

Sino - Japanese Relations in early Meiji Era : Status of Ryukyu and Taiwan

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Both China and Japan had tributary relations with Ryukyu for several centuries prior to its annexation by Japan in 1879. Claimed simultaneously by two powerful neighbours, dual suzerainty over the Ryukyu archipelago, a chain of some 60 islands that lie between Taiwan and Japan, continued to remain shrouded in ambivalence, complexity, and peculiarities. Taking note of this wildered status of Ryukyu Islands, an eighteenth century Japanese scholar Hayashi Shihei (1738-1793) commented that the Ryukyu kingdom, being between two countries of China and Japan, “subjects herself to both countries and pays tribute to both. She uses the Japanese calendar when she deals with Japan and the Chinese calendar when she contacts China”.¹

In an age when the international affairs of the countries of East Asia were governed according to the norms of the Chinese tributary system,² the kingdom of Ryukyu (Liu-ch’iu in Chinese) also maintained regular tributary relations with China. It was in 1372 that the Ryuku King Satto (1349-1395) sent the first mission from Okinawa to China, then under the rule of Emperor Hung-wu (1368-1403) of the Ming dynasty. The successive princes of Ryukyu continued this trend and every year ships sailed from Okinawa to Fukien. This annual contact with china, which was political and cultural as well as commercial, greatly enriched the ‘Chuzan state’, as the Ryukyu kingdom under Satto’s rule came to be known. The kingdom gained further eminence during the reign of King Sho Hashi (b. 1372, r. 1406-1439) who brought various petty and loosely scattered principalities under his control and united them to the island of Okinawa, the seat of ‘Chuzan state’. In order to derive benefits from the mainland trade and enhance his own position, Sho Hashi even entered into tributary relations with China during the reign of the Ming emperor, Yung-lo (r. 1403-1425). In course of time, the Ryukyu Islands became an important and thriving centre of East and Southeast Asian commerce.

¹ *Sangoku tsuran zusetzu (Illustrated account of three countries)* in Kikuchi Kenjiro, “Ryuku ga honpo oyobi Shina ni taiseshi kankei o ronzu” (Discussion of Ryuku relation with Japan and China), SZ, 7.10:860-861 (October 1896); quoted in Robert K. Sakai, “The Ryukyu (Liu-ch’iu) Islands as a Fief of Satsuma” in John K. Fairbank (ed.), *The Chinese World Order: Traditional China’s Foreign Relations* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1968), p.112.

² The tributary system was a distinct type of imperialism and diplomacy by which the power of the Chinese empire was extended far beyond its territorial limits. It was based on the belief that the Celestial (Chinese) Empire was the hub of the universe and that about this hub were grouped barbarian or uncivilized states. Under the tributary system, a tributary monarch was required to obtain investiture from the Emperor of China. In submitting to the overlordship of China, the acquiescing states were motivated by various considerations fear of the military might of the Chinese empire, need for security and military assistance against hostile neighbours and desire to partake of the benefits of a superior culture, and prospect of lucrative trade.

Around this time, when the Ryukyu King was stepping up relations with china, Japan was passing through a tumultuous period, commonly known as the Age of the Warring States (*sengoku jidai*) which lasted for about a century. In the fifteenth century, an internecine war has erupted among powerful feudal states and a large part of the Japanese empire, namely the domains of Satsuma, Hizen, Higo, Chikuzen, Chikugo, Nagato, Iwanu, Iyo, Izumi, and Kii, had become the scene of fierce warfare. For the deserters, traders and those civilians who had been deprived of their property and livelihood, the China waters and the nearby located islands afforded a lucrative field of adventure. It was at this crucial juncture that the lord (*daimyo*) of Satsuma domain (*han*) of Kyushu in south-western Japan realized the advantages which could be gained by tapping the economic resources of the neighbouring continent, and the focus was centered on the Ryukyu Islands, whose ports had become entrepots for flourishing trade.³

In the mid-twelfth century, though there was no official contact between Japan and China, some feudal domains, namely Satsuma, had developed a brisk trade with the native merchants on the eastern seacoast of China. The trade flourished so much that the *daimyo* of Satsuma domain (chief of Shimazu clan) was made “lord of the twelve islands of the South seas”.⁴ But this trade was disrupted and Satsuma’s control was subsequently lost after Japan plunged into a state of prolonged civil warfare in the mid-fifteenth century (*sengoku jidai*). Realizing the advantages which could be gained by tapping Ryukyu’s overseas trade, the daimyo of Satsuma tried once again in 1472 to reassert his authority over the islands by demanding that Ryukyu must cease trading with ships from other countries (probably he was referring to the ships sent by his rivals in Japan), and in 1480 he even instructed the Ryukyu king to dispatch a tribute mission to Muromachi, the seat of Ashikaga bakufu.⁵ It is not clear whether such a mission was ever sent, but Satsuma gained eminence in the eyes of Ryukyans because from time to time officials from Okinawa (seat of Ryukyu Islands) did present themselves in Satsuma to express solicitude or to felicitate the daimyo as and when occasion demanded.⁶

Satsuma, however, lost prestige among Ryukyans when the kingdom was invaded in 1587 by the great Japanese invader and unifier Toyotomi Hideyoshi (1536-1598). Hideyoshi envisaged a grandiose plan of

³ Robert K. Sakai, “The Ryukyu (Liu-Ch’iu) Islands as a Fief of Satsuma”, p.116.

⁴ Hosea Ballou Morse and Harley Farnsworth McNair, *Far Eastern International Relations*, vol.1 (New York: Russell and Russell, 1931), p.483.

⁵ Kikuchi Kenjiro, “Ryukyu ga honpo oyobi Shina ni taiseshi kankei o ronzu” ,SZ, 7.9:784 (September 1896); cited in Robert K. Sakai, “The Ryukyu (Liu-Ch’iu) Islands as a Fief of Satsuma” ,p.116.

⁶ Robert K. Sakai, “The Ryukyu (Liu-Ch’iu) Islands as a Fief of Satsuma”, p.116.

building a sprawling Japanese empire, beginning with an attack on Korea. He demanded from Ryukyu to contribute troops for his expedition but the Ryukyu King Sho Nei (1589-1612) refused to comply with Japanese demands. Then, on the pretext that the kingdom had not met its obligations, Hideyoshi thought of annexing the islands and in the following years ordered that a tribute mission be sent to him. Although Ryukyu had sent as congratulatory embassy to Hideyoshi in 1589, it had not submitted to Japan as it had to Ming China. The Ryukyuan expected some kind of help from Satsuma but in the absence of any aid from Satsuma against Hideyoshi's exaction, King Sho Nei sought to strengthen his ties with China's ruling dynasty and warned them of the impending Japanese attack on the continent.⁷

After Toyotomi Hideyoshi's death, when Tokugawa Ieyasu (1542-1616) established his military rule (bakufu) in 1603, Shimazu Iehisa, the *daimyo* of Satsuma, began urging King Sho Nei to send an embassy of congratulatory tribute as an expression of submission to Ieyasu. The Ryukyu king, however, ignored these overtures, as he had earlier ignored Hideyoshi's demands for cooperation in the Japanese invasion of Korea.⁸ Matters were finally resolved when in 1609 Shimazu Iehisa received authorization from Ieyasu to force the submission of Ryukyu even if it required sending an expeditionary force to the Island Kingdom. In the summer of 1609 a large force of 32,000 troops left Satsuma and invaded Ryukyu and quickly brought the Island Kingdom to its knees. Ryukyu Kingdom's "submission" to "vassal state" status, contends Ronald P. Toby, was used as an evidence of legitimacy of the Tokugawa bakufu in its correspondence with the Ming.⁹ Not just that, through the Ryukyuan the shogun could also seek to demonstrate his supreme control over foreign affairs, extend his prestige beyond the seas, and maintain contacts with the mainland. Sho Nei and his principal councillors were taken as prisoners to Kagoshima, the Shimazu's seat of power, and then to Edo, the seat of Tokugawa bakufu. The bakufu congratulated the Satsuma daimyo for this heroic deed and service to the Japanese state, and assigned him the care of the Ryukyu kingdom.¹⁰

In 1611, Ryukyu agreed to be a vassal state of Satsuma. The northern islands of Amami were placed under the direct control of Satsuma but Ryukyu was allowed to retain its royal family and a façade of independence. Thereafter, it sent a Japanese style tribute mission every year to Kagoshima and periodically to

⁷ Ibid., p.116.

⁸ George H. Kerr, *Okinawa: The History of an Island People* (Tokyo: Charles E. Tuttle, 1958), p.155.

⁹ Ronald P. Toby, *State and Diplomacy in Early Modern Japan: Asia in the Development of the Tokugawa Bakufu* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1984), p.57.

¹⁰ Kagoshima Kenshi (History of Kagoshima Prefecture), vol.II. (Tokyo: Kagoshima Ken, 1940), pp.626-627; in Robert K. Sakai, "The Ryukyu (Liu-Ch'iu) Islands as a Fief of Satsuma", p.118.

Edo.¹¹ Ryukyu had thus come under the dual sovereignty of Japan and China, because the Ryukyu king continued to send tribute missions to China¹² and, side by side, it also maintained tributary relationship with Satsuma. It was a peculiar arrangement for two reasons. Firstly, under this “dual” arrangement, while Satsuma’s approval was necessary before an heir could succeed to the throne, it was the investiture ceremony conducted by officials from China that made the succession legitimate in Chinese eyes. Secondly, while the issue of Ryukyuan submission to china was with the knowledge and consent of Tokugawa bakufu, every effort was made by the Satsuma government to conceal the nature of Japanese control over the Ryukyu Islands. The policy of deception was adopted so that the Ryukyu kingdom could derive benefits and exploit commercial opportunities in china from the resulting cultural and political ties between Ryukyu and china. “Through the Ryukyu Islanders”, as Robert K. Sakai writes, “the Shimazu *daimyo* obtained valuable Chinese commodities which were then sold for a profit to other parts of Japan”.¹³

The *daimyo* of Satsuma, in fact, fostered the fiction of Ryukyu’s “independence” and encouraged the kingdom to cultivate cultural and political ties with the mainland and continue sending tribute to China. The purpose was to derive benefits and exploit commercial opportunities on the continent through Ryukyu’s tributary relationship with the Chinese empire. The concealment of Satsuma’s control over the Ryukyu kingdom from the Chinese, enabled the Tokugawa bakufu to use it as a strategy to normalize Japan’s trading relations with East Asia which has been ruptured on account of Hideyoshi’s seven-year war with Korea and China.

In 1612, the Ryukyu government sent its first tribute mission to China after the Satsuma invasion.¹⁴ The Chinese received the mission with doubt; nevertheless, they exchanged the tribute and imperial gifts. Although the Ming government (1386-1644) was aware of the Satsuma invasion in 1609, it took no serious note of it and decided to receive tribute mission from Ryukyu periodically. This enabled Ryukyu to carry on trade with the mainland. However, Ryukyu-China tributary relationship received a setback when in 1644, the ruling Ming dynasty was toppled on account of the Manchu invasion and subjugation of china. In 1630s,

¹¹ Robert K. Sakai, “The Ryukyu (Liu-Ch’iu) Islands as a Fief of Satsuma”, p.124. *Kagoshima Kenshi* vol.2, pp.669-670, records 21 Ryukyuan missions between 1634 and 1850 to Edo, each headed by a Ryukyuan prince of the blood.

¹² This relationship with China lasted altogether about five hundred years, from 1372 to 1879. After the conquest of China by the Manchu (Ch’ing) dynasty, eight investiture missions in all were dispatched by Ryukyu in 1663, 1683, 1719, 1800, 1808, 1839, and 1866. For more details see, Ta-Tuan Ch’en, “Investiture of Liu-Ch’iu kings in the Ch’ing period”, in John K. Fairbank. *The Chinese World Order*, pp.135-164.

¹³ Robert K. Sakai, “The Satsuma-Ryukyu Trade and the Tokugawa Seclusion Policy”, *Journal of Asian Studies*, 23.3 (May 1964), p.391.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p.392.

around the same time that the Tokugawa bakufu promulgated the Seclusion Edicts which closed Japan to the outside world. The move was spurred, partly on account of the fear of the inflow of Christianity and partly because of the threat posed to Japan's security on account of China's fall in the hands of Manchu invaders. The Japanese feared that the Manchus, after consolidating their hold over China, might attack Japan.

The disruption of Ryukyu-China tribute relations on account of Manchu's conquest of China proved detrimental for Japan's trading interests. Hence, despite the policy of seclusion, the Tokugawa bakufu was keen to establish some trading links with china and encouraged Satsuma to press the Ryukyu kingdom to resume tribute relations with the Manchu government. By 1644, the Manchu rulers had stabilized their position and restored peace and order on the continent. That felicitated the Ryukyu kingdom to resume its biennial tribute mission to Peking. From that time onwards, each successive king who ascended the Ryukyu throne received investiture from the Emperor of China, considered himself as his vassal, and paid homage to the Chinese suzerain. Satsuma was content to concede china's ritual authority over Ryukyu, since it hoped to profit from tribute trade and this sort of relationship continued, until 1879.

Thus, caught between its two powerful neighbours, the Ryukyu kingdom was placed in an anomalous position. It had entered into a status of dual subordination" to both China and Japan. As long as China and Japan had peaceful relations, status quo prevailed and Ryukyu continued to present tribute to both. In traditional East Asia, where the countries regulated their diplomatic relations in accordance with the loosely-conceived norms of the Sinocentric world order, dual subordinationship was not a serious problem. Because in the Chinese conception of world order, equality among the sovereign states, whose territorial extent was determined by clearly defined boundaries, and whose intercourse was regulated by formal treaties and the management of a balance of power, was absent. The Chinese world order was a loosely-conceived empire in which china's claim to centrality and superiority was based on the Confucian assumption of superior of the exalted positions the Chinese emperor and the superiority of Chinese civilization.

The dual subordination of Ryukyu was, however, possible so long the East Asian world order was isolated and Japan remained in seclusion. By 19th century, as the Western imperialistic powers started advancing into East Asia, these make-believe and informal arrangements crumbled down. Like the Chinese empire, the other East Asian countries including the Ryukyu kingdom also underwent drastic changes and had to readjust their relations with neighbouring countries and the outside world. After the opening of Japan by Commodore Perry of the United States in 1853, the Ryukyu kingdom also came under the pale of Western

powers. Ryukyu made strong protests to the appearance of European powers and reported these events to the Chinese court, requesting aid in expelling these foreigners. But the Chinese regarded this problem as a peripheral matter. Besides China, defeated in the Opium War (1839-1842), was itself reeling under the humiliation of defeat and the unequal treaties. It was under these circumstances that Commodore Perry landed at Naha in 1853 and forced the Ryukyu government into a treaty with United States guaranteeing waiting station for American vessels and good treatment for its sailors. Several other European powers – the French, British and Dutch demanded and concluded similar treaties.

In brief, the Ryukyu kingdom was beset with so many political anomalies and the Westerners took full advantage of its confused status. The archipelago was outside the Tokugawa system because the king was invested by the Emperor of China, yet the islands were within the sway of the shogun because Ryukyu was dependent upon Satsuma and the latter was subordinate to the shogun. In the absence of any visible signs of effective control either by China or by Japan, the Western nations sought to treat Ryukyu king as a sovereign of an independent state kingdom.

Like the Ryukyu Islands, the pre-modern history of Taiwan (Formosa) too is surrounded with mystery. For several centuries, the Taiwan Island was considered by the Chinese “as part of Loochoo (Ryukyu) group, and was variously designated both in historical writings and in maps as “Great Loochoo”, “Lesser Loochoo”, etc.¹⁵ To avoid confusion with the principal or the main Loochoo group, it also devised the name of “little Loochoo”.¹⁶ The ancient Chinese annals make brief mention of these islands which were to them foreign land inhabited by savages. The location of Formosa, its ambiguous port open to the vassals of all countries, where trade could be conducted without fear of official interference or the imposition of tribute or taxes. In due course of time, it not only became an important trading link between China and Japan, but also a thriving commercial centre for the Portuguese, Spanish, and Dutch traders who had started making appearances in the China Seas from the 16th century onwards.

In 1593, Toyotomi Hideyoshi had issued licences to Japanese merchants that authorized them to open offices on the island. He had also insisted that “the ruler of Formosa” should pay tribute to Japan, but this demand was never complied with. Emboldened by the success of military expedition to Ryukyu in 1609, the Tokugawa bakufu directed its attention to Formosa also and made two attempts in 1609 and 1616 to occupy

¹⁵ James W. Davidson, *The Island of Formosa, Past and Present* (New York, 1903), p.2.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p.4.

it.¹⁷ But both attempts were unsuccessful. Later, the promulgation of the ‘national seclusion’ policy by the Tokugawa bakufu ended the scope for any kinds of further action in the island.

After the conquest of China by the Manchu invaders, Formosa became a part of the Chinese empire and in 1683 it was constituted as a prefecture of Fukien province under the name ‘Taiwan’. Later, as the Manchu consolidated their position, a large number of Chinese settlers made the island their permanent abode, covered the whole western lowlands and gradually drove the native inhabitants into the mountain regions. This drew stout resistance from native inhabitants into the mountain regions and the island soon came under the group of constant disturbance and warfare between the Chinese and the aborigines. Subsequently, to protect the Chinese villages, Ch’ing government established a boundary between the lowlands and the mountain regions to separate the Chinese from the mountain aborigines and set up military posts on the major routes leading to the aboriginal territory.¹⁸ Later, the Chinese villages were formally restricted from entering the territory of the mountain aborigines.

The eastern part of the island where the aborigines dwelt was not immediately incorporated into the administrative units of the island prefecture. In conformity with China’s traditional policy of non-interference in the internal affairs of its provinces, the Manchu government allowed the aborigines to continue with their customs till they voluntarily sought assimilation. The policy of gradual cultural assimilation was not generally ineffective. A minority of them from the early 17th century had begun to live in plains and assimilated themselves with Chinese culture and customs and came to be known as “civilized aborigines”. The Chinese government expected that the remaining “uncivilized aborigines” would also follow suit and would join the Chinese race.¹⁹

According to Sophia Su-fei Yen, the underlying theory of the universal Chinese state and the traditional policy, which the government adopted towards the aborigines of Taiwan, differed greatly from the Western concept of the property rights of a state. The Western concept, as expressed in the “Law of Nations” of Vattel and other authorities on international law, required as a prerequisite for claiming a territory some visible signs of effective control of subjugate the indigenous inhabitants of a territory and the instituting of administrative authorities on their land was considered the evidence of effective control. This concept was not

¹⁷ Ronald G. Knapp (ed.), *China’s Island Frontier: Studies in the Historical Geography of Taiwan* (Honolulu: University Press of Hawaii, 1981), p.11.

¹⁸ Wang Jen-Ying, “Cultural Contact and the Change of Economic Life among the Aborigines of Taiwan”, *Bulletin of the Institute of Ethnology Academia Sinica* 22 (1966): 184; cited in Ronald G. Knapp (ed.), *China’s Island Frontier*, p.41.

¹⁹ Sophia Su-fei Yen, *Taiwan in China’s Foreign Relations, 1836-1874* (Hamden: The Shoe String Press Inc., 1965), p.19.

readily accepted by China, nor was China challenged by Western powers on this point when they flocked to the Far East in the mid-19th century.²⁰

However, in 1874 China's claim was challenged by Japan, a nation which resumed political interest in Taiwan upon the lifting of the policy of national seclusion in the 1850s. After the Meiji Restoration in 1868, Japan's Taiwan policy reflected the Meiji government's expansionist ambitions and its adoption of Western ideas and modes of international behavior. For the first time, China realized that it must take active measures to stake its claim and to obtain recognition of its sovereignty over Taiwan – the island which it had always considered to be its own. Soon, both Taiwan and Ryukyu became contentious issues between Japan and China who tried to assert their suzerainty over the islands on the basis of some historical facts and precedents.



²⁰ Ibid., p.20.