Japanese Invasions of Korea from 1592 to 1598 and the Weaponry of the Yi Dynasty

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On his way to the unification of Japan, Toyotomi Hideyoshi attempted twice to invade Korea in 1592 and in 1598. These two campaigns, named in Japan "The Battle of Bunroku" and "The Battle of Keichō" respectively, are called collectively, in Korea, "Injin Chongyu Waeran" (Jinshin Teiyu no Waran in Japanese). This paper intends to analyze the issue of the weaponry of the Korean Yi dynasty during the period. The war produced important repercussions in east asian countries of that time, and the same may be said for weaponry.

After their embarkation, Japanese armies reached to Korean capital in a very short time. Their victory in the beginning of the war owed much to their swords and matchlocks. The Korean armies, then equipped only with traditional bows and primitive canons, were no match for the Japanese armies armed with incisive Japanese swords and long range, accurate, and easy-to-handle matchlocks.

Soon after the war broke out, Chinese Ming dynasty sent, upon the request of Koreans, a large army to Korea. Koreans having great difficulty in matching matchlocks and Japanese swords, diligently learned from Ming officers about the weaponry and military arts of Southern China. They tried to make the most of (Chi-Hsiao Hsin-Shu) 「紀效新書」 especially, a book of strategy written by (Chi Chi Kuang). 威繼光 the hero of China's battles against Japanese pirates.

Meanwhile, the Korean government followed its traditional policy of conciliation with Japanese surrenderers: they wanted to learn the manufacture and handling of powerful matchlocks and Japanese swords. At first their attempts ended in failure because of discord remaining between them, but it became efficient when surrenderers increased with the prolongation of the war. The surrenderers were attached to the military training center in Seoul or military
arsenals and taught Koreans the manufacturing methods of Japanese weapons and military arts.

During this warfare, northern tribes, Djurchins, harassed the northern frontiers of Korea and intensified their invasion after the withdrawal of both the Japanese and Chinese armies. Even after the Japanese invasion, the Korean government suffered from troubles from within and without, such as civil wars and Chinese invasions, therefore the preservation of armament remained as a permanent problem. The weaponry and military arts learned from Chinese and Japanese settled down in Korea.