

A Step Back:

The Tale of 16th Century Japan in the Context of the 21st Century

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“That's one small step for man, one giant leap for mankind”. The words of Neil Armstrong when he first stepped onto the Moon's surface still resonate clearly today. His words reflect humanity's obsession with the need to constantly be taking steps forward. Advancing is regarded as bettering. Even the word “progress” reveals humanity's biased view. One definition states that progress is “a forward movement”, while a second definition states that it is “gradual betterment” (Merriam-Webster). Why is the notion of moving forward equivalent to the idea of betterment? Nature's cyclical pattern has proven to support life for over three billion years. If man exists in the world of the natural, why then is he so anxious to progress in an exponential fashion? Where will the line on the chart of man's exponential growth lead? In the 21st century it has lead humanity into a technologically advanced society. Many see this society as a technological battlefield of man versus machine, and see the world heading into the direction of a technological Armageddon in which machine will conquer. However, “the shock of having to deal with the machine is not restricted to the [21st] century; it has occurred many times in the past, and societies have reacted many different ways to the sudden effects that have accompanied technological innovation” (Rybczynski, 31).

The shock of having to deal with the machine occurred to Japanese society in the 16th century, with the introduction of firearms into their society. After a century of assimilating the use of the gun into their culture, the Japanese took an uncommon step; Japan took a step back. For two hundred years, Japan gave up the gun to return to more primitive methods. The Japanese experience with firearms provides an interesting analogy with the world of today, in terms of how society is affected by and deals with new technologies. Through using Japan's experience as a foundation to understand technology's impact today, this essay illustrates how a technology can elicit certain vulnerabilities and dehumanizing effects within a society, which

raises the option, which Japan chose, of giving up the technology. It concludes with the question of whether such a retreat is possible, or necessary, in the 21st century.

The story of Japan's encounter with the gun begins in the mid-sixteenth century. The gun was originally invented in China, and was further refined in Western Europe. (Shigehisa, 7). In 1543, a cargo ship carrying Portuguese adventurers who carried guns and ammunition with them drifted onto the shores of Japan. The firearms caught the attention of feudal master Lord Tokitaka, who bought the only two guns aboard the ship and immediately initiated the manufacture of them by his chief swordsmen (Turnbull, 137). The arrival of the gun into Japanese society could not have been timelier. Japan was in the midst of the so-called "Age of the Country at War", a century-long power struggle during which major feudal lords were fighting to both unify the principalities of Japan, and to gain military control over the country (Perrin, 9). Naturally, the gun was an attractive tool during a time of such turmoil. Further perpetuating the rapid assimilation of the gun was the skill and ease at which the Japanese produced it. Based on their knowledge of forging swords, the Japanese found it almost instinctual to apply their skills to the manufacture of firearms. Before long, gunsmiths were producing firearms in great quantity. Lord Takeda stated: "guns will be the most important arms. Therefore, decrease the number of spears, and have your most capable men carry guns." (Perrin, 17). With this shift, Japan was about to learn the effects of the new technology on its society.

A new technology bears new consequences, and if a technology is too quickly and too naively integrated into a society, the society places itself in a vulnerable position. To have the knowledge to invent a technology is one thing, but to have the understanding of how to use it

effectively and constructively is another. Too often, as soon as a technology is developed, it is implemented before any attempts have been made to foresee its consequent potentials for both good and evil. Jose Ortega y Gasset, a great Spanish philosopher of the early 20th century, “represented modern man as a primitive in the midst of a civilized world, who used technology without really understanding it” (Rybczynski, 27). Once something becomes possible, it is seen as necessary. If a technology is available, it will be used. However, new technologies require new methodologies. The haste to use available technology immediately, often causes old methodologies and mentalities to be used with new technologies and as a result humanity falls victim to its own creations.

Japan in the 16th century fell vulnerable to firearms due to the society’s initial lack of understanding of the new technology. To know how to use a gun in its most efficient way is something that is not innately known to a society so accustomed to fighting with a sword. No time was spent understanding the methodologies and intricacies of the technology before using it in battle. In 1548, Lord Takeda secretly armed his soldiers with guns to fight a battle with an enemy bearing only swords (Perrin 16). However, he did not consider changing his battle rituals and tactics to suit the new technology. Rather than immediately lighting the flame for their guns, Takeda’s warriors traditionally bowed before advancing, as was the custom in battles with swords. Once the fighting commenced, Takeda’s warriors were busy lighting their firearms while the enemy was busy conquering the gunners with their swords. The troops “won because they did not have any guns:” (Perrin, 17). Applying the same mentality to the gun that was used with the sword, Lord Takeda made his army extremely vulnerable by misusing a technology. As beneficial that the gun could have been to him, Takeda’s ignorance and haste use of the gun proved more disadvantageous than had he stayed with a more primitive weapon.

Besides causing vulnerability, misusing technology introduces great potentials to dehumanize a society. First, in today's world the feeling of intimacy amongst individuals and communities has decreased, as communication and interaction with others has become increasingly mediated. "Communication at a safe distance, community without contact" (Trend, 341); this seems to be the trend in today's society. As technology allows people to affect one another from such remote locations, a type of "humanistic intimacy" is lost. The lack of physical closeness reduces compassion, and such a large body of space exists between action and consequence that a type of desensitization results. From these phenomena a second issue emerges. Technology dehumanizes in the fact that morals and values which once helped define human action are being challenged and redefined in this technological age of the 21st century. Third, technology has a tendency to dehumanize in the sense that it redefines humanity's stature in the world. Is man truly in control if machine is his primary tool for accomplishing tasks? Perhaps the hierarchy in which machine was once considered below man is being questioned: "How many men at this hour are living their lives, in a state of bondage to the machines?" (Butler, 208). If factories are creating products, microwaves are creating dinners, and synthesizers are creating music, it seems questionable whether credit can be given to man, or whether glory belongs to the machine. Is control of humanity in the hands of humans themselves, or has humanity relinquished its control to technology?

The dehumanizing effects of technology in the 21st century parallel those that took place in 16th century Japan. The first dehumanizing effect of the usage of firearms was the lack of intimacy, heroism and compassion compared to battles with the sword. The close proximity of a

sword fight provides a physical and emotional intimacy unlike the removed nature of firearms. Japanese battles had typically consisted of numerous single combats. However, once firearms were introduced, incidents of heroic, noble fights that were common with traditional samurai duels “occurred very rarely in mass battles with firearms. A well-aimed volley of a thousand shots killed soldiers without discrimination- and at a distance too great for conversation” (Perrin, 25). With firearms, the reality and “humanistic intimacy” of death became faint, and almost illusory due to the distance between gunmen. The second dehumanizing effect of the gun was the resulting loss of certain Japanese values. The *Bushido* or “Way of the Warrior” was a code of conduct and way of life the samurai’s held in high esteem. “It put emphasis on loyalty, self sacrifice, justice, sense of shame, refined manners, purity, modesty, frugality, martial spirit, honor and affection.” (Nippon, 329). With the new predominance of firearms, all of these noble values of the samurai, which brought a sense of humanism to the battlefield, were at once relinquished. The third form of dehumanization through firearms pertained to a lost appreciation of skill and status of warriors. “Efficient weapons tend to overshadow the men who use them” (Perrin, 24), and this was true with the guns of 16th century Japan. An untrained peasant could now fight as effectively as the most well trained samurai could. Rather than “each man’s fate depending principally on his own ability and state of training” (Perrin, 24), fate was handed over to the weapon itself. Hierarchies suddenly became challenged. If both could kill just as effectively, who deserved more status: the skilled samurai or the untrained farmer? Neither ruled the hierarchy of the battlefield, for the gun, the technology itself, dominated over both. This experience forebodes the potential for humanity to lose control over technology and become subservient to it.

There have been many opinions as to how to control technology from escaping the grasp of human control. It has been considered that a society must first be aware of the technologies in the world, and how they have influenced human existence, in order to recognize what needs to be controlled and how to go about this task. Economist Paul A. Samuelson states that “We live in such close proximity to all sorts of machines [that] we tend to see only part of the whole...[and] lose sight of the overall pattern...we lack the perspective to observe the pattern of our own technological environment...” (Rybczynski, 213). Therefore, until we are able to isolate ourselves from technology, to somehow find a way to retreat from the environment in which the technology resides, we will not be capable of fully seeing the technology and effects of modernization that pervade our society. However, this recoil from technology seems like an incomprehensible task.

It is possible that taking a step back from technology is not as daunting of a task as it seems. In today’s modern world, it is difficult to imagine a society completely remote from technological influence. However, in terms of halting progress, or actually retreating from it, “some critics of contemporary technology have suggested that not only *can* the clock be turned back, it *should* be turned back.” (Rybczynski, 102) Perhaps technological society needs to take a step back towards more traditional techniques. Perhaps many of the technologies we live with and are continuing to create are not necessary for, or are even hindering, a rich existence on this earth.

“No class of beings [machines] have in any time past made so rapid a movement forward. Should not that movement be jealously watched, and checked while we can still check it? And is it not necessary for this end to destroy the more advanced of the machines which are in use at present...?” (Butler, 203).

Retreating back into a less technological society would allow progress to happen at a more organic rate, which would potentially allow for a more controlled evolution and a clearer

understanding of the changes that are occurring in the world. However, is it possible for a society to give up a technology that it has already assimilated? If humans have the knowledge to create technologies, would it be beneficial and desired to refrain from applying it? Just because the 21st century bears the capacity to create powerful technologies does not necessarily mean it should bring them to fruition. “As our understanding of the history of technology increases it becomes clear that a new device merely opens a door; it does not compel one to enter” (Rybczynski, 166).

“The Japanese resolutely opened that particular door and marched in...and about one hundred years later, gingerly marched out.” (Rybczynski, 180). Japan answers the question of the possibility of giving up a technology affirmatively. In the 16th century, the gun had been required for the successful unification of Japan, and before long Japan became the country with the greatest number of guns in the world (Shigehisa, 8). However, in the 17th century, after the warring period, firearms were no longer necessary or desired (Rybczynski, 186). There was no formal abolition of guns, but rather a gradual reversion. The first step to the control of arms was actually a clever plot conceived by Lord Hideyoshi just prior to the 17th century. He announced that he was to build an enormous statue of Buddha, and that in order to attain enough metal to build it, all farmers, samurai and monks were required to donate swords and firearms to the cause (Perrin 26).

The steps to control guns continued in 1607, when the Tokugawa shoguns required that all gun makers move to Nagahama (a great gun manufacturing center) and that all gun production must remain within that city's borders. Furthermore, all gun orders needed to be licensed through Tokyo (Perrin, 58). Gun productions seriously deteriorated since many gun makers replaced their trade due to their unwillingness to move to Nagahama, and because very

few orders for guns were cleared. Gun production dwindled, while swords, spears, and bows, continued to be made in large numbers (Perrin, 63). After the Shimabara Rebellion in 1637, guns ceased to be used in Japan with any readiness. “The samurai went back to taking fencing lessons, the monks resumed making black-feathered arrows...” (Perrin, 67).

Japan announced a “policy of isolation” in 1636, in which only the Netherlands and China could trade with Japan through the port of Nagasaki. Japan wanted to prevent Western influence and, with such a policy, any contact Japan made with the West was through the Dutch (Shigehisa, 139). Japan therefore had the power to be selective over what it wanted to incorporate into its society, and to ensure that Western ideas did not displace their own. Even though Western influence was severed, Japan still developed as a self-sufficient, self-supporting, modern society. Technological evolution was gradual, organic, and thus “maybe it was better suited to the human mind” (Perrin, 81). Firearm development was ceased, but Japan went forward in other fields, which proved that isolation and a retreat from a certain technology does not imply a stagnant society. The policy, along with the isolated geographic nature of Japan made it possible for the country to grow and live peacefully without external wars and influences or internal disturbances for over 230 years (Shigehisa, 4).

Modern weapons did eventually return to Japan. Commodore Perry arrived on the shores of Japan in 1853 and convinced the Japanese to re-incorporate firearms (Perrin, 72). In 1858, the period of isolation ended when Japan signed the United States-Japan trade treaty (Shigehisa, 139). Once Japan opened to outside influence, Japan realized the West had stronger military powers, and therefore “began to strive for a ‘rich country, strong army’ through westernization and industrialization.” (Shigehisa, 1). By 1876, the samurai were forbidden to wear their swords

since the new Meiji government was anxious to advance in military methods (Perrin, 72). As quickly as guns were dropped in the 17th century, they were again picked up in the 19th, and Japan's military capabilities caught up with the Western world. Today, Japanese society does include guns; however, in the entire democratic world they have the strictest gun control laws. "Their weapons law begins by stating 'No one shall possess a firearm or sword', and very few exceptions are allowed" (Kopel). Gun crime is barely existent in today's Japan. Compared to America with its high gun crime, it is evident that Japan has continued to be selective of outside influence and has learnt to control the technology of weaponry in a way that sustains a constructive way of life.

The Japanese experience with firearms provides an interesting analogy with the world of today, in terms of how society is affected by and deals with new technologies. Like the gun in Japanese society, technology has unexpected and unpredictable consequences. Like 16th century Japan, the 21st century needs to consider how to most effectively control its technology. "That technology has almost always had unintended side effects has often been cited by critics as a symptom of man's inability to control his inventions" (Rybczynski, 6). The technologies themselves are not harmful; it is man's haphazard creation and use of them that brings about unwanted results. Technology is advancing at such an incredible pace, that perhaps the solution to maintaining control over it is to take a step back in the timeline of progress. "So many talk as if progress, "were something semidivine, an inexorable force outside human control. And of course, it isn't. It is something we can guide, and direct, and even stop." (Perrin, 92). However, many are skeptical that such a retreat is possible. "Occasionally the stresses of cultural change, "the shock of the machine", becomes too great. The technology may be kept at bay, or violently expunged, but the abolishment of a technology can never succeed." (Rybczynski, 128). In a

sense, Japan proved such skeptics wrong. Although Japan eventually returned to using guns, its two hundred year retreat from guns proved that a civilized society could deliberately take a step back. (Perrin, 77). Perhaps it is true that like Japan, modern society would “end up falling back on the very technology that was initially rejected [and that] at best it buys a little time for cultures that are unwilling to accept the technological system.” (Rybczynski, 128). However, perhaps this is what the 21st century needs - to buy a little time to try to grasp the complexity of the technologies being created.

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