is referred to as "*sakoku*" (national isolation).

Including Nagasaki (which was under the Shogunate's direct control), a total of four locations served as windows to the wider world: Satsuma (to Ryukyu), Tsushima (to Korea), and Matsumae (to Yezo, the Kurile Islands, and Karafuto). Still, all of these had insular structures and provided benefits to the Shogunate.

Because the Shogunate repeatedly issued prohibitions on the construction of large ships, the Shogunate and domains had no way to respond when Western European warships appeared near the Japanese coast in the second half of the Edo Period. Japan had the largest number of guns at the start of the early modern period, but nationwide gun control put a stop to firearm manufacturing and research. Matchlocks used for shooting harmful animals were allowed as farm tools, and overall the farmers had more guns than the *bushi*. However, even in the case of agrarian revolts (a type of collective bargaining), the farmers did not employ guns. The feudal lords also refrained from using guns. This was an implicit and mutual rule that applied to both sides.

Noel Perrin, an American scholar of British and American literature, wrote a book entitled, *Giving up the Gun: Japan's Reversion to the Sword, 1543-1879* (translated by Heita Kawakatsu, Kinokuniya Company). Published in 1984, it got many people talking and was even recommended by former Ambassador to Japan Edwin O. Reischauer, but one cannot deny that it seemed Reischauer was partial to the author.

The "disarmament" discussed in this book was merely forced on the domains to maintain the power of the Tokugawa Shogunate. In the end, Japan fell into the trap of "one-country pacifism" and was threatened with the danger of colonization by the Western European powers at the end of the Edo Period. The Pax Tokugawana bears a strong likeness to the current status in which all 100 million Japanese people refuse to think critically and are devotees of peace under the current constitution imposed by the Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers (GHQ). This is easy to see if we replace the Shogunate with the U.S.; the domains with Japan; guns with nuclear weapons; and the Western European powers with anti-Japanese, hostile nations in possession of nuclear weapons.

The Boshin War was fought between the former Shogunate forces and the powers that wanted to overthrow the Shogunate and create a powerful, united nation that could stand up to the major Western European powers (mainly Satsuma and Choshu). They rejected the intervention of Britain and France (who were watching vigilantly for an opportunity behind the scenes) and created a new nation-state with few casualties. Less than 30,000 people died in the Meiji Restoration from the Battle of Toba-Fushimi to the Satsuma Rebellion. Four million people died in France in the French Revolution that toppled King Louis' Ancien Regime and the following Napoleonic Wars until the formation of a modern nation-state. Around half of these casualties were French people.

The Meiji government, led by the Emperor of Japan, rapidly reformed Japan into a modern nation-state, with the return of land and people to the emperor, abolition of feudal domains, equality among the four classes, a modern school system, and military conscription ordinances. This was accomplished through self-sacrifice by the privileged *bushi* class, which would be unthinkable in Western Europe.

Meiji Japan promoted industry and worked to increase national prosperity and military power at a furious pace. It won the First Sino-Japanese and Russo-Japanese Wars, becoming in the blink of an eye a major power that impacted international politics. All of these "miracles" stem from the accomplishments of the Edo Period.

Still, the Pax Tokugawana, of which there are no parallels around the world in early modern history, lasted for 260 years, during which Japan was not invaded and did not invade any other countries. It gave rise to a culture and civilization of autonomy and maturity, but at the same time it led Japan into one-country pacifism that may cause its ruin. We must pay heed to this historical paradox.