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PART II — Precolonial
The Lidai Baoan and the Ryukyu Maritime Tributary Trade Network with China and Southeast Asia, the Fourteenth to Seventeenth Centuries

—— Takeshi Hamashita

The Ryukyu Kingdom (present-day Okinawa) was located at the intersection of the South China Sea and the East China Sea, facing South China and Kyushu. Long before the Ryukyu Kingdom period (1429–1879), the Ryukyu Kingdom was already alert to the advantages and opportunities offered by the sea and put them to use in its trade with East and Southeast Asia. Under the Ryukyu Kingdom, missions were sent to Southeast Asia to obtain goods for its tributary trade with China. Even after it was invaded, in 1609, by the Satsuma domain of Tokugawa-period Japan, Ryukyu continued to dispatch tribute envoys to Qing China. At the same time, it sent envoys to Tokugawa shoguns in Edo (present-day Tokyo) and maintained relations with Korea (see map 1).

The period from the late fourteenth century to the early sixteenth century was one of the most prosperous in the history of the Ryukyu Kingdom, due in large measure to the far-flung trading activities of its people, who traversed the East and Southeast Asian waters as enterprising agents of entrepôt trade for countries bordering those waters. Not only were the Ryukyuans in contact with China and Japan, but they also established and maintained relations with Korea and Southeast Asian countries. The story of the Ryukyu merchants’ trading enterprises constitutes an important chapter not only in Ryukyuan history, but also in the history of the tributary trade system in East and Southeast Asia as a whole. This account draws on the primary historical source on the Ryukyus, the Lidai Baoan (Rekidai Hoan in Japanese), or “precious documents of successive generations.”

The current Lidai Baoan represents a fraction of the original archive compiled under the auspices of the Ryukyu Kingdom. While incomplete, the
surviving documents nevertheless provide a partial record of diplomatic correspondence exchanged between 1424 and 1867, encompassing a period stretching from the third year of the reign of the Ryukyu king Sho Hashi to the twentieth year of the reign of King Sho Tai, the last monarch to rule the Ryukyu Kingdom before its dissolution and incorporation into the Japanese state during the Meiji Restoration of January 1868. The collection thus spans the entire period from the twenty-second year of the reign of Emperor Eiraku (Yong Le) of the Ming Dynasty to the sixth year of Emperor Dochi (Tong Zhi) of the Qing Dynasty.

The Lidai Baoan is a compilation of manuscripts, written in Chinese, relating to Ryukyuan contacts with China, Korea, and eight Southeast Asian countries (or more precisely, port towns), covering a 444-year period, from 1424 to 1867 (see fig. 1). The countries are Siam, Malacca, Palembang, Java, Sumatra, Sunda-Kelapa, Patani, and Annam. Lidai Baoan documents shed new light on historical events and developments in all these countries (see
table 1). In particular, they supplement and correct historical accounts relating to South Sea countries, where the activities of Ryukyu merchants have been entirely ignored in existing chronicles and historical records.2

The documents of the Lidai Baoan relate principally to the diplomatic relationship between the Ryukyu Kingdom and China, which developed from contacts initiated by Emperor Taizu in 1372. These initial contacts led to the subsequent development of an envoy-tribute relationship in which Ryukyu administrations offered loyalty and goods to the Chinese imperium in exchange for diplomatic recognition and external protection. As a result, the kingdom became a subordinate member of a regional security and trading alliance dependent on Chinese military and economic hegemony. In this essay, I explore the trading history between Ryukyu Kingdom and China and Southeast Asia.

Trading Relations between Ryukyu and Siam
Merchant ships (manaban) from Southeast Asia came to be a familiar sight in the Ryukyu Kingdom during the latter half of the fourteenth century (see fig. 2). In response, Ryukyuan traders began to engage in return expeditions.
**Table 1** List of Ryukyuan Ships Dispatched to Southeast Asian Ports

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<th>Year</th>
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* * * * *  Lacunae in sources (continued) * * * * *
Records of these expeditions first appeared in the *Lidai Baoan* in the fifteenth century, during which time abundant references were made to contacts with Xianluo (Siam), Patani, Melaka (Malacca), Palembang, Jawa (Java), Samudera (Sumatra), Annam (Vietnam), and Sunda (see table 1). Pioneers of this trade with South Sea countries were accompanied on their voyages by letters containing the king’s seal and gifts in anticipation of establishing formal trade relations with sister ports.

The entrepôt trade that subsequently developed involved the export of goods such as Japanese swords and gold, which were traded for ivory, tin,
jewels, pepper, spices, and caesalpinia sappan for medicine or dyes; such goods were often re-exported to China, Japan, or Korea. Many of the Ryukyu Kingdom’s Southeast Asian trading partners shared a similar tributary relationship with the Ming Dynasty, and as a result Chinese became a lingua franca for official communication and trade negotiations.

The earliest document in the Lidai Baoan pertaining to Ryukyu-Siam relations is a dispatch dated Hongxi 1 (1425), but communication between the two territories is presumed to have begun in the late 1380s. The dispatch of 1425 states, “From our royal great-grandfather’s time through the times of our grandfather and father down to this day, we have frequently dispatched our envoys.” The great-grandfather referred to is King Satto, the grandfather of King Bunei and father of King Shisho. It was in Hongwu 4 (1371) that Siam sent its first tribute to China, after it had received the envoy and imperial rescript from Emperor Taizu of the Ming. This was in the reign of Somdet
Phra Baramarajadhiraj, the third ruler in the Ayutthaya dynasty of Siam. According to the Korean record, 
*Koryosa* (History of Koryo), a Siamese envoy, Nai Goung, came to Korea in the third year of the reign of King Kongyang (1391), having left Siam in the summer of 1388 and stayed in Japan for about a year before traveling to Korea. Again, in the second year of T’aego of Chosôn (1394), another Siamese envoy, Nai Zhang Sidao, arrived in Korea. As he sailed home, Japanese pirates raided his ship, and he was obliged to return to Korea the following year. He left Korea the same year, accompanied by Korean envoys returning the Siamese courtesy.

Siamese interaction with Ryukyu must have begun about the same time that Siam established relations with Japan and Korea. For some time after King Satto of Chûzan began paying tribute to Ming China, sulphur and horses were taken as tribute, but from 1390, the tribute cargo included pepper, sappanwood, and other products of South Sea origin. It is presumed that these products were introduced as a result of Ryukyuan contact with Siam.

Judging from the documents in the *Lidai Baoan*, it appears that while Ryukyuan ships went to Siam, no Siamese ships came to Ryukyu during this period of early Ryukyuan-Siamese contact. The Siamese entrusted their messages to the Ryukyuan envoys coming to their country, and there was no envoy dispatched from Siam to Ryukyu. A Siamese ship visited Ryukyu in 1479, but this was under special circumstances and did not constitute a case of official relations.

Prior to the earliest *Lidai Baoan* documents from the third decade of the fifteenth century, however, there is evidence of a slightly different Ryukyuan-Siamese relationship. In 1404, the provincial government of Fujian wrote to the Chinese emperor about the accidental arrival of a Ryukyu-bound Siamese ship, whereupon Emperor Yongle replied that Siamese intercourse with Ryukyu was praiseworthy in relations among the barbarian countries. He ordered the provincial government to have the ship repaired and provided food for the Siamese, so that they could proceed to their own country or to Ryukyu, whichever they wished to do, after waiting for a favorable wind. This episode indicates that Siamese ships were traveling to Ryukyu early on.

As was the case with Siamese contact with Japan and Korea, Siamese contact with Ryukyu began as a result of the commercial activities of Chinese merchants living in Siam and other countries in the South Sea region. The influence of Chinese merchants living in these areas declined temporarily during the first half of the fifteenth century. With this decline, as ships from the south ceased coming, Ryukyuans headed toward the South Seas.
The decline of Chinese influence seems to have been a potent factor instigating Ryukyuan seafaring in Eastern waters.

The nature of Ryukyuan missions across the seas can be discerned from documents exchanged between Ryukyu and Siam.

*Lidai Baoan*, vol. 40, doc. no. 8

The King of Chūzan, Country of Ryukyu, declares with reference to tributary affairs.

This country has nothing that is appropriate as an article of tribute, and for this reason we are especially dispatching Chief Envoy Nanzatu and others to lead men and take ships with a cargo of porcelains, to proceed to your productive lands to purchase such goods as pepper and sappanwood, and then to return to our country to prepare our tributary needs.

They shall also take some presents we have specially prepared for presentation to you to convey our sincerity. We hope that you will accept them. We would like to request that the members of the mission now departing be allowed to obtain sappanwood and other goods through mutually satisfactory arrangements and return to the country speedily with the wind.

We desire that all within the four seas be regarded as brothers and that intercourse among us be maintained forever.

We list our presents below. Let this dispatch be given to the addressee.

The following goods:

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<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Quantity</th>
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<td>Woven-gold satin</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ornamental satin</td>
<td>20 bolts</td>
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<td>Swords</td>
<td>4 [5?]</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fans</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sulphur</td>
<td>2,500 jin</td>
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<td>Big blue vases</td>
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<tr>
<td>Small blue vases</td>
<td>400</td>
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<tr>
<td>Small blue bowls</td>
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Dispatch to the Country of Siam

Xuande 4/10/10 [6 November 1429]

*Lidai Baoan*, vol. 39, doc. no. 1

The King of Chūzan, Country of Ryukyu, has received a dispatch from the Country of Siam in the sixth month of Xuande 5 [1430] [in which it was stated:]
We have read [the dispatch from Ryukyu, which stated:] “With reference to the matter of tribute to the Great Ming and other matters, we have few goods which are appropriate [as articles of tribute], and we still suffer great inconvenience. We are specially dispatching our envoy Nanzatu Utchi and others aboard a seagoing ship, with a cargo of porcelains and local products, to proceed to the country [Siam] and purchase such goods as pepper and sappanwood, and then to return to our country to prepare our needs. We have also prepared our presents for you.”

We have received this dispatch. Heretofore, you have purchased goods to make [necessary] preparations. Your [present envoys] are now departing at this convenient time with a favorable wind. Therefore, we list our return presents below and inform you through this dispatch. Let this dispatch be given to the addressee.

The goods are as follows:
- Sappanwood 3000 jin
- Red oiled cotton cloth 20 bolts
- Variegated velvet carpets 2
- Soft Western silk 1 length

Dispatch to the King of Chūzan, Country of Ryukyu
Xuande 5/3/21 [13 April 1430]

Both the Ryukyuan and the Siamese king recognized each other very clearly and understood the purposes of trade. Both expected trading activities under tributary relations with Ming China, and the correspondences between the two kings were regular and formal.

Ryukyu ships searching for tributary commodities such as pepper and sappanwood in the South China Sea had to understand the changing networks of trade and had to find more lucrative and safer trade partners and trading ports.

Trading Relations between Ryukyu and Java

Chinese people had begun to reside in South Sea countries and to develop commercial enterprises there from about the late Yuan and early Ming periods. They settled in such places as Palembang and Siam, and probably also in Java. The time for Chinese settlement in Java may have been the latter part of the reign of Hayam Wurch (1350–1389), which was the golden age of the Majapahit dynasty in Java. The Chinese in South Sea countries were the driving force for the opening of trade relations. It is around the end of the four-
teenth century when trade started between those countries and countries
in the north like China, Japan, Korea, and Ryukyu. As for Ryukyu, Chinese
residents there also served as important trade and navigation personnel, and
contributed greatly to the beginning and continuation of the country’s inter-
course with South Sea countries, as well as with China.

Ryukyuan contact with Java began in 1430. It is not apparent from the dis-
patch of that date that this was the first mission, but the Ryukyuan king’s
dispatch dated Chengtong 3 (1438) says that in Xuande 5 (1430), the Ryuk-
yuan court sent its first contingent to pay courtesy to the country. A dispatch
to Java dated Chengtong 5 (1440) mentions that in Xuande 5 presents were
prepared and envoys dispatched to the said country for the first time. The
country named was Java.

In Ryukyuan history, King Shō Hashi of Chūzan is recorded to have sub-
jugated King Tarumi of Sannan in Southern Okinawa in 1429 and thus ef-
fected the unification of the whole island under his control. In 1428, rela-
tions were opened with Palembang, which in the late fourteenth century
became a vassal state of the Majapahit dynasty on the island of Java. Palem-
bang was a port town where Chinese lived and carried on trade, and Chinese
also lived and traded actively on the island of Java. The well-known prosperity
of Palembang as well as of Javanese ports such as Gresik, Surabaya, and Tu-
ban, located near the capital of the state of the Majapahit dynasty in Eastern
Java, was largely the result of the business activities of many Chinese living
in those places. It is easily understood that the Ryukyuan people voyaging to
the South Seas took every opportunity to reach Java through Chinese trade
networks.

There are six documents relating to Java in the *Lidai Baoan*, and they are
all official dispatches from Ryukyu covering the period from 1430 to 1442.
Chinese people were influential in maintaining relations between China and
Java and other South Sea countries in which they resided, as well as in main-
taining Ryukyuan relations with China. International relations in East Asia
at this time were conducted around China based on the Chinese tributary
system, and Chinese living overseas naturally played a significant role in this
system.

The Javanese king at the time of the opening of Ryukyuan relations was a
man mentioned in Chinese records as Yang Wei-xi-sha. It is recorded that in
the ninth month of Hongwu 3 (1370), the Javanese king known in Chinese
transcription as Si-lī Pa-ta-la-p’u complied with the summons of Ming Taizu
and sent his envoy to pay tribute to the Chinese emperor. Later, in Yongle 1
(1403), the “western” king of Java, by the name of Tu-ma-pan, sent a mission to offer felicitations on the enthronement of Emperor Yongle, and soon the “eastern” king of Java, Pen-ling-ta-hai, followed suit. Around this time there were two kings in Java, the eastern and western kings, who were rivals.

At the time of Zheng He’s visit to Java in Yongle 4 (1406), a battle occurred in which the eastern king was defeated and his power destroyed. Some 170 soldiers under Zheng He’s command, going ashore to do some trading, were killed by men of the western king. Later, probably at the time of Zheng He’s departure from Java, the western king dispatched a mission to China, and it is recorded that the king offered apologies to the Chinese for the crime committed by his men.5

In Yongle 13 (1415), a tributary mission was dispatched in the name of the western king, Yang Wei-xi-sha, and this name is said to have been the new name adopted by Tu-ma-pan.6 In Chengtong 8 (1443), Political Counsel Zhangyan of Canton wrote to the emperor that the almost yearly payment of tribute by Yang Wei-xi-sha was too burdensome because visits by Javanese incurred great expenses for receptions on the part of the Chinese. Accordingly, a decree was issued to the effect that Java, too, had to observe the rule of one tribute mission every three years like all other foreign countries sending missions to China.7

Formation of Tributary Missions to China

As a general rule, the upper echelon of a tributary embassy consisted of the following personnel: the envoy representing the king of a tributary state, his assistant or deputy envoy, interpreters, the general manager in charge of the ship’s cargo (known in Chinese as caifu or zhiku; zaifu, chokko), the pilot of the ship (huochong; kacho), and his assistant.8 As far as tributary states were concerned, this official and private trade in goods was likely to have been the core of the tributary system.9 These goods were either those belonging to the king of the tributary state, those of the king and several powerful local chieftains of that state, or those traded by merchants of the state individually.10 A similar structure of tributary mission existed from Ryukyu to other tributary countries such as Malacca. It should also be noted that the Ryukyu king issued a certificate with a similar form with it, and this exemplified the tally system from Ming China.11

Lidai Baoan, vol. 42, doc. no. 3 (1509 Malacca)

King Sho Shin of Chûzan, the Country Ryukyu, in reference to tributary affairs, now makes this known. This country, being deficient in products
and lacking tributary goods, still suffers great inconvenience. For this reason, we are now dispatching Chief Envoy Kamadu, Interpreter Ko Ken, and others aboard a seagoing ship bearing the designation K’ang, with a cargo of porcelain and other goods, to proceed to the productive land of Malacca to purchase such products as sappanwood and pepper through mutually satisfactory arrangements, and then to return to the country to make preparations for the presentation of tribute to the Celestial Court of the Great Ming in a subsequent year.

There is no special document, however, on which the members of this mission now departing can rely, and it is deeply feared that they may encounter the inconvenience of investigations and obstructions by officials along the way. Accordingly the Royal Court has now issued a certificate stamped with a seal bearing half each of the character Hsuan and the number 174, to be received and borne by Chief Envoy Kamadu and others in proceeding on their mission.

In the event of investigation by guards at landings and by coastal patrol officers in the course of the voyage, it is requested that the mission be released and that no obstacles that might cause delay and inconvenience be put in its way. Let this certificate be given to the envoys.

It is now stated [that the mission consists of]:

- One chief envoy: Kamadu
- Two deputy envoys: Manyuku, Gurami
- Two interpreters: Ko Ken, Ko Ga
- Pilot: Ryo Jitsu
- General manager of the ship: Mabuta
- No. of personnel including crew: 150 persons

Cheng-te 4/8/18 [2 September 1509]

The above certificate has been issued for and received by Chief Envoy Kamadu, Interpreter Ko Ken, and others.

Certificate

According to the list of Javanese envoys, most of the chief envoys in the Lidai Baoan had the title of alie. In the intercalary sixth month of Chengtong 1 (1436), the Javanese king’s envoy Ma Yongliang is said to have reported that previously he had been appointed badi and sent to China to present tribute, at which time he was given a silver sash; and that since he had now come to pay tribute again, this time in the capacity of alie, he requested a golden sash. He also requested silver sashes for Badi Nan Wu and others in his company.
Emperor Yingzong granted all his requests. The rank of badi (or bazhe) appears to have been below that of alie.

About this time, another envoy from Java, Gao Naisheng, came to China. He requested that ship carpenters repair his wrecked ship, while promising to take responsibility for providing necessary materials and provisions for the work. Also found is the name of another Javanese envoy, Man Yong, who had the title of caifu bazhe. Gao and Man may have come to China on a different ship than did Ma Yongliang, but the two missions arrived at the same time. The title caifu bazhe may indicate a badi acting in the capacity of caifu; that is, a general manager of the ship with the title of badi. Man Yong was a Chinese. He was originally known as Hong Mouzi and had been a resident fisherman of the district of Longqi in Zhangzhou Prefecture of Fujian Province, but was later taken prisoner by pirates, from whom he finally escaped and fled to Java. There he changed his name to reflect the Javanese style, and he was included as a member of the tributary embassy to China. In China, he requested permission to return to his original home and former occupation, whereupon Emperor Yingzong appointed him a civil servant, providing him with coolies and provisions and sending him back to his native district.

Ma Yongliang came to China as a tributary envoy of Java again in Chengtong 3 (1438), also in the years 7 and 11 (1442 and 1446). In 1438, he was accompanied by the interpreters Liang Yin and Nan Wendan; they, like Ma, were men of Longqi in Fujian Province who had accidentally landed in Java during a fishing trip. In the sixth month of Chengtong 3, all three men, Ma, Liang, and Nan, were permitted to return to their native district, and Ma and Nan in particular were advised to build ancestral halls for the observance of ceremonies in honor of their ancestors.

The Javanese tributary envoy of Chengtong 2 (1437), Ya Mizhe, had acted as interpreter in missions dispatched during the periods of Yongle and Xuande (1403–1435) and had been given a silver sash by the Ming court. Now, in Chengtong 2, he requested a golden sash by virtue of having been promoted to the rank of alie, and asked also for a silver sash for Huang Qi, his company’s interpreter. Both requests were granted. Both Ya Mizhe and Huang Qi were also Chinese.

In Chengtong 11 (1446), Bazhe Ma Mo and Chen Mawu came to China as Javanese envoys at the time of Ma Yongliang’s visit. Also known are the names of Bianshi Bazhe, Li Fu, and the interpreter Li Ai. Again, in Tianshun 4 (1460), in the suite of the Javanese envoy Alie Guoxin were the interpreter Bazhe Ma Mo and Caifu Bazhe Ma Wu. All those mentioned here, possibly including Guo Xin, were Chinese.
Among the Javanese envoys coming during the periods of Yongle and Xuande, Bazhe Chen Weida, Li Qi, Li Tianshan, and others may have been Chinese, but it is difficult to ascertain the race of many of those chief envoys who had the title of alie. At any rate, many Chinese lived in Java and were appointed as chief envoys under the title of alie, and it appears that other important positions in a tributary mission, including interpreter, general manager, and pilot, were also held by Chinese.

In Hongchi 14 (1501), there came drifting to the coast of Tianbo District in Guangdong Province the ship of a Javanese envoy calling himself Naihe-dayamu. He and his men were sent to Guangzhou (Canton), where they were treated as members of a tributary mission and given provisions. A report was sent to the capital, and it was soon brought to light that Naihe-dayamu was a Javanese whose real name was Gengyisu, and that two men, named Li Zhaotie and Li Tingfang, both natives of Jiangxi Province in China, had conspired with a Fujianese by the name of Zhou Cheng and others to conduct secret overseas trade, for the purpose of which they had incited Gengyisu to load goods in Java to be taken to Canton. The false tally sheet carried by Gengyisu led to the disclosure of this conspiracy.

Gengyisu was the son of the Javanese chieftain Badi Niaoxin, who had given his son a tally bearing the Chinese character Zhao and the number 3 torn from the ledger book. This was the tally Gengyisu took for his voyage to China.

Under the tally system of the Ming as applied to Java, one hundred tallies were prepared, each bearing the designation Zhao, which was the first of the two characters for Java, and also two hundred tallies, each bearing the character Wa, the second of the characters for Java. Two copies each of two ledger books for the respective types of tallies were also prepared. One copy of the Zhao ledgers and one hundred Wa tally sheets were given to Java; another copy of the Zhao ledgers, one hundred Zhao tallies, one copy of the Wa ledgers, and one hundred Wa tallies were kept at the Board of Rites in Beijing; and another copy of the Wa ledgers was placed at the Provincial Office in Canton, which was the designated port of entry for Javanese ships. Each tally bore the stamp of a character and a number, each of which was split in half, and each ledger book contained one hundred tallies bound together. The tally brought by a Javanese envoy was to be checked against its ledger in China, and the tally carried by a Chinese against its ledger in Java, and in this way the authenticity of an embassy was verified. A new series of tallies and their ledger books were issued for the period of each reign in China. The fact that Gengyisu carried the tally bearing the character Zhao and the num-
ber 3 torn from the ledger naturally served to disclose the ruse. The Board of Rites held that the correct tally to be presented by the Javanese at this time was the one bearing the character Wa and the number 12. Hence it can be assumed that eleven of the tallies issued for use in the Hongchi period (1488–1505) had been used before that time. (The remaining tallies of the Chenghua period [1465–1487] had been returned to China by the first Javanese mission in the following period, Hongchi, according to the procedure stipulated by the Chinese for unused tallies.) On the back of each tally were entered the number and names of the men aboard the ship, the number of items in the ship’s cargo, and the like.

The sham tally brought by Gengyisu bore the names of 109 Chinese and foreign people, together with a list of goods like pepper and garuwood. These names show that a Javanese tributary embassy in those days included people with Javanese names and those with Chinese names. And yet, though carrying Javanese names, many persons occupying important positions were in fact Chinese.

Chinese and their descendants were important members of the tributary embassies of Ryukyu and South Sea countries, and the roles to which they were appointed had been more or less fixed since the middle of the fifteenth century. In the case of Ryukyu, the general manager of a tributary ship who took charge of its goods was appointed from among native Ryukyuans. In the case of Java, however, such an official seems to have been chosen from among Chinese, and in this sense it can be assumed that direct Chinese influence was considerable in the conduct of Javanese tributary relations with China, more so than in the case of Ryukyuan tributary relations. What has been described above generally holds true for tributary relations which other South Sea countries, like Siam, Malacca, and Palembang had with China, as well as with Ryukyu.

Ryukyu Trade Networks: Tribute Trade and Private Trade by the Ryukyu King

According to the First Collection of the Lidai Baoan, Ryukyu engaged in commercial transactions with various parts of Southeast Asia such as Siam, Palembang, Java, Malacca, Sumatra, Annam, and Patani. It is likely that Japan, Korea, and China were added to these Southeast Asian countries, thereby linking Ryukyu in an extensive trade network.

The trade network, or what may be called the Ryukyu network, was founded on the Ryukyu tribute trade with China. Its trade with Southeast Asia was aimed at obtaining pepper and sappanwood, which were presented as tributes to China. This trade network had two distinctive features: that
trade with Siam and other Southeast Asian countries was vigorous between the early fifteenth century and the mid-sixteenth century; and that, as far as the records of *Lidai Baoan* show, the trade with Southeast Asia declined, while the trade with China and Japan increased.

This phenomenon prompts two questions. What happened to the trade with Southeast Asia after the mid-sixteenth century? And what was the nature of the trade with Manila and Luzon in the context of Ryukyu trade with Southeast Asia? In examining these questions, one must take into account that the Ryukyus were involved in two trade routes between South China and Southeast Asia. One route ran along the island chains on the eastern side of the South China Sea, from Luzon to Sulu, and the other stretched along the coast of the continent on the western side of the South China Sea, from Siam to Malacca.

The eastern route started from Quanzhou (or Fuzhou) and connected the Ryukyus, Taiwan, and Sulu. This route carried not only the trade with Southeast Asian tributary states, but also, from the sixteenth century onward, the trade with Spain centered at Manila—exchanging silk for silver—and the trade with the Dutch East India Company centered on Taiwan. At the same time, the route ran farther north from Fuzhou, connecting with soybean and soybean-meal trade from North China. Thus the Ryukyus mediated the north-south trade along China’s eastern coast.

The western route, starting from Guangzhou, runs along the coast linking major Southeast Asian tributary states, including Siam, Malacca, and Sumatra. Major items traded on this route included rice, marine products, and spices. This route was therefore closely related to food production in the South China area, including Guangdong, Guangxi, and Hunan. Specifically, rice and sugar imported from Southeast Asia played a key role in supplementing such productions in South China. Related to this point, in 1666, ninety-six years after records of official trade with Southeast Asia stopped appearing in the *Lidai Baoan*, King Sho Shitsu applied for pepper, which was not produced locally, to be excluded from the list of tribute goods. The Chinese court approved. This suggests that over the preceding century, the Chinese were able to obtain pepper through non-official channels. Behind this development lay the increase in China’s rice trade with Siam, which brought more merchants from the Chinese coast to Southeast Asia. As a result, the Ryukyuans had to obtain pepper and sappanwood either by competing with the Chinese merchants trading in Southeast Asia or by direct purchase from them (thus increasing their uncertainty and costs.)

This can also be explained by the record of annual extra export of pepper
and sappanwood by the Ryukyu king to China under the title of “attached commodities.” To fulfill the demand for these so-called “attached commodities,” the Ryukyu king continually needed to obtain pepper and sappanwood in ways other than trade missions to Southeast Asian countries.

Trading Relations between Ryukyu and Manila

In 1571, an expeditionary force led by the Spanish general Miguel Lopez de Legazpi entered Manila and made it the seat of government. At that time, Luzon and Sulu were already bound in tributary relationship with China, with their own Chinatown and Japanese-town. When Spanish galleons connected Manila with the American continents, large amounts of silver flowed into Asia. In return, the New World obtained Chinese raw silk, pepper, and other special products from Southeast Asia.

In 1494, as stipulated in the Treaty of Tordesillas, Spain and Portugal split the world in half. The whole of central south America, not including Brazil, came under Spain, while Asia was basically given to Portugal. After setting up base in Manila, Spain could not trade directly with Asia. But she recruited Chinese merchants to participate in China-Manila trade, exchanging silver for raw silk. It is likely that Ryukyu merchants also participated in this trade, transporting into China not the usual products from Southeast Asia, but silver transiting Luzon. Ryukyu was cited fifty-nine times in Spanish records over 220 years of trade with Ryukyu (from 1519 to 1738), including the name and location of Ryukyu; the locations of exchange and trade; the shapes and forms of the various islands and their living conditions; and Ryukyu's relations with Spain, Japan, and China. Besides these, the tributary relationship with China and the Satsuma invasion were also mentioned.

A number of records document the silver–raw silk trade between Ryukyu and Luzon. During the sixteenth century, the Spanish recorded on Ryukyu that every year six to eight Ryukyuan junks called at Luzon islands and that the Ryukyu people there were presumed to be Chinese. Depending on the situation, there may not have been a contradiction between Ryukyuan and Chinese because many Hokkien people were involved in Ryukyuan trade with South Sea countries. The Spanish, extending their influence (in competition with the Portuguese) by spreading Christianity, targeted the wealth of China, Ryukyu, Java, and Japan. Ryukyu became rich by selling Japanese silver for Chinese raw silk, and since Ryukyu was a small country, it could not possibly have had a vigorous external trade.21

From the above materials (though not necessarily immediately relevant), one gathers that in the latter half of the sixteenth century, Ryukyu secured
the conditions to expand its trade from one that was hitherto restricted to procuring tributary goods from Southeast Asia to a much bigger network with silver in Manila. Such conditions were created when a large amount of silver was supplied by Japan and the New World, turning East Asia into a silver-currency zone focused on China. The price ratio between gold and silver at that time was 1:13 in Spain, 1:6 in China, and 1:9 in Japan, thus making it profitable not only to trade with the Chinese for raw silk, but also to trade silver for gold.

In this way, when Ryukyu expanded to a more popular, silver-based exchange system, its trade network was no longer limited to the framework determined by the tributary system. The trade activities of Ryukyu became more versatile, at times getting closer to the network of the Chinese traders, at other times specializing in Japanese trade. However, the Ryukyu kingdom did not necessarily premeditate such an expansion.

Conclusion: Tribute System from Periphery

Under the tribute-envoy system, a tributary state sent periodic tribute missions to the Chinese capital, and each time the ruler of a tributary state changed, the Chinese emperor dispatched an envoy to officially recognize the new ruler. This tributary relationship was at the same time a political, economic, and trade relationship. Other than the exchange of tributes for silk products from the emperor, specially licensed traders accompanying the envoy engaged in commercial transactions at the Beijing Huitongguan (residence for tributary envoys). In addition, more than ten times as many merchants as these special traders were allowed to trade at the country’s borders or at the ports of call. The specific direction and points on the sea routes for Ryukyuan tribute envoys were established, thus confirming their position in their voyage to the port of Fuzhou. Also, making use of seasonal winds, they were able to establish points and lines through navigational charts and by monitoring the coasts and the movements of the stars. This tribute trade was not limited to Chinese merchants from East and Southeast Asia; Indian, Muslim, and European merchants also participated, confirming the link among coastal ports.

A distinguishing feature of the Ryukyu Kingdom was the tributary trade in the East and South China Seas from the Ming to the Qing dynasties. The Ryukyuans obtained pepper and sappanwood, which were not produced locally in Southeast Asia, and presented them as tributes to China. This intermediary trade strengthened Ryukyu’s relationship with Fuzhou on the opposite shore while also allowing its involvement in the migration network
from South China to Southeast Asia. Taking advantage of duty-free trading permitted under the tributary system, important trading ports were interconnected via coastal routes or pan-oceanic long-distance routes.

In 1839, it was decreed that the frequency of tributes from Siam, Burma, and Ryukyu would be reduced to once every four years, but this was not enforced in practice. An imperial edict issued by Emperor Daoguang on the sixth day of the fifth moon, 1839, states,

Up until now, Vietnam has continued with biennial tribute missions and dispatched an envoy to Beijing once every four years. These two were conducted concurrently. Ryukyu sent tribute missions once every two years; while Siam once every three years. These countries submitted their good faith sincerely without complaining. Regardless of the long distances they had to travel or the bad weather that they have encountered, they have made great contributions showing their loyalty. From now on, Vietnam, Ryukyu, Siam will each dispatch tribute envoys once every four years. By so doing, they will demonstrate their will to be a vassal state.22

This was a major change for Vietnam, which was, beside Korea, the country closest to China politically; for Siam, China’s stable source of imported rice; and for Ryukyu, which had continued with biennial tribute missions. The Ryukyu king opposed this edict and petitioned repeatedly to continue traditional tributary relations. For reasons related to the jurisdiction of the LiBu, tributes continued in the case of Ryukyu.

What could have triggered such a change in tribute policy as is evident in Emperor Daoguang’s edict? The year 1839 was a significant date, just before the start of the opium war. Traditional studies have emphasized that the opium war was a result of the West’s (Europe’s and America’s) need to fulfill their trade interests by forcing Asian nations to open up their markets. However, as seen in the change to tributary policy, the Qing court had become more sensible in relations with its traditional tributary states and was seen to attempt to adopt a policy of mercantilism in order to centralize its financial power. In other words, the central government had, by changing tributary regulations, refocused their attention on Guangdong so as to reap the profits from trade there.

One also cannot ignore the fact that in 1880, the Chinese Zongli Yamen (Foreign Affairs Office) took jurisdiction over all matters related to foreign relations. Thus, through consular offices, rather than the traditional interests in the king of a tributary state, the Qing foreign policy had shifted to
direct, cost-benefit relations with the parties concerned: overseas Chinese (huaqiao), overseas Chinese workers (huagong), and overseas Chinese merchant (huashang).

To summarize Ryukyu’s foreign relations, the Ryukyu king’s status was fixed by the tribute-envoy relationship with China; relationships with Korea and other Southeast Asian tributary states were maintained as equals; and while theoretically existing as an equal to Japan, Ryukyu was in reality regarded as a part of the Satsuma domain and thus expected to be subordinate to it. As the evidence suggests, the interrelationship among various Southeast Asian nations and regions was determined by the hierarchical ranking system.

Appendix: The Ryukyus and Java

1430 Java
Lidai Baoan, vol. 40, doc. no. 9
The King of Chūzan, Country of Ryukyu, with reference to matters of courtesy, sends this statement from afar.

You, the subject of China, are loyal, kind and broad-minded, and you look after the people of the country so that they enjoy their duties and live in peace. You give good treatment to [men coming from] all directions, and it is because of your great virtue that [people of] various countries come to you.

For a long time we have wanted to dispatch envoys bearing felicitations, but to our regret our small country lacked pilots well acquainted with the seaways, and thus we have been greatly remiss in showing courtesy.

We now have men who are well acquainted with the waterways, and we have prepared some trifling presents and are specially dispatching Chief Envoy Nan-zatu Utchi and others to proceed aboard a ship to your country, taking gifts with them to be offered as a small token of our sentiments. We shall be happy if you will accept them.

It would be our good fortune if you would facilitate trading for the men now being dispatched and let them depart as soon as possible to come back to the country with the wind. We hope that, by long maintaining intercourse, all men within the four seas will be united as brothers.

We list our gift items below. We now close this dispatch. Let this dispatch be given to the addressee.

The following goods:
- Gold satin 2 bolts
- Golden gauze 3 bolts
- White satin 20 bolts
- Swords 5
- Big blue vases 20

LIDAI BAOAN AND RYUKYU TRADE 127
Dispatch to the Country of Zhaowa [Java]
Xuande 5/10/18 [3 November 1430]

Notes


2. The Rekidai Hoan is composed of three primary collections and one supplemental collection: the First Collection, originally 49 volumes, comprises 42 extant volumes (1424–1696), sorted according to style and nation; the Second Collection, originally 200 volumes, comprises 187 extant volumes (1697–1858), chronologically arranged; the Third Collection, originally 13 volumes, comprises 13 extant volumes (1859–1867), chronologically arranged; and the (Fourth) Supplement includes information on France, the United Kingdom, and the United States.


4. See Lidai Baoan, vol. 40, doc. no. 9, as contained in the appendix to this essay.

5. Huang Ming shilu, under the date Yongle 5/9/day of Guiyu (1407). See also ibid., under the date Yongle 4/11/day of 1-chou (1406).

6. Ibid., under the date Yongle 13/3/day of wuwu (1415).

7. Ibid., under the date Zhengtong 8/7/day of Xinsi (1443).

8. Tributary protocol involved the following: presentation of gifts from the tributary state to the Chinese emperor, return of presents from the latter to the king and con-
sort of the tributary state, presentation of personal gifts from tributary envoys and “rewards” to them from the Chinese, and official and private trade in goods brought aboard the tributary ship. “T’aejong sillok” in the YiJo sillok, under the dates T’aejong 6/8/day of ting-yu (1406); T’aejong 12/4/day of i-hai (1412); and T’aejong 12/5/days of GuiSi and wushen (1412).


10. For instance, in the case of Ryukyu, general goods aboard a tributary ship belonged to the king, and the tributary trade was considered a royal monopoly. Tomiyama Kazuyuki, Ryukyu okoku no gaiko to oken [Diplomacy and Sovereignty of the Ryukyu Kingdom] (Tokyo: Yoshikawa-kobunkan, 2004), 262–98.

11. With the Japanese, however, the tributary voyages conducted under the control of the bakufu (Tokugawa shogunate) took the form of joint ventures of the bakufu and some local feudal lords, and cargoes consisted mostly of goods belonging to individual merchants, who joined tributary voyages in great numbers. Thus, the membership of tributary embassies naturally varied, according to the types of trade. Ibid., 247.

12. Among thirteen envoys from Java to China between 1405 and 1429, the title of alie is 11 and title of badi, or bazhe, is 2.

13. See “Yingzong shilu” in the Huang Ming shilu, under the dates Chengtong 1/inter. 6/days of jichou and renchen (1436).

14. Ibid., under the date Zhengtong 3/6/day of wuwu (1438).

15. Ibid., under the date Zhengtong 2/3/day of bingwu (1437).

16. Ibid., under the dates of Zhengtong n/n/day of xinsi, and Zhengtong n/12/day of bingshen (1446). The title bianshi indicates a general manager, corresponding to the term zongguan (Japanese: sōkan), which is the same as caifu or zhiku.

17. Ibid., under the dates of Tianshun 4/8/days of xinhai and gengwu (1460).

18. This registration in the tally was called tianxie, meaning “to fill in.”

19. “Gaozong shilu” in the Huang Ming shilu, under the date Hongzhi 14/3/day of renzi (1501).

20. For the case of Ryukyuan trade with Java, see the appendix to this essay.


LIDAI BAOAN AND RYUKYU TRADE 129