"Ryukyu/Okinawa, From Disposal to Resistance"
Gavan McCormack and Satoko NORIMATSU
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Introduction

Gavan McCormack and Satoko Norimatsu's broad survey of Okinawan geography and history is intended to provide a frame of reference for contextualizing the articles that follow. They begin by locating Okinawa in its East Asian geographic context, identifying the climatic, social and cultural factors that set Okinawa apart from mainland Japan. They follow with a historical overview, beginning with a discussion of what Okinawans today remember as the "glory days" of the Ryukyu Kingdom in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, when the monarchy held the island chain together and prospered as a commercial entrepot and trading power. They then discuss the first major historical transformation of Okinawa's political status wrought by the unilateral actions of an external power, namely the 1609 invasion of the Ryukyu Kingdom by Satsuma, the southern-most domain of feudalistic Edo Period Japan (1603-1867). The invasion set the stage for a peculiar dual vassalage arrangement in which the Kingdom maintained its formal status as an independent tributary state of the Chinese Empire while under the tight behind-the-scenes control of Satsuma, which benefited from maintaining the fiction that Okinawa was politically closer to China than to Japan. For MacCormack and Norimatsu, the 1609 political structure is the first instance of a recurring, "theatrical" pattern in which a staged outward equality of status very thinly veils a real structure of differential treatment and subordination. They go on to trace this pattern through its various manifestations in Okinawa's subsequent history via a series of *shobun* (punishment or, alternatively, disposals): namely, (a) the original Ryukyu disposal of 1872-79, (b) the post-World War II "disposal" that began with the 1945 Battle of Okinawa and culminated in Japan's ceding sovereignty over Okinawa to the United States, (c) the 1972 reversion of Okinawa to Japan, and (d) the post-Cold War restructuring of the U.S. bases in Okinawa within the context of a redefined U.S.-Japan Security relationship. They thereby shed light on the sources of Okinawa's "difference" from the rest of Japan and its ambiguous status of being simultaneously incorporated into, but never fully integrated with, mainstream contemporary Japanese society and culture.

It should be noted that the extensive discussion in McCormack and Norimatsu's original article of the anti-U.S. base resistance movement were edited out and readers interested in that topic are strongly urged to read the article in its original form.

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In May 1972, following twenty-seven years of direct American military rule, the Ryukyu Islands reverted to being a Japanese prefecture under the name “Okinawa.” The year 2012 therefore marks its fortieth anniversary.

These islands have a complex history and every year is punctuated by anniversaries, many with painful associations. Okinawa today looks back upon a history as an independent kingdom, enjoying close affiliation with Ming and then Qing dynasty China (1372–1874); a semi-independent kingdom affiliated with both China and Japan but effectively ruled from Satsuma in southern Japan (1609–1874); a modern Japanese prefecture (1872–1945); a US military colony, first as conquered territory and from 1952 subject to the determination of the San Francisco treaty (1945–1972); and then, from 1972 to today, once again as a Japanese prefecture but still occupied by US forces. Before the recent and contemporary disputes that are at the center of the US-Japan relationship can be understood, something of this checkered history as a region alternately in and out of “Japan” has to be recounted.

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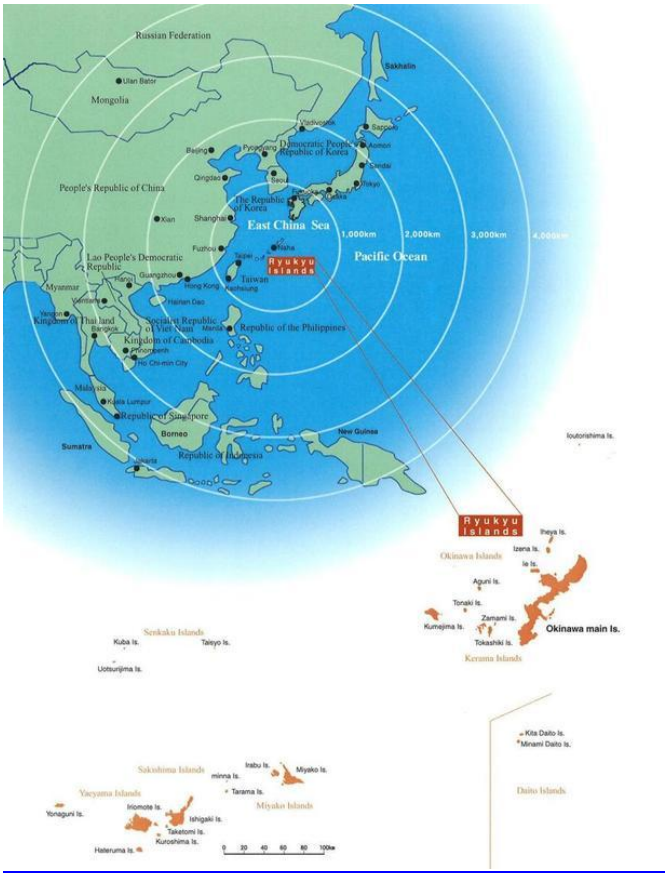

(Map by Executive Office of the Governor, Okinawa Prefecture)

Okinawa's chain of islands—around sixty of them inhabited and many more not—stretch for 1,100 kilometers (683 miles) along the Western Pacific between Japan's Kagoshima

prefecture and Taiwan. The largest and most populated island is about one hundred kilometers long and between four and twenty-eight kilometers wide, and the islands as a whole are about one-seventh the area of Hawaii. Linked to the Asian continental landmass until a million or so years ago, the islands have long been separated from it by a gulf sufficiently deep and dangerous to have allowed the emergence in relative isolation of a rich and distinctive human as well as botanical and zoological environment. Today its people are both "Japanese," speaking more-or-less standard Japanese and constituting part of the Japanese nation-state, but also "non- Japanese," whose ancestors a century ago spoke languages distinct from Japanese, that is, separate languages rather than dialects, and five of which, still spoken today, especially on the outlying islands, are recognized by UNESCO as either "endangered" or "severely endangered." [1]

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The islands enjoy a mild subtropical climate and good rainfall with a rich marine reef environment. From the fifteenth century a flourishing autonomous state, the Ryukyuan Kingdom, trading along the China coast and as far south as Vietnam and Siam, formed part of the East Asian tribute world centering on Ming China. Though virtually obliterated from conventional historical memory, premodern Okinawa was a vigorous, independent economic, cultural, and political system, flourishing on the frontiers of the early modern Asia-Pacific. Its music and performing arts and its crafts, including lacquerware, dyed textiles, and pottery, were widely known and appreciated. However, the island kingdom that flourished in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries was profoundly affected by major shifts in the global geopolitical balance starting in the late sixteenth century and continuing into the mid-twentieth century.

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Both the early and then the mature phases of European maritime expansion, in the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries, opened new routes of commerce, spread new ideas and technologies, and helped dissolve and reform states. In the seventeenth century, as European capitalism and nationalism, underpinned by war and its technologies, despoiled Africa, colonized the Americas, and encroached on Asia, Japan, emerging from a long period of chronic civil war and failed attempts (in the 1590s) to subject Asia to Japanese rule, retreated to concentrate on developing its so-called closed country (*sakoku*) polity. But it first launched in 1609 one last expansionary thrust: an invasion force of three thousand musket-bearing samurai to conquer the Ryukyu Kingdom, punishing it for its recalcitrant attitude toward Hideyoshi's grand continental invasion plan. Within days, the court submitted and King Sho Nei (1564–1620) and his entourage were carried off to Kagoshima.[2]

The new order that was imposed was more "modern," rationalized and bureaucratic than the shamanistic, ritual court world it displaced. It was also often harsh, with basic policy decided from Kagoshima (capital of the Satsuma domain), 660 kilometers away. The king and court continued, but the kings were no longer sovereign. Okinawa/Ryukyu became a Potemkin-like theater state: Okinawans had to hide the fact that they were incorporated into the Japanese system in order to sustain the tribute relationship to China, those

involved in missions to and from China were ordered to hide all things Japanese, and those on embassies to Edo (Tokyo) were required to wear distinctive, non-Japanese clothing. Thus the façade of independence was preserved, a trading window between Japan and China kept open through Japanese-controlled Ryukyuan tributary missions to China, and the prestige of the Bakufu heightened by the appearance of a foreign mission pledging fealty to it. Ryukyu became in effect Japan's colony, its kings tied to the Japanese domain of Satsuma, and through it to the Edo Japanese state, while maintaining all the appearances of continuing attachment to the Chinese court in Beijing. Dual vassalage characterized the next several centuries. It meant that Okinawan officials were required to perform theater designed to conceal the locus and nature of political authority, and Shuri Castle, the site of the Ryukyu kings, was a carefully constructed stage.

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Images of Ryukyu Tributary relationship with China.

The curtain did not ring down on this peculiar state till the mid-nineteenth century. For a brief period then, the omens for Ryukyu seemed good. Left more than usual to its own devices as the crisis in the Japanese Edo order deepened, Ryukyu courts negotiated modern "opening" treaties, as an independent kingdom, with the Americans, French, and Dutch (in 1854, 1855, and 1850).[3]

Visitors were impressed. When the US Navy's Commodore Perry sailed into what was known as the Loochoos on his Black Ships en route to open Japan in 1853, his scientific advisers reported on a fertile, friendly, and prosperous state, a "most rich and highly cultivated rural landscape," with an agriculture more akin to horticulture, in a "system which could scarcely be improved" and its villages quite romantic, and more beautiful than any of like pretensions I have ever seen." [4]

However, Ryukyu's ambiguous, dual-sovereignty status was incompatible with the "new world order" of expansive, rapacious, and militarized modern states and competing empires. While the island elite debated possible responses to Commodore Perry on his

1853 visit and struggled to explain their island's status as a dual attachment, the governing elite of the new modern Japanese nation-state in Tokyo adopted a strict modern, legalist view of the world, in which sovereignty was absolute and indivisible and frontiers had to be secured. The Japanese flag was first raised over the main island of the Ryukyus in 1872 and in 1873 over the outlying islands of Kume, Ishigaki, Miyako, Iriomote, and Yonaguni.

The Ryukyu court faced an impossible dilemma. The dual fiefdom status quo was unsustainable however much they clung to it. The Qing court could not come to their aid with the Chinese "world order" under siege from central Asia to Indochina and Korea and much of the country only slowly recovering from the calamity of the Taiping rebellion and civil war. Beijing viewed Ryukyu as of relatively minor significance, just a "small kingdom in the sea."[5] The Shuri court, after much agonizing, ended its feeble resistance in 1879.7 Submitting to the "punishment" from Tokyo over its lukewarm response to the new Meiji state order, in the first of the series of modern *shobun* or "disposals," it handed over the castle and sent the king, Sho Tai (1843–1901), into exile. Its incorporation into the modern Japanese state is unique in having been accomplished as part of a punishment (shobun), "unilaterally and by force," thus becoming an "unrecognized colony," and its subsequent status within the state was marked by persistent suspicion, discrimination, and forced assimilation. According to one story, probably apocryphal, as King Sho Tai in 1879 surrendered Shuri Castle to the superior force of the Meiji government, he uttered the words "Life is precious" (*nuchi du takara*). These words later came to be understood as a core statement of Okinawan moral value, In the face of oppression, militarism, and colonialism the Okinawan people struggled to preserve the ideal of the supremacy of life over death, peace over war, the *sanshin* (*samisen* = a banjo-like musical instrument) over the gun.[6]

Thus Okinawa was incorporated in a subordinate status within the Japanese state. The new national government in Tokyo regarded the islands as crucial to state defense rather than as integral elements of any national community. This was clear from the readiness they showed, in negotiations with China from 1879, to split the islands into two, ceding the farthest islands, Miyako and Yaeyama, to China in return for the grant of "most favored nation" trading rights within China itself. China in response, proposed a three-way split, south to China, north to Japan, with a reinstated Ryukyu Kingdom in the main island. In the end, no agreement was reached.[7] China only formally acknowledged Japanese sovereignty over the Ryukyu Islands under the Treaty of Shimonoseki in 1895, as part of the settlement of the Sino-Japanese War, which also ceded Taiwan to Japan.

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Belatedly incorporated within the modern Japanese state, Okinawans were pressed to follow a path of self-negation, casting aside their distinctive language and culture, their "Okinawan-ness," in order to become "Japanese." Less than seven decades after being launched on this process of identity change, in 1945 Okinawa was to be sacrificed in order to stave off attack on the "mainland" and preserve the emperor system in the cataclysmic Battle of Okinawa, when more than 120,000 Okinawans, between one-quarter and one-third of the population, died. These months, March to June 1945, marked the islands as nothing before or since has.

From the onset of the Battle of Okinawa in late March 1945, Okinawa and the surrounding (Nansei) islands were severed from Japan by order of the commander of the US Pacific Fleet, Admiral C. W. Nimitz[8]. Months later, the thirtieth parallel was defined as the dividing line. Separated from Japan, when the catastrophe of the war ended, Okinawa was transformed into the American "Keystone of the Pacific." The Japanese emperor himself, Hirohito (1901–1989), gave his blessing to the separation and long-term military occupation. In an arrangement thus blessed at the highest level, mainland Japan became a constitutional "peace state" and Okinawa a "war state," both tied symbiotically within the US Pacific and Asian Cold War empire of bases. In mainland Japan, the US occupation ended in 1952; in Amami, the most northerly of the major Ryukyu Islands in December of the following year; but in Okinawa itself and its adjacent islands, and in Miyako and Yaeyama Islands, US occupation lasted until 1972.

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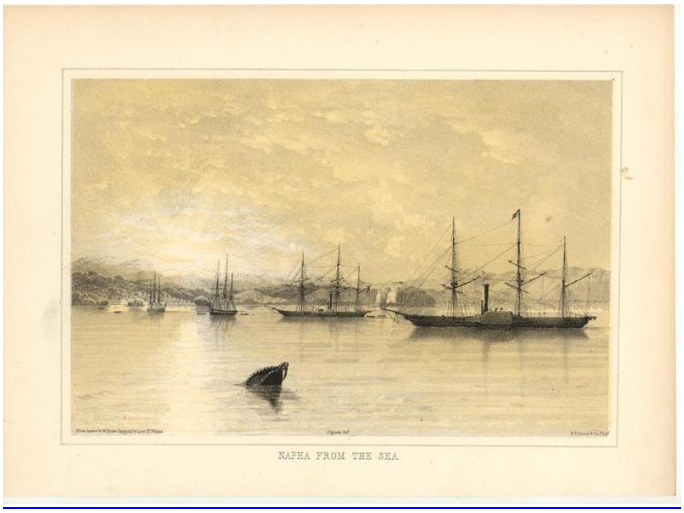
1832 Ryukyu mission to Edo



Perry's ships in Naha, Ryukyus in 1853

As the islands reverted from direct American military control to Japanese administration, the curtain rose over a different kind of "theater state." Nothing on stage was quite what it seemed. First, the reversion was not so much a "handing back," as implied by the words, but actually a "purchase."[9] Second, the "return" was a "nonreturn" since the US military continued to occupy and enjoy free use of much of the most fertile agricultural lands and to control the seas and skies. And third, following this strange transaction in which roles of buyer and seller were reversed, Japan adopted as national policy the retention of a

substantial US military presence in Okinawa. To prevent any significant reduction of US forces ever taking place, it began to pay a sum that steadily increased over the years.

Americans landing in the Battle of Okinawa

Okinawans had sought a reversion that would release them from the parameters of force, return their most fertile lands, and restore something of their ancient ideal of demilitarized, peaceful islands. The 1972 terms thus disappointed and angered many. On the actual day of the reversion ceremony, none of Okinawa's seven recently elected members of the National Diet attended the Tokyo ceremony, and in Naha far more gathered in Yogi Park to protest the terms of reversion than attended the official ceremony. For them, May 15 was a day of humiliation.

The formal documents and instruments of power were therefore as deceptive and misleading as the Ryukyu expressions of tribute fealty to China and Japan in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Post-1972 Okinawa performed Japanese sovereignty, constitutional pacifism, prefectural self-government, and regional autonomy while in reality sovereignty was only partially returned. The US-Japan security treaty continued to serve as Okinawa's key charter, in effect transcending and negating the constitution, and all important decisions were reserved to Tokyo and Washington. Despite nominal incorporation in the constitutional pacifist Japanese state, the American military colony of Okinawa became the militarized, dual-colonial dependency of Japan and the United States.

Emperor Hirohito and Empress Nagako in Tokyo look on as US Vice President Spiro Agnew presents Japanese Prime Minister Eisaku Sato with documents returning Okinawa to Japan.

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Two decades after "reversion," the Cold War ended. The enemy against whom the base structure had been directed collapsed, but the base complex remained. The bases did not just remain, but to the bitter disappointment of Okinawans, both governments insisted they be reinforced. In the Gulf, Iraq, and Afghan wars, the United States called on Japan to play a stepped-up military role, and governments in Tokyo did their best to comply, with Okinawa remaining pivotal. As of 2012, nearly 20 percent of the total area of Okinawa Island is occupied by US bases. Okinawa prefecture, which is only 0.6 percent of the total area of Japan, hosts 75 percent of the US military bases in Japan. This means that the density of US bases in Okinawa is about five hundred times that of the mainland.

Okinawans who aspired to a reversion that would transform their islands from the militarism of war and occupation to the peace-centered values of the constitution of Japan found that the role assigned them in the post–Cold War order was to be that of bastion for the projection of force to maintain a US-dictated order from the Western Pacific to Central Asia. As after the reversion in 1972 and after the end of the Cold War in 1990, the military relationship with the United States, not the constitution, was to be Okinawa's key charter.

When mass discontent at these arrangements threatened to boil over, especially following the rape of a schoolgirl by three US servicemen in 1995, a new round of "reversion" was promised; but again deception was the keynote. Where "reversion" in 1972 meant retention (and purchase), so in 1996 it came to mean substitution, modernization, and expansion of US military bases. Of the dense web of bases across the main island of Okinawa, the return of none was more urgently sought than that of Futenma Marine Air Station, which sat uncomfortably in the midst of the bustling city of Ginowan. While the two governments sought to contain the 1995 crisis by promising Futenma's return, they did so only by attaching the condition that an alternative facility would first be constructed. They assumed it would be possible to impose such a solution on the people of Okinawa. As the

nature of the process was obfuscated by calling it reversion, so its scale too was concealed by calling the projected new base a "heliport" and by using the expression *seiri shukushō* (base reduction) to try to convey the impression that overall that was what was happening. For the most part, clientelism and the Japanese state priority to military ties to the United States could be ignored by people in mainland Japan because it impinged little on their everyday lives; but in Okinawa it weighed heavily and was felt intolerable. While protest elsewhere was scattered and easily contained, in Okinawa it grew steadily.

Today, as in the late sixteenth to early seventeenth and nineteenth centuries, the old order is again breaking down. The global coalition of US-led, militarized, and alliance- supported neoliberal states confront uneasily the crumbling of an order that once they believed to be unshakable. For Okinawa, geopolitical and economic flux constitutes threat and opportunity: to be swallowed again into an exploited and manipulated status, or to assert a distinctive role as a historical actor. Alternately "in" and "out" of Japan over four centuries, and an integral member of the China-centered "tribute world" for a similar period before that (and partly coinciding with it), Okinawans sense the opportunity encased in the present crisis: to formulate a way beyond nation-states and military blocs and to reconstitute itself at the center of the process of evolution of an East Asian or Northeast Asian community, as a bridge linking Japan, China, Korea, and the Asia-Pacific.

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Okinawans tend to look back and see the four hundred years of their troubled premodern and modern history in terms of successive *shobun*, or "disposals," by superior, external forces depriving them of their subjectivity, with militarism their peculiar bane—under Satsuma from 1609, the modern Japanese state from 1879 to 1945, direct US military rule from 1945 to 1972, and nominal Japanese rule after 1972. Though helpless to avoid or resist past disposals, from 1996 the balance shifted. Okinawa gradually has come to play a major, if rarely acknowledged, role in the regional and global system. It became a state of resistance.

(Struggle between government survey ship and protesters in canoes, November 2004. Photo by Toyozato Tomoyuki)

In the centuries before 1609, Okinawa's smallness of scale and its relative geographic isolation from major powers were its strengths. After 1609, in the Westphalian era of nation-states contesting and prevailing by force, they became its weaknesses. The Japanese nation-state (and its American patron) continue today to see Okinawa's location as crucial for the defense of "Japan proper" and for the regional and global projection of military force to advance their interests. Okinawans know from their history that armies do not defend people and that security in real terms depends on the forging of close, friendly, and cooperative ties with neighbor countries. To attain such security, Okinawa's "war preparation" functions designed to secure American power throughout the Asia-Pacific have to be converted into "peace-building" functions. Okinawa's geographical location and multicultural history suit it well to serve in the future as a peace center, a Sino-Japanese bridge, and an obvious candidate to house some of the core institutions of a Northeast Asian concert of states, as an Asian Luxemburg or Brussels.

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Both authors are coordinators of the Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus*, which in 2008 was awarded the Inaugural Ikemiyagi Shui Prize (by the Okinawan daily* Ryukyu Shimpō*) for the dissemination of issues surrounding Okinawa to the world.*

[1] Kunigami, Miyako, Okinawa, Yaeyama, and Yonaguni. Christopher Moseley (ed.), *Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger*. 3rd ed. (Paris: UNESCO Publishing, 2010)
[2] The Ryukyu resistance was overwhelmed by superior force, especially forearms. Gregory Smits, "Examining the Myth of Ryukyuan Pacifism," *Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus* (September 13, 2010), http://japanfocus.org/-Gregory-Smits/3409. After the initial hostilities and surrender, resistance ceased, but one prominent member of the Ryukyu nobility, Jana Teido (a.k.a. Jana Uekata Rizan) (1549–1611), was summarily executed in Kagoshima because of his refusal to swear allegiance to the new Satsuma overlord.

[3] Nishizato Kiko, "Higashi Ajia shi ni okeru Ryukyu shobun," *Keizaishi Kenkyū*, no. 13 (February 2010): 74.
[4] J. Morrow, "Observations on the Agriculture, Etc, of Lew Chew," in *Narrative of the Expedition of an American Squadron to the China Seas and Japan, Performed in the Years 1852, 1853, and 1854, under the Command of Commodore M. C. Perry, United States Navy* (Washington: A.O.P. Nicholson, 1856), 15; and D. S. Green, "Report on the Medical Topography and Agriculture of the Island of Great Lew Chew," in ibid., 26, 36.
[5] Li Hongzhang, quoted in Nishizato, "Higashi Ajia," 99.
[6] Hideaki Uemura, "The Colonial Annexation of Okinawa and the Logic of International Law: The Formation of an Indigenous People," *Japanese Studies* 23, no. 2 (September 2003): 107–124: 122.
[7] Nishizato, "Higashi Ajia," 107–8.
[8] "Proclamation No. 1 (The Nimitz Proclamation), 5 April 1945," Gekkan Okinawa Sha*, Laws and Regulations during the U.S. Administration of Okinawa, 1945–1972* (Naha: Ikemiya Shōkai, 1983), 38.
[9] See Chapters 3 and 4 of Gavan McCormack and Satoko Oka Norimatsu, *Resistant Islands: Okinawa Confronts Japan and the United States* (Lanham and Boulder: Rowman and Littlefield, 2012).