

Ryukyu and Southeast Asia

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FROM about 1373 to 1570, or for nearly two centuries, the kings of Ryukyu engaged in a prosperous and active trade between East and Southeast Asia. Several hundred Ryukyuan ships voyaged to Southeast Asian ports, from Siam to Patani, Malacca, Sumatra, Java, and elsewhere. These were in addition to, and indeed complementary to, hundreds of trading voyages to China, Japan, and Korea.

However, there are only scattered references to the Ryukyuan trading expeditions to Southeast Asia in Portuguese, Chinese, Japanese, and Korean records. What is more, Ryukyuan chronicles compiled in the seventeenth century contain only fragmentary notices of these voyages. This was most puzzling to modern scholars, for other records showed that tremendous quantities of goods of southern origin were carried from Ryukyu to China, Japan, and Korea in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, indicating that there must have been a correspondingly large trade with southern regions. It had to be presumed that in connection with such trade, countless records and documents must have been compiled. And yet the official histories of Ryukyu made only passing mention of old contacts with countries in the southern seas.

The mystery was finally solved some thirty years ago when a vast collection of manuscript copies of official documents was brought out of hiding in Okinawa. This collection was called the *Rekidai hōan* (*Li-tai pao-an*) [Precious Documents of Successive Generations]. It is a compilation of documents pertaining to Ryukyuan relations with China, Korea, and Southeast Asia, and covers a period of some 444 years, from 1424 to 1867. When discovered in 1932, the *Rekidai hōan* comprised 262 volumes, in 18,260 folios. This valuable collection was transferred to and preserved after 1933 in the Okinawa Prefectural Library. It was destroyed during the Battle of Okinawa in World War II, when the library was reduced to rubble and ashes.

Fortunately, however, a copy of the *Rekidai hōan* had been made for the Taihoku Imperial University, now the National Taiwan University in Taipei. This copy consists of 249 volumes, in 17,271 folios. A complete microfilm copy was obtained by the East-West Center at the University of Hawaii in January, 1963, and other copies are expected to be obtained by the Library of Congress and other libraries in several countries. A number of Japanese studies based on the *Rekidai hōan* have been published, but the Western world is only now beginning to learn of this important collection.¹

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¹ Shunzō Sakamaki, *Ryukyu: A Bibliographical Guide to Okinawan Studies* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1963), pp. 40-43; "The *Rekidai hōan*," *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, LXXXIII (Jan.-Mar., 1963), 107-113. Lai Yung-hsiang, *Li-tai-pao-an, A Collection of Documents on Foreign Relations of the Ryukyu Islands* (Taipei, 1962).

The *Rekidai hōan* was first compiled in 1697-1698, when the royal government of Ryukyu decided to preserve in a systematic file all diplomatic documents that were then extant. An untold number had already disappeared, and the oldest documents surviving were for the year 1425, although Ryukyuan diplomatic relations with China had started in 1372. The documents include records of missions of diverse types to and from Ryukyu, giving dates, purposes, routes, names and ranks of personnel, inventories of cargoes, lists of gifts, and other kinds of information. This is an invaluable source of primary information for the study of East and Southeast Asia in medieval and early modern times. A detailed, annotated study of the documents in Volumes 39-43 of the *Rekidai hōan* compiled in 1697-1698 is being prepared by Dr. Kobata Atsushi, Professor of History at Kyoto University and East-West Center visiting scholar at the University of Hawaii in 1962-1963.

There are 108 documents in Volumes 39-43 concerning Ryukyuan relations with Siam, Malacca, Java, Sumatra, Annam, Patani, and Palembang from 1425 to 1563.² They are all written in Chinese. The documents that were despatched from Ryukyu were composed by Chinese who had migrated to Okinawa from the Fukien coast during several decades from late in the fourteenth century, and by their descendants. Many of the first Chinese to settle in Okinawa had been sent by order of the Ming emperor to serve the Ryukyuans as experts in navigation, shipbuilding, and related arts. They settled in a coastal village called Kumemura, now part of the city of Naha. They and their descendants came to monopolize the handling of diplomatic despatches and letters between Ryukyu and foreign countries other than Japan. Documents received from these foreign countries also were written in Chinese.

The Chinese communications from Southeast Asia reflected the fact that, as in Ryukyu, diplomatic correspondence concerning trade was handled by Chinese who had migrated and settled overseas. The marine trade of China had witnessed a great growth from the T'ang through the Sung. The Fukien port of Ch'üan-chou became one of the great commercial emporia of the world. The Fukien region was long pre-eminent for its shipbuilding, particularly from Sung times. The people of Fukien, with a mountainous hinterland generally unsuited for agriculture, turned to the sea for their livelihood.

However, after the famous expeditions of Cheng Ho in the early Ming, foreign trade was suddenly virtually proscribed by the imperial government. Chinese ships were restricted to coastal waters and only tribute-bearing ships were permitted to come to China. The trade of Ch'üan-chou and Canton with southern areas withered away. Not only those engaged in trade, but the people as a whole in Fukien and other coastal provinces in southeastern China were poverty stricken. Following the example of others who had fled the country when the Mongols overran the realm, many persons now migrated to the lands in the south that they had come to know so well. Furthermore, illicit foreign trade began to grow significantly along the south China

² The basic primary sources used in preparing this paper are the following: Volume 39: five despatches from Siam to Ryukyu, A.D. 1430-1481; eight from Malacca, 1467-1481. Volume 40: nineteen despatches from Ryukyu to Siam, 1425-1442; five to Java, 1430-1442; one to Palembang, 1428; four to unspecified countries (probably Siam or Java), 1437-1438. Volume 41: five despatches from Ryukyu to Siam, 1464-1469; eleven to Malacca, 1463-1472; three to Sumatra, 1463-1468. Volume 42: twenty-two *shusshō* (certificates) for voyages to Siam, 1509-1564; three to Malacca, 1509-1511; one to Annam, 1509; two to Sunda, 1513, 1518; eight to Patani, 1515-1543; and one to Palembang, 1428. Volume 43: seven despatches to Palembang, 1428-1440; two from Palembang, 1431; one to Siam, 1428.

coast in the late fifteenth century, and some Chinese ships were trading in India at the turn of the century.³ The development of contacts between Siam, Indonesia, Japan, Korea, and Ryukyu in the early fifteenth century cannot be understood without due attention to the activities and influence of overseas Chinese merchants in Southeast Asia.

Ryukyu, being a small country with meager natural resources, has had to turn to maritime trade for viability in its economy. We know little about Ryukyuan marine activities prior to the fourteenth century, except for occasional references in Japanese and Chinese annals. However, toward the end of the fourteenth century there began a period of far-flung trading enterprises that saw Ryukyuan ships sailing on hundreds of expeditions to China, Japan, and Korea, and to Siam, Annam, Malacca, Sumatra, Java, and Luzon, in a vast and generally very profitable entrepôt trade.⁴ An important feature of this trade was that it was a royal monopoly, with no room for private enterprise. It may be said to have started in the year 1372, with the establishment of diplomatic relations between the newly established Ming empire and the kingdom of Chūzan, the largest and most prosperous of the three principalities that comprised Okinawa. The Ming court was indulgently generous to the envoys that arrived from Ryukyu. Among other things, it provided them with capital funds to help them in purchasing exotic wares that could be brought to the Ming court as tribute, in return for which they would be given fresh gifts of cash and of goods that brought tremendous profits when sold in other lands. For several decades, the Ming government also gave seagoing ships to the Ryukyuans, and repaired and refitted their ships for them at no charge, whenever they arrived in China with tribute.

Chinese navigation reached its peak in the early fifteenth century, and between 1405 and 1431 seven famous expeditions journeyed to Java, Sumatra, Ceylon, Arabia, Ormuz, and the Somali coast. In the meantime, Shō Hashi, King of Chūzan, in central Okinawa, unified the country in 1429, and became ruler of all Okinawa. The old port of Tomari was superseded by a new port, Naha, and overseas trade rose to unprecedented heights. Shō Hashi's foreign trade policy was based on several considerations. One was the basic desire for the trade, which was most profitable. Another was the desire to provide a new outlet for the energies of the people who had been engaged in internecine warfare for long decades. Strict controls ensured that foreign trade remained exclusively an official enterprise. All ships going abroad had to have certificates, or *shishō* (*chih chao*), issued by the Ryukyuan government at Shuri.

The certificates followed a general pattern in their wording. As an example, a certificate carried aboard a Ryukyuan ship sailing for Malacca on the 18th day of the

³ See Sakuma Shigeo, "Ming-dai kaigai shibōeki no rekishiteki haikai—Fukien-shō o chūshin to shite" ("Historical Background of Private Foreign Trade in Ming Period—Chiefly on the Case of the Fukien Province"), *Shigaku Zasshi* (The Journal of Historical Science), LXII (Jan. 1953), 1-25; "Ming-chō no kaikin seisaku" ("On the Prohibition of the Overseas Trade under the Ming Dynasty"), *Tōhōgaku* (Eastern Studies), No. 6 (June 1953), 42-51. Edwin O. Reischauer and John K. Fairbank, *East Asia The Great Tradition* (Boston, 1960), pp. 321-325, 330-337.

⁴ Important studies of Ryukyuan relations with Southeast Asian countries in the 14th-16th centuries include the following: Kobata Atsushi, *Chūsei nantō tsūkō-bōeki shi no kenkyū* [Study of Overseas Contacts and Trade with the Southern Islands in the Middle Ages] (Tokyo: Nippon Hyōronsha, 1939). Higaonna Kanjun, *Reimeiki no kaigai kōtsū shi* [History of Overseas Contacts at the Dawn of a New Age] (Tokyo: Teikoku Kyōkukai, 1941). Asato Nobu, *Nippon nanpō hatten shi* [History of Japan's Southern Expansion] (Tokyo: Sanseidō, 1942).

8th moon of Shō Toku (Cheng Te) 4 (September 2, 1509), reads as follows, in translation:

Shō Shin, King of the Ryukyu Country Chūzan, in reference to tribute and related matters, is deeply concerned over the circumstance that this country's products are meager and inadequate as articles of tribute, causing great inconvenience. For that reason, we are now despatching Chief Envoy Kamadū, Interpreter Kō Ken (Kao Hsien), and others aboard a seagoing ship bearing the designation of the character *Kō* (*K'ang*), with a cargo of porcelain and other goods, to proceed to the productive land of Malacca in order to purchase such products as sapanwood and pepper through mutually satisfactory arrangements, and then to return to this country to make preparations for the presentation of tribute to the Ming Celestial Court in a subsequent year. However, the members of the mission now departing do not have official credentials individually and are indeed fearful of the inconvenience of investigations and obstructions by officials along the way. So the Royal Court has issued a Certificate stamped with a split seal bearing the character *Gen* (*Hsüan*) and the number 174, to be received and borne by Chief Envoy Kamadū and others in proceeding on their mission. Accordingly, it is requested that officials and guards of the straits and coastal waters will, after examining this Certificate, release them promptly and not inconveniently deter them from proceeding on their way. This Certificate is hereby bestowed. It is now stated (that the mission comprises): One chief envoy—Kamadū; two assistant envoys—Maniku and Guramī; two interpreters—Kō Ken (Kao Hsien) and Kō Ka (Kao Ho); pilot—Ryō Mi (Liang Shih); general manager of the ship—Mafutu; lesser officers and crew—150 persons.⁶

Ships not carrying such a certificate were generally suspected of being pirate ships. Each ship was assigned a certificate with a sequential number under a category that was changed with each new reign in Ryukyu.

Most important of the Southeast Asian countries in the Ryukyuan trade was Siam. There is official documentation for some sixty-two ships going to Siam on forty-eight voyages between 1425 and 1564, but the total number of ships that journeyed to Siam, from about 1385 to 1570, is estimated to have been about 150. Trade with Siam started earlier and persevered longer than with any other Southeast Asian country.⁷ In 1421, a trade mission of over twenty people from Palembang, in southeastern Sumatra,

⁶ *Rekidaikōen* First Collection (1697-1698), Vol. 42, document No. 3.

⁷ Annotated monographs on the Ryukyuans in Southeast Asia include the following by Akiyama Kenzō: "Gores wa Ryūkyū-jin de aru" ["The Gores are Ryukyuans"], *Shigaku Zasshi* (The Historical Journal of Japan), XXXIX (1928), 268-285; "Gores naru meishō no hassei to sono rekishiteki hattēn" ["The origin and historical development of the term Gores"], ibid., 1349-1359; "Muromachi-jidai ni okeru Ryūkyū no Indo-Shina shokoku to no tsūkō" ["Ryukyuan Communications with the Countries of Indo-China During the Muromachi Period"] [1392-1490], *Rekishi Chiri* [Historical Geography], LVI (1930), 441-461; "Ōhaku raikō zengo no Tōyō ni okeru kaijō-bōeki" ["Sea Trade in the Orient About the Time of the Advent of European Ships"], *Shakai Keizaihigaku* (The Journal of the Social and Economic History Society), V (1935), 503-519, 629-646. See also Akiyama Kenzō, *Nishi kōshō shirō* [Historical Essays on Japanese-Chinese Relations] (Tokyo, 1937), 254-303, and *Tōō kōshō shirō* [Historical Treatises on East Asian Relations] (Tokyo, 1944), 124-136. Kobata Atsushi, "Kyūkō oyobi sono Nichi-Ryū ryōkoku tano kōshō ni tsuite" ["On Palembang and its Relations with Japan and Ryukyu"], *Shirin* (The Journal of History), XX (1935), 590-661; "Ryūkyū-Maraka-kan no tsūshō kankei ni tsuite" ["On Trade Relations Between Ryukyu and Malacca"], *Keizaihi Kenkyū* [Studies in Economic History], XIV (1935), 579-593, 712-724. See also monographs by Kobata Atsushi in *Taiheiyo-ken minzoku to bunka* [Peoples and Cultures in the Pacific Ocean Sphere] (Tokyo, 1942), 223-251; *Nanpō bunka kōza: Nippon nanpō hattēn shi hen* [Lectures on Southern Cultures: Volume on the History of Japanese Expansion Southward] (Tokyo: Sanshōdō, 1944), 95-151.

was shipwrecked in Japan. The survivors were sent from Japan to Ryukyu with a request that the Ryukyuans return them to their native Palembang. The Ryukyuans carried the group to Siam for repatriation thence. In 1428, a Ryukyuan mission voyaged to Palembang to inquire as to the safe return of the foregoing group and to begin trading relations. Three other voyages followed prior to 1440, after which no other ships proceeded thither because Palembang had declined as a port after its conquest by the Javanese in the mid-fifteenth century. Eastern Java was visited by six Ryukyuan ships on five expeditions between 1430 and 1442. Sunda Kalapa, today's Jakarta, in western Java, was visited by several Ryukyuan ships in 1513-1519.

In the fifteenth century, the sultanate of Malacca rose to prominence and the obscure fishing village of Malacca burgeoned into the most important port in all of Southeast Asia. It sat athwart the straits between Sumatra and the mainland through which merchant ships passed in going to and from India and the East Indies and China. Ryukyuans began going to Malacca around 1460, and at least twenty ships are recorded as having gone to this great East-West emporium prior to 1511, when the Portuguese attacked and captured Malacca. Three Ryukyuan ships voyaged to Samudra, in northern Sumatra, in 1463-1468. One expedition went to Annam in 1509 to extend thanks to the king for the repatriation of shipwrecked Ryukyuans who had been sent back by way of China. Patani, a Siamese port on the eastern coast of Malaya, was an important port of call for Ryukyuan ships from 1480 to 1541, and especially after the fall of Malacca to the Portuguese. There are records of ten Ryukyuan voyages to Patani between 1490 and 1541. Ships were sent to Luzon, but there are no documents extant on these trips. In all probability, Ryukyuan ships called at other ports in Southeast Asia which are not mentioned in the *Rekidaï hōan* documents.

Ryukyuan ships carried to Southeast Asia such cargoes as: sulphur and horses from Ryukyu; porcelain, silk, brocades, satins and other cloth, copper coins, iron and iron-ware, other metal ware, medicines, alum, grain, musk, etc. from China; and swords, lances, bows, armor, helmets, harnesses, folding screens, fans, lacquer ware, and gold and gold dust from Japan. Principal return cargoes were sapanwood and pepper. Sapanwood, a soluble redwood used for making red and purple dyes, was usually cut into pieces one inch in diameter and two feet long. It sold in China for one hundred times the prevailing price in Ryukyu and many hundred times the purchase price in Southeast Asia. Pepper sold in China for 750 to 1500 times the original price. Other goods brought from Southeast Asia included cloves and nutmeg, camphor, gold, tin, ivory, sandalwood, perfumes and incense, coral, mercury, opium, saffron, Malacca wine, cotton prints, muslin, silk goods, olibanum, eaglewood, costusroot, rose water, rhinoceros horn, strange animals and birds, ebony, agate, resin, ships' timber, musical instruments, and other products of Southeast and South Asian arts and crafts.

For a number of decades after diplomatic relations had been started with China in 1372, the Ryukyuans received gifts of seagoing ships from the Chinese government. They were often given a new ship every time they went to China, which was sometimes every year. In 1439, when the Ryukyuan envoys asked for another seagoing vessel, they reported that of the thirty ships that had been given to them during the fifty-four years since 1385, only seven were still in commission, the others having been lost or damaged during the intervening years. Most of the ships were large and seaworthy vessels, carrying upwards of 250 men. One ship going to China in 1470 carried

366 men besides twenty horses, 20,000 pounds of sulphur, and a cargo of sapanwood and pepper.

From about the mid-fifteenth century, or earlier, no ships were given by the Ming, and ship repairs had to be paid for by the Ryukyuans, because of deterioration in Ming finances. Thenceforth, more and more Ryukyuan-made ships had to be used. Smaller in size, these still could carry 150 men or so, and were adequate for the voyages to China. In 1431, two Okinawan shipwrights who accompanied a mission to Korea built a Ryukyuan-type ship for the Korean government. It was raced against a Korean naval ship and won handily. Korean officials were pleased and ordered other ships built like it. The favorite timbers for shipbuilding were pine, cryptomeria, and camphorwood.

Ryukyuan ships sailed with the prevailing monsoons on their long overseas journeys. The northeast monsoons blew from the 8th moon of the lunar calendar, and the southwest monsoons from the 3rd to the 7th moon. Hence, in sailing from Ryukyu to southeast China and lands to the south, the best time to go was between the 8th and the 11th moon, and for the return voyage to Ryukyu the best season spanned the 3rd and 4th moons. Ryukyuan ships that missed the favorable winds for the return voyage would have to wait a year, and this could be financially ruinous. Thus in the letters from Ryukyu to the various southern countries it was expressly requested that the business of the Ryukyuans be attended to with despatch so that they could return to their country with the next favorable monsoons.

On their southward journeys, Ryukyuans sailed from Naha past the Kerama and Kume islands to the Fukien coast, then along the coast of southeastern China to Annam and Siam, thence to Palembang and Java, or from Siam and Patani to Malacca and thence to Sumatra and Sunda in western Java. With favorable tail winds, a ship could reach Malacca in about forty-six days. It appears that the mariner's compass was used, for persons who were experts with the "south-pointing needle" are mentioned as going on some of the journeys, in addition to persons familiar with wind and current movements. Excepting for the envoys, deputy envoys, and business managers, most of the officers on these expeditions, such as the ship's captain, the navigator, and the interpreters and clerks, were of Chinese descent, from the Kumemura community.

The period of trade with Southeast Asia, from roughly 1385 to 1570, gave birth to a golden age in Ryukyu. The tremendous profits that were realized went primarily into the royal coffers, strengthening the king's government as against the former regional lords of the islands. The country was unified under a central authority, which was strong enough to enforce an edict banning the private possession of weapons of war. The king's castle and the surrounding capital city of Shuri were rebuilt in a splendor that reflected the wealth that accrued from the overseas trade. Many temples, bridges, and other structures were built. Roads were constructed and improved, and the port of Naha was developed. Books, scrolls, paintings, and other luxuries were imported from China, Japan, and Korea.

The golden age of Ryukyuan maritime activities in southern waters reached its peak and began to decline during the long reign of Shō Shin (1477-1526). Reasons for the decline included the following: (1) a deterioration in the fortunes of the Ming Empire; (2) the rise of burgeoning pirate fleets that ravaged the east Asian littoral and preyed on shipping on the high seas; (3) the advent of the Portuguese

in the southern regions; and (4) the development of strong albeit forbidden maritime activity on the part of the merchants of Fukien and Kwangtung provinces. From the time of King Shō Gen (1557-1572) the Ryukyuans gave up their southern voyages and limited themselves perforce to trade between China and Japan, which was lucrative but on a relatively limited scale. The golden age of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries became a nostalgic memory to them, as also to their contemporaries half way round the world in Portugal.