

Brothers in Strange Lands: Higaonna Kanryo, Trade, and the Experience of an Okinawan Merchant in the Later 19th Century

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Abstract

This study explores the status and actions of Okinawan merchants in Fuzhou Province through the events in the life of Higaonna Kanryo. Through the methods of social and economic history the author seeks to demonstrate the deep connections that existed between the inhabitants of the Ryukyu Islands and Southern China during an era of great political and cultural upheaval in both societies. During this time Okinawa came under full control of the new Meiji Imperial System in Japan, whilst in China, the end of the Qing dynasty inaugurated an era of anarchy and lawlessness. Higaonna Kanryo's experiences as an Okinawan merchant trading with Fujianese partners provide the post-modern historian with unique insight regarding challenges faced by Okinawan traders during his complex era. This paper also addresses the intersection between Okinawan studies, and the efforts of students of martial arts history to better understand the socio-cultural environment in which the founders of current 21st century karate styles developed their systems.

Note: In the period before the Meiji Restoration, the Ryukyuan islands were an independent kingdom, whose capital was Shuri, on the island of Okinawa. The major trading harbor for the kingdom was, and still is, the port city of Naha. Because diplomacy, trade, and indeed the majority of official actions involving the Kingdom of Ryukyu centered around the island of Okinawa, the name of the Island is used unless the specific subject being addressed is the actual Imperial entity.

Introduction

China's Imperial dynasties developed tributary relationships with many Asian nations in the period preceding the demise of the Qing Dynasty in 1911. The relationship between the Kingdom of Ryukyu and China was particularly unusual, because it was based on a not-so-secret charade. Ostensibly, the independent kingdom of Ryukyu was a tributary of the Chinese Empire, however Ryukyu's status as a fiefdom of the Japanese Satsuma Clan, following the latter's successful invasion of the islands in 1609, meant that the client kingdom of Ryukyu served as an intermediary for trade between China and Japan.¹ This paper will explore the activities of Okinawan merchants in the Chinese city of Fuzhou in the period 1867-1910 utilizing the life and activities of Higaonna Kanryo as an exemplar. This era was the twilight of what Dahpon David Ho has described as the Southern Chinese Maritime Frontier, yet was also a period when the aggressive intrusions of European powers into the affairs of Asian nations had begun to be felt quite strongly.²

The Ryukyu Kingdom, whose capital city, Shuri, on the island of Okinawa, had an established relationship with China long before the Satsuma invasion, and the Ryukyu islands are

¹ Akamine, Mamoru, *The Ryukyu Kingdom: Cornerstone of East Asia*, (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2017), For the establishment of Ryukyu as a tributary of Chian during the Song period, see page 17. For Ryukyu's status as a vassal of the Ashikaga Shogunate in the fifteenth century, see p.37. For the Shimazu samurai of Satsuma's interest in Ryukyu in the sixteenth century, and their eventual conquest of the island kingdom in 1609, see pp 59-63.

² Ho, Dahpon David, *Sealords Live in Vain: Fujian and the Making of a Maritime Frontier in Seventeenth Century China*. Doctoral Dissertation, University of California San Diego, 2011.

mentioned in Song Dynasty documents from the early 10th century.³ There is documentary evidence for the existence of Chinese officials and an associated trade colony in the port city of Naha by 1373, and associated records show that imperial tribute delegations from Ryukyu had set up permanent operations in Guangdong and Fujian provinces by this time.⁴

By the 19th century, and the twilight of the Qing Dynasty, travel between the island of Okinawa and Southern China was quite common, and a sizeable community of Okinawan merchants existed in Fujian Province's primary city, Fuzhou.⁵ These Okinawan merchants and their families took full advantage of the educational and cultural opportunities available to them, and the children of merchant families were frequently enrolled in academies where they studied the Chinese classics, as well as more practical subjects like medicine, architecture, and agricultural propagation of crops such as sweet potatoes. In return, Chinese officials and merchants who settled in Naha, on Okinawa, learned such skills as long range navigation, as well as the languages and particulars of interacting with the peoples of other Pacific cultures, like those of the Philippine Islands, and Indonesia.⁶

Interlude: Higaonna Kanryo Goes to China

Higaonna Kanryo (1853-1915) was the youngest son of a family that traded Okinawan horses and textiles from Southeast Asia in exchange for lumber in Fuzhou, Fujian province. The

³ Akamine, Mamoru, *The Ryukyu Kingdom*, 17.

⁴ Akamine, *The Ryukyu Kingdom*, 23.

⁵⁵ Smits, Gregory, *Visions of Ryukyu: Identity and Ideology in Early Modern Politics*, (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1999), 39.

⁶ Akamine, *The Ryukyu Kingdom*, 51.

Higaonna family had established their presence in Fuzhou in the late 18th century, and by the time of young Kanryo's first visit in 1867, maintained a sizeable compound from which to conduct their mercantile operations.⁷ During this time, until his brief return to Okinawa in 1875, he studied Chinese literature, philosophy, and medicine, as well as White Crane Chinese boxing with Xie Zhongxiang (1852-1930), who was employed as a tutor to the family by the Higaonna patriarch. Higaonna's life and experiences in both Fuzhou and Naha provide a window into the world of the Okinawans who bridged the gap between Japan and China. At 14, his age at this first visit, Higaonna would have been responsible for learning the ins and outs of the family business, as well as perfecting his ability to speak the Eastern Min dialect, and how to negotiate with Qing officials.⁸

Methodology and Literature Review

The study of the actions of an expatriate population, particularly when much official documentary evidence was destroyed during the Second World War, must rely on ethnographic analysis and interpretation of oral traditions. Though some letters from Higaonna Kanryo to his

⁷ Cohen, Itzhik, *Karate Uchina-di*, 373. Most of the history of Higaonna Kanryo, and his activities in China has been preserved by the students to whom he taught White Crane Boxing in the last decade of the 19th and first decade of the 20th centuries. Documentary confirmation of oral traditions has been made in the last three decades, with herculean effort, by martial artists turned historians like Mark Bishop, Itzhik Cohen, Harry Cook, Simon Keegan, and Patrick McCarthy. For a further discussion of how this research fits in the broader set works utilized in this study, please see the section on sources and methodology. Some accounts state that Higaonna's first visit to Fuzhou was not until 1870, however considering that 14 was the average age at which Okinawans were sent to China by their families to apprentice to older members of merchant families, a date of 1867 seems more likely. The earlier date also makes more sense when we consider other aspects of Higaonna Kanryo's life and activities.

⁸ See Peng, Hao, *Trade Relations Between Qing China and Tokugawa Japan, 1685-1859*, (Singapore: Springer, 2015), 131 for a discussion of Qing regulatory interactions between merchants and Qing officials. The Qing officials attempted to maintain detailed records of vessels and their cargoes, whilst merchants, as they have since time immemorial, did their best to fudge records, and pay as few fees as possible. Doubtless young Kanryo would have been instructed in this soft deception by his seniors.

family exist, mostly in the hands of his senior karate students, they have not, at the time of this article, been published. The record of the life of Higaonna Kanryo has been reconstructed from stories told by his senior students of what would later be named *Naha te* (Uchinaguchi: ‘*Nafadi*’) karate. It is not unlikely that stories Higaonna passed on to his students might have been edited to present himself and his actions in a more favorable light. In addition, martial arts students are well known for their penchant for inflating the actions of preceding generations, in conscious or unconscious efforts to assert the supremacy of their own combative systems.⁹ Because of the possibility that either Higaonna himself or his students might have misrepresented individual events in his lifetime, this study will concentrate specifically on his life and actions in the context of trade relations between Okinawan and China, and not on his status as a martial artist.

The secondary literature on the Okinawa-China trade relationship is much more complete, and has grown exponentially in the last few decades, from the point where the only scholarly work in English was that of George Kerr, published in 1958.¹⁰ Though Kerr’s work is still an interesting and informative text, it has been superseded by more recent studies, many of which have focused specifically on Okinawa’s trade relationship with China, including works by Gregory Smits and Akamine Mamoru.¹¹

Similarly, much research has been done on China’s relationship with other Pacific Nations in the period from 1700-1900, with detailed attention paid to trade between Qing era

⁹ Lorge, Peter, *Chinese Martial Arts: From Antiquity to the Twenty-First Century*, (London: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 8.

¹⁰ Kerr, George, *Okinawa: The History of an Island People*, (Rutland, VT: Tuttle, 1958).

¹¹ Akamine, *The Ryukyu Kingdom*, and Smits, *Visions of Ryukyu*.

China and close neighbors Okinawa, Japan, and Korea. The amount of material available in recent years is such that no survey could be complete. For this study I have focused mostly on recent works by English language authors.

Lastly, scholars of Okinawan activity in Fujian Province in the 19th and early 20th centuries are indebted to martial artists turned historians like Itzhik Cohen, Simon Keegan, Patrick McCarthy, and Andreas Quast, who have been untiring in their efforts to collect, translate, and publish material related to this period in the history of Chinese and Okinawan relations.¹² This paper seeks to synthesize the above mentioned sources, by focusing on the life of an individual best known for his contribution to the Okinawan martial arts world.

The Relationship Between Ryukyu and China Prior to Meiji

By the late 16th century it was not uncommon for crews of trading vessels that plied the Southern Pacific Ocean to include both Chinese sailors from Fujian as well as Okinawans.¹³ The Fujianese port city of Fuzhou was ideally situated for transport of goods between the Chinese mainland, and the Okinawans port city of Naha, from whence transport could continue northward to the Japanese Islands, or southward toward the Philippines. Trading documents allowing the passage of goods and people between Fuzhou and Naha were frequently issued by the Qing authorities beginning in the early 18th century, and continued to be renewed through the

¹² New translations and articles have appeared frequently in semi-scholarly, yet peer-reviewed publications like *Bugeisha Magazine*, *Classical Fighting Arts Magazine*, and the late *Journal of Asian Martial Arts*, whose presence is sorely missed by those interested in the origins of contemporary styles of karate and quanfa.

¹³ Ng, Chin Keong, *Boundaries and Beyond: China's Maritime Southeast in Late Imperial Times*, (Singapore: National University of Singapore Press, 2017), 262.

end of the first decade of the 20th.¹⁴ Alongside authorized trade, illicit transport of goods continued, and court records mention that Okinawan pirates were among those captured by the British Navy and executed by Qing officials during this era.¹⁵

A sizeable Fujianese community was established in Naha in 1392, and by 1650 this community, known as the “36 Families,” was fully integrated into the cultural and commercial affairs of Ryukyu.¹⁶ This community was initially composed of official translators intended to provide diplomatic liaison to the Okinawan Court at Shuri, but commerce rapidly overcame diplomacy as the primary concern of this expatriate colony. Indeed, from roughly 1471, Chinese coins were universally accepted currency throughout Southeast Asia well into the 17th century, and the Chinese community at Naha was instrumental in maintaining the flow of *Yongle* copper cash between China and the Tokugawa seat in *Edo*.¹⁷ These Chinese emigrants frequently made their way into middle and upper level positions as advisors to the Ryukyu kings, and were thus able to assist Okinawan merchants who wished to set up trading operations in China.

An Okinawan community had been formally established in Fuzhou in 1479, following that city’s assumption of port duties after the silting up of the harbor at Quanzhou.¹⁸ After the

¹⁴ Peng, Hao, *Trade Relations Between Qing China and Tokugawa Japan, 1685-1859*, (Singapore: Springer, 2015), 75.

¹⁵ Murakami, Ei, *The Reorganization of the Maritime Order in Coastal Areas of South China During the Mid 19th Century: The British Royal Navy and the Pirates of Fujian and Guangdong*, (MA Thesis: Kyoto University, 2003), 7.

¹⁶ Akamine, *The Ryukyu Kingdom*, 24.

¹⁷ Akamine, *The Ryukyu Kingdom*, 43, and Smits, *Visions of Ryukyu*, 135.

¹⁸ Akamine, *The Ryukyu Kingdom*, 45.

conflict that resulted in the Qing overthrow of the Ming dynasty, and a brief prohibition on the emigration of foreigners, Okinawans again began settling in Fuzhou, and old trading relationships were reestablished. These Okinawan merchants initially arrived as *kingaku*, or “working students.” *Kingaku* travelled to Fuzhou as crew members on Ryukyuan vessels or servants of official delegations to the Imperial Court, and stayed in Fuzhou for short periods, usually less than ten years, to study Confucian classics and Qing jurisprudence.¹⁹ Though the Qing government officially limited the period of residence for these foreigners to seven years, it was not uncommon for individuals to make multiple trips to Fuzhou during their lifetimes, and families often sent several members to serve as *kingaku* at short intervals, so that families and their associated trading operations could maintain a steady presence despite efforts by the Chinese officials to prevent them.

Higaonna Kanryo in Fuzhou

Higaonna Kanryo arrived as a *kingaku* at the age of 14, in 1867. Like most members of his class, his formal education would have begun at age 5, when he would have traveled to the Chinese settlement of Kumemura, near the capital at Shuri, to develop competence in Mandarin Chinese, as well as the Fujianese dialect needed to function day to day in Fuzhou.²⁰

The Higaonna family were related by marriage to the Kojo clan, who had emigrated to Naha as one of the original 36 families in the 15th century. The Kojo family owned and operated

¹⁹ Akamine, *The Ryukyu Kingdom*, 95.

²⁰ Keegan, *Karate Jutsu*, 45. Simon Keegan has managed to collect the most verifiable information regarding Higaopnna Kanryo’s lineage and associations. Many records, including family genealogies were lost during the Pacific War of 1937-45.

a company that imported horses from the Ryukyus, and textiles from the South Pacific to China, and exported wood and metals, items that were in short supply in the Ryukyu islands. The Kojo family also participated in the transfer of tea from China to Okinawa and Japan. This was probably the most lucrative aspect of their operation.²¹

Higaonna seems to have distinguished himself with his apprenticeship and was soon accompanying transport parties bringing tea from Sichuan to Kojo company warehouses in Fuzhou. It is likely that these journeys, and the very real possibility of being accosted by bandits spurred Higaonna to request instruction in Chinese martial arts from his primary teacher, Xie Zhongxiang.²² Higaonna's initial visit to Fujian lasted a year longer than the officially prescribed period of seven years, though the reason for this additional year's sojourn remains unknown. Higaonna left Okinawa the year preceding the overthrow of the Tokugawa Shogunate, and the subsequent chaos that occurred in Japan proper during the establishment of the Meiji regime. The Kingdom of Ryukyu ceased to exist in 1872, and, after a series of incursions from the new Meiji emperorship, became Okinawa prefecture. In 1875 officials from the newly renamed capital of Tokyo ordered the cessation of all tributary ties between the Ryukyus and China.²³ Higaonna Kanryo returned from his initial stay in Fuzhou to a completely different nation than the one he had left eight years previously.

²¹ Keegan, *Karate Jutsu*, 107.

²² Cohen, *Karate*, 100.

²³ Smits, *Visions of Ryukyu*, 145.

Interlude: Higaonna Returns to Naha

Higaonna Kanryo returned to Okinawa at a time when the island kingdom's status had been reduced from its already reduced status as a pseudo-kingdom under the control of the Satsuma samurai of Kyushu, to that of a rural and impoverished Japanese domain.²⁴ His first efforts would have been to assist his seniors in the trading house to determine what rules regarding trade with China had changed. At the same time, he was planning for a return to Fuzhou, this time to assume a more important role in the Chinese branch of the company. Travel between Naha and Fuzhou was restricted until 1877, and Higaonna spent those two years assisting his family with their efforts to strengthen ties with Japanese transport and trading companies, as well as taking on a few martial art students from among the now displaced Okinawan nobility.²⁵ He returned to Fuzhou in November of 1877 on a ship that carried many of the Chinese ambassadors to the Court of Ryukyu and their staff and servants.

Okinawan Merchants in Fujian During and Immediately After the Meiji Restoration

The designation of Okinawa as an official Japanese prefecture in April of 1879 was a turning point for the status of Okinawan merchants in Fujian province. Though still foreign nationals. They now represented a possible threat to peaceful order in China, since many of the Okinawan merchants were active in the effort to re-establish Okinawan sovereignty, and sought the assistance of Qing officials in Fuzhou.²⁶ In order to prevent seditious activities that might involve Chinese nationals, Qing officials briefly restricted the Okinawan merchants to their

²⁴ Akamine, *The Ryukyu Kingdom*, 148.

²⁵ Keegan, *Karate Jutsu*, 110.

²⁶ Akamine, *The Ryukyu Kingdom*, 153.

compounds, and threatened to arrest and deport anyone who might violate this quarantine.²⁷ This prohibition did not last, and Okinawan merchants acquired freedom of movement once again by the year's end. By 1880 the Japanese government had assumed the privileges and perquisites previously accorded to the Kingdom of Ryukyu by the Qing. Similarly, Okinawan merchants and their Chinese counterparts now had to register with the new Meiji government in Tokyo. These new arrangements ended the charade of independent sovereignty Okinawan merchants had been operating under, and increased competition for commerce, as Japanese trading concerns sought to undertake contracts that they had previously been forbidden from seeking. The Chinese government approved Japanese applications to trade under provisions established after the Second Opium War, and in return the fledgling Japanese naval forces agreed to assist in the prevention of piracy and smuggling in the waters off the Chinese coast.²⁸

With the end of the Ryukyuan Kingdom, and the expulsion of the Chinese diplomatic colony in Naha, the status of the original 36 Families and their descendants decreased. Families like the Kojo, and their associated cadet branches, like the Higaonna, maintained their standard of living even as the overall economic fate of the island suffered. The Okinawan trading houses now began to sponsor Chinese merchants who wished to set up operations on the island.²⁹ These reciprocal arrangements were facilitated by the centuries of association between the Ryukyuan and Chinese merchants. The Okinawans were looked down upon by the Japanese officials, and

²⁷ Smits, *Visions of Ryukyu*, 146.

²⁸ Murakami, *The Reorganization of the Maritime Order in Coastal Areas of South China During the Mid 19th Century*, 20.

²⁹ Cohen, *Karate*, 208.

the island's economy, already precarious, suffered even more under Japanese control. After annexation by the Meiji government Okinawa prefecture became, and has remained, the poorest in the nation.³⁰ This fact may have influenced the generally positive attitude toward Okinawan merchants in Fuzhou at the time, since they would not have been equated with the more presumptuous Japanese traders who had begun doing business in China after the Opium Wars. Also, Okinawan merchants were continuing a long-established relationship with the Chinese, a relationship that the upstart Japanese merchants did not possess.

One consequence of the Japanese annexation of Ryukyu was that residents of the island were now subject to conscription in Japan's newly modernized military, that had been organized along western lines.³¹ Conscription was quite unpopular among the Okinawan public, and the trading houses like those of the Kojo now assumed a new activity, that of transporting fugitives from Japanese military service to Fujian.³² These fugitives were usually taken on by the Okinawan merchant companies as general laborers and sailors on vessels bound for Fuzhou, and provided a cheap source of labor for the trading houses. It is not known how many of these fugitives from conscription eventually returned to Okinawa, and how many remained in China. Their presence in Fujian appears to have been tolerated by the local communities, if not actively approved of, since no major efforts were made to arrest and repatriate these Okinawan youths.

³⁰ Smits, *Visions of Ryukyu*, 161.

³¹ Akamine, *The Ryukyu Kingdom*, 158.

³² Cohen, *Karate*, 210.

The outbreak of hostilities between Japan and China over control of the Korean Peninsula in 1894 further complicated the relationship between the Okinawan community in Fuzhou and the Chinese nationals among whom they dwelled. Despite hostility toward the Japanese people and their government, Okinawan merchants in Fujian province appear not to have suffered much antipathy. The Okinawans were not considered to be really Japanese by the citizens of Fujian, and their activities continued with few restrictions on mobility or interactions with local residents, despite official restrictions that were placed on the trading community by the Qing government.³³ Fuzhou continued to be a popular destination for young Okinawan males who wished to avoid military service, and Higaonna Kanryo continued to participate in the transport of these young men.³⁴ Despite the strong anti-Japanese sentiment that predominated in China after the imposition of the terms in the Treaty of Shimonoseki in 1895, and the subsequent Japanese occupation of Taiwan in May of that same year, the position of Okinawan merchants resident in Fuzhou remained unchanged throughout the remainder of the Qing era.

In addition to his continued visits to Fuzhou during his lifetime, Higaonna Kanryo, like other Okinawan merchants, frequently sponsored Chinese merchants who wished to settle in Okinawa. Wu Xianghui (Japanese: *Go Kenki*) was born in Fuzhou in 1886, and undertook employment with Higaonna Kanryo's establishment in the first decade of the 20th century. In 1912, three years before Higaonna's death, Wu emigrated to Okinawa to manage the Higaonna

³³ Smits, *Visions of Ryukyu*, 151.

³⁴ Cohen, *Karate*, 394.

family's warehouse in Naha.³⁵ Wu was one of many Chinese who, after the fall of the Qing Dynasty in 1911, left China for the relative stability of other countries in Asia. Wu's previous association with Higaonna allowed him to integrate into Okinawan society with very little difficulty, and by 1920 he was the owner of his own tea importing business. The rapidity of Wu Xianghui's transition from employee to business owner in his own right suggests that the close cultural ties between the Okinawan merchant community in Fuzhou and the Fujianese population was close and possessed reciprocal benefits for both.

Conclusions

The Qing dynasty ended in 1911, ushering in the chaos that was the Republican period of 1912-1949. Initially the change in government had little effect on the status of the Okinawan merchants in Fuzhou, though the demise of the Qing bureaucracy meant that foreign merchants in China were subject to more occasions of corruption, and the failure of banking institutions in Shanxi and Sichuan must have had a chilling effect on the abilities of the local banks in Fujian province to guarantee accounts held by merchants like Higaonna.³⁶ Perhaps the greatest change that occurred during his period was the way that Japanese aggression following the country's successful military expedition against Russia in the first decade of the twentieth century led to an increase in wariness by Chinese merchants when dealing with merchants from the Empire of the Rising Sun. Okinawan merchants were not viewed as Japanese by their Chinese trading partners,

³⁵ References to the life and activities of Wu Xianghui are drawn from Cohen and Keegan, as well as records of the *Ryukyu Karate Kenyukai*, of which Wu was a founding member in 1926.

³⁶ Lin, Man-Houng, "China's 'Dual Economy' in International Trade Relations, 1842-1949," *Japan China, and the Growth of the Asian international Economy, 1850-1949*, (Sugihara, Kaoru (ed)), (London: Oxford University Press, 2005), 189.

and were, in fact, frequently regarded as fellow sufferers of Japanese Imperial oppression. That attitude began to change as the Japanese expanded their operations in Manchuria, and the participation of Okinawan settlers in the Japanese annexation of Taiwan became more widely apparent.³⁷ By the 1930s the Chinese perception of the Okinawan merchants as other than Japanese had been replaced by the general hostility toward the Japanese as military aggressors, and Okinawan merchants in Fuzhou were treated as hostile foreign occupiers who sought to take advantage of the local Chinese population. Even Wu Xianghui had, by the 1930s acquired Japanese citizenship, indicating a shift in allegiance from occupied Chinese citizen to membership in the occupying society. The era of friendly cooperation between the Okinawan and Chinese merchants in Fuzhou had ended for good. Despite having been subject to the control of the satsuma clan of Kyushu since the 17th century, the Ryukyu cultural milieu was a mix of Chinese and native Okinawan influences and thus the Okinawan merchants in China were easily able to navigate the social and behavioral nuances required to be successful in their commercial endeavors. Further research on this subject must necessarily be interdisciplinary, since many of the documents relating to this era were lost during the Pacific war. The use of oral narrative, and analysis of cultural and sociological artifacts must take the place of much of the written record, and the historian must learn to utilize the tools of the cultural anthropologist to better understand the actions and influences of this community and its importance to the study of both nations.

³⁷ Cohen, *Karate*, 285. Cohen discusses several of Higaonna's students who joined in Imperial Japanese settlement expeditions to the Island of Taiwan. The actions of these and other Okinawans who participated in Japanese colonial efforts in East Asia are problematic for the otherwise hagiographical narratives that have grown up around the early karate pioneers, and are currently the subject of much discussion (and much pointed pretending that certain things never happened) in the study of the history of Okinawan and Japanese karate. Certainly colonialism and its more reprehensible aspects are subjects which must be addressed and dealt with in order for the field to grow and assume its place in the formal study of history.

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