FROM TRIBUTE TRADE TO MIGRATION CENTER:
THE RYUKYU AND HONG KONG MARITIME NETWORKS
WITHIN THE EAST AND SOUTH CHINA SEAS IN
A LONG-TERM PERSPECTIVE

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The region of the East and South China Seas is often studied either from a regional or from a colonial perspective. This essay argues that different patterns of trading and power relations formed overlays that changed slowly over the centuries and influenced each other. Thus understanding the changes of 1839 and after requires a long-term perspective. Such a perspective is possible through the Lidai baoan, 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 the period for 444 years from 1424 to 1867. The countries are Siam, Malacca, Palembang, Java, Sumatra, Sunda-Karapa, Patani, and Annam. Lidai baoan documents shed new light on historical events and developments in this region and 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. The documents 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 upon Chinese military and economic hegemony. A first trading region emerged.

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1 Structure of Lidai baoan are composed of the following three collections and one supplement collection. First Collection: 49 volumes, 42 volumes extant (1424–1696), sorted according to style and nation; Second Collection: 200 volumes, 187 volumes extant (1697–1858) chronologically arranged; Third Collection: 13 volumes, 13 volumes extant (1859–1867) chronologically arranged; (Fourth) Supplement; information on France, the UK and the USA.
Early Developments I: Relations between Ryukyu and Korea since the Fourteenth Century

After the establishment of the Ming dynasty in China, Emperor Taizu sent an envoy to Ryukyu in 1372 and demanded tribute. King Satto of Chūzan immediately dispatched his brother Taiki in the same year, entrusting him with a memorial to the emperor and tributary goods. Tribute offering by the kings of Chūzan continued thereafter. The two other Ryukyuan principalities, Sannan and Hokuzan, also began sending tribute to the Ming before long.

It should be noted that among the tributary goods brought by Utchi to Koryô in 1389 were sappanwood and pepper, which were also tributary goods from Koryô to China, in addition to sulphur and horses and other local products from Ryukyu and Japan. Ryukyuan tribute to China in the earliest days included horses and sulphur from Ryukyu, but in 1390 products of South Sea origin like pepper, sappanwood, and olibanum were added to the tribute cargoes for China. From this time on, goods of the South Sea region came to constitute part of the tribute. It is conjectured that the communication and trade of the king of Chūzan with Siam began about this time. Ryukyuan contact with Japan had been established before this time and some ten years after the opening of formal tributary relations with the Ming, Ryukyu is presumed to have expanded its overseas activity from Korea in the North to Siam in the South.

From the early days of the fifteenth century, Korea-bound ships of daimyō, merchants, and others of Kyushu began to carry in their cargoes products of the South Sea region, like sappanwood, pepper, cinnabar wood, ivory, cloves, sandalwood, garu-wood, rhinoceros horns, and Baroos camphor, together with such native products such as copper, sulphur, and swords. The Southern products were in the main imported into Kyushu from Ryukyu. Not a few Ryukyuan ships made their way to Japan, but Japanese ships in even greater numbers began coming to Ryukyu in order to buy Southern products.

Ryukyuan communication with Korea after the reign of Sejong was handled, in most cases, by men aboard the ships of Hakata and other northern Kyushu districts that voyaged to and from Ryukyu. Although some Ryukyuan boards these ships as envoys, it gradually became a more common practice for the Ryukyuan government to entrust official dispatches and presents intended for Korea to Japanese merchants acting as Ryukyu’s envoys. Korean envoys, for their part,