

Foundation and Visions: The Kingdom of Ryukyu in the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries

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1. Uchinan-chu (Okinawan) and Yamaton-chu (Japanese)

I would like to begin by talking about my personal experiences. A student from Okinawa Prefecture showed up in front of me when I was a research assistant at Nagoya University in the early 1980s. He was very pleased with my attitude toward him because I constantly treated him as a Ryukyuan, as a foreign student. I did not know about new theories of ethnicity or minority. I had merely learned pre-modern Ryukyu history for a part of my research. There were rich and good examples to conceptualize distinctive image of Okinawa area from mainland Japan so it seemed natural to regard him in such a way.

Now a professor of history at Ryukyu University, he frequently discusses the independent nature of the Ryukyu kingdom even after the Satsuma invasion of 1609. I was wondering why he argued a point that seemed so appropriate. But, I underestimated the difficulty his stance would meet. Later, I came across many descriptions of Ryukyu in books and papers published through the 1970s, such as studies of post-invasion Ryukyu that described the country as independent only in diplomatic formalities. Further, I also found similar depictions of Ryukyu before the invasion, such as Ryukyu being a small kingdom under the suzerainty of Ming China or a semi-independent kingdom.

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It was typical to emphasize the fragile character of the Ryukyu kingdom surrounded by strong powers, such as Ming or Qing China and Satsuma. This attitude may have come partly from the actual situation of Okinawa under American rule after World War II and partly from discrimination against Okinawans in Japanese society. Unconsciously, a sense of political correctness worked in the minds of academics. In that sense, there were many descriptions of minorities emphasizing similarity with majorities. Later, academics realized problems in this stance, which sometimes obscured specific features of minorities. I just happened to learn that point from history by luck.

The reason that graduate student was pleased with my treatment corresponded to an expression of how Okinawans differentiate themselves from mainland Japanese. They sometime use the word *Yamaton-chu* to indicate mainland Japanese and *Uchinan-chu* to mean Okinawans, which literally means inside people. That may remind us of other examples, such as the Ainu word *Shisamu*, meaning neighbor and mainland Japanese and the Korean word *Yukchi-saram*, which for Cheju islanders refers to mainland Koreans. These people prefer to differentiate themselves from the majority, though they hate to be discriminated against.

In my presentation today, I will discuss several topics from pre-modern Ryukyu history, and provide clues to the conceptualization of an island identity or the nature of Ryukyuan. In particular, topics are mostly chosen from perspective of maritime history since Ryukyu once flourished thanks to overseas trade.

2. Foundation of the Ryukyu Kingdom

From the perspective of archeology, Ryukyu history of the twelfth century to the fifteenth century is called the *Gusuku* era. This era featured diverse kinds of *Gusukus*, or sanctuaries and places for religious rites, areas for castles or forts and their adjacent complexes. Throughout the *Gusuku* era, chiefs grew more powerful and wealthy through foreign trade and struggled against one another. Finally, they were integrated into several political entities in the late fourteenth century (Asato 1990).

However, it is not easy to answer the question of when the Ryukyu kingdom was founded. Three major chronicles of Ryukyu dynasties, *Chuzan-seikan* (中山世鑑), *Chuzan-seifu* (中山世譜) and *Kyuyo* (球陽), compiled in the eighteenth century tell the history of Ryukyu with a mixing of historical facts and mythic tales. It is not possible to find only historical facts in these books. For examples, in these three Ryukyu chronicles, there are several kings depicted as mythic or supernatural figures. Among them, Satto (察度) has mother of tennyō (heavenly woman, 天女), namely a supernatural woman. But, his existence can be denied.

In 1372, Ming China sent a mission led by Yang Qi (楊載) to Ryukyu to ask for a tribute mission to the new Chinese emperor. Responding to this request, Satto as King of Chusan, in Ryukyu (琉球国中山王察度) sent Taiki (泰期), his younger brother, upon Yang Qi's return (『明実録』洪武5年1月甲子、同年12月壬寅). This is the first time that a “King of Ryukyu” appears in written documents. A question can thus be raised. Why did Satto not call himself the “King of Ryukyu”? He could not do this.

In 1380, Ming China accepted a mission sent by Sho Satto (承察度) who was titled the King of Sannan, in Ryukyu (琉球国山南王), and in 1383 a mission sent by Haniji (? 尼芝) titled the King of Sanboku, in Ryukyu (琉球国山北王)(『明実録』洪武13年10月丁丑、同16年12月甲申). Ming accepted three kings from Ryukyu Kingdom at the same time. Furthermore, even younger brothers of kings and sons of kings were accepted. However, Ming China recognized only one kingdom, Ryukyu. There are no such expressions as “Chuzan Kingdom,” “Sannan Kingdom,” or “Sanhoku Kingdom” in Chinese sources. When Yang Qi visited Ryukyu, he may already have understood that, in the late fourteenth century, there were several political powers, and none of them could overwhelm the others. In other words, Ming China’s authority exerted strong influence over Ryukyuan politics in the late fourteenth century and the early fifteenth century. This period corresponds to the final stage of the *Gusuku* era. In Ryukyu history, this period also is called the *Sanzan* era (三山時代), the era of three kingdoms.

Ming’s attitude toward Ryukyu was definitely favorable if compared to Japan case. In 1374, the Ming court rejected a mission that was probably sent by the Shogun because the Envoy did not bring the proper form of official letter, a *Hyou* (表), and because Ming China had already acknowledged King Ryoukai (国王良懐) as the legitimate King of Japan (日本正君)(『明実録』洪武7年6月乙未). That is, the Ming emperor acknowledged only ruler in Japan, although he recognized three rulers in Ryukyu.

Throughout the Three Kingdoms era, the Chuzan kingdom, which was probably the strongest among the three, attempted to integrate the other two kingdoms under its rule. It is worth noting, though, that the King of Chuzan gained approval only as King in Ryukyu from regional leaders, the *Aji* (按司), after military victories. This suggests that many political elite contributed to the formation of the Chuzan kingdom, and that without their support no ruler could maintain the throne. In terms of the political structure, even after Chuzan completed the unification in the late 1420s, the kings did not hold overwhelming power.

The Ryukyu histories provide stories of several coups d’etat that may also show political instability in the kingdom. Among them, two coups in particular can be discussed.

The first coup, documented in *Chuzan seifu*, relates an incident from 1350 when the King died. Ministers tried to raise the King’s five-year old son to the throne. However, many subjects opposed the succession because the King’s rule was rich in violence and lacking in virtue and because the child could not govern the country. In the end, someone else, the *Aji* Satto, who was based in Urazoe(浦添), gained the throne through wide and strong support.

The *Chuzan seifu* also describes a second coup, one that occurred in 1469². After King Sho Toku’s (尚徳)death, ministers tried to make his son take the throne. An elderly man condemned the King’s rule citing cruel violence and insufficient virtue, and recommended Kanamaru (金丸), the former minister of the treasury, instead of the young son. Many

² This coup d’etat might occurred in 1470 because a letter from Sho Toku to King of Choson has the date of the first day on the fourth month in 1470 (『歴代宝案』).

subjects agreed with him unanimously. Finally, Kanamaru took the throne, and became King Sho En after ministers, the young son, and King Sho Toku's family were killed.

These two topics have common features: (1) there were two classes, higher and lower, among subjects; (2) the former class took lineage as the first priority in the succession, while the latter class chose political leadership; (3) the latter got win. They lead us to the evaluation of political character of Ryukyu that a person called a king is relatively the first ranking figure among rulers, and an appointment to the King of Chuzan in Ryukyu Kingdom by the Ming Emperors only authorizes his superiority.

In 1477, King Sho En's twelve-years son became King Sho Shin (尚真). In Ryukyu history, this is the first time to have a child king. The reign successfully continued for around fifty years, making regional leaders *Aji* live in Shuri to cut off their influence over their territories. His regime established a principle of succession of king by lineage.

In the process of foundation of the Ryukyu Kingdom, Ming China played important roles of taking shape of the Kings of Ryukyu. However, Ming China never committed actual political scenes in Ryukyu, and just appointed persons recommended in Ryukyu society the Kings of Ryukyu to authorize their legitimacy. In that sense, the Ryukyu Kingdom formed its shape independently, though, bottom-to-up political structure sometimes generated political disorder.

3. Visions of the Ryukyu Kingdom

A bell cast in 1458 hung in the main building of the Shuri Palace (首里城). The inscription on the bell states that the Kingdom of Ryukyu has an excellent location in the south sea. The country gathers premiums from three kingdoms of Korea, the relationship between Ryukyu and Ming China is like a circle and the spokes of a wheel, and the relationship between Ryukyu and Japan is like the lips and teeth of a mouth. Engaged in sea trade, Ryukyu serves an emporium to bridge many countries.

The inscription can be characterized as a declaration of the Ryukyu Kingdom which took a decisive policy for sea trade oriented country, though it missed to state the relationship between Ryukyu and the Southeast Asian countries because a Japanese wrote it.

Ryukyu history has its high time in the fifteenth century in terms of international relations. Ryukyu sent annual mission to Ming China with spices and pepper imported from the Southeast Asian countries, and horses and sulfur as Ryukyu products. Ming China presented Ming calendars and official clothes for the kings of Ryukyu that visualized Ming China influence over Ryukyu Kingdom, and traded pottery, iron, textiles, and coins. Ryukyu also had relations with Siam, Palenban, Java, Malacca, Sumatra, Patani, Annan, and Shulivijaya in Southeast Asia. Of course, Ryukyu eagerly imported spice and pepper. Although Japanese traders took control of the sea route to the north, Ryukyu still maintained relations with Japan and Choson (Higaonna 1941, Tanaka 1980, Kawazoe 199?).

Rekidai Hoan (歴代宝案) includes many copies of diplomatic documents exchanged between Ryukyu and other countries. It could reconstruct most of these relations, of course, it is partly needed to refer to Korean and Japanese sources. This *Rekidai Hoan* has been preserved by the Chinese community in Naha (那覇). These people had moved to Ryukyu mainly from Fujian, China, and served as high-ranking government officials and official translators for the Ryukyu kingdom. Maehira Fusaaki thus demonstrated their roles in Ryukyu diplomacy and foreign trade. Similar compositions of an indigenous kingdom, a port town open to the external world, and the presence of an overseas Chinese community involved in foreign trade can also be readily found in the histories of many Southeast Asian countries (Maehira 1992).

Takara Kurayoshi also has offered important analyses of the Ryukyu kingdom. For example, he treats the topic of the official letters of appointment to government offices. He shows close similarities between the names of government officials and the names of ships for overseas trade, and suggests that the bureaucratic system reflected the management of Ryukyuan maritime activities (Takara 1987).

Earlier works on Ryukyu's history following the Satsuma invasion of 1609 tended to neglect the continuing independence of Ryukyu. However, Tomiyama Kazuyuki, whom I mentioned at the beginning of this paper, has written of the independence of Ryukyu being visible in external relations with the Ming and Qing dynasties, with Satsuma province after the invasion, and with the Tokugawa *bakufu*. He also showed how the Tokugawa *bakufu*'s China policy could be influenced by information received from Ryukyu envoys visiting Edo (Tomiyama 1988).

These works in particular will contribute to a broader understanding of the importance of foreign relations to Ryukyu kingdom. Further, these also afford useful clues for comparative studies on foreign trade-oriented governments.

4. Ryukyu in the *Haedong chegukki*

In 1471, Shin Sukchu (申叔舟) edited *Haedong chegukki* (『海東諸国紀』) describing history, geography, culture and society in Japan and Ryukyu. He made a hard effort to collect information on Japan and Ryukyu with his highest position as the prime minister (領議政) in the cabinet (議政府), and his carrier to travel Japan in 1443 as the Secretary (書上官) in the Choson royal embassy (通信使). This book represents the Choson court's comprehensive understanding of Japan and Ryukyu in the late fifteenth century, in particular, attached maps that offer clear images of the Choson court's interests in Japan and Ryukyu.

The map 1 covering most of the Japanese archipelago and Ryukyu kingdom shows features of Korean perspectives on Japan and Ryukyu.

Western Japan and Ryukyu have details in depiction, contrasting with eastern Japan, which has only names of provinces with little notion of land shape.

In particular, Tsushima Island, Iki Island and Ryukyu are emphasized in terms of size, shape and geographical information.

Many small islands with names are placed between Tsushima and Ryukyu.

These features suggest the Choson court's serious interests in the East Asian maritime world, and reflect Choson's relations with Japan and Ryukyu, as well. In actual relations with Japan and Ryukyu, Choson did not limit ties only to central governments. The King received missions from major figures in the Muromachi Shogunate, from ex-pirates, from local officials in Tsushima Island, Iki Island and northern Kyushu. Most senders of such missions can not be identified in Japanese sources (Takahashi, 1982).

Map 2 covers Ryukyu and its surroundings in much more detail on this area. In the main island, there are the Capital of Ryukyu (琉球国都), Kunigami-Gusuku (国頭城), many *gusuku* (城), the port of Naha (那波皆渡), and the Treasure Storehouse (宝庫). The map also includes many small islands and distances to and from Japanese and Ryukyuan locations, such as Kami-Matsuura (上松浦) or Oshima (大島). Most of the *gusuku* and islands can be identified with a modern map. Similar to this map of Ryukyu, the *Haedong chegukki* also featured individual maps for Tsushima Island and Iki Island. They are of the same or better quality than the map of Ryukyu.

Descriptions of Ryukyu in the *Haedong chegukki* are also noteworthy. It explains, for examples, that "the country is located in the south sea, and is long from north to south and narrow from east to west. The capital has stone walls. (The kingdom) governs thirty six islands laid out like stars," and that "the land is small, and population is large. Trade by sea voyages is the major livelihood. (The kingdom) has contact with *Nanban* (southern barbarian) and China to the west, and Japan and Choson to the east. Ships from Japan and *Nanban* anchor at the port (Naha) in the capital, and Ryukyuan manage shops to trade on the shore." Furthermore, the sea route from the port of Pusan in Kyongsang-do, in Choson, to the Ryukyu capital by way of several ports and islands is documented with the distance for each leg of the voyage.

The *Haedong chegukki* depicts and describes simply but vividly various characteristics of Ryukyu. It is not difficult to see that Choson understood Ryukyu as a trade-oriented and independent country. In Choson's relation with Ryukyu, the Choson court mostly treated Ryukyu and missions from the King of Ryukyu as equal as Japan and missions from the King of Japan in terms of diplomatic status (Takahashi 1982).

Conclusion

Through development of the Ryukyu Kingdom, the territory expanded to Amami islands to the north, and Miyako islands and Yaeyama islands to the south. The Ryukyu Kingdom directly governed core region, and partly involved peripheral areas in tribute system. Later, the Ryukyu Kingdom suffered serious set back, and finally disappeared. Now, most of maximum Ryukyu territory, except Amami islands that belong to Kagoshima prefecture, is in Okinawa prefecture.

When it comes to *Uchinan-chu* and *Yamaton-chu*, discussion may tend to focus on history of hardship. Shimazu invasion in 1609 actually endangered existence of Ryukyu Kingdom. *Ryukyu Shobun* (Ryukyu execution that the Meiji Government annexed Ryukyu into

Japan) in 1879 eventually extinguished Ryukyu Kingdom. Furthermore, World War II and American rule after the War generated another tragedies.

I could not precisely tell what extent Okinawans have been influenced from Ryukyu history or which particular points in Ryukyu history have struck Okinawans. We should admit that all these history of hardship might have nourished shaping of the mentality of Okinawans in certain extent. However, when we notice strong pride of Okinawans as *Uchinan-chu*, we should realize that positive aspect of Ryukyu history such as I narrated has also provided crucial structure of identity of Okinawans.

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