On Weapons in the early Yi Dynasties

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This paper attempts to make clear how weapons were produced in the early part (especially in the 14–16 centuries) of Yi Dynasties in comparison with China and Japan.

In general only firearms have been mentioned in the field of the historical research on weapons of these periods, because firearms were regarded as indispensable to the defense of Korea against the invasion of the Jurichi and Japanese pirates. But in fact various kinds of weapons besides firearms were employed on the battlefield. These included bows and arrows, swords, and spears.

To begin with I examine the text “The Weapon— explanatory illustration” edited in 1474, and then turn to the text “The Records of Yi Dynasties”, where many historical accounts of dynasties are well preserved, in orders to investigate the actual circumstances of weapons. Bows used as weapons in those periods were of a complex style and made of cow-horn. This cow-horn must have been imported from China as it could not be found in Korea. However the cow-horn bows of complex style were vulnerable to the humid climate of Korea and were not easy to keep taut. Thus a new style of bows made of deer-horn, bamboo and other materials, which were stronger in power and easier to obtain within the country, began to be produced. That the bow and arrow as a weapon was superior to firearms is confirmed from the fact that the art of archery was a mandatory discipline for officers and soldiers of those days.

In the early Yi Dynasties Koreans not only made efforts to develop excellent weapons to defend themselves against the attack of the Jurichi and the Japanese pirates, but they also had an interest in the weapons of Japan and China. For example the Korean swords used in those days were short in length and less sharp than those of the Japanese. Koreans obtained a lot of Japanese swords through battles with the Japanese pirates or by trade with Japan, and learned the superior sword forging techniques of Japan. But Chinese weapons such as the crossbow and the iron shield could not be employed as ordinary weapons in these earlier Yi Dynasties due to lack of both material and technique.