

Most Powerful Warlords in Western Japan

By the late sixteenth century, the Hiroshima-based Mohri clan were the most powerful warlords in the Chugoku area (the modern prefectures of Hiroshima, Okayama, Shimane, Tottori, and Yamaguchi). Under Mohri Motonari (1497–1571), the clan reached the zenith of its power, controlling a domain that stretched from the border of modern-day Okayama Prefecture in the east down to Fukuoka Prefecture in the west.

This dominance, however, was short-lived. When Motonari's grandson Terumoto supported the losing side in the Battle of Sekigahara in 1600, the victorious Tokugawa Ieyasu punished him by reducing his domain to a quarter of its original size. Forced out of Hiroshima, the clan built a new castle in 1604 at Hagi on the Sea of Japan side of modern-day Yamaguchi Prefecture. This was the origin of the Choshu Domain also known as the Hagi Domain.

Choshu and the Meiji Restoration

The Mohri clan presided over Choshu until around 1870, when Japan's warlords were forced to surrender their domains to the emperor, and the feudal system made way for today's prefectural system. In the early years of the Meiji period (1868–1912), the former daimyo were made to live in Tokyo to loosen their bonds with their people and to prevent them stirring up trouble. By the late 1880s, however, things had settled down sufficiently that then-head of the family Duke Mohri Motonori could leave Tokyo and return to Yamaguchi. Motonori instructed one of his followers to find a suitable location for a grand modern residence. The place that he found was at the bottom of Mt. Tatara overlooking the plain of Hofu. It had a warm climate, a spectacular view of the Inland Sea, and was close to the port. (There was no railway until 1904.)

In 1892 Motonori gave the go-ahead and the family started buying up parcels of land and stockpiling wood. However, construction was delayed by the First Sino-Japanese War (1894–1895) and then by the Russo-Japanese War (1904–1905). Once building work finally got under way in 1912, the house was completed in five years. As Motonori had died in 1896, Duke Mohri Motoakira (1865–1938) was the first member of the family to live in the house, taking occupancy in 1916.