

Making a Good Impression: Cultural Drama in the Ryukyu-China Relationship

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The kingdom of Ryukyu existed in a potentially unstable political and diplomatic space between Japan and China. Among other functions, Ryukyu served as a conduit of information and goods from China to Japan during the early modern era (1609-1879). In this capacity, the small island kingdom was able to maintain a substantial degree of political autonomy as long as it maintained close ties to China. Impressions mattered in this context. Over time, the elite Ryukyuan who managed the relationship with China became increasingly skillful at what we might call “public relations.”

In the classic pattern during the Ming and Qing dynasties, foreign affairs masqueraded as cultural relationships between the Chinese court and the rulers of other countries. In this arrangement, foreign states expressed ritual subordination to Chinese culture to gain access to trade, education, technology and other concrete benefits. Evidence that foreigners had internalized Chinese elite culture, therefore, facilitated trade and diplomacy with China. Over the course of the early modern era, Ryukyuan elites became especially adept at using Chinese culture to enhance their kingdom’s image. The arrival in Okinawa of Chinese investiture envoys was a particularly important opportunity for making a good impression. Indeed, the investiture process can be likened to a parade, by which Ryukyuan officials presented their kingdom in the best possible light. To contextualize this parade-like quality of the investiture process, some background on the kingdom and the history of its relations with Japan and China is necessary.

Background: The Early Modern Ryukyu Kingdom

A reasonable beginning point for the Ryukyu Kingdom is the early fifteenth century, when Shō Hashi 尚巴志 (r. 1422-1439) unified all of Okinawa under his rule. For the next century and a half, the Chūzan 中山 kingdom of Okinawa fought a series of wars, gradually expanding to become a small-scale empire consisting of most of the Ryukyu Islands. (For details on Ryukyuan military affairs during this time, see Smits 2010.) The economic basis of this expansion was far-reaching maritime trade. Ryukyuan traders dealt with parts of South and Southeast Asia, China, Korea, and Japan. In part owing to competition from European traders, the kingdom entered a period of economic and military decline from the middle of the sixteenth century. The low point occurred early in the seventeenth century, during several decades immediately following Ryukyu's military defeat in 1609 by an invading army from Satsuma.

Owing to modern and contemporary notions of national identity, the status of Ryukyu after 1609 has long been a contentious issue in both academic and popular circles. The big question, of course, is the extent to which Ryukyu was or was not part of Japan, a question made all the more difficult because of the ambiguous status of “Japan” prior to the Meiji Restoration. It is common for advocates of different positions to force modern

categories onto the seventeenth or eighteenth century instead of attempting to explain Ryukyu's historical status by means of concepts relevant to that time. An explanation of the political status of early-modern Ryukyu is beyond the scope of this paper, but there are some points we should bear in mind. First, after 1609 Satsuma controlled Ryukyu's foreign relations—at least to a point. Ryukyuan cooperation, however, was essential for Satsuma's attainment of its objectives in China. The need for Ryukyu to appear fully independent in Chinese eyes provided its royal government with leverage vis-à-vis Satsuma. The number of Japanese residents in Ryukyu sharply decreased after 1609, and many forms of Chinese culture flourished, especially among social elites, from the middle of the seventeenth century onward. Satsuma encouraged this general Sinification of Ryukyuan culture to facilitate diplomacy and trade with China. (Regarding the political status of Ryukyu, see Smits 1999: 15-49. For a thorough study of this issue, see Tomiyama 2004.)

Satsuma derived modest economic benefit from the Ryukyu-China trade. Until the eighteenth century, however, complications often prevented Satsuma from realizing significant profits. These complications included pirate attacks, policy changes in China, Ryukyuan passive resistance, and bakufu decrees aimed at limiting competition from Satsuma products in Japanese markets. Ryukyu's royal government constantly “borrowed” silver from Satsuma for use in trade and diplomacy in China, and it rarely paid all of these funds back. Information from China was sometimes as valuable as material products. Satsuma was able to serve as a broker of valuable, first-hand information about conditions in China because Ryukyu maintained regular diplomatic relations with the Qing court, and Ryukyuan envoys periodically traveled to Beijing. (For details on Ryukyu-Satsuma trade with China, see Uehara 1981 and 1989. Regarding Ryukyu and Satsuma as information brokers, see Maehira 1990 and 1997, and Toby 1991, esp. pp. 143-144, 147-150.)

Socially, there were two broad, legally defined divisions in eighteenth-century Ryukyu: aristocrats, known by such terms as *yukatchu* 良人, *keimochi* 係持, or *samurei* 士, and commoners, typically known as *hyakushō* 百姓 in official documents. Because of the prevalence of Japanese-derived terms in documents and the superficial resemblance to the legally defined *samurai* versus commoner distinction in Japan, it is easy to overlook significant differences. Ryukyuan aristocrats defined themselves by possession of *kafu* 家譜, household records indicating ancestors who had served as government officials. Throughout the seventeenth century, the government at Shuri gradually certified what it regarded as legitimate *kafu* and established an office to maintain records of aristocratic households.

Aristocratic status in Ryukyu was theoretically linked with government service, but by the eighteenth century, this connection had become problematic because government jobs were insufficient to employ all the aristocrats. Moreover, wealthy commoners began purchasing aristocratic status from a financially pressed government, thereby creating a group known as *shinzanshi* 新参士 or *kōisamurei* 買い士. After 1609, aristocratic status and residence in urban areas gradually became linked. In other words, local government officials in the countryside became “commoners.” To make matters

more complex, starting in the eighteenth century, destitute aristocrats began establishing their own agricultural villages (*yaadui* 宿取). Aristocratic status in Ryukyu was subject to many gradations all the way up to the king, who was not part of a separate nobility like the Japanese emperor. During the eighteenth century, many Ryukyuan elites began to see themselves in the manner of Chinese scholar-officials.

Turning to the economy, eighteenth-century Ryukyu was primarily an agricultural society. In addition to food grains and sweet potatoes, Ryukyu's agricultural sector included forestry, sugar and salt production, and animal husbandry. The kingdom's tribute trade with China, although essential for political reasons, was a net loss for the royal government. Partially offsetting these losses was the government's sugar monopoly, a major source of state revenue (Smits 1999, pp. 34-35, Sakihara 1975, Araki 1980: 121-129, Tasato 1987: 13-14, and Kamiya 1990: 24). Wide-ranging trade had once been the kingdom's main source of wealth, but from the end of the sixteenth century onward, circumstances forced Ryukyu to rely mainly on its own resources. Ryukyuan officials were slow to acknowledge the implications of this new reality. Other than the sugar monopoly, there were no major attempts to reform agriculture during the seventeenth century.

Background: Early Connections with China

Even during the fourteenth century, when the island of Okinawa was home to three principalities, each of these small states established formal tribute relations with Ming China and conducted trade within that framework. Satto 察度, lord of Chūzan, received the calendar from the Ming emperor in 1372, and in 1383 the rulers of Chūzan and Sannan 山南 received silver and gold seals, followed in 1385 by the ruler of Hokuzan 北山. From this point onward, all three rulers of the Okinawan principalities received investiture from the Chinese court and were participating in its tribute system. (For details on early Okinawan relations with the Ming court, see Tomiyama 2004: 23-34.) At this time, Chinese residing in and around the port of Naha were instrumental in conducting the tribute trade. Indeed, there is strong circumstantial evidence that resident Chinese in the fourteenth century headed their own quasi-independent office (Ōsōfu 王相府) for handling the tribute trade with Ming China. Although this office was located in Chūzan, it also handled tribute missions and trade for the rival principalities of Hokuzan and Sannan (Maeda 1972: 64-67.) From then until just prior to formal annexation by Japan in 1879, the Chūzan kingdom of Okinawa maintained formal relations with China, albeit with a brief hiatus following the Satsuma invasion of 1609 and the Ming-Qing transition in the seventeenth century. Ryukyu sent regular tribute missions to China, sent students to study in China privately or at the National Academy (Guózǐjiān 國子監) in the capital, and received investiture envoys from China to confer ritual imperial sanction new kings.

The oldest extant stone monument in Ryukyu was created in 1427, and its inscription constitutes the oldest extant Ryukyuan document in classical Chinese. The likely author is Kaiki 懷機, the king's chief minister and a Daoist practitioner of Chinese ancestry whose apparent main duty was to ensure royal longevity. Known as the *Ankoku zanju*

kaboku no kihi 安国山樹華木之記碑, the text praises King Shō Hashi as a paragon of loyalty, humility, and love for the common people as well as Kaiki's influence with supernatural forces. It explains that the king sent Kaiki to China to investigate beneficial plants and that Kaiki returned to Ryukyu and constructed a garden at Mt. Ankoku near the royal palace. To the north of the mountain, he dug out an area to create Ryūtan Pond 龍潭池, and to the south he constructed a pavilion for royal officials to visit while taking a break from their duties. The text also likens the ever-increasing vitality of the garden to the vitality of the kingdom (Okinawa kenritsu hakubutsukan 1993: 16, 82 and Maeda 1972: 45). From this monument and other sources, we know that early in the kingdom's history popular Daoism and possibly some rudimentary knowledge of geomancy 風水 were present in the capital area from the beginning of the fifteenth century if not earlier.

The Chinese who came to Okinawa in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries were mainly seafaring merchants. Although they resided in various places at different times, a community of Chinese immigrants to Ryukyu developed in Kumemura 久米村, near the port of Naha. In the local language Kumemura was called Kuninda, and in documents it often appears as Tōei 唐營, literally something like “Chinese businesses.” The traditional date for the founding of Kumemura is 1392, although the early details are sketchy. By the second half of the fifteenth century, Kumemura had become the locus of Ryukyuan trade and diplomacy with China. Its fortunes declined sharply in the years just before and after Satsuma's invasion. Owing to the political importance of Ryukyu's ties with China after 1609, the royal government put considerable resources into reviving Kumemura as a center for diplomacy and Chinese studies. The golden age of Kumemura extended from the late seventeenth century to the late eighteenth century. During this time, its residents played a disproportionate role in both politics and scholarship. In some sense, they were too successful. By the late eighteenth century, the entire Ryukyuan elite had become so well grounded in Chinese learning that Kumemura lost its monopoly on Chinese studies and the management of diplomacy. (For a comprehensive history of Kumemura and its most prominent residents see Ikemia, Kowatarai, and Dana 1993.)

Beginning in the seventeenth century, male residents of Kumemura enjoyed guaranteed stipends starting at ten years of age and increasing with formal rank and status. The lowest official post in the Kumemura hierarchy was “interpreter” (*tsūji* 通事). Those holding this rank performed a variety of low-level diplomatic functions and typically studied in China. The loftiest rank was *murasaki kintaifu* 紫金大夫, indicating a high level of diplomatic service and academic attainment. During the seventeenth century, financial and other incentives persuaded some of the best minds within the Ryukyuan elite to settle in Kumemura and take “Chinese” names. Consider the case of Ryukyu's most influential official Sai On 蔡温 (1682-1761). Although born in Kumemura, both of Sai On's parents relocated there from Shuri, the royal capital. Danger was part of the privileged status of Kumemura residents. Most traveled to China repeatedly for study or official business. Many died in this process owing to shipwreck, pirates, or disease.

Sai On was perhaps most prominent scholar in early modern Ryukyu, but many other Ryukyans excelled in various realms of Chinese studies or Chinese-derived knowledge. For example, Sō Eki 曾益 (1645-1702) was a renowned poet, whose work was known in China. While in Fujian in 1688, Sō and several other Ryukyans contributed funds so that Gi Shitetsu 魏士哲 (Takamine Tokumei 高嶺徳明 1653-1738) could study a surgical procedure to repair a harelip in 1688 with the physician Huang Huiyou 黄會友. (Uezato 1993: 184 and Xu 1991: 196-197). The poems of Tei Junsoku 程順則 (1663-1734) were known in China, and he also wrote a book on maritime navigation, *Shinan kōgi* 指南広義, for use by Ryukyuan pilots sailing between Naha and Fujian. Agriculturalist Gima Shinjō 儀間真常 (1557-1644) and pragmatic diplomat Sai Kokki 蔡国器 (1632-1702) are also excellent examples of Ryukyans whose accomplishments were grounded in knowledge they acquired in China.

Specialized knowledge advanced fields such as medicine agriculture, textiles, metallurgy, tile making, and more. In the realm of medicine, when Gi Shitetsu returned to Ryukyu, he successfully repaired the harelip of Crown Prince Shō Eki 尚益 and many other children. He eventually set out with two assistants to spread knowledge of this surgical technique throughout Ryukyu. In 1743, while on his way to Beijing, An Mōtoku 晏孟得 encountered and studied under a Chinese physician who specialized in surgery of the mouth and tongue. Upon his return, An's medical reputation spread as far as Satsuma (Xu 1991: 196-197).

Sugar production, the main economic basis of the government, benefited from Chinese knowledge. In 1623, Ma Heikō 麻平衡 (1557-1644) studied sugar production in Fujian and became the first person in Ryukyu to make dark sugar from the juice of sweet potatoes. Then in 1663, the royal government sent Riku Tokusen 陸得先 to Fujian to study advanced sugar production techniques. He returned with knowledge of production techniques for white sugar and rock candy (*kōrizatō*) (Xu 1991: 193-194). While in China, all Ryukyans functioned, to varying degrees, as diplomats for whom mastery of Chinese verse was a basic professional skill.

Making Good Impressions

It should be clear from the preceding discussion that good relations with China were essential for the continued survival and prosperity of the early modern Ryukyu kingdom. A key aspect to maintaining the Ryukyu-China relationship was negative, namely, hiding from Chinese eyes the nature of Ryukyu's relationship with Satsuma and the bakufu in Edo. Reports from Chinese investiture envoys (*sakuhōshi* 冊封使) indicate that Chinese officials were aware of the high level of Japanese influence in the kingdom but chose not to make an issue of it. The other side of this effort at obscuration was active campaign to create positive impressions. The most important opportunity for making a good impression was royal investiture. Investiture (*sakuhō* or *sappō*) consisted of a series of rituals in which the Chinese court formally recognized new kings. Not only did the investiture envoys and their entourage stay in Ryukyu for several months, they typically wrote a book-length report on conditions in the kingdom, which became

available to subsequent envoys and other Chinese officials. Taken as a whole, the investiture process functioned much like a parade, in which Ryukyuan officials strove to present to the envoys a kingdom steeped in Chinese culture and values.

As mentioned previously, poetry lubricated the gears of diplomatic exchanges. The ability to compose elegant, learned Chinese poems about local scenery, journeys, famous places, and special occasions marked Ryukuans as masters of the civilized arts not only in Chinese eyes, but also in interactions with Japanese elites along the route between Kagoshima and Edo (Uezato 1990: 22-24). In his autobiography, Sai On described a scenario in which his ability to compose an impromptu Chinese poem about the surrounding scenery became the main evidence of his mastery of essential learning during an initial encounter with a reclusive scholar in Fujian. Although the scholar's praise of the poem was actually a setup to criticize Sai On, the matter reveals that the ability to compose decent poetry usually served as proof of refinement and learning. (Sakihama 1984: 106-107). Poetry exchange accompanied many diplomatic situations, and the presentation of poems as gifts was a common practice. For example, investiture envoy Xú Bǎoguāng's *Zhōngshān chuánxìnlù* (*Chūzan denshinroku*) 中山傳信錄 ends with poems presented as parting gifts to the envoys by the king and leading Ryukyuan officials. In a different type of example, in 1761 a group of Ryukyuan students in Beijing made a good impression on their hosts by presenting a book of poems they wrote in honor of the empress dowager's seventieth birthday. (Xu 1991: 189).

In Chinese eyes, official histories were an essential component of legitimate royal lines. Ryukyu's earliest official histories, *Chūzan seikan* 中山世鑑 (Mirror of Chūzan) and *Ryūkyūkoku yuraiki* 琉球国由来記 (Origins of Ryukyu) were written in Japanese, but during the late seventeenth century Kumemura scholars translated both works into Chinese, resulting in *Chūzan seifu* 中山世譜 (Genealogy of Chūzan) and *Ryūkyūkoku kyūki* 琉球国舊記 (Account of Ryukyu's past). These Chinese-language versions of Ryukyu's past, however, were not simple linguistic conversions. Instead, they presented Ryukyu's past in ways that would appeal to Chinese readers. For example, in the section on Shuri, *Ryūkyūkoku kyūki* includes a lengthy discussion of the geomancy (*chiri* 地理) of the region. It begins by explaining, "nothing was more important than geomancy to the sage kings of old in establishing the capital of their state," even though geomancy was a relatively new technology in seventeenth century Ryukyu and the original founders of Shuri would have been ignorant of it. (Yokoyama 1988: 9-10). *Chūzan seifu*, especially Sai On's eighteenth century revision if it, substantially transformed Ryukyu's past into a moral drama centered on the kingdom's line of monarchs. The accounts of Ryukyu's history found in the reports of investiture envoys during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries drew heavily upon the kingdom's own revised official histories.

The succession of Ryukyuan monarchs was central not only to *Chūzan seifu* but also to the arrangement of royal ancestral tablets in official temples and shrines. These official religious sites were closely connected with the ritual calendar of the royal court and with ceremonies in which Chinese investiture envoys participated. In 1683, Qing investiture envoy Wāng Jí 汪楫 viewed the royal tablets at Sōgenji and wrote that their order

appeared random. Shunten was in the middle as the great progenitor, flanked by Eiso and Satto. The arrangement did not make sense to Wang, who had expected to see the customary Chinese *zhāo-mù* order 昭穆秩序, with the dynastic founder in the middle, the even numbered reigns 2, 4, 6, etc. to his left (*zhao*), and the odd numbered reigns, 3, 5, 7, etc. to his right (*mu*) (Tomiyama 2004: 242-243). The Ryukyuan logic had the most important founding figure flanked by the founders of two ancient lines, followed by the kings of the current second Shō dynasty.

The next investiture envoy, Xu Baoguang, was aware of the strange arrangement his predecessor had encountered. Arriving in Ryukyu in 1719, Xu diagramed the tablets, which, however, were now in what Xu regarded as the proper *zhao-mu* order. This matter was part of a larger debate over posthumous titles, the proper housing and arrangement of royal tablets, and related matters of court ritual that took place between approximately 1690 and 1731. The details of the debates are complex and need not concern us, but the basic goal was to reconcile Chinese and Ryukyuan practices. Although the general trend was greater conformity to Chinese practices, even Kumemura scholars agreed that deceased Ryukyuan kings should receive both Confucian and Buddhist veneration. Prior to the arrival of Xu, however, all of the royal tablets were arranged in the Chinese manner, even in Enkakuji, the kingdom's major Buddhist temple. After Xu's return to China, the tablets in Enkakuji reverted to their Buddhist layout. (For a detailed analysis of these and related matters, see Tomiyama 2004: 242-257.) In short, the arrangement of royal memorial tablets prior to the arrival of the investiture envoys was another example of Ryukyuan officials creating a good impression.

The best example of cultural drama designed to enhance Ryukyu's image in the eyes of investiture officials is *kumiodori* 組踊, a combination of drama and music based mainly on local Okinawan legends, music, and dance. Its creator, Tamagusuku Chōkun 玉城朝薫 (1684-1734) had travelled to Japan five times, where he studied dramatic arts such as *nō*, *kyōgen*, puppet theater, and *kabuki*. The first known performance was in 1719, at a banquet to entertain the investiture envoys. Xu Baoguang describes the second of six plays as "Tsuru and Kame—two sons avenge their father," a reference to the play *Nidō tekiuchi* 二童敵討 (Two boys avenge their enemy). Based on the conflict between Gosamaru 護佐丸 (1393?-1458) and Amawari 阿摩和利 (?-1458), the sons of the unjustly destroyed Gosamaru kill the scheming Amawari, who had wrongly convinced the king that Gosamaru was plotting rebellion. Xu summarizes the plot without commenting on it (Xu 1721: 111). The play transforms the violent events connected with the early formation of the kingdom into a cultural drama highlighting loyalty and filial piety.

Another *kumiodori* Xu saw at a later event was *Kōkō no maki* 孝行之巻 (Tale of filial piety), which was particularly suitable for the task of highlighting lofty moral values for consumption by investiture envoys. It is set in the time of the semi-legendary king Gihon (r. 1249-1259). Summarizing the plot, a filial son and daughter from a poor household offered themselves as sacrifices to appease a violent dragon and thus provide money for their family. Ultimately, it was the daughter who had to make the ultimate sacrifice,

thus resonating with Chinese tales of dutiful women who sacrifice their lives. However, owing to their steadfast filial piety, the cosmic forces intervened to provide a happy outcome for everyone involved. In 1800, Investiture envoy Lǐ Dǐngyuán 李鼎元 saw this episode and was moved by it. In his account, *Shi Ryūkyū ki* 使琉球記 (Record of an envoy to Ryukyu), he devoted considerable space to summarizing and quoting from the play. At the end he commented, “For Heaven to reward filial behavior is deeply satisfying” (Li 1802: 337).

There was at least one more event that Li found deeply satisfying. The 11th day of the 10th month was his mother’s birthday. However, Li had intended to keep this matter to himself and did not tell anyone. Ryukyuan officials had done their research, however, and royal envoys surprised Li with gifts of five elegant fans, an incense burner, and a commemorative longevity manuscript. The event led to a celebratory feast with the Ryukyuan envoys, and of course, enhanced Ryukyu’s image as a small but highly refined kingdom worthy of Chinese esteem (Li 1802: 407-408).

Conclusion

Ryukyuan delegations parading through the streets of Edo and elsewhere in Japan was the major means by which the island kingdom created impressions of itself within Japan. Prints and other reproductions of such parades helped amplify their impact. More quietly, Ryukyuan envoys to Japan exchanged poems, discussed conditions in China, and otherwise interacted with Japanese elites. Vis-à-vis the continent, Ryukyuan efforts to forge favorable impressions among Chinese elites was at the core of its diplomatic efforts. Success in this realm was essential for the kingdom’s quasi-autonomous existence, and by the seventeenth century, Ryukyu’s experts in Chinese affairs had become skilled at their craft. Whether on stage in a dramatic portrayal of filial piety, in temples housing ancestral tablets of the royal line, in portraying Ryukyu’s past, or in the countless occasions for writing and exchanging poems, Ryukyuan elites took advantage of opportunities to, in effect, parade before Chinese officials an image of a morally and culturally advanced kingdom.

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