The Ryukyu Network in the Fifteenth and Early Sixteenth Centuries

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INTRODUCTION

In recent years Chinese and Japanese scholars have devoted much attention to the history of the Ryukyu Islands. This has led to a large number of publications on Ryukyuan subjects, especially in Chinese and Japanese. One interesting dimension of research concerns Okinawa's foreign trade relations during the fifteenth and early sixteenth century, usually within the general context of Asian maritime trade, or, more specifically, within the framework of bilateral contacts between Ryukyu and China.

China, then under Ming rule (1368-1644), was certainly a major maritime "player". Early in the fifteenth century it had initiated Zheng He's 郑和 famous expeditions. At the same time, private sea trade, already restricted during the Hongwu reign (1368-1398), remained forbidden. Although the relevant laws were modified in the course of time—and not always rigorously observed by the authorities —, long-lasting improvements only occurred in 1567. Throughout the period considered here, trade with the Middle Kingdom had to be conducted through official channels, i.e., within the Ming tribute system, otherwise it was considered illegal by China's officials. Minor deviations from this pattern, it is true, can be observed in some years, but they were exceptions to the rule.

The Ryukyu merchants profited from this unusual situation. They began developing an extended network of trade contacts, which connected Fujian Province with Okinawa, mainly through tribute relations, and at the same time they also traded with various Southeast Asian locations. Other branches of trade reached out from Ryukyu to Korea and several ports on Kyushu, in southern Japan. Most commodity flows involved in these different branches went through Naha 那霸, the chief port on Okinawa.

The present note will present a survey of Ryukyu's foreign trade, which is well documented through the *Lidai bao'an* (in Japanese: *Reikidai hôan*), various entries in the *Ming shilu* (now MSL) and the Korean *sillok*, special chapters in Chinese *lishi dili* works of the Ming period, Chen Kan's monograph *Shi Liuqiu lu* (1534), some Chinese nautical treatises with data on the sea route between Fujian and Naha, Chinese local gazetteers and several Portuguese, Spanish and other texts.[1] The material in Classical Chinese is of course the most important contemporary data stock. Japanese works usually date from later periods and are of little relevance here. Iberian texts offer no systematic view of the Ryukyu network; however, they often contain additional details related to its Southeast Asian branches. In the present note, which mainly quotes secondary sources, but also some primary works, the focus will be—quite naturally—on the trade between Naha and China and to some extent also on the relations between Naha and Southeast Asia.

CHINA-RYUKYU: THE GENERAL SETTING

As was said, under the early- and mid-Ming, tribute trade was the only legal way in and out of China. Ming tribute regulations also applied to China-Ryukyu contacts. According to the MSL, official relations between both sides began in 1372, when the Hongwu emperor sent Yang Zai 杨载 to these islands in order to proclaim his accession to power.[2] Ryukyu was then

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Above and enlarged detail on page 6: This painting depicts the Ryukyuan ships returning from China, an exciting event as the populace of Naha and the Dragon boats (used as racing boats) came out to greet the returning ships.
Artist and date of creation are unknown. (Courtesy of the Okinawa Prefectural Museum.)

Next page: Scale model of a Ryukyuan trade ship. Tribute ships were dispatched from the Ryukyus to China once every two years. The 40m long and 10m wide ships held about 100 people with two to four ships forming a tribute fleet. (Courtesy of the Okinawa Prefectural Museum.)

divided into three small kingdoms: Zhongshan 中山, Shannan 山南 and Shanbei 山北. Whether Yang Zai visited all three places or just one kingdom is not reported in the sources, but Zhongshan reacted faster than the other two: still in the same year it dispatched its first tribute envoy to Nanjing, then the Ming capital. This envoy was headed by Taiqi 泰期, who came again two years later, presenting "horses and local products" as tribute "gifts".[3] From then onwards several delegations went back and forth between Zhongshan and the Ming court in quick succession, often more than once a year.

The other two countries also exchanged envoys with China, but less frequently. Zhongshan, it seems, was the most important one among the three island states and probably also developed the best connections to imperial court circles in Nanjing. The three Ryukyuan states were of course rivals, although it is possible that they cooperated temporarily when costly tribute ships had to be equipped.

Tribute trade was not the only facet of Ryukyu-China relations under the Ming. The MSL refers to a descendant of the former Mongol dynasty, who was exiled by the Ming to Ryukyu.[4] In other cases, we hear of Ryukyuan students going to Nanjing, where they joined the imperial academy to be trained in Confucian ethics and other subjects. The first students arrived in 1392. Generally, they mostly came from Zhongshan, and not infrequently the sons of high-ranking families were among them. Probably the student "program" did not continue without interruption, but scattered references to scholarly subsidies granted in the fifteenth century may be encountered in several sources. Moreover, there are references to students from Ryukyu staying in China during the 1480s and again in the early sixteenth century.[5]

Much has also been written on Chinese emigrating to Ryukyu. However, not all details are clear. The best-known case is the one of the so-called thirty-six families (*sanshiliu xing* 三十六姓). These families were selected by the Ming authorities and probably moved to the islands in the early fifteenth century. They mostly hailed from Fujian. Many of them were certainly well acquainted with navigational techniques and possibly also with the art of shipbuilding. After landing on Okinawa, they settled near Naha. In later sources, their living quarters are often referred to as Tangying 唐营 or Jiumicun 九米村 (Jap.: Kumemura), but little else is known for this

early period. Some of them offered "technical" services and skills to their hosts, others were commissioned to act as official envoys and interpreters in the tribute trade.[6] This was nothing unusual because we read of parallel cases in the context of Ming relations with Southeast Asia. In modern terms, China granted "economic aid" to a small "developing country" at its maritime periphery. What it expected in return was loyalty and formal recognition of its superior position. The emigrants were seen as a tool to achieve this goal.

In all likelihood Ryukyu's financial sources were still weak at the time when tribute trade began. Therefore, China did not only send "experts", but also granted ships. These vessels were to be used in the tribute trade. Most likely they were built in Fujian and equipped with Fujianese and local Ryukyuan sailors. Although the exact number of ships handed over to Ryukyu is no longer known, scattered references in the sources point to several dozens of vessels in the course of the early fifteenth century. From the mid-fifteenth century onwards, China's technological aid became less important, and Ryukyu had to rely on its own capacities. How these changes effected maritime trade is difficult to assess.

CHINA-RYUKYU: THE EARLY FIFTEENTH CENTURY

On average, one or two Ryukyuan embassies sailed to China per year. In some years several official voyages took place, such as in 1396, which saw the arrival of seven delegations: three from Zhongshan, two from Shannan and two from Shanbei.[7] To some extent, the varying frequency of official contacts, particularly in the early period, mirrored political dissent among the three island kingdoms and their quest for protection through the mighty neighbour on the mainland. Similar constellations may be found in the context of Ming contacts to Brunei and Sulu, or Champa and Annam, to mention just two examples. Whether Chinese merchants—or migrants—became involved in local rivalries, especially on the Ryukyu Islands, remains a matter of speculation, but seems somewhat unlikely.

The situation changed dramatically when, in 1416, Zhongshan annexed the territory of Shanbei. This was followed by a few years of "internal stability", until Zhongshan also swallowed its other rival, Shannan, in 1429. From then onwards the Ryukyu Islands remained in one hand, as an independent polity, which nonetheless continued to be a nominal vassal of the Ming. The ruling house in Naha was the Shang 尚 family (Jap.: Shô). Like many of his successors, Shang Bazhi 尚巴志, who had annexed Shannan, was "confirmed" as the "legal" ruler of his country through an official Chinese envoy, in this case a certain Chai Shan 柴山. In 1470, the first Shang dynasty was substituted by the second Shang dynasty, which remained in power until 1879.

The unification of Ryukyu came at a time when Ming government fleets, led by Zheng He and other court eunuchs, controlled the sea routes to Guangdong and Fujian and certainly also some segments of international commodity flows outside of China. Ships were then regularly dispatched to the "Western Ocean" (Xiyang西洋), i.e., they followed the so-called "western route" (*xihanglu* 西航路) from Jiangsu via Zhejiang, Fujian, Guangdong, Hainan and Vietnam, down to the area of modern Singapore, from where they entered the Indian Ocean. Other ships sailed from Pulau

Condore, near the southern tip of Vietnam, to the west coast of Kalimantan and northern Java, or they went from Vietnam into the Gulf of Siam. While this system of sea routes was much frequented by Chinese and other ships, the so-called "eastern route" (*donghanglu* 东航路) from Fujian to Luzon and the Sulu zone—as well as trade and traffic through the East China Sea—rarely got associated with the early Ming ventures. This also means that Zheng He had little or nothing to do with the Ryukyu Islands.[8]

Forces under the command of Zheng He, it is well known, intervened in Samudra, on northwestern Sumatra, to settle a local conflict, and they also landed on Sri Lanka, thus compelling a Ceylonese ruler to recognize China's formal overlordship, but Ming troops never fought against any of the contending Ryukyuan parties. This policy of neutrality was strictly followed under both the Yongle and Xuande emperors. Even when Zhongshan moved against Shannan and Shanbei, China opted to stay out of the conflict. Obviously, the Ming court saw no advantage in a possible action against its island neighbours. Diplomatic relations between China and Ryukyu had been cordial from the Hongwu period onwards, so that no Ming emperor thought it necessary to put additional pressure on the Ryukyu Islands. Moreover, from a military viewpoint, none of the Ryukyu states appeared dangerous, neither to China's coastal provinces nor to international shipping, unlike for example Annam or some smaller Southeast Asian polities, which had become involved in sea banditry, thereby threatening international shipping routes.

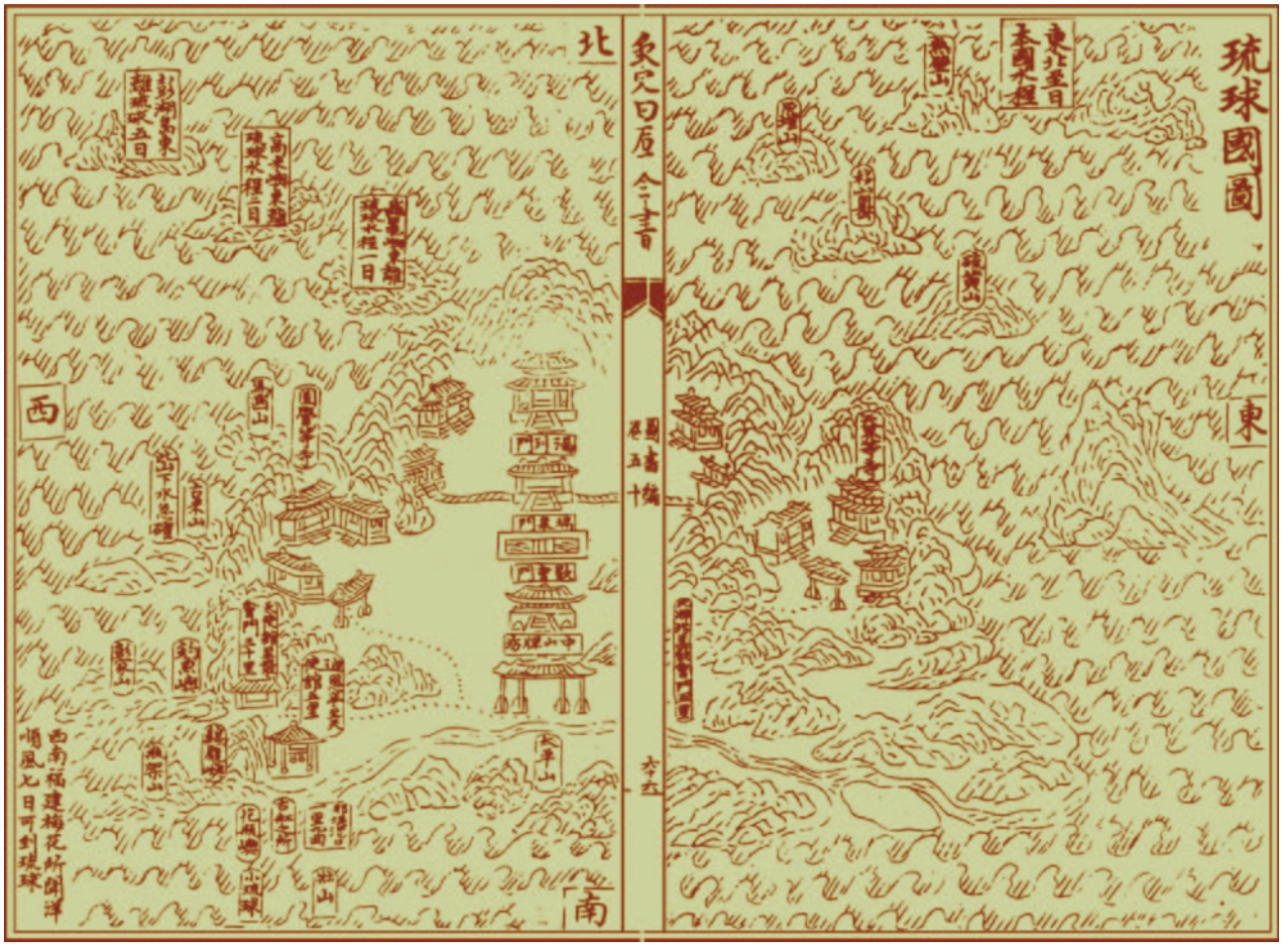
The end of active Ming government shipping beyond China's coastal limits came in the 1430s, after the successful conclusion of Zheng He's seventh voyage. Financial considerations and a gradual reorientation of Ming foreign policy from the maritime to the land frontier contributed to this change of affairs. The result was a decline in the number of tribute delegations coming from maritime countries to China. This was not the case with Ryukyu. Ryukyu-China tribute trade continued as before, without any significant interruption.

CHINA-RYUKYU: FROM THE MID-FIFTEENTH TO THE EARLY SIXTEENTH CENTURY

Although the Ming government no longer pursued an active policy along its maritime frontier and in relation to Southeast Asia, private sea trade remained forbidden by law. Officially, it thus became impossible to substitute tribute shipments by non-government trade. The central government did not favour private ventures because it feared that its coastal areas might evade imperial controls, once the local population would be free to cooperate with foreigners, among whom were smugglers, bandits and other "bad elements". But those favouring China's "isolation" overlooked one important factor: the coastal population in major port cities like Ningbo, Fuzhou, Quanzhou, Zhangzhou and Guangzhou was traditionally oriented towards the sea. With too few goods coming in through official channels, no profits could be made, and many people formerly employed directly or indirectly by the government sector were now unable to make a living. This forced merchants to look for illegal business opportunities. Others undermined the system by emigrating to Southeast Asia. As family ties between these emigrés and their colleagues in Fujian and Guangdong remained strong, there were additional incentives for illegal trade. Soon, the local gentry, who always needed income, also began to ignore the laws, either tolerating or actively participating in smuggling activities. Towards the end of the fifteenth century and in the course of the sixteenth century there thus emerged various illegal networks run by so-called Wokou traders, some of whom collaborated with Japanese and Southeast Asian merchants.[9]

During this entire period, trade relations between China and Ryukyu were more important than ever. In theory, they were restricted to tribute contacts, but unofficially many more ships than recorded in the sources sailed between both places. For a small country like Ryukyu these relations were of vital interest. Tribute trade meant that only some goods brought to China had to be presented to the imperial court, while the larger part could be sold freely, according to the conditions set by the imperial authorities. Moreover, in return for their tribute goods, Ryukyuan delegations would receive gifts and rewards from the central government in China's capital. Ships not declared as tribute vessels would sell all their goods illegally, either at high risk, or with the unofficial consent of provincial institutions, which did not always follow central laws. Both legal and illegal trade certainly brought much profit for the Ryukyuans.

Since the official port of entry for tribute ships from Naha was first Quanzhou and later Fuzhou (in



Map of Ryukyu, from *Tushu bian*.

the 1470s), the local Fujianese also profited from this arrangement. Presumably, Fujianese imports from Ryukyu functioned as a partial substitute for the gradual decline in other tribute imports after the end of Zheng He's expeditions and Ming government trade, more generally. But this very simplistic picture still calls for additional explanations. Tribute ships from other countries normally went to Guangzhou and not to the ports of Fujian. Therefore, declining tribute imports mostly concerned the central Guangdong market, and not so much Fujian, where the number of incoming tribute vessels, mostly from Naha, did not change dramatically over time. Thus, if there was a major substitution effect, it concerned China *in toto*, while, at the provincial level, the situation was different.[10]

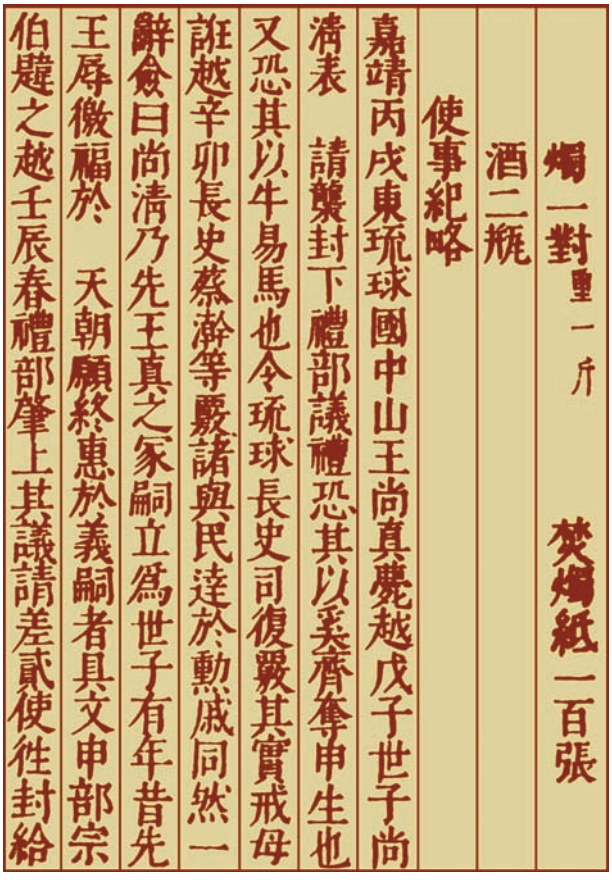
With regard to the latter—and to Fujian-Liuqiu relations in particular—the following must now be considered: first, from the 1440s onwards, China no longer granted ships to the Naha government. The large junks obtained earlier were still intact, but after some years Ryukyuans had to construct their own vessels, which were probably smaller than the former Chinese carriers. Second, during the 1450s a temporary relaxation in handling Ming trade prohibitions can be observed. The Fujianese certainly took advantage of this change by expanding their network, although in principle private seafaring remained forbidden. Whether the Ryukyuans were able to intensify their China trade as well remains unclear. A possible shortage in shipping would be an argument against a further growth. Third, in 1475 the Ming court restricted Ryukyu tribute shipments to one mission every two years, the number of tribute delegates per mission was limited to one hundred persons, and it was decreed that private buying and selling would no longer be

permitted during the missions. The government in Naha petitioned to maintain the old regulations, which had been more favorable, but these requests were rejected. Further alterations in the 1480s and 1490s entailed no major change. It was only during the Zhengde reign (1506-1521) that Ryukyu was again permitted to send tribute on an annual basis, which rule, however, was again abolished under the next emperor, who reverted to the biennial system.[11]

The above leaves some room for interpretation. First, during the early period of tribute trade, Ryukyu had depended on China's good will and Fujian's support. In all likelihood this support had mostly come from the area around Quanzhou, where the trading bureau (or *shibosi* 市舶司) handling Ryukyuan tribute vessels was then located. When, after the end of Ming government trade, more and more Minnan merchants became involved in the illegal sector, they also intensified clandestine cooperation with their Ryukyuan colleagues. Naha still profited from tribute trade, but it could now also count on private Fujianese interests, and these interests began to "outweigh" the tribute sector. It is possible that the entire Ryukyu trade became more and more "Fujianized" in this way. If so, the Southern Fujianese now stood on two legs: their own rapidly expanding illegal network *and* the system of trade links to and via Naha. Furthermore, as the first system gained ground, both in absolute and relative terms, the role of Naha was relegated to a position of secondary importance—as seen through Fujianese eyes.

Next, towards the later decades of the fifteenth century, there is news of some Ryukyuan ships going to other places along the China coast, especially the Xiangshan 香山 area near Guangzhou.[12] These were vessels either visiting that region on their way to and from Southeast Asia, or commissioned to trade exclusively between Naha and the central Guangdong market. Whichever way it was, the modest restrictions imposed on Ryukyu tribute trade via Fujian from the 1470s onwards could be an explanation for increased Ryukyuan activities near Guangzhou at around that time. These activities may or may not have been in association with the Fujianese, whose ships followed the same sailing route when going from Zhangzhou or Quanzhou to Hainan, Vietnam and further south.

Here then, we can return to where we had started. Changing relations between China and the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誑越辛卯長史蔡瀚等覈諸與民達於勳戚同然一
辭僉曰尚清乃先王真之家嗣立爲世子有年昔先
王辱徼福於　天朝願終惠於義嗣者具文申部宗
伯題之越壬辰春禮部肇上其議請差貳使往封給

Text from Chen Kan's *Shi Liuqiu lu.*

outside world could be associated with something like a "substitution effect" on the local level: Direct imports to Fujian, handled by the Fujianese themselves, increased, while the relative weight (and not necessarily the total volume) of imports from or via Ryukyu shrank. However, one may go on asking whether Fujian-Ryukyu relations were also affected by other factors, such as by internal Fujianese rivalries, or by moving the official trade bureau from Quanzhou to Fuzhou in the 1470s? Was this move designed as a measure to weaken the South Fujianese, or was the merchant elite in Quanzhou interested in pushing the trade bureau out of town so as to get rid of an unwanted government institution that could always be used against local interests? Or was there something like a division of labor between different Fujianese groups—a situation that called for a restructuring of Naha-Fujian relations? There is, I am afraid, no clear answer to these questions. All one may say at this point is that, by the early sixteenth century, trade based on Naha and reaching out from there to Fujian had already lost some

of its former importance. By contrast, the Fujianese were on a steady growth path—they were to become the winners.

KOREA, JAPAN AND RYUKYU

Here one may briefly look at the other branches of Naha's foreign trade. Written evidence of trade between the Ryukyu Islands and Korea can be traced back to the late fourteenth century. In 1389, the King of Zhongshan, Chadu 察度, sent an official delegation to Korea, which was then governed by the Koryo dynasty. Among other things, this delegation offered sappanwood and pepper, both products of Southeast Asian origin, acquired either directly from Southeast Asia or through the Fujianese. Under the Yi dynasty, which took over in 1392, Korea-Ryukyu relations continued as before, but they never became as important as those between Naha and Fujian. Moreover, most of the Naha-Korea business was conducted with Ryukyuan ships; Korean vessels rarely came to Okinawa, possibly for fear of Japanese competitors.

In the later half of the fifteenth century, Japanese merchants often acted as intermediaries between Korea and Ryukyu. Official messages exchanged between both countries were sent aboard Japanese ships, as were gifts and various commodities for trade. Those offered by the Ryukyuan side included Southeast Asian products, together with some domestic items like sulphur. By and large, relations between Korea and Ryukyu were amicable, but not very frequent.

Towards the end of the fifteenth century, Japanese merchants began to abuse this system. They forged official documents and pretended to be sent as royal commissioners. The effects were disastrous: Korea and Ryukyu no longer trusted each other, and some years later, in the early sixteenth century, bilateral contacts came to end.

The earliest written evidence of official contacts between the Ryukyu Islands and the *shôgunate* in Kyoto relates to 1414. Thereafter Ryukyuan vessels were occasionally sighted in the ports around Kyushu, especially in Hakata and Hyôgo. These and other coastal towns were then about to acquire some importance within the highly complex structure of Japan's foreign trade, which at that time was very fragmented among different groups and mostly carried out with China and the Korean peninsula.

Sino-Japanese relations were always difficult, due to the improper conduct of Japanese merchants in China's ports. To settle these disputes, the Ming court occasionally asked for Naha's diplomatic help. Two cases often get cited: in 1432, the Xuande emperor sent an official message to Okinawa, which was passed on to Japan. This led to a reopening of official tribute contacts. The second case refers to the early sixteenth century. In 1523, two competing embassies, both from Japan, fought over tribute "rights" in Ningbo. Several persons were killed, including some Chinese, and many houses were destroyed. Thereafter both sides, China and Japan, undertook efforts to normalize their relations by using Naha as an intermediary, especially in exchanging official correspondence.[13]

Diplomatic relations between China and Ryukyu had been cordial from the Hongwu period onwards, so that no Ming emperor thought it necessary to put additional pressure on the Ryukyu Islands.

On the whole, Ryukyu probably did not profit much from its contacts with Japan, especially since, in the course of the sixteenth century, many Japanese became involved in coastal banditry along the China coast and piratical acts on the high seas. Towards the turn from the sixteenth to the seventeenth century, Satsuma on southern Kyushu became interested in annexing Ryukyu. This was a period when the balance of power in East Asia began to change dramatically. By then, the good times of Ryukyu-based trade were already a thing of the past.

SOUTHEAST ASIA AND RYUKYU

Ryukyuan vessels sailing to Korea and China in the late fourteenth century carried some Southeast Asian products, as was mentioned above. It is possible

that Ryukyan merchants had acquired these commodities directly in Southeast Asia, although the earliest references to such direct contacts only date from the 1420s. They are found in the *Lidai bao'an* collection, which also reveals that Ryukyuan ships sailed to eight major Southeast Asian destinations in the course of the fifteenth century: Siam, Palembang, Java, Samudra, Patani, Melaka, Sunda and Annam.[14] All these places were located along the so-called "western route", which also connected Fujian via Guangdong to maritime Southeast Asia. Whether Ryukyuan ships sailing from Naha to, say, Palembang and Java, would make regular stopovers in Fujian or prefer to proceed directly to the South China Sea is not known, but both possibilities must be taken into account.

Most southbound Ryukyuan vessels would certainly pass Taiwan on its western side, although the east coast was not totally unknown under the Ming.[15]

Tribute trade meant that only some goods brought to China had to be presented to the imperial court, while the larger part could be sold freely, according to the conditions set by the imperial authorities.

To the south of Taiwan, stopovers were occasionally made in the ports of central Guangdong, as has been said, and in the ports along the east coast of Hainan. Not infrequently, ships were forced to seek shelter in these places due to unfavorable winds. To what extent they were accustomed to take up water and provisions in small towns like Wenchang 文昌 or Lingshui 陵水 is not known.[16]

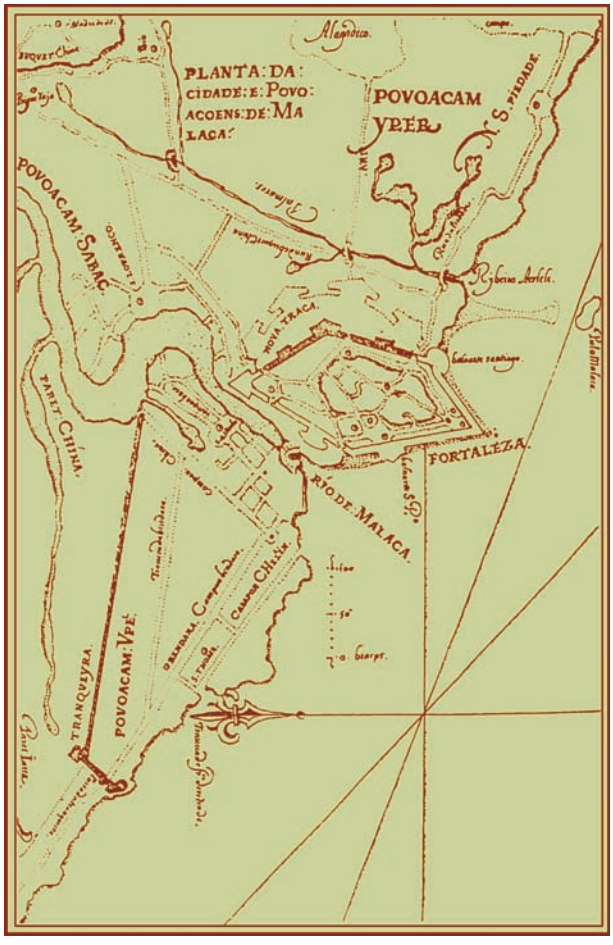
Among the Southeast Asian trading partners, Siam—or Ayuthaya—was the most important. On average one or two Ryukyuan ships would go there per year, according to the *Lidai bao'an*. Between circa 1460 and 1510, Ryukyuan vessels were also sent to Melaka, then possibly the leading port in the area. If the inflated account by Tomé Pires can be trusted, the *shabandar* in charge of Chinese vessels coming to that port had to look after the ships of Champa and Ryukyu as well.[17] Samudra, Sunda and the Annam coast were less important within the Naha network. But Patani became a popular port-of-call, particularly after the Portuguese conquest of Melaka in 1511. This also transpires from Portuguese sources.[18]

Some Ryukyuan merchants going to Siam, Melaka and later Patani certainly cooperated with the Fujianese. Presumably Ryukyuan vessels were partially manned with Fujianese sailors, perhaps even pilots, captains and other "professionals", who had evaded the China mainland in search of a better life abroad. In the course of the fifteenth century many Chinese had also begun working for Southeast Asian merchant groups and ruling houses; therefore, encountering a ship with a mixed Sino-Siamese or a mixed Sino-Ryukyuan crew was probably nothing exceptional. Certain segments of the Ryukyu-Southeast Asia network, it would seem, were thus "Fujianized" to some degree.

Ryukyu-Southeast Asia relations became less important in the 1520s or 1530s. Patani and Siam continued to be major destinations, but according to the *Lidai bao'an* only one vessel per year went to these places. The further growth of Fujianese trade to Siam, Insulindia, Japan and other places, the regularization of Portuguese links between Melaka, Macao and Japan from the 1550s onwards, the gradual expansion of Japanese shipping in the second half of the sixteenth century, and finally, the beginning of direct contacts between Manila and Japan—all these developments weakened the position of Naha in international trade. The end of direct traffic between Southeast Asia and Naha came at around 1570, when it was decided to no longer send Ryukyuan vessels to Siam and other southern destinations.

TRADE: SOME STRUCTURAL FEATURES

Both the *Lidai bao'an* and MSL allow us to reconstruct a fairly accurate picture of the commodities traded to, from and via Naha. But before looking at these details, the following "structural" features must be considered: The Ryukyu Islands were a small world with a small population, and therefore local demand for imports was limited. Most merchandise arriving from other countries, especially spices and luxury



Melaka, from Manuel Godinho de Erédia's *Declaração de Malaca.*

goods, was passed on to China, Korea, Japan or Southeast Asia. Within this framework, Naha functioned as a transshipment point, or redistribution centre. However, some products were also produced on the islands themselves. These were collected in Naha—through inter-island trade—and then offered abroad. In that sense, Naha was also an "export outlet" for its own domestic goods.

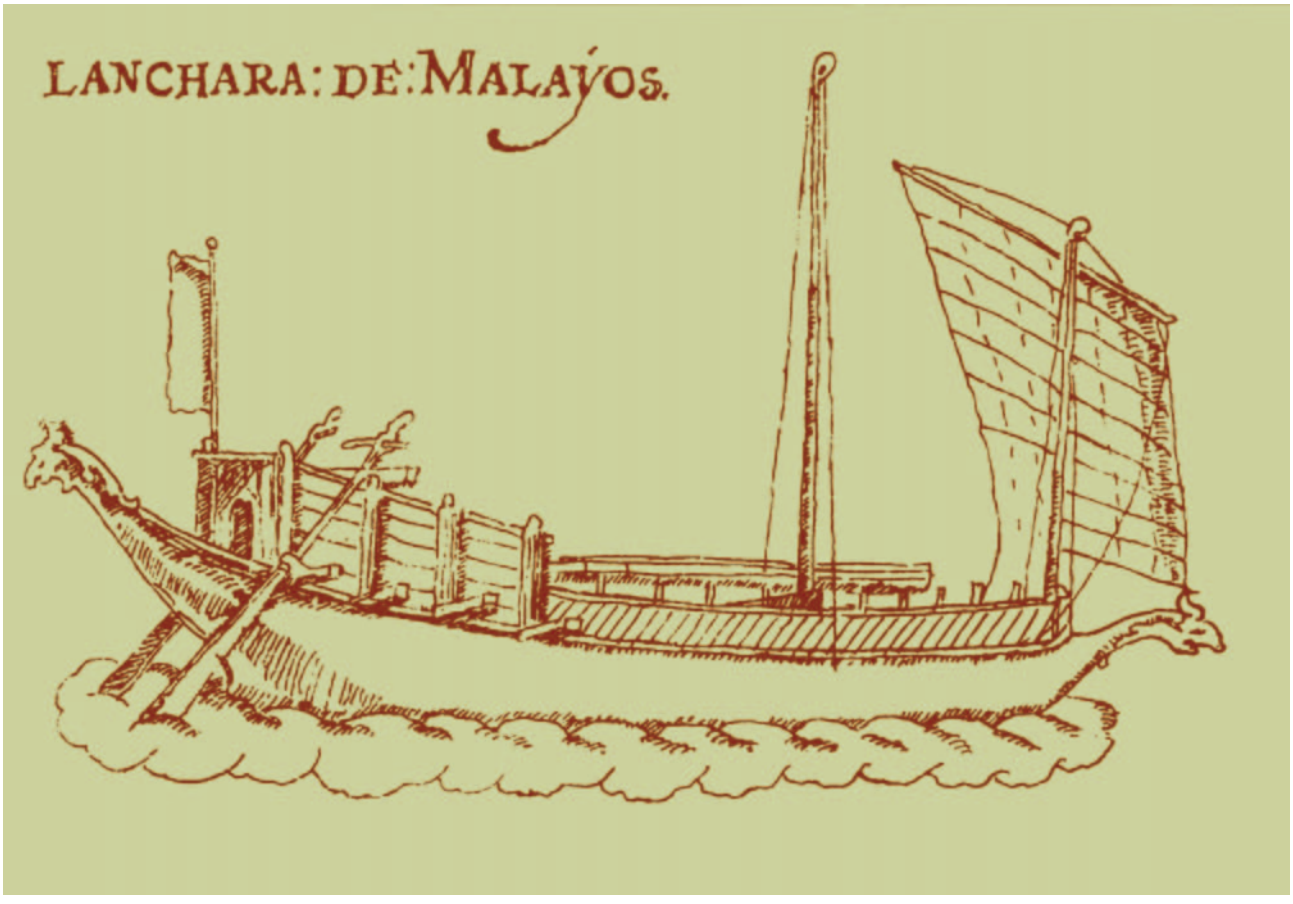
Within this small but highly complex system of mercantile connections, the Fujianese market constituted the most important element. China's demand for Southeast Asian and local Ryukyuan products was decisive for the growth of Naha's foreign trade. Although Japan and Korea required the same commodities, they certainly consumed less. In other words, economically Ryukyu depended on China more than it depended on its Korean and Japanese customers.

The products going from Southeast Asia via Naha to Fujian and in the other direction, especially during the second half of the fifteenth century, were also traded directly between China and Southeast Asia. It is impossible to estimate the Ryukyan share in this overall structure of commodity flows, but in view of the rapidly expanding Fujianese sector, the Ryukyuan share must have declined over time.

As both the Fujianese and Ryukyuans were involved in the same trade "branches", they were either competitors or cooperated with each other. One may also think of this problem in terms of different Fujianese trading groups, as was alluded to above. With some groups, it would seem, the Ryukyuans maintained cordial relations, others they tried to avoid. Those falling into the first category probably "undermined" the Ryukyuan system, or at least tried to use it for their own benefit. If so, the continued operation of the Ryukyuan network—in close agreement with Minnan and other merchant groups—can also be seen as a Fujianese defensive strategy against possible competitors, or, in the earlier periods, as a convenient arrangement to evade the limitations set by the Ming tribute system. Differently put: the excellent court-to-court relations between Naha and the early- and mid-Ming suited Fujianese needs because they camouflaged much of the illegal trade between Fujian and the non-Chinese world developing in the course of the fifteenth century.

If Naha functioned like an adjunct to the Fujianese market, it was certainly different from a typical emporium. Too few foreign ships frequented this small port, mainly because it was not centrally located, unlike, for example, Melaka or Samudra. Occasionally, Korean and other vessels would go to Naha, it is true, but very little points to a "multi-cultural" sphere in that "city", as found, for example, in many Malay ports of the late medieval and early modern periods. Chinese and perhaps Japanese and Korean cultural influence was strong, and China was also dominant as a political power, but the foreign "diaspora" in Naha was not as "diversified" as the "diaspora" in a town like Melaka, nor was Naha embedded into a network of seemingly similar entities, comparable to the many Malay ports which were related to each other through family ties, finance, religion and in other respects.

If the foregoing is correct, then the story of Naha and its trading network was a very special one. The port itself could perhaps be characterized as a hybrid entity between a typical entrepôt, mainly serving



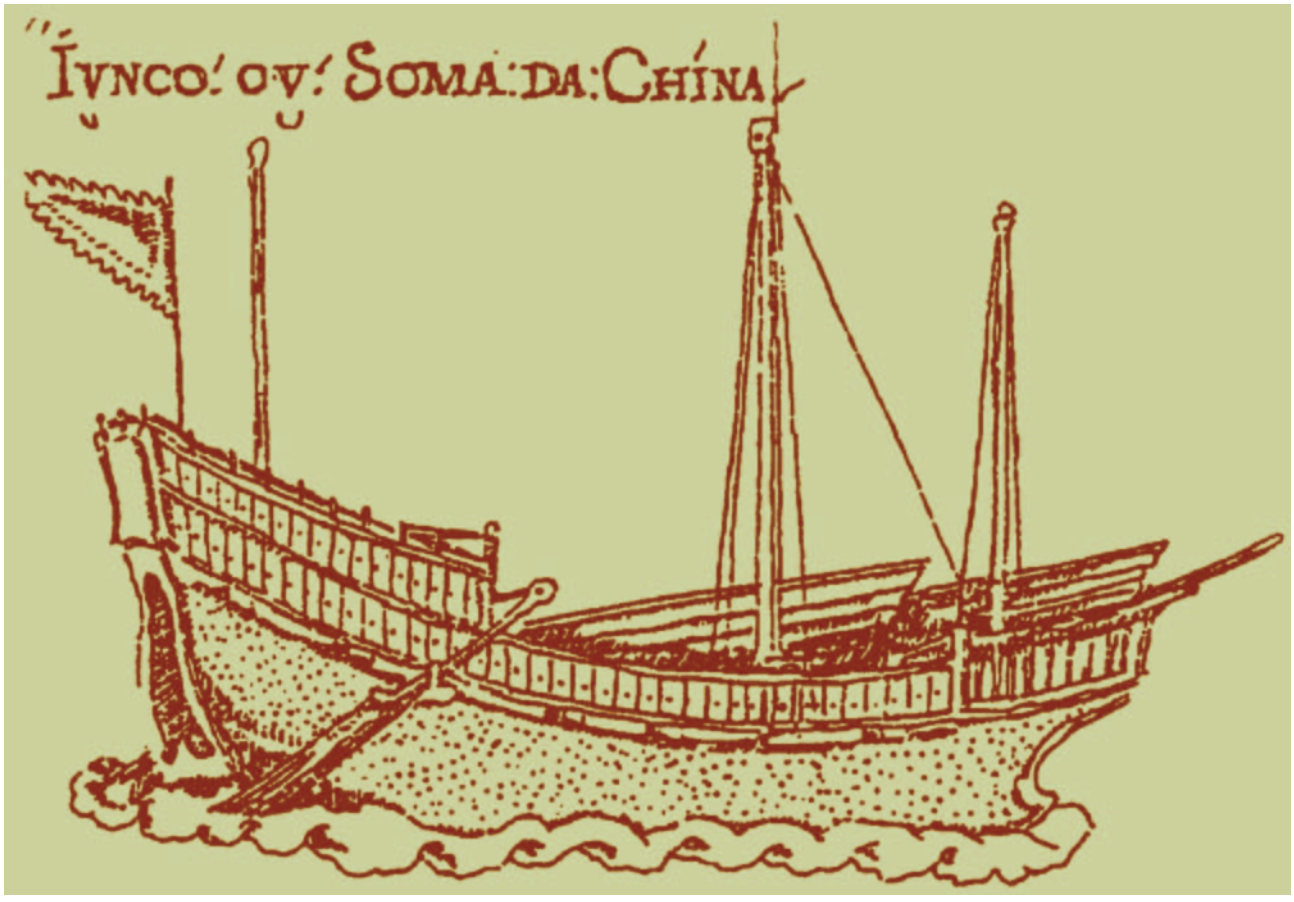
"Lanchara de Malayos" in *Declaração de Malaca.*

domestic interests, and an international emporium, open to at least some foreign "partners". The network, it was argued, moved from an "independent" stage to successive stages of growing "Fujianization", and thereby to growing dependency on the outside world. However, this picture is a very "radical" one, which rests on a mixture of facts and assumptions; therefore, it may not be accepted by everyone.

COMMODITIES

Be this as it may, the above allows us to explain another point: The route from Southeast Asia via Naha to Quanzhou and Fuzhou required more sailing time than direct trade between Fujian and Southeast Asia. Under conditions of free competition, this would have meant higher transportation costs and other disadvantages for those trading via Naha, but China's closed-door policy impeded free trade. Furthermore, the Fujianese were certainly interested in keeping Naha afloat—as a kind of defensive strategy against a possible diversion of Ryukyuan interests towards Northeast Asia. Finally, Ryukyu's own local products may have played a decisive role in this calculation. These products were sulphur and horses both of which were urgently needed in China. Below we shall look at them in some detail.

Sulphur came from the small volcanic island of Iôtorishima in the northern section of the Ryukyu chain. It was used in traditional medicine and as a basic constituent for the production of gunpowder and fireworks. Already under the Song and Yuan, primitive firearms were employed in warfare, so sulphur was of strategic importance. Obviously, some sulphur could be obtained on Sumatra, in the Moluccan Islands and the Solor-Timor region, and much of this material was brought to Melaka and from there to the area of modern Vietnam.[19] But for China it was of course more convenient and safer to receive sulphur from a nearby location such as the



"Íunco ou Soma da China" in *Declaração de Malaca.*

Ryukyu Islands, which lay only a few days away from the Fujianese coast.

Horses were needed for local transport and the military. The Ming imported large quantities of horses from central and northern Asia, Korea, the southwestern border regions and even from Hainan, as well as through tribute trade from various locations around the Indian Ocean and in Southeast Asia.[20] Some horses were small and less apt for warfare, but others were famed for their qualities and held in high esteem. Those from Ryukyu probably fell into the first category. Little is known about their further distribution in China, but in all likelihood they were mostly kept in coastal Fujian, where they were used in local transport.

Figures tabulated by Kobata, Chang Pin-tsun and others show that several dozens of horses were shipped from Ryukyu to Fujian per year. In some years the total number was close to one hundred animals or even exceeded that figure substantially. The most spectacular figure refers to 1383: in that year China acquired 983 (!) horses, according to an entry in the MSL. After 1500, however, Ming imports began to decline. Recorded shipments of sulphur ranged in the order of 30,000 to 80,000 *jin* (catties) per annum, with only a few years deviating from this "rule". Here again, a certain decline can be observed after 1500.[21] The quantities of both horses and sulphur can be related to the number of tribute ships. On average some 15 to 20 horses and circa 20,000 *jin* of sulphur came with one vessel. Sulphur was probably stowed in the lower sections of the ship as ballast, while most horses were kept on the upper deck.

From the late 1460s onwards, we also hear of sappanwood, pepper and tin being imported via Naha to Fujian. All three commodities came from Southeast Asia. The first two, in particular, were already in demand under the Hongwu reign and in the days of Zheng He, as was established by Ts'ao Yung-ho.[22] Large consignments of tropical forest products and spices were then channeled to Guangzhou and the

Ming capital through direct government and tribute trade with Southeast Asia.

In China, as elsewhere, sappanwood was mainly used as a dye. Like pepper and ebony, it also served as a salary for Ming government officials. The principal production sites were located in Siam. In 1390 a Siamese tribute mission took more than 170,000 *jin* (c. 68 tons) of aromatic substances—pepper, sappanwood and lakawood—to China.[23] The share of sappanwood in this unusually large quantity is not recorded, but probably it amounted to one-third or even more.

Presumably Ryukyuan vessels were partially manned with Fujianese sailors, perhaps even pilots, captains and other "professionals", who had evaded the China mainland in search of a better life abroad.

As was said, Ryukyuan merchants went to Siam regularly, from where they—like their Chinese colleagues—also took sappanwood back home. This commodity was then distributed from Naha to Fujian and Northeast Asia. China's recorded imports via Naha ranged between 2,000 to 6,000 *jin* per year and probably exceeded Naha's sales to Korea and Japan.[24] After 1500, shipments to China declined. This was followed by a sharp rise between 1508 and 1514. From the 1530s onwards, however, sappanwood deliveries via Naha came down to about 1,500 to 2,000 *jin* per annum. On the whole, the volume of China's sappanwood imports via Naha was certainly much below the volume of direct Fujianese shipments from the production areas in Southeast Asia.

Tin originated from the "hinterland" of Melaka. After 1511, with the end of Ryukyu-Melaka relations, Chinese imports via Naha gradually ceased. The largest recorded quantity of tin ever sent from Naha to Fujian amounted to 6,000 *jin* (in 1499). In all likelihood tin was another ballast item aboard Ryukyuan junks.

Pepper could be procured in Melaka, as well as in Samudra, Aceh, Sunda and other ports. Patani was a further supplier of this commodity, which certainly gained in importance after 1511. Ryukyuan vessels first went to Melaka. From the late fifteenth century onwards they also sailed to Patani, where they became regular visitors in the 1510s and 1520s. The recorded quantities of pepper offered to China through this system amounted to annual averages of some 4,000 *jin*. In good years, such as in 1499, up to 6,000 *jin* were sold, which however was probably still significantly less than the amounts sent directly from Southeast Asia to Guangdong and Fujian. Finally, after 1500, recorded pepper quantities involved in Naha-China trading declined substantially.

Other Ming imports via Naha included whetstones and different kinds of textiles, all from Ryukyu, Japanese weapons, lacquer objects, gold and copper, as well as sandalwood, ivory, cloves, skins and other things from Southeast Asia. Many of these items are listed in the *Lidai bao'an*, but very often no quantities are given. Some of them, like calambac, were extremely valuable and must have brought high returns when sold to China, Japan or Korea.

Commodity flows from Naha to the latter two were not exclusively composed of Southeast Asian products but also of Chinese manufactured goods and such expensive rarities as musk, which came from Yunnan and Tibet.[25] The same goods were also brought to Southeast Asia, along with Chinese silks, porcelain, iron and some Japanese products. Unfortunately, there are not enough statistics for Ryukyu's exports to Southeast Asia, which makes it impossible to relate the quantities involved in this trade to those flowing directly from China to Southeast Asia.

THE ARRIVAL OF THE PORTUGUESE AND RYUKYU

Albuquerque's conquest of Melaka in 1511 led to certain modifications in the structure of Southeast Asia's trade. The Islamic networks withdrew from Melaka and began to intensify their activities in the Johore-Riau area, on northern Java, in the ports along Sumatra, and in other locations around the Malayan peninsula. Some Indian and Chinese merchants (the

latter often called "Chincheus") decided to cooperate with the Portuguese. Other Chinese groups, possibly with an Islamic background, pulled out of Melaka. So did the Ryukyuans, or "Lequeios", as they were then often called by the Portuguese.

The Ryukyuan retreat from Melaka is puzzling in many ways. First, Ryukyuan ships had never run into open conflict with the Portuguese. Second, there was no religious problem between them. The Ryukyuans were among the non-Muslim groups, many of whom—such as the Siamese—were on good terms with the Portuguese. Third, it has been assumed that there was some cooperation between the Siamese, Fujianese and Ryukyuans; furthermore, those Chinese who had decided to join the Portuguese in Melaka mostly hailed from Fujian. Why then did the Ryukyuans, who were associated with the Fujianese, not stay on in Melaka after 1511?[26]

There are two possible explanations for the above. First, the so-called "Chincheus", who assisted the Portuguese in Melaka, may have come from one area of Fujian, namely the region around Zhangzhou and Quanzhou, while those cooperating with the Ryukyuans may have come from other regions of the same province. Perhaps, then, competition between different Chinese groups had some influence on the decisions taken in Naha. Next, there are reasons to assume that Ryukyu had maintained cordial relations with Champa throughout the later part of the fifteenth century. The merchants based in Champa were mostly Muslims, who had been in close touch with Melaka prior to 1511.[27] Thus, when Melaka fell, the Champanese, as many others, moved away from that port, and perhaps the Ryukyuans, as their friends, decided to join them. Unfortunately, the documents available in the *Lidai bao'an* collection offer no details to verify these hypotheses.

As was said earlier, after 1511, Patani became more important to the Ryukyuans, who would now obtain most of their pepper and other spices in this port. Concentrating on Patani probably reduced transportation costs because the route from Naha to Patani was shorter than the one via Johore-Riau to Melaka. Indeed, Patani became an important pepper "outlet" in the early sixteenth century. The Fujianese made abundant use of that port, and the Portuguese also kept an eye on it.[28] However, whether the Ryukyuans and Fujianese sailing to Patani were competitors or allies at this early stage, is not told in the sources.

Selling pepper to China was a lucrative business. The Fujianese, Siamese, Ryukyuans and Portuguese profited thereof, and many Southeast Asian ports became involved in that trade: Sunda, Pahang, Samudra, and so on. This led to some unwanted competition between certain Chinese groups and the Portuguese, but the role played by the Ryukyuans therein remains unclear. It is also possible that the arrival of the first few Portuguese in the Pearl River estuary, during the 1510s and again in the early 1520s, reduced unofficial Ryukyuan activities off the central Guangdong coast near Xiangshan, or even set an end to them.

The well-known Luso-Chinese clashes in the early 1520s, which came next, entailed a temporary closure of Guangzhou to most foreign ships. But soon, the Siamese and others were back, and the Fujianese also became more active in the area. The Ryukyuans, it appears, did not return, and the Portuguese were now gradually drawn to Fujian.

Portuguese merchants sailing to Fujian and even Zhejiang in the 1530s and 1540s were not sent by the authorities in Lisbon, Goa or Portuguese Malacca. Therefore, they did not represent the official levels of the *Estado da Índia*. Thus, from a Fujianese viewpoint, they had now become easier to deal with, because they were fragmented into small and uncoordinated groups, which had to rely on Fujianese goodwill in order to slip through official Ming controls and get access to China's markets.

Surprisingly, Portugal undertook no substantial efforts to tap the Ryukyu network or explore the islands themselves (although some visits were accomplished), even after trade to Japan had become more regular and more important, following the exchange of silk for silver. At the same time, the image of the "Lequeios" in Portuguese texts remained almost unchanged. It may be called neutral or positive, as if the *Estado* and Lisbon had no interest in these lands, or were uninformed about them.[29] The reasons are unclear, but a Portuguese occupation of Naha, it is certain, would have angered the Fujianese. These in turn must have tried their best to keep the Portuguese away from that port and probably spread wrong information about it. After all, the Ryukyu Islands belonged to the Fujianese "sphere of influence", and a Portuguese stronghold in front of

Fujian's doors was not desirable. The *Estado*, it would seem, understood the rules of the game, the implicit calculation being that it was better to avoid new tensions with China—the conquest of Melaka, another vassal of the Ming, had already caused enough trouble —, than to acquire an additional outpost.

With the foundation of Macao in the 1550s, the structure of Far Eastern trade assumed new contours. The Portuguese were now back in the central Guangdong market, acting as major carriers between Southeast Asia, Guangzhou and Japan. The Fujianese played an analogous role with respect to Fujian. Both they and the Portuguese were again competitors. By now, the role of the Ryukyuans in international trade had become marginal. Basically it was restricted to Korea, some ports around Kyushu and in Fujian. It is here that this short survey must end because the Ryukyu Islands gradually began to move into a new era, which was distinctly different from the golden years of the fifteenth century.

FINAL REMARKS

Although much has been written on the Ryukyu Islands, and although useful statistics are available for the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, many questions remain unanswered, some of which were addressed above. Unofficial trade in particular, which never got recorded systematically, is an unknown quantity. The hypothesis that parts of the Ryukyu network became more and more "Fujianized" is another element that should be discussed more thoroughly. A major study of the Portuguese and Spanish documents related to the "Lequeios" is also needed. What, for example, did the Spanish know about Naha when Manila proposed to invade Fujian, Hainan and other places along the Far Eastern "rim"?[30]

The most direct route between Luzon, Ryukyu and Japan passed Taiwan on its eastern side. Here another question arises: To what extent was this "avenue" used by the Ryukyuans? What can one say about pre-Spanish contacts between Naha and Luzon in the late medieval and early modern periods? Was there more traffic along the *donghanglu* or "eastern route" than we tend to think today?

In spite of these and other questions, it is obvious that the Ryukyu Islands, for several generations, were an interregional "player" in the greater context of Far Eastern maritime trade and commerce. This role is also documented through archaeological evidence, which has been ignored in the present study.[31] Future surveys may try to go back in time and link the archaeological material to the written sources; certain long-term features will then emerge more clearly. RC

NOTES

1 Important sources are listed in the bibliography (with their Chinese and Japanese characters). Also see, for example, Li Guoxiang, *Mingshi lu leizuan* (listings under "Japan"), Wada Seitoku, "Min jitsuroku", Lai Yung-hsiang, "Li-tai pao-an", and Yang Lianggong, *Liuqiu*. For studies on Chen Kan's work, see Mueller, *Wohlwollen*, and Xu Gongsheng, "Chen Kan". For nautical texts, see Yang Guozhen, "Mingdai Minnan", and Zhang Sun (ed.), *Zhongguo hanghai*, pp. 173-180, Ptak, "Jottings" (not directly related to Ryûkyû, but many references). For Portuguese materials, see, for example, Schurhammer, "1543-1943", pp. 60-70, Kammerer, *La découverte*, especially pp. 19 et seq., and Beillevaire, *Ryûkyû Studies*, vol. 1 (Tomé Pires and Fernão Mendes Pinto). Spanish texts with references to the Ryûkyû Islands are in Blair and Robertson, *The Philippine Islands*. For European maps see Kreiner, "European Maps". For a collection of pre-Ming texts on Liuqiu (sometimes referring to Taiwan), see, for example, Taiwan yinhang..., *Liuqiu yu Jilongshang*. Many early Western studies, some listed in Beillevaire, "General Bibliography", also contain translations of or references to these pre-Ming materials.

2 MSL, Hongwu 5, j. 71, 3a (p. 1317). For Ryukyu-China relations in the Hongwu reign, also see Cao Yonghe, "Ming Hongwu chao", pp. 196 et seq. (Yang Zai), and Sun Wei, "Ming chu Zhongguo dui Liuqiu zhengce".

3 MSL, Hongwu 5, j. 77, 4b (p. 1416).

4 MSL, Hongwu 21, j. 192, 1b (p. 2886).

5 For the Ryûkyû students, see, for example, Nakadomari, "The System"; Mueller, *Wohlwollen*, pp. 47-54; Liu Gengsheng, "Ming Qing"; Xie Bizhen, *Zhongguo yu Liuqiu*, pp. 244-269; Matsuda, "The Ryukyuan Government Scholarship Students"; Yang Dongquan, "Mingdai"; Huang Xinxian; "Fenggong tizhi".

6 For the thirty-six families and Fujian-Ryûkyû relations, see, for example, Mueller, *Wohlwollen*, pp. 44-47; Yang Guozhen, "Mingdai fazhan Zhong Liu youhao guanxi de Zhangzhou ren"; Xie Bizhen, "Guanyu Ming ci Liuqiu Minren", and *Zhongguo yu Liuqiu*, pp. 31-47. For Jiumicun and genealogical records, see, for example, Tomishima Sôei, "Minmatsu Kumemura"; Chen Longgui, "Liuqiu Jiumi xi jiapu"; Chen Jiexian, "Liuqiu Jiumi xi jiapu yanjiu"; Fang Baochuan: "Fujian jiapu".

7 For details on tribute delegations, see, for example, Chang Pin-tsun, *Chinese Maritime Trade*, pp. 355-357; Xie Bizhen, *Zhongguo yu Liuqiu*, pp. 138-185; Zhu Delan, "Shiwu shiji", pp. 142-145; Xu Yuhu, *Mingdai Liuqiu*.

8 For the eastern route, see, for example, Ptak, "Jottings".

9 For the situation in the sixteenth century, see, for example, Ptak, "Sino-Japanese Trade".

10 Also see the diagrams and explanations in Ptak, "Ming Maritime Trade", pp. 187-189.
11 See, for example, Mueller, *Wohlwollen*, pp. 32-36; Chang Pin-tsun, *Chinese Maritime Trade*, pp. 185-187.
12 See sources quoted in Tang Kaijian, *Ming Qing shidafu*, pp. 5-6, and *Aomen kaibu*, pp. 67-68, 72.
13 Higgins, *Piracy*, pp. 54-55; MSL, Jiajing 4, j. 52, 4a-b (pp. 1303--1304), and Jiajing 9, j. 111, 11b-12a (pp. 2636-2327).
14 For conveniently arranged tables, see, for example, Chang Pin-tsun, *Chinese Maritime Trade*, pp. 353-354; Kobata Atsushi, *Chûsei Nantô*, pp. 429-437 (Siam), 455-502 (Palembang), 503-538 (Melaka).
15 See, for example, Ptak, "Jottings", p. 119.
16 Kobata Atsushi, *Hainandao shi*, p. 164; Ptak, "Hainan's Außenbeziehungen", p. 98.
17 See, for example, Thomaz, *Early Portuguese Malacca*, p. 77.
18 See, for example, Loureiro, *Fidalgos, Missionários e Mandarins*, pp. 201-202. There are many more references in Loureiro's work; see n. 28 here.
19 Mills, *Ma Huan*, p. 117; Cortesão, *Suma Oriental*, pp. 115, 137--138, 203, 214.
20 Details and references in Ptak, "Pferde auf See", and "Hainan's Außenbeziehungen", pp. 107-108.
21 Kobata Atsushi, *Chûsei Nantô*, pp. 126-167, 265-276, 298-304; Chang Pin-tsun, *Chinese Maritime Trade*, pp. 355-357. For the year 1383, see MSL, Hongwu 16, j. 156 (p. 2429), and Cao Yonghe, "Ming Hongwu chao", p. 220.
22 Ts'ao Yung-ho, "Pepper Trade in East Asia".
23 MSL, Hongwu 22, j. 201, 1b (p. 3008).
24 For figures given here and in the following paragraphs, see sources indicated in n. 21.
25 For musk, see Ptak, "Almíscar", pp. 48-51, and Borschberg, "Der asiatische Moschushandel".
26 For this and the next paragraphs, see especially Ptak, "The Fujianese, Ryukyuans and Portuguese".
27 See, for example, Momoki Shiro, "Was Đai-Viêt a Rival of Ryukyu", pp. 106-107.
28 For the Chinese in Patani, see, for example, Loureiro, *Fidalgos, Missionários e Mandarins*, especially pp. 319, 320, 369, 377.
29 See, for example, texts cited in Schurhammer, "1543-1943", pp. 60-70, and again Loureiro, *Fidalgos, Missionários e Mandarins*, pp. 369-370.
30 For these projects, see: Ollé, *La invención*.
31 For a recent Western article on this, see, Pearson et al., "Port, City", pp. 191 et seq. Also see research on coins, for example Zhou Guangdou's "Liuqiu gu bi".

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