The Introduction of Musket to Japan and the Influence of Wakō–Pirates: A Debate with Dr. Udagawa Takehisa

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The purpose of my present article is to reply to the article of Udagawa Takehisa that appeared in issue 190 of this journal with the title “Another Study of the Introduction of Guns to Japan: As a Counter-argument to the Criticism of Dr. Shōsuke Murai”. In my article I examined Udagawa’s theory that says, “wakō–pirates introduced and gradually distributed muskets to several places in Western Japan”. During my examination of his arguments based on the historical sources I came to the following three conclusions.

First, the often repeated statement of the author that says, “Murai states that the introduction of muskets was a direct encounter with the European world”, is a misunderstanding of that what I stated in fact in my article. Second, I agree with the author that it is not necessary to think about the year 1542 (or 1543) and the island Tanegashima as the only possible time and place for the introduction of muskets, and that it is possible that wakō–pirates also played a part in the introduction of muskets in other different ways. Still, the problem is that the author does not provide concrete examples or evidences for possible alternatives based on the historical sources that would support this argument.

Third, the author’s theory, according to which he is interpreting “huopao/hwap'o (cannon)” –a word that can be seen in the Chinese and Korean sources in the 1540–50s – as “musket”, is a mistake. Therefore, it is not possible to discuss the introduction of musket based on this theory.

Based on these conclusions, I examined the following question: What was the relationship between those muskets possessed by wakō–pirates after the middle of the 16th century and the muskets used by the Japanese army during the war in the East Asian world at the end of the 16th century (the so called Imjin war)?

It is possible that Koreans saw the muskets of wakō–pirates before the Imjin war, but these muskets had probably no impact on them, and the Koreans did not feel yet the threat of muskets at that time. Therefore they did not create a special word for musket. Rather, Koreans felt apprehension that “huopao/hwap'o (cannon)”, the conventional firearms of Chinese origin would flow out from Korea or China into the hand of wakō–pirates or Japanese.

But during the following years, musket, the new weapon introduced to Japan in the midst of the disturbances of the Warring States period, underwent several technical improvements in the Japanese