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Art of Embassy: Material Culture of Exchange between the Ryukyu Kingdom and Ming-Qing China

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Master of Arts Thesis

Art of Embassy

Material Culture of Exchange between the Ryukyu Kingdom and Ming-Qing China

MA in East Asian Studies

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Abstract

Ryukyu, also known as Okinawa, is the southernmost prefecture of Japan today. However, these islands were once an independent Kingdom and played a crucial role as a link between Northeast and Southeast Asia during the maritime period. Established in 1429, the Ryukyu Kingdom existed as a separate state for nearly 450 years until it was incorporated into Okinawa Prefecture by the Meiji Japanese government in 1879. Scholarship on Okinawa has predominantly focused on post-war geopolitics or the general exchanges between China, Japan, and Ryukyu in the early modern period, often relying on textual accounts. Unfortunately, the arts of Okinawa have largely been overlooked by the Western world due to the prevailing notion that Japan is a homogeneous culture, disregarding local variations and leading Western Japanologists to lack specialized interest in Japan's peripheral regions. Similarly, ethnographic museums in the West have limited collections related to the Ainu people. These circumstances suggest that contemporary studies on Japan are largely influenced by the country's nationalist concept of a unified nation, particularly after the Meiji Restoration.

China had been sending diplomatic envoys to the Ryukyu Kingdom since the Ming Hongwu Emperor, and this practice continued until the mid-19th century when Japan annexed Ryukyu and made it part of its territory. The four-century-long diplomatic history between Ryukyu and China can be considered the golden age of Okinawan history, during which numerous art forms thrived, and Okinawans took great pride in their unique culture and language. The Okinawans referred to the vessels carrying envoys from China as *Okansen* (meaning "crown ships"), and the primary envoys who crowned the Ryukyu King were called *Sappōshi*. Although the Ryukyu Kingdom was officially established as a unified dynasty by King Shō Hashi in 1429, the tributary relationship with Ming China had already begun in 1372, during the reign of the Ming Hongwu Emperor and King of Chūzan.

In addition to the vassal and tributary relationship with China, the Kingdom maintained careful relations with Japan after the invasion by the Japanese Satsuma-Shimazu clan based in Kagoshima, Kyushu in 1609. The Ryukyu Kingdom pursued a diplomacy of equidistance and multilateralism, establishing trade with China, Japan, Korea, and Southeast Asian countries as the foundation of its economy. Consequently, people, goods, and information from various Asian countries were exchanged, giving rise to an international "Ryukyu culture."

This study aims to explore the enduring but relatively understudied tributary

relationship between the suzerain and vassal states through an examination of historical documents and material culture. Specifically, I will analyze similar tributary offerings found in the collections of various museums.

Keywords: Ryukyu; Okinawa; lacquer; textiles; diplomacy; *bingata*

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Introduction

My thesis comprises four chapters. Chapter one situates Ryukyu in pre-modern East Asia from the 14th century onwards. Chapter two investigates the objects exchanged during this period, relying on historical accounts to identify overlaps and potential correlations. Chapter three adopts an object-based approach, closely examining Ryukyuan lacquerware and *bingata*, a type of dyed textile worn by Ryukyuan royals and elites. Finally, the conclusion will discuss whether there are noticeable imitations in terms of techniques, materials, and imagery, and examine whether Ryukyuan arts align with the evolution of Chinese and Japanese artistic trends. It is also important to determine if Ryukyu developed its own distinct patterns or symbols and explore their possible sources. Previous scholarly efforts have provided limited insights into this topic, and even when available, the discussions have been relatively brief. My goal is to expand upon the existing scholarship and shed further light on this subject.

Chapter 1: Situating Ryukyu in early modern East Asia

1. The establishment of diplomatic ties between Ryukyu and Ming China

This chapter begins with an imperial edict issued by Emperor Hongwu on January 16, 1372, during the fifth year of his reign. In the edict, Emperor Hongwu proclaimed the Ryukyu King Chūzan as follows:

"In the past, when the Son of Heaven governed the world, wherever the sun and the moon shined, there was no distinction between distance and nearness, and all regions were treated equally. Thus, it is not my intention to change and adopt foreign customs. I, as the ruler, support my subjects, and the honorable title of ruling the world is 'Daming.' Therefore, I have sent envoys to foreign countries. Wherever my envoys went, the foreign chiefs proclaimed themselves as subjects and paid tribute. However, Ryukyu, being in the southeast of China and distant overseas, has not received this information. Thus, I have specially sent envoys to inform you. You should be aware of this."¹

This record marks the origin of the tributary relationship between China and Ryukyu during the Ming and Qing dynasties. It can be argued that Emperor Hongwu, who rose to power from a humble background, sought to enhance the prestige of the nascent

¹ Ming shilu, vol.71, pp.3; Huang Chang-chien, *Ming shilu fu jiaokanji ji fulu* (Taipei: Academia Sinica, 1984), pp.1317.

Ming dynasty. To achieve this, it was the responsibility of the Ming Dynasty to fulfill Ryukyu's desires, and in return, it was appropriate for Ryukyu to become a vassal state and pay tribute. Tributes encompassed not only tangible goods but also concepts such as status, rank, esteem, supremacy, and reputation. According to the records of Zhou Huang, an envoy of Qing Qianlong, the noble surname Shō (C. Shang) of the Ryukyu kings was granted during the Hongwu and Yongle periods.²

It is essential to note that the tributary system was not a one-sided imposition from China to Ryukyu but a bilateral relationship. Historical accounts reveal that Ryukyu also voluntarily requested China to bestow peerage. During the reign of Emperor Yingzong of Ming (first reign as Zengtong from 1435 to 1449, second reign as Tianshun from 1457 to 1464), when the founding Ryukyu King Shō Hashi passed away, his son Shō Chū requested the Ming court to officially confer kingship to strengthen and legitimize his rule. In the seventh year of Zhengtong, Emperor Yingzong issued an imperial edict stating that the emperors of the Ming Dynasty treated overseas states as monarchs ruling their people without distinction.³ Emperor Yingzong also urged the honest and prudent subjects of Ryukyu to wholeheartedly support the new king, enabling him to govern effectively and ensure the happiness and peace of the Ryukyu people.⁴

The situation remained relatively unchanged after the Qing Dynasty replaced the Ming Dynasty and the Manchurians ruled China. In 1654, during the eleventh year of Emperor Shunzhi's reign, an edict was issued to Ryukyu King Shō Shichi, stating that "the gods and virtues of the emperor should be in harmony with the top and bottom. Upon inheriting the Mandate from Heaven, he goes to the seaside to praise, vassal of the barrier."⁵ In 1718, during the fifty-seventh year of the Kangxi Emperor's reign, envoy Xu Baoguang declared that "the Ryukyu country is on the tropical border, and therefore should be a vassal,"⁶ while ordering Ryukyu civil officials to "cultivate the monarchy carefully, encourage loyalty and honesty, support and assist the royal family, and promote prosperity for future generations."⁷ The Kangxi Emperor also granted Ryukyu a horizontal wooden tablet inscribed with the words "Chū Zan Sei Do" in 1682, the twenty-first year of his reign, which is still proudly displayed in the great hall of

² Zhou Huang, *Liuqiuguo zhilue*, vol.12; *Naha-shi shi, sapposhi roku kankei shiryō* (Naha: Naha Shiyakusho, 1977), pp.218.

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 62.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp.121.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp.97.

⁷ *Ibid.*

Shuri Castle.

Prior to the advancements and disruptions caused by European colonialism, regions and countries such as Korea, Ryukyu, Vietnam, and Tibet were incorporated into the tribute system by the Central Kingdom, and China served as the political axis of East Asia for centuries. Chinese-style foreign diplomacy demanded that neighboring countries and subjects fulfill their rights and obligations, while also receiving the cultural and commercial benefits that China had to offer.

Since Ryukyu established a tributary relationship with the Ming Hongwu Emperor, China sent envoys to confer with the Ryukyu king a total of twenty-three times—fifteen times during the Ming Dynasty and eight times during the Qing Dynasty.⁸ Among these twenty-three instances, forty-three individuals have been identified as the principal and deputy envoys, leaving us with approximately fourteen precious written records that have survived to this day.⁹ These envoys were well-educated civil officials, often highly cultivated in poetry and the arts. During their missions, envoys and their personnel, often four to seven hundreds in number, would stay in Ryukyu for up to six months.¹⁰ Therefore, constructing an accurate history of Ryukyu is incomplete without referencing their written records.

2. The role of Fujian: the migration of its people and provincial culture into Ryukyu

The interactions between Ming-Qing China and Ryukyu extended beyond official channels and encompassed non-governmental exchanges. The influence of Chinese culture on Ryukyu had a profound impact on the local way of life, including cuisine, crafts, and folk religions. Many famous Okinawan products that are promoted by the Japanese government today, such as brown sugar, awamori liquor, the sanshin musical instrument, and karate martial arts, all trace their origins back to Fujian, China. These have become essential elements of daily life for the Ryukyu people.

It is widely accepted that Chinese immigration to Ryukyu began in 1392, the 25th year of Ming Emperor Hongwu's reign when he granted 36 clans from Fujian to Ryukyu¹¹.

⁸ Shimajiri Shotaro, *Sapposhi-ro nitsuite, Naha-shi shi, shiryō hen*, vol.1-3 (Naha: Naha shiyakusho, 1977), pp.1-17.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ https://ryukyunihonisan.jp/en/story_en/#storyAnchor03

¹¹ Sun Qing-ling, "On the particularity of Fujian thirty-six family trees in the history of overseas Chinese- a case study of emigrants under the tribute system of East Asia," *Journal of Fujian Institute of Education* vol.10 (Fuzhou: Fujian Normal University, 2006), pp.90-93.

These official Chinese immigrants settled in the Kumemura village near Naha city, the capital of present-day Okinawa, and played a crucial role in spreading Ming-Qing cultures to Ryukyu. The Ryukyu government treated them with great respect, and they maintained most of the traditional Chinese way of life until the Meiji Restoration. Their contributions to the prevalence of Chinese culture in Ryukyu were immense. The migration of these Fujianese clans likely transplanted the ethos of Fujian to Ryukyu. In 1992, Fukushuen Garden was opened in commemoration of the 10th anniversary of the city friendship between Fuzhou, Fujian, and Naha city. This garden is located where the Kumemura village (or Kuninda in the local Ryukyu language) used to exist.

The villagers of Kumemura passed down the teachings of Chinese language and classics from one generation to another. They had a significant influence on the education system of the Ryukyu Kingdom. Due to their specialized skills in interpretation and navigation, the Chinese descendants were often selected and sent as tribute envoys and interpreters by Ryukyu kings.¹² They were responsible for drafting diplomatic documents sent to the Chinese government. Official records indicate that Ryukyu envoys paid tribute under different names approximately two hundred times, spanning from the early Ming Dynasty to the late Qing Dynasty, maintaining an uninterrupted tradition for five hundred years.¹³ After traveling to China, the Kuninda individuals either studied at the Imperial Academy in Beijing or attended private schools in Fuzhou.¹⁴ Upon their return to Ryukyu, the first public school, Meirindo, was established.¹⁵ The school taught Beijing Mandarin, Chinese classics, poetry, and the official way of writing diplomatic documents.¹⁶

¹² Wu Aihua, "Liuqiu lishi shang de jiumicun," *Bulletin of Historical Research*, vol.13 (Taipei: National Taiwan Normal University, 1984), pp.107-144. The Kingdom of Ryukyu had two diplomatic systems. The first was dominated by the Chinese, who wrote official documents, licenses, and credentials in Chinese, and were responsible for missions to the Ming Dynasty, Korea, and Southeast Asian countries such as Annam, Siam, Malacca, Java, etc.; the second system was led by Buddhist monks, who were proficient in Japanese, wrote national documents in Japanese kana characters and Chinese characters, and traveled to Japan as envoys.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Majikina Anko and Shimakura Ryuji, *Ryukyu issennen-shi* (Naha: Ryukyu shiryō kenkyū kai, 1966).

¹⁵ Kenichi Uezato and Chen Weifen, "Acceptance of Confucianism in the Ryukyus," *Taiwan Journal of East Asian Studies*, vol.3-1 (Taipei: National Taiwan Normal University, 2006), pp.3-25.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

3. Satsuma's invasion of Ryukyu in 1609 and its aftermath

The Ryukyu Kingdom fell victim to the invasion of Japan's southernmost Satsuma Domain, located approximately 776 kilometers away from Naha, in 1609, marking the beginning of Japan's oppressive rule over Ryukyu. Although officially considered a vassal state of China, Ryukyu was essentially controlled by Japan.

In 1609, during the thirty-seventh year of Ming China's Wanli era and the fourteenth year of Japan's Keichō era, the Satsuma Domain launched an invasion of Ryukyu with three thousand elite troops and over one hundred warships. The fierce Satsuma warriors quickly seized control of the entire kingdom and took Ryukyu King Shō Nei as a hostage. Although the king was allowed to return to Ryukyu two years later, Satsuma dispatched Japanese officials to closely monitor all activities in Ryukyu. The History of Shimazu Country (J. *Shimazu Kokushi*) documented the following:

"On the 19th day of September in the 16th year of Keichō, Junior Assistant of the Ministry of War, Defender of Kii, Victorious Lieutenant, and Gonzaemon Left Gate Guards, who were able to fight in the army, jointly signed more than ten decrees and had them published in the Ryukyu Kingdom. The Ryukyu King Shō Nei wrote the League and stated: 'From now on, I dare not have two hearts. If anyone wants to disobey, all kinds of gods will kill him!'¹⁷

Satsuma established the position of "*Zaibanbugyō*" (Chief Executive stationed in Ryukyu), which became the de facto ruling authority over the Ryukyu Kingdom.¹⁸ Personnel were dispatched to extensively survey and assess the main and affiliated islands of Ryukyu, determining the annual tribute amount and collecting various taxes.¹⁹ The Law of Fifteen Injunctions were imposed upon the Ryukyu king, forcing him to relinquish his rights and sovereignty, and in return, a written oath (*kishōmon*) was sworn to acknowledge Satsuma's "benevolence."²⁰ Ryukyu's status changed from an independent kingdom to a Japanese vassal, with Satsuma ordering the Ryukyu King to continue paying tribute to the Ming dynasty. The costs associated with tribute exchanges were borne by Satsuma, and any profits obtained belonged to the latter.²¹

¹⁷ Kerr, George H., *Okinawa: The History of an Island People* (Rutland, VT: Charles E. Tuttle Company, 1958), pp. 162.

¹⁸ Yano Misako, "Positioning of the Ryukyu Kingdom in East Asia," *Waseda Rilas Journal*, no.9 (Tokyo: Waseda University, 2021), pp.286.

¹⁹ Liu Yue-wu, "The study about the relations among China, Japan and Ryukyu during the Ming dynasty," *Historical Research in Anhui*, no.4 (Hefei: 2006).

²⁰ <https://ryukyu-bugei.com/?p=7999>

²¹ Sakai, Robert K., "The Satsuma-Ryukyu Trade and the Tokugawa Seclusion Policy," *The Journal of*

The Ryukyu people were effectively reduced to instruments at Satsuma's disposal.

Iha Fuyū, known as the modern "father of Okinawa studies," likened the situation in Ryukyu at that time to "cormorants on the Nara River."²² This metaphor symbolizes cormorants that are skilled at fishing but have their heads and necks tied with ropes. When the ropes are tightened, they obediently spit out the fish and present them to their captor. This comparison accurately depicts the relationship between Ryukyu and Satsuma during that period. Since then, due to the strict control imposed by Satsuma, the domain not only gained local tax revenue but also profited immensely from the mutual tribute trade between China and Ryukyu, gradually becoming one of the four powerful domains in Edo Japan.

It may be reasonable to assume that Ryukyu was a Sinicized nation heavily influenced by the Ming dynasty. However, as early as the end of the sixteenth century, both China and Japan had already impacted Ryukyuan society. Zhang Han, a civil official from Ming China, observed and wrote in his *Pine Window Dreamy Words* (C. *Song Chuang Meng Yu*) in 1593:

"When it comes to Ryukyu, it is evident that it is significantly influenced by China. However, at the same time, Japanese currency circulates in the Ryukyu market, and Ryukyuans also have practices such as ritual suicide by disembowelment."²³

After Satsuma's invasion in 1609, clear differences in Ryukyu's external relations with Japan emerged, transforming from an equal to a subordinate status. By comparing a letter addressed to the Shimazu Master of the Office of Palace Repairs (*shuri no daibu*) in 1580 and a letter addressed to the Council of Elders of the Tokugawa Shogunate (*gorōjū shū*) in 1634, the 11th year of the Kanei era, we find that the former referred to the Ryukyu king as the "King of Chūzan," while the latter simply used the title "*Ryūkyū kokushi*" (Governor of Ryukyu).²⁴ Additionally, the Chinese year name was removed, the red seal "The Seal of Shuri" was replaced with a mere signature, and the writing system adopted a Japanese style distinct from the previous Chinese style.²⁵ These changes symbolized the demotion of Ryukyu's status and Japan's attempt to internalize

Asian Studies, vol. 23, no.3 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press,1964), pp.391–403.

²² Iha Fuyu, *Okinawa yo doko he: Ryukyu-shi monogatari* (Sekaisha, 1928).

²³ Wang Zhen-zhong, "Qingdai guanmian shang de jiabaoshi," *Shanghai Review of Books* (Shanghai: 2015).

²⁴ Yano Misako, "Positioning of the Ryukyu Kingdom in East Asia," *Waseda Rilas Journal*, no.9 (Tokyo: Waseda University, 2021), pp.285.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

Ryukyu as a "foreign country" (*ikoku*) within the shogunate system.²⁶

Subsequently, whenever a new shogun assumed office or the Ryukyu king ascended the throne, Ryukyu sent congratulatory missions (*keigashi*) to Edo to celebrate the succession or gratitude missions (*shaonshi*) to express appreciation to the shogun. Throughout the Edo period (1603-1867), the Ryukyu envoys sent to Edo amounted to a total of eighteen times.²⁷ Their activities in Edo were documented in the Account of the Ryukyuan Envoys (*Ryukyu Heishiki*) written by the Japanese Confucian scholar Ogyu Sorai in 1710.

During the *Edo nobori* ceremonies, Ryukyuan officials brought ceremonial regalia such as plaques and drums. As requested by Satsuma, the Ryukyuan officials dressed in Chinese attire during the procession.²⁸ The musical performances included pieces such as "Perennial Spring," "Celebrating the Dynasty," "Playing for the Qing," "Congratulating the Holy Ming," "Thank His Grace," "Blessing and Longevity," "Celebrating Prosperity," "Phoenix Song," and others.²⁹ These musical pieces combined elements of Ming and Qing music with Ryukyuan music.³⁰ From the perspective of the Tokugawa shogunate, the content of the songs was not of significant concern. What mattered to the Tokugawa was the creation of a Chinese atmosphere and sentiment, aiming to establish a Japan-centered world order.³¹

Under the shogunate system, diplomatic relations treated both Korea and Ryukyu as correspondent countries, primarily for trading with China and the Netherlands.³² Although both Ryukyu and Korea were considered correspondent countries, their treatment was vastly different. While there was an exchange of credentials between the Tokugawa Shogun and the Joseon King in Japan-Korea relations, communication between Edo and Ryukyu was relegated to the elder ministers (*rōjū*).³³ From this perspective, we can understand that Satsuma's invasion of Ryukyu stemmed from

²⁶ Ibid.; Kamiya Nobuyuki, *Bakuhansai kokka no Ryukyu shihai*, (Tokyo: Azekura Shobo, 1990).

²⁷ Toby, Ronald P., *State and Diplomacy in Early Modern Japan: Asia in the Development of the Tokugawa Bakufu* (Boston: Princeton University Press, 1984), pp.48-49.

²⁸ Zhu De-lan et al, *Liuqiu chongsheng de guang he ying* (Taipei: Wunan Culture Enterprise, 2019), pp.63.

²⁹ *Ryukyu heisiki*, Sakamaki/Hawley Collection (Honolulu: University of Hawaii), HW457, <https://shimuchi.lib.u-ryukyu.ac.jp/collection/sakamaki/hw457>.

³⁰ Wang Zhen-zhong, "Qingdai guanmian shang de jiabaoshi," *Shanghai Review of Books* (Shanghai: 2015).

³¹ Toby, Ronald P., *State and Diplomacy in Early Modern Japan: Asia in the Development of the Tokugawa Bakufu* (Boston: Princeton University Press, 1984), pp.87.

³² Zhu De-lan et al, *Liuqiu chongsheng de guang he ying* (Taipei: Wunan Culture Enterprise, 2019), pp.56.

³³ Ibid.

economic interests rather than territorial expansion.³⁴ Ming China banned Japanese business activities in 1547, but Ryukyans still enjoyed this privilege.³⁵ In the past, prosperous tally trades (*kangō bōeki*) flourished for over a hundred years between Ningbo port and Muromachi Japan, leading to the development of sophisticated Kitayama and Higashiyama cultures. Satsuma coveted these lucrative profits and desperately sought to control Ryukyu at any cost. However, at that time, Satsuma's ambitions were curtailed by the Tokugawa shogunate. In fact, the Tokugawa did not want Satsuma to annex Ryukyu and become a powerful domain in the south, posing a threat to its rule.³⁶ Additionally, the Edo shogunate aimed to restore the old tally trades with Ming China, so it had no reason to compete with the Ming dynasty for suzerainty over Ryukyu.³⁷ For pragmatic reasons and to ensure continuous trade profits from China, Satsuma had no need to annex Ryukyu either.³⁸ On the contrary, Satsuma intentionally concealed its insidious activities in Ryukyu.

Strict measures were implemented as follows: Satsuma did not allow Chinese immigrants to settle in Ryukyu. When Chinese envoys and businessmen visited Ryukyu, all Japanese individuals in Shuri, Naha, and other areas, as well as conspicuous objects, were evacuated to remote locations. The Ryukyuan people were also prohibited from speaking Japanese. Ryukyuan missionaries and businessmen carried handbooks containing questions they might encounter in China along with standardized answers. This disguise persisted for two hundred and fifty years.³⁹

Kishaba Chōken (C. Shō Enyoku), a close minister to the last Ryukyu King Shō Tai, confessed in his *Ryūkyū Kenbunroku*:

"Once the relationship between our country and Japan is exposed, it will hinder tribute, so we must conceal it from China. When the imperial envoy came to Ryukyu, all Satsuma officials and businessmen in Ryukyu moved to Gusukuma Village in Urasoe city, and the Satsuma ships that were originally docked were moved to Unten

³⁴ Liu Yue-wu, "The study about the relations among China, Japan and Ryukyu during the Ming dynasty," *Historical Research in Anhui*, no.4 (Hefei: 2006), pp.34.

³⁵ The official tally trade was interrupted for various reasons, including multiple cases of Japan violating Ming rules for sending ships and personal exceeding the stipulated amounts, a tribute conflict between two representative Japanese clans in 1523 causing massive damage to Ningbo, and a surge in piratical activities on southeastern Chinese coasts, even harassing Nanjing.

³⁶ Liu Yue-wu, "The study about the relations among China, Japan and Ryukyu during the Ming dynasty," *Historical Research in Anhui*, no.4 (Hefei: 2006), pp.34.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ Sakai, Robert K., "The Satsuma-Ryukyu trade and the Tokugawa seclusion policy," *Journal of Asian Studies*, vol.23:3 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1964), pp.391-403.

³⁹ Yang Jong-qi, *Liuqiu gujin tan*, (Taipei: The Commercial Press, 1990).

Port near Nakijin to avoid the scrutiny of the Chinese. All the Japanese Kanei coins that are usually circulated in the country are hidden, and the reserved Hatome coins in the government are brought out temporarily and circulated in the city during the Chinese stay. Hanging scrolls, bell inscriptions, inscriptions in government offices and temples, and other items related to Japan, people's names, or things substantially connected to Japan are collected and concealed. Articles and utensils used in the country are said to be produced on a fictional Dokara Island if they are made in Japan. In the past, the ports were closed between China and Japan, and there was no communication or exchange of envoys. Therefore, the Chinese do not know that our country belongs to Satsuma."⁴⁰

Both Satsuma and Ryukyu made great efforts to maintain this charade. For Ryukyu, tributary trade was vital for the survival of the small kingdom. Prior to 1609, Ryukyu enjoyed profitable foreign trade, particularly with China. However, after Satsuma's invasion, this interest was heavily exploited, and Ryukyu lost its former glory. Faced with these significant changes and recalling the suffering and humiliation endured during the exile in Kagoshima, King Shō Nei felt so ashamed that he could not face his ancestors. When he passed away, he instructed his attendants to place a mask on his face and requested not to be buried in the ancestral grave but in a cave located dozens of miles away from Urasoe city.⁴¹ From then on, Ryukyu found itself caught between China and Japan and dared not offend either party.

⁴⁰ Kishaba Choken, *Ryukyu kenbunroku*, (Okinawa: Toteiicho kankokai, 1962).

⁴¹ Wu Ai-hua, "The invasion of Ryukyu in 1609 by the Satsuma clan," *Bulletin of Historical Research*, no.13 (Taipei: National Taiwan Normal University, 1985), pp.171.

Chapter 2: Objects in Motion

The study of Ryukyu heavily relies on *Rekidai Hōan*, a canonical work compiled by Ryukyu itself, which contains diplomatic credentials, official documents, archives, licenses, and imperial edicts issued by the Ming and Qing dynasties to Ryukyu. However, the majority of these documents, around 90%, are related to Ming-Qing China, with only about 10% related to Korea, Southeast Asian countries, and excluding Japan, an important trading partner of Ryukyu.⁴² By examining *Rekidai Hōan*, we can gain insights into Ryukyu's international relations and the commodities traded. For example, it recorded an incident in 1425 when King Chūzan Shō Hashi filed a complaint against Siam (Ayutthaya Kingdom) for restricting the trade of sumac dyes and pepper, causing significant losses to Ryukyu despite their official purchase of Chinese porcelain.⁴³ To ensure the safe return of Ryukyuan traders and the acquisition of desired goods, Ryukyu also sent gifts to Siam, including high-end textiles from Ming China, over 2,000 pieces of celadon, Ryukyu sulfur, as well as Japanese fans and knives.⁴⁴ These records reveal that the rise of the Ryukyu Kingdom was based on triangular trade facilitated by its tributary relationship with Ming-Qing China. In this trade pattern, foreign goods were brought to China by Ryukyu and Chinese goods were re-exported to foreign countries for sale, generating significant profits and contributing to Ryukyu's golden age while attracting the attention of Satsuma.

Before analyzing the traded goods, it is important to note that the trade between China and Ryukyu did not operate based on market supply and demand. Tribute trade was not a free market and was subject to administrative intervention by the Ming Dynasty.⁴⁵ During the Yongle and Xuande eras, the Ming Dynasty was particularly generous to tribute missions from various countries, even providing large junks as official tributary ships to Ryukyu.⁴⁶ From the Hongwu to Yongle periods, Ryukyu received 30 Chinese junks, each measuring 45 meters and capable of accommodating 300 people.⁴⁷ Starting from the Jingtai period in 1450, Ryukyu began to bear the costs of manufacturing large

⁴² Ho Kai-lung, "The rise of fall of Ryukyu Kingdom's international trade: focusing the type and amount of goods attached in the tribute to Ming China," *The Silk Road Cultural Studies* (Nanjing: Nanjing University, 2020), pp. 29-31.

⁴³ Harada Ayumi, *Ryukyu Kingdom as the center of maritime exchange* (Fukuoka: Kyushu National Museum, 2015), pp.3.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ Ho Kai-lung, "The rise of fall of Ryukyu Kingdom's international trade: focusing the type and amount of goods attached in the tribute to Ming China," *The Silk Road Cultural Studies* (Nanjing: Nanjing University, 2020), pp. 35.

⁴⁶ Harada Ayumi, *Ryukyu Kingdom as the center of maritime exchange* (Fukuoka: Kyushu National Museum, 2015), pp.3.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

ships in Fujian.⁴⁸ However, due to the decline of the Ming Dynasty's national power and depletion of wood for shipbuilding in Fujian, Ryukyu started building its own tributary ships in the 16th century.⁴⁹ As a result, the ship size became smaller, and the cargo capacity for traded goods also decreased.

1. Goods imported from Ming-Qing China

Historical documents record that the gifts bestowed upon the Ryukyu kings, queens, and officials by the Ming and Qing emperors primarily consisted of dynastic robes, gauze hats, belts, headgear, and textiles. Even during the Qing Dynasty, the gifts were customized according to the styles of the Ming Hongwu and Yongle periods, symbolizing the superior status of the Ryukyu rulers.⁵⁰ The clothing system of the Ryukyu kings and officials was established and influenced by Ming China, and Chinese attire was mandatory for formal occasions and ceremonies.⁵¹ Even when sending envoys to Japan, they would wear Chinese court attire.⁵² While the Ming Dynasty directly gifted palace clothing, during the Qing Dynasty, fabrics were rewarded, and tailoring was done in Ryukyu itself.⁵³ A Qing envoy named Zhou Huang described the attire worn by the Ryukyu king and regent:

"The hat is wrapped around the head with a handkerchief, and thin wood chips are used as supports. There are seven or nine layers in the front and eleven or twelve layers in the back. Purple is the most expensive, followed by yellow, red, and green. Different floral or plain silk is used in the middle. The king still wears the crown of the Ming Dynasty when receiving an envoy, along with a black gauze hat, an upward-facing wing, a gold and red necklace hanging down the collar, and a leather belt. The regent wears a brocade hat that can be seen from a distance, resembling a house with a leaky roof."⁵⁴

In contrast to Joseon's loyalty to the Ming Dynasty, Ryukyu pragmatically recognized the Qing Dynasty's takeover of China, which earned them more rewards from Qing

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Xu Bao-guang, *Zhongshan chuanxinlu*; Naha-shi shi, sapposhi kankei shiryō (Naha: Naha Shiyakusho, 1977), pp.62.

⁵¹ Kyuyo, no.861, ed. Kyuyo kenkyukai (Tokyo: Kadokawa Shoten, 1974).

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Harada Ayumi, *Ryukyu Kingdom as the center of maritime exchange* (Fukuoka: Kyushu National Museum, 2015), pp.5.

⁵⁴ Zhou Huang, *Liuqiuguo zhilue*, vol.12; Naha-shi shi, sapposhi kankei shiryō, (Naha: Naha Shiyakusho, 1977), pp.196.

emperors. Besides precious textiles like satin, gauze, and yarn, Qing imperial wares produced by the Jingdezhen official kiln were also unearthed at Shuri Castle. These wares, bearing Chinese year marks, spanned from the high Qing dynasties to Daoguang and were presumed to be rewards bestowed by the Qing emperors to the Ryukyu kings. They mainly consisted of plates and bowls decorated with three-clawed dragon and phoenix patterns. These Ryukyu-specific wares, different from the five-clawed dragon patterns found in the Jingdezhen official kiln, were specially made for rewards rather than for the Forbidden City.⁵⁵ Excavations primarily concentrated around Shuri Castle, particularly in the Ochibara Eastern quarters, Kogane Goten Golden Palace, and Nakagusuku Palace, which were the living areas of the king, queen, and crown prince, respectively.⁵⁶ Qing imperial wares were found alongside domestic wares.⁵⁷

Through tribute trade, Ryukyu kings received precious fabrics and imperial porcelains as rewards from China. These benefits extended to civic trade as well. According to Qing dynasty's official archives, when Ryukyu ships arrived in China, they mostly carried back coarse ceramics apart from clothes and textiles.⁵⁸ Archaeological surveys indicate that Chinese ceramics had been imported into Ryukyu as early as the 12th and 13th centuries during the Yuan dynasty, with the volume significantly increasing by the end of the Ming dynasty. The imports included monochromes, blue and whites, Longquan celadon wine pots, plates, and other utensils.⁵⁹ Additionally, Dehua white-glazed religious sculptures were imported during the Qing dynasty.⁶⁰

Another significant Chinese export to Ryukyu was silk, particularly raw silk from Huzhou, Zhejiang. These fabrics purchased from China were then sent to Satsuma on special ships called "*Oshisen*" from Naha.⁶¹ Chinese goods imported to Japan through Ryukyu were known as "*Ryūkyū sanbutsu*" and were highly sought after by the Japanese.⁶² In the 19th century, the shogunate even permitted the domestic sale and circulation of these goods through the *Nagasaki kaisho* Customs.⁶³

⁵⁵ Mori Tatsuya, "Shuri shutsudo no Shincho Keitokuchin kanyo jiki," *Koto Shuri wo horu* (Okinawa: Okinawa Archaeological Society, 2018), pp.97-104.

⁵⁶ Xiang Kun-peng, "On the Qing-dynasty porcelains unearthed at Shurijo castle site and the issues concerned", *Palace Museum Journal*, vol.221 (Beijing: The Palace Museum, 2020), pp.94.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, pp.106.

⁵⁸ Chen Jie-xian, *Ming Qing Zhong Liu Guanxi Runji* (Taipei: Sanmin Book, 2019), pp.31.

⁵⁹ Harada Ayumi, *Ryukyu Kingdom as the center of maritime exchange* (Fukuoka: Kyushu National Museum, 2015), pp.22-23.

⁶⁰ Xie Bi-zhen, *Ming Qing Zhong Liu hanghai maoyi yanjiu* (Beijing: Ocean Press, 2004), pp.159.

⁶¹ Zhu De-lan et al, *Liuqiu Chongsheng de guang he ying* (Taipei: Wunan Culture Enterprise, 2019), pp.58-59.

⁶² *Ibid.*, pp.60.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

In general, goods imported from Ming-Qing China can be categorized as consumable goods, cultural goods, and religious goods. Consumable goods included Chinese medicines, herbs, and tea. Cultural goods encompassed paintings, lacquerware, incense burners, inkstones, books, paper, table screens, brushes, drums, and sanshin music instruments.

2. Tributes from Ryukyu.

Ryukyu's tributes can be categorized into two main types. The first category consists of gifts, such as horses and luxury items, which were exclusively reserved for the emperors. These gifts were of limited quantity and were not intended for circulation in the Chinese market. As a result, they do not provide an accurate reflection of the real economic situation.⁶⁴ The second category comprises goods that were attached to the imperial tributes. These goods were purchased and traded by the Maritime Trade Bureau in Fuzhou, and the officials then sold them in the Chinese private market.⁶⁵ The types and quantities of these attached goods underwent changes that reflected the demands of the Chinese market and indicated the rise and fall of Ryukyu's position in the international entrepot trade.

Since the establishment of official ties between Emperor Hongwu and Ryukyu, the main tributes included sulfur, horses, straw goods (*tawaramono/hyomotsu*), summer cloth, sumac, pepper, tin, and copper.⁶⁶ The first four items were native to Ryukyu. Sulfur, produced on the volcanic Ryukyu Islands, served as a raw material for gunpowder. *Hyomotsu* referred to products packed with straw, specifically sea cucumber, abalone, and shark's fin. Seafood and other miscellaneous items, known as "*Shoshoku*," included essential ingredients in Chinese cuisine such as kombu, shredded squid, dried bonito, and dried shrimp and had a large demand in China.⁶⁷ Summer cloth, made from banana fiber, was a local specialty of the subtropical island. It was included as a tribute as early as the Hongwu period.⁶⁸ While banana cloth was also produced in

⁶⁴ Ho Kai-lung, "The rise of fall of Ryukyu Kingdom's international trade: focusing the type and amount of goods attached in the tribute to Ming China," *The Silk Road Cultural Studies* (Nanjing: Nanjing University, 2020), pp. 32.

⁶⁵ Li Jin-ming, "Mingdai haiwai chaogong maoyi shizhi chu tan," *The Journal of Chinese Social and Economic History*, no.2 (Xiamen: Xiamen University, 1988), pp.72-77.

⁶⁶ Zhou Huang, *Liuqiuguo zhilue*, vol.12; Naha-shi shi, *Sapposhi kankei shiryō* (Naha: Naha Shiyakusho, 1977), pp.59.

⁶⁷ Zhu De-lan et al, *Liuqiu Chongsheng de guang he ying* (Taipei: Wunan Culture Enterprise, 2019), pp.59.

⁶⁸ Kyuyo, no.51, ed. *Kyuyo kenkyukai* (Tokyo: Kadokawa Shoten, 1974).

Fujian and Guangdong, the Chinese envoys to Ryukyu regarded it as a special product of the island kingdom and mentioned it repeatedly in their accounts, praising banana as both an edible and versatile crop.⁶⁹

The remaining tributes consisted of overseas products and were subject to market fluctuations. Three of these products came from Southeast Asia. Sumac, a natural dye from Siam, ceased to be traded with Ryukyu in 1571.⁷⁰ Pepper, produced in various places such as Java, Sumatra, and Malacca, saw its trades with Java end in 1442 and with Sumatra in 1468, leaving only Malacca as a source.⁷¹ In addition to spices, Ryukyu also bought tin blocks from Malacca. However, the supplies of pepper and tin became unstable and intermittent after the Portuguese captured the port city, disrupting caravans and killing foreign merchants.⁷² Unable to access Malacca, Ryukyu turned to Japanese red copper as an alternative.⁷³ With the Manchurians ruling China and the diminished demand for horses in the northern borders, Ryukyu replaced horse tributes with tin from Satsuma.⁷⁴

In general, Ryukyu sent regular tributes of horses and sulfur to China, while other items were considered non-regular tributes. Taking the early Qing Dynasty as an example, in the 11th year of Shunzhi (1654), Ryukyu sent ten horses, three thousand conch shells, and twenty-six hundred catties of sulfur.⁷⁵ Additionally, sabers with gold and silver handles, painted screens, gold-ground fans, silver-ground fans, banana cloth, saffron, pepper, sumac, and other celebratory items were included.⁷⁶ In the sixth year of Kangxi (1667), an additional five hundred catties of red copper and ten mother-of-pearl lacquerware plates were added.⁷⁷ In the 20th year of Kangxi (1673), Emperor Kangxi ordered the Ryukyu Kingdom to send local goods, exempting the need for tributes such as sulfur, conch shells, and red copper; horses, tobacco, and mother-of-pearl utensils were also exempted.⁷⁸ The reasons behind Emperor Kangxi's refusal of these goods are unclear; it could be due to the difficulty in distinguishing between Ryukyu's local

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ryukyuan Lacquerware from the Urasoe Art Museum Collection (Okinawa: Urasoe Art Museum, 1995) pp.222

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Zhang Xie, Dongxi yangkao; Xie Fang ed. (Beijing: Zhonghua Book, 2000), pp.70.

⁷³ Ho Kai-lung, "The rise of fall of Ryukyu Kingdom's international trade: focusing the type and amount of goods attached in the tribute to Ming China," *The Silk Road Cultural Studies* (Nanjing: Nanjing University, 2020), pp. 44.

⁷⁴ Harada Ayumi, *Ryukyu Kingdom as the center of maritime exchange* (Fukuoka: Kyushu National Museum, 2015), pp.3.

⁷⁵ *Daqing Huidian Shili*, vol.503 (Taipei: Zhongwen, 1963), pp.2.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Ibid., pp.5.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

products and imports or simply a matter of personal preference.⁷⁹ Occasionally, miscellaneous items that did not originally belong to the official tributes became the subsequent official tributes under the policy of benefiting foreign countries and discouraging frequent contributions to save labor and resources.⁸⁰ Ideally, the tributes should consist mainly of local products, but many of the mentioned tributes were non-Ryukyu specialties.

During the 276-year Ming Dynasty, Ryukyu paid tribute over three hundred times, and under the Qing Dynasty, official tributes from Ryukyu occurred every two years.⁸¹ However, Ryukyu often visited China under various pretexts such as coronations or the new year. This led to continuous trade activities between Ryukyu and Fujian, with substantial volumes of trade. Fujian officials once suggested imposing taxes, but Emperor Kangxi, based on the principle of empathy, opposed taxing Ryukyu ships.

"The Ministry of Rites replied and allowed the governor of Fujian's proposal that foreign tribute ships should be taxed to enable trade. However, Emperor Kangxi disagreed, stating that foreign countries could collect taxes on privately traded ships, but taxing tribute ships was inappropriate and contrary to his benevolent intentions."⁸²

Furthermore, Emperor Kangxi increased rewards to the Ryukyu King and permitted the island kingdom to send more ships and personnel to maximize their profits. In the twenty-eighth year of Kangxi's reign, the number of personnel on the two tributary ships increased to 300, and an additional ship was added to receive gifts, making a total of three ships.⁸³

While the exchanges of Ryukyu's tributes and Chinese rewards may appear as official trade activities, they were conducted based on the principles of propriety and righteousness rather than for profit.⁸⁴ Both China and Ryukyu established laws and regulations that required officials to warmly receive each other, provide escort, food, and accommodation along the way, and prohibit local officials from engaging in bribery and smuggling.⁸⁵ Moreover, the Qing emperors often expressed sympathy and concern, allowing Ryukyu to avoid sending unproduced foreign goods or exempting them from

⁷⁹ Chen Jie-xian, *Ming Qing Zhong Liu guanxi runji* (Taipei: Sanmin Book, 2019), pp.12.

⁸⁰ Daqing Huidian Shili, vol.503 (Taipei: Zhongwen, 1963), pp.19.

⁸¹ Jin Hui and Liu Yi, "Shiwu zhi shijiu shiji Liuqiu qi wenhua kaoshu," *Journal of Nanjing Arts Institute*, vol.173, no.5 (Nanjing: Nanjing University of the Arts, 2017), pp.49.

⁸² Qijuzhu, dated 19th April, 24th year of Kangxi.

⁸³ Daqing Huidian Shili, vol.514 (Taipei: Zhongwen, 1963), pp.2.

⁸⁴ Chen Jie-xian, *Ming Qing Zhong Liu guanxi runji* (Taipei: Sanmin Book, 2019), pp.125.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

another tribute if the ship encountered storms.⁸⁶ Both the items brought into China by foreign envoys and those returned to Ryukyu were tax-free.⁸⁷ These privileges would not have been granted from a purely commercial perspective.

Chapter 3: Closer examination

Among the various tributes from Ryukyu, we can only gather information from historical documents as the lifespan of horses is limited and materials like sulfur, copper, tin, and seafood are consumables. The remaining tributes consist mostly of luxury goods. The Kuomintang, which retreated to Taiwan after 1949, focused on the legitimacy of their regime. As a result, the National Palace Museum in Taipei primarily preserves the diplomatic archives of the Ming and Qing dynasties regarding the relations between China and Ryukyu, while the Palace Museum in Beijing houses most of the Ryukyuan artifacts, particularly lacquerware and textiles. This chapter will focus on these two artistic media.

1, Ryukyuan lacquer

As an island country with a pleasant subtropical climate, the Ryukyu Kingdom was abundant in lacquer trees and mother-of-pearl resources. Lacquerware production was one of the most important handicrafts in Ryukyu, widely used in diplomacy, ceremonies, trade, and daily life. It received significant support from the state. From the 15th to the 19th century, when Chinese porcelain and silk, Japanese daggers and fans, and Southeast Asian dyes and spices flooded the market, Ryukyuan lacquer industry thrived, creating its own distinctive characteristics and craft style.

Archaeological surveys have revealed flakes of vermilion lacquer dating back to the 13th century in the tomb of King Eiso, before the unification of the Shō dynasty.⁸⁸ Korean annals called "*Joseon Wangjo Sillok*" mention the observation of lacquer carriages of the royal family and lacquer temples by Korean castaways at the end of the 15th century, indicating the existence of a lacquer culture during that time.⁸⁹ During the Ming Wanli period, the Ryukyu Kingdom established a special institution called "*Kaizuribugyōsho*" to manage lacquerware production. Various positions, such as shell

⁸⁶ Daqing Huidian Shili, vol.503 (Taipei: Zhongwen, 1963), pp.3.

⁸⁷ Chen Jie-xian, *Ming Qing Zhong Liu guanxi runji* (Taipei: Sanmin Book, 2019), pp.68-69,125.

⁸⁸ Miyazato Masako, "The lacquer arts of Ryukyu and Okinawa," *Bulletin of the National Museum of Japanese History*, vol.225 (Chiba: National Museum of Japanese History, 2021), pp.277.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

processors, painters, carpenters, and grinders, were designated and awarded grades.⁹⁰ This indicates that by at least the early 17th century, Ryukyuan lacquerware production had reached a considerable scale, with the design and production being directly managed by the government, holding a significant position in the country's politics, economy, and culture.

During the 15th and 16th centuries, Ryukyu lacquerware was predominantly characterized by two techniques: "Chinkin," which involved carving lines and immersing them in gold foils on a red or green ground, and "Raden," which involved applying mother-of-pearl cuts on vermilion lacquer. After coming under the control of Satsuma in the early 17th century, most works were made using mother-of-pearl on a black lacquer background.⁹¹ In the 18th and 19th centuries, a more elaborate technique called "Tsuikin," which involved a stacking method, was introduced as craftsmen went to study in Qing China.

As early as the 15th century, when Ryukyu and Japan were on par with each other, Ryukyu presented a Chinkin lacquer box incised with gold as a diplomatic gift to the Japanese Muromachi shogun Ashikaga Yoshimasa in 1458.⁹² In 1500, the King of Ryukyu rewarded the priestess of Kumejima Island with a round lacquer box for containing her ritual jade objects for quelling rebellion.⁹³ Throughout the 16th century, similar round Chinkin lacquer boxes were given to priestesses in Amami Ōshima Island and Tokunoshima Island, and one Chinkin stand was presented to Hideyoshi in 1589, which is now preserved at Kōdai-ji Temple in Kyoto.⁹⁴ These historical records indicate that Chinkin gold incision was the most representative technique of Ryukyu lacquerware in the 15th and 16th centuries, aligning with the lacquer style in China during the same period.

⁹⁰ Jin Hui and Liu Yi, "Shiwu zhi shijiu shiji Liuqiu qi wenhua kaoshu," *Journal of Nanjing Arts Institute*, vol.173, no.5 (Nanjing: Nanjing University of the Arts, 2017), pp.51.

⁹¹ *Ryukyu no bi* (Aichi: Okazaki Mindscape Museum, 2019), pp.47.

⁹² *Ibid.*, pp.14.

⁹³ *Ibid.*

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*



Chinkin round cabinet with phoenixes and clouds (16th century, Urasoe Art Museum)

In the early Ming dynasty, lacquer craftsmanship mostly inherited techniques from the preceding Song and Yuan dynasties, with two types being prominent: Qiangjin incision and Diaoqi carved lacquer.⁹⁵ Compared to the more sophisticated Diaoqi technique, Qiangjin or Chinkin had a shorter production cycle and was more cost-efficient. Furthermore, as the royal surname of the Ming dynasty was Zhu, which also symbolized red in Chinese, the red carving technique could only be used by the imperial workshop. Folks and commoners adopted the more accessible Chinkin or Qiangjin method. According to the Japanese account "*Zenrin kokuhōki*," Emperor Yongle presented many carved lacquerware pieces as diplomatic gifts to the Japanese general Ashikaga Yoshimitsu for his efforts in suppressing Japanese pirates and his loyalty to Ming China under his Buddhist name Gendōgi.⁹⁶ Emperor Yongle bestowed 58 pieces of carved red lacquerware in the first year of his reign in 1403, followed by 95 pieces in the fourth year of Yongle in 1406 and another 50 pieces the following year.⁹⁷ This exclusivity of the carved lacquer technique helps explain why Ryukyuan lacquerware in the 15th and 16th centuries predominantly featured the Chinkin type. Common motifs included

⁹⁵ Zhang Rong, *Gudai qiqi* (Beijing: Cultural Relics Press, 2005), pp.205.

⁹⁶ Wu Mei-feng, "Yongle huangdi de waijiao riqi," *Forbidden City*, no.5 (Beijing: The Palace Museum, 2014), pp.124-125.

⁹⁷ Garner, Harry M., "The export of Chinese lacquer to Japan in the Yuan and early Ming dynasties," *Archives of Asian Art*, vol.25 (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1971/72), pp. 8-9.

Chinese landscapes, birds and flowers, phoenixes, auspicious clouds, sun wheels, and *Tomo-e*, Ryukyu's royal insignia.



Chinkin bowl bearing *Tomo-e* emblems (19th century, Shuri Castle)

Another characteristic technique during the same period was Raden, the shell inlaid technique. According to "*Ryūkyū shikkiko*" (Thoughts on Ryukyu Lacquerware), written in 1889 during the Meiji period, the state supervised *Kaizuribugyōsho* had already produced mother-of-pearl ink screens in the early 16th century.⁹⁸ Other products included red or black lacquer Raden-decorated bowls, plates, scabbards, tables, and plaques. An example is a red lacquered tray with mother-of-pearl inlays of dragons and flames, bearing the imperial inscriptions "*Daming Longqing Nian Yuyong Jianzhao*," which is housed at the Tokyo National Museum, demonstrating the synchronous technical and stylistic development between Ming China and Ryukyu. However, this archetypal Raden on a red ground became less prevalent in subsequent eras.



Raden dragon tray (16th century, Tokyo National Museum)

⁹⁸ Ishizawa Hyogo, *Ryukyu Sikkiko* (Tokyo: Aduma Kenzaburo, 1891).



"Daming Longqing Nian Yuyong Jianzhao" year mark

Additionally, a combined technique of Raden and gold leaf emerged, influenced by Japanese Namban lacquer made for Portugal and Spain during the Azuchi-Momoyama period.⁹⁹ However, Ryukyu employed a more efficient method using gold leaf instead of Maki-e gold powder, which was used in Japanese Namban lacquer.¹⁰⁰ An example of this influence is seen in Ryukyu lacquer boxes ornamented with a motif of grapes and squirrels, symbolizing the prosperity of offspring, which is a common motif in Ming Chinese porcelain but not native to Ryukyu.¹⁰¹ Most Ryukyuan lacquer used geometric patterns or *karakusa*, stylized Chinese arabesques, in the second half of the 16th century. In contrast, Namban lacquers typically displayed lavish mother-of-pearl inlays and dense naturalistic compositions featuring local flora and fauna throughout the entire surface.¹⁰² Therefore, these grape and squirrel Ryukyu lacquer boxes were truly unique and clearly demonstrated Namban style.

⁹⁹ Okamoto Aki, "History and culture of Ryukyuan lacquerware," *Crafts in Okinawa* (Kyoto: New Color Photographic, 2015), pp.14.

¹⁰⁰ Tokugawa Yoshinobu, "The history of Urushi lacquer-art of the Ryukyus," *Ryukyuan Lacquerware from the Urasoe Art Museum Collection* (Okinawa: Urasoe Art Museum, 1995), pp.228.

¹⁰¹ Okamoto Aki, "History and culture of Ryukyuan lacquerware," *Crafts in Okinawa* (Kyoto: New Color Photographic, 2015), pp.15.

¹⁰² Canepa, Teresa, *Silk, Porcelain and Lacquer* (Leiden: Universiteit Leiden, 2015), pp.398-401.



Raden-Hakue stationary box with decoration of grapes and squirrels (16-17th century, Urasoe Art Museum)



Raden-Hakue small box with decoration of grapes and squirrels (16-17th century, Urasoe Art Museum)



Blue and white grape-and-squirrel dish, Jingdezhen, China (early 17th century, the Mujintang Collection)



Wucan grape-and-squirrel jar, Jingdezhen, China (early 17th century, the Mujintang Collection)

In the late 16th century, Ryukyu's Chinkin technique underwent new changes and began incorporating plant-based oil paints called Mitsuda-e. An example is a round Chinkin lacquer box adorned with bird and flower motifs against geometric patterns from Tokugawa Ieyasu's collection. The combination of golden lines and colored images created a visually rich effect. This combined technique is also mentioned in the Chinese canonical work "*Xiushilu*" (Records of Lacquering) and was particularly popular during the Ming Jiajing period.¹⁰³

Entering the 17th century after Satsuma's invasion in 1609, Ryukyu produced a large number of black ground mother-of-pearl lacquerware to cater to the taste of Japanese samurais.¹⁰⁴ This Chinese-style lacquerware, imagined by the Japanese nobilities, was known as "*tōfu konomi*" or "*tōbutsu konomi*" historically, similar to the concept of Chinoiserie in Europe. These black lacquered mother-of-pearl wares also served as tributes to Qing China. In the fifth year of Kangxi, Ryukyu envoys presented 10 pieces of black lacquered dragon Raden plates, in addition to the regular tribute, and in the seventh year of Kangxi, they sent a hundred black lacquered Raden tea caddies.¹⁰⁵ There are over three hundred Ryukyu lacquerwares now at the Palace Museum in Beijing in total. In the meantime, Ryukyu also offered tributes such as Ryukyu

¹⁰³ Jin Hui and Liu Yi, "Shiwu zhi shijiu shiji Liuqiu qi wenhua kaoshu," *Journal of Nanjing Arts Institute*, vol.173, no.5 (Nanjing: Nanjing University of the Arts, 2017), pp.52.

¹⁰⁴ Okamoto Aki, "History and culture of Ryukyuan lacquerware," *Crafts in Okinawa* (Kyoto: New Color Photographic, 2015), pp.16.

¹⁰⁵ *Kyuyo*, no.364, 411, ed. Kyuyo kenkyukai (Tokyo: Kadokawa Shoten, 1974).

lacquerware, textiles, and Awamori liquor to the Tokugawa shogunate, Shimazu clan, and various Japanese daimyo during their *Edo nobori* journeys. One example is a black lacquered Raden box embellished with the four arts and Tokugawa family crest (*J. Aoi mon*), which is now part of the collection at the Urasoe Art Museum.



Raden tray with dragons chasing a flaming pearl (18-19th century, Palace Museum)



Raden Aoi-mon box (17-18th century, Urasoe Art Museum)

Under Satsuma's control, Ryukyu sent missions to China multiple times to learn new techniques, including two visits to Fujian in 1641 and 1690 to acquire shell-cooking and processing methods.¹⁰⁶ These techniques made the originally thick Raden thinner and more delicate. In 1715, Fang Hongde (R. Higa Chikudonpekumi) learned the "Tsuikin" stacking brocade method based on the Yangzhou Bai Bao Qian (inlay with hundreds of treasures) craftsmanship, which was popular from the late Ming to the mid-Qing dynasty.¹⁰⁷ Instead of inlaying gemstones or ivories, Ryukyu artisans mixed ripe lacquer and pigments to create Tsuikin mochi cakes, stretched them into appropriate sizes, and finally trimmed them into different shapes before embedding them onto the

¹⁰⁶ Miyazato Masako, "Karei naru iro to katachi," Ryukyu no bi (Aichi: Okazaki Mindscape Museum, 2019), pp.9.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., pp.9-10.

lacquer surface to achieve low-relief effects. By 1718, Ryukyu presented a paired Tsuikin table screens to Tokugawa Yoshimune, indicating the maturation of this craft imitation within three years.¹⁰⁸

Considering the style and technique, the development of Ryukyu lacquerware aligns with that of Ming-Qing China. However, due to Ryukyu's lifestyle and closer proximity to Japan, some Ryukyu lacquerwares exhibit similarities in shape and structure to Japanese lacquerware, such as Tenmoku stands, Inro cases, Kodansu small chests, Katana stands, and low tables. There are also wares specific to Ryukyu, including the Tundabun candy box for guest entertainment, the ritualistic Ukufan set, the Taku hot water basket, and the Jikiro tiered food container set boxes. Among these, Tundabun, Jikiro, and Taku baskets are said to have originated from China.¹⁰⁹ Only Ukufan, or known as Utukubun before WWII, is a form that cannot be seen in other regions.¹¹⁰



Hakue Tundabun box (18-19th century, Urasoe Art Museum)

¹⁰⁸ Tokugawa Yoshinobu, "The history of Urushi lacquer-art of the Ryukyus," Ryukyuan Lacquerware from the Urasoe Art Museum Collection (Okinawa: Urasoe Art Museum, 1995), pp.212.

¹⁰⁹ Ryukyuan Lacquerware from the Urasoe Art Museum Collection (Okinawa: Urasoe Art Museum, 1995), pp.162-166.

¹¹⁰ Irei Takuro, Okinawa Prefectural Museum and Art Museum, 2020/5/12; <https://okimu.jp/museum/column/1589251566/>



Hakue Taku basket (18-19th century, Urasoe Art Museum)



Chinkin-Mitsudae Ukufan set (16-17th century, Tokugawa Art Museum)



Hakue Tunbabun box (18th century, Shuri Castle)



Tsuikin-Chinkin-Raden Katana stand, (18-19th century, Shuri Castle)



Raden Sagejū picnic box with handle (18th century, Shuri Castle)



Tenmoku stand (17-18th century, Urasoe Art Museum)

2. Common motifs in Ryukyuan lacquer

Ryukyu lacquerware flourished by learning and imitating Chinese prototypes; however, there are some differences. In terms of decoration, common geometric ground patterns in Ryukyuan lacquerware include coins, hexagons, hemp leaves, and lozenges, which are consistent with Ming-Qing Chinese lacquerware. There are swastikas and lotus roundels too, resulting more elaborate decorative effects. However, fern-like pommel scrolls (*J. guri*) and *ruyi* patterns derived directly from the *Diaoqi* or *Tixi* carving lacquer technique are absent. Occasionally, the influence of Edo Japan can be seen with the presence of *Ichimatsu* or *Ishidatami* checkered patterns found on kimonos. The royal emblem of Ryukyu, *Tomo-e*, is also applied onto lacquerware as a main motif or subsidiary patterns.

Naturalistic motifs in Ryukyuan lacquerware are comparatively limited. Plum blossoms, chrysanthemums, camellias, and peonies can frequently be found, unlike Yuan-Ming lacquerware and ceramics, which often feature various flowers such as gardenias, loquats, lychees, pomegranates, peaches, apricots, bergamots, lotuses, and banana leaves as ornaments. Religious motifs such as the eight treasures and *Yingluo* hanging jewels only appear sporadically, unlike the abundance of longevity-related Taoist symbols found on Ming Chinese lacquerware from the Jiajing and Wanli periods, such as the eight trigrams, eight immortals, and Fu Lu Shou Wan characters.¹¹¹ These Taoist motifs are also seen on Korean lacquerware. It is speculated that Ryukyu people were still influenced by their indigenous animism and Zen Buddhism, making the Taoist motifs less common.



Korean lacquer box with trigrams (19th century, Okada Museum of Art, Kanagawa)

¹¹¹ Zhang Rong, *Gudai qiqi* (Beijing: Cultural Relics Press, 2005), pp.216-219.

In terms of animal motifs, cloud dragons and phoenixes, symbols of royal power, are inherited from China with only three-clawed and five-clawed differences. Other animals commonly found on Ryukyuan lacquerware include birds, tigers, lions, butterflies, fishes, and bats, which are also considered auspicious in Chinese culture. The grape-and-squirrel boxes influenced by Namban lacquerware, as discussed earlier, are another popular auspicious motif throughout the Ming-Qing dynasties, often seen in contemporaneous Chinese paintings and ceramics. In addition to being used as a ground pattern, the combination of grapes and squirrels can also stand out as a main motif alone, symbolizing prosperity of offspring. It is worth noting that while children-at-play was a common theme in Ming-Qing Chinese lacquerware, its appearance was less frequent in Ryukyu.

As Ryukyu was influenced by and accepted Chinese Confucianism for a long time, themes featuring recluses or literati roaming in mountain and river landscapes were very common among Ryukyuan lacquerwares. Additionally, didactic themes promoting good deeds and virtues can still be seen in extant works, such as the four arts of the scholar, the twenty-four filial pieties, the story and literature of Northern Song official Sima Guang, and Wang Zhaojun departing for the frontier, among others. These stories used as decorative motifs were common on late Ming and early Qing porcelains, and their adoption onto Ryukyuan lacquerware reflects their popularity. For example, the Urasoe Art Museum houses a red-lacquered Raden tray depicting the theme of Hanshan and Shide holding a broom. Hanshan and Shide, also known as Hehe Erxian, are famous Zen Buddhist figures from Tang China. They were revered throughout the Song to Qing dynasties due to their harmonious relationship and their natural characters unshackled by worldly values. Given Ryukyu's belief in Zen Buddhism, it is understandable that these figures would be widely accepted and incorporated into the local lacquerware.



Hanshan-Shide Raden tray (16-17th century, Urasoe Art Museum)



Wang Zhaojun themed Raden box (17-18th century, Urasoe Art Museum)



The-24-filial-exemplar Raden-Chinkin Jikiro (17-18th century, Urasoe Art Museum)



Raden plaque of Family Precepts (16-17th century, Urasoe Art Museum)



Sima Guang-themed Raden screen (17-18th century, Urasoe Art Museum)

3. Ryukyuan textiles

Before the maritime period, the costumes of the Ryukyu people were very simple. Historical records indicate that the legendary ancestor of the Ryukyu people, Tenson, "took banana fiber, made it into cloth, and taught it to the people to avoid the cold."¹¹² In 1447, during the 13th year of Chenghua in the Ming Dynasty and the 8th year of Sejong in Korea's Joseon Dynasty, the *Joseon Wangjo Sillok* recorded that Ryukyu and its affiliated islands had no other raw materials for weaving except hemp.¹¹³ Due to the small land area and lack of minerals in the island country, it was not feasible to sacrifice arable land for fiber cultivation.¹¹⁴ Therefore, cotton cloth, silk, and various pigments were later imported.

¹¹² Tei Heitetsu, *Ryukyukoku Kyuki*; ed. Iha Fuyu, Higashionna Kanjun, and Yokoyama Shigeru, *Ryukyu shiryō soshō* (Tokyo: Inoue Shobo, 1962).

¹¹³ *Kyuyo*, no.51, ed. *Kyuyo kenkyukai* (Tokyo: Kadokawa Shoten, 1974).

¹¹⁴ Okamura Kichiemon, "Bingata no bi," *Ryukyu bingata no bi* (Nishinomiya: Otani Memorial Art Museum, 1983).

Ryukyu fabrics can be roughly divided into three types: *bingata*, *kasuri* ikat, and banana cloth. *Bingata*, a term coined by Japanese scholar Kamakura Yoshitaro in the early 20th century, means "colorful patterns."¹¹⁵ According to the Naha City History Museum, the *bingata* robes passed down by the Shō royal family mainly featured yellow and red colors, with yellow being a noble and special color exclusively for the royal family, likely influenced by imperial China.¹¹⁶ Red mineral pigments were also used in local palace buildings and lacquerware, mostly relying on imports.¹¹⁷ Blue, a plant-based dye, was used for the formal attires of prominent families and could be locally produced like turmeric. *Bingata* that incorporated various shades of blue in the dyeing process was also referred to as *Eigata*.¹¹⁸ Additionally, imported Prussian blue, an artificial inorganic pigment invented in northern Germany in 1704, was brought to Japan via China and became famous for its use in Hokusai's "Thirty-six Views of Mount Fuji."¹¹⁹ Another pigment used was lead white, primarily employed in local paintings and occasionally for coloring or as a background to enhance bright patterns.¹²⁰

Similar to lacquerware, the raw materials and production of *bingata* were controlled by *Ezu Bugyōsho*, the Drawing Office of the royal government.¹²¹ The color and size of the patterns were divided based on class and age, with higher ranks featuring larger patterns.¹²² *Bingata* served as the formal and daily attire of the Ryukyuan nobility and was predominantly worn during the reception of Chinese investiture envoys and important ceremonies in the kingdom.¹²³ For example, dignitaries performing the *Okansen* boat dance and the *kumiodori* performance had to wear *bingata* as stage costumes.¹²⁴ Dancers and female roles were played by young boys aged under fifteen by wearing appropriate costumes.¹²⁵ Commoners were limited to wearing *bingata* with smaller-sized patterns for formal occasions, known as the *Naha* type or the *Tomari* type

¹¹⁵ Murakami Satomi, "Textiles in Okinawa," *Crafts in Okinawa* (Kyoto: New Color Photographic, 2015), pp.12.

¹¹⁶ Bai Yin-sheng, "Hong xing gugong jiucang liuqiu zhiwu," *Forbidden City*, vol.129, no.2 (Beijing: The Palace Museum, 2005), pp.82.

¹¹⁷ Uezu Yasuyuki, "Shikizai ga kataru Ryukyu senshokushi," *Churashima Textiles* (Tokyo: Shoto Museum of Art, 2019), pp.12.

¹¹⁸ Murakami Satomi, "Textiles in Okinawa," *Crafts in Okinawa* (Kyoto: New Color Photographic, 2015), pp.13.

¹¹⁹ Uezu Yasuyuki, "Shikizai ga kataru Ryukyu senshokushi," *Churashima Textiles* (Tokyo: Shoto Museum of Art, 2019), pp.13.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*

¹²¹ Murakami Satomi, "Textiles in Okinawa," *Crafts in Okinawa* (Kyoto: New Color Photographic, 2015), pp.12-13.

¹²² *Ibid.*

¹²³ *Ibid.*

¹²⁴ Miyazato Masako, "Karei naru iro to katachi," *Ryukyu no bi* (Aichi: Okazaki Mindscape Museum, 2019), pp.13.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*

in contrast to the *Shuri* type, and it was primarily used as linings.¹²⁶ *Bingata* was also presented as a diplomatic tribute, and many preserved pieces can be found in the Forbidden City in Beijing.

Kasuri, which utilized warp and weft weaving techniques to create geometric patterns, was widely used from the royal family to the common people. The grade of *kasuri* was also determined by the size of the pattern.¹²⁷ Silk, cotton, and linen materials were available options. After Ryukyu came under the control of the Satsuma domain in 1609, *Kasuri* was designated as a tribute alongside *bashōfu* banana cloth.¹²⁸ The Ryukyu government outsourced the production of specified styles, known as "*Miezu*" royal drawings, to outlying islands for the production of *kasuri*.¹²⁹ Due to its high quality, it is referred to as "*Satsuma jyobu*" (Satsuma upper fabrics) or *Ryukyu kasuri* in Japan, which, in turn, influenced the *Echigo kasuri* ikat in the Echigo area, Niigata Prefecture today.¹³⁰

Finally, there is the beloved banana cloth, which used different fiber thicknesses based on social status. The plantain cloth used by princes and nobles mostly consisted of fine and soft fibers that were boiled and then dyed using local vegetable dyes.¹³¹ The patterns primarily featured vertical stripes.

4. Common motifs in Ryukyuan textiles

Ryukyuan *bingata* design can be categorized into two types. The first type consists of Chinese auspicious motifs such as dragons, phoenixes, auspicious clouds, bats, peonies, and Penglai Mountain, which were exclusively used on royal garments. The second type is influenced by Japanese motifs, including pine, bamboo, plum blossoms, cherry blossoms, iris flowers, maple leaves, and chrysanthemums. Other established genres from the Heian period, such as mists, flowing water, distant mountains, and sea waves, were also incorporated, along with auspicious animals like turtles and cranes. Pine, bamboo, plum, tortoise, and crane motifs are shared between China and Japan. Japanese-style patterns such as shells, fans, *Asanoha* hemp leaves, checked *Ichimatsu/Ishidatami*, drying fishnets, and snake cages also appeared, indicating a

¹²⁶ Yamada Yoko, "Bingata-the epitome of Okinawan dyeing," Churashima Textiles (Tokyo: Shoto Museum of Art, 2019), pp.19.

¹²⁷ Murakami Satomi, "Textiles in Okinawa," Crafts in Okinawa (Kyoto: New Color Photographic, 2015), pp.13.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, pp.14.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, pp.13.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, pp.14.

stronger influence from Japan on the shape and decoration of Ryukyu fabrics.

Japanese scholars have pointed out the similarities between Ryukyuan *bingata* worn by the royal and prominent families and the costumes of Japanese *Noh* heroines, as well as the jacquard or embroidered fabrics worn by the upper Samurai society. All three share the characteristic of featuring large-sized motifs.¹³² *Noh* drama was a form of entertainment popular among the samurai ruling class in Japan. Many academic articles have discussed the influence of *Noh* on Ryukyu's *kumiodori*, a performance used to entertain Chinese investiture envoys during their long stay in Ryukyu. As *kumiodori* was related to state diplomacy and the survival of the country, roles were mostly performed by children from noble families, and *bingata* worn by them served as formal costumes. Hence, it is highly likely that Japanese *Noh* costumes played a role in influencing Ryukyuan *bingata*.¹³³

While *bingata* predominantly incorporated animals, plants, and sceneries specific to the Japanese temperate climate as decorative motifs, Ryukyu's own subtropical specialties such as banana leaves and hibiscus flowers were hardly featured. Designers relied on imagination or drew inspiration from imported fabrics and artworks from Japan, resulting in more freedom in color usage, vibrant and bold compositions, and dynamic arrangements.¹³⁴ Unlike Japan, Ryukyuan textiles were not limited by the seasonal concept, allowing for the combination of various flowers from different seasons.¹³⁵ Patterns were often arranged vertically or symmetrically, interspersed with both large and small motifs to create an asymmetrical composition. Occasionally, blank spaces were intentionally left, resulting in a strong sense of design and dynamic outcomes. These compositions, akin to paintings, emphasized balance and required meticulous calculations and meticulous designs. Therefore, the painters from the *Kaizuribugyōsho*, responsible for producing lacquerware in the Kingdom, were also in charge of textile design.¹³⁶

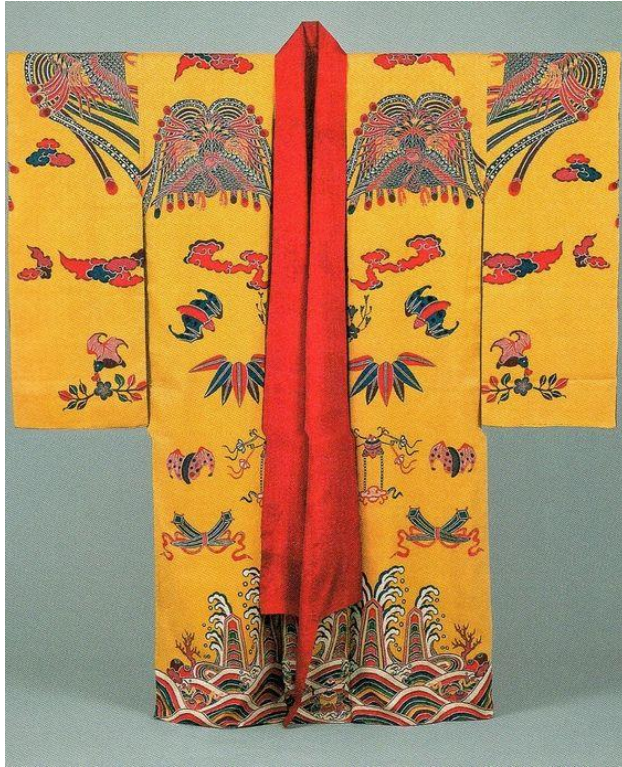
¹³² Yamada Yoko, "Nahashi rekishi hakubutsukan shozo kokuho Ryukyu kokuo shokei kankei shiryō no *bingata* shiryō nitsuite," Churashima Textiles (Tokyo: Shoto Museum of Art, 2019), pp.101.

¹³³ *Ibid.*

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, pp.98.

¹³⁵ Miyazato Masako, "Karei naru iro to katachi," Ryukyu no bi (Aichi: Okazaki Mindscape Museum, 2019), pp.12.

¹³⁶ Yamada Yoko, "Nahashi rekishi hakubutsukan shozo kokuho Ryukyu kokuo shokei kankei shiryō no *bingata* shiryō nitsuite," Churashima Textiles (Tokyo: Shoto Museum of Art, 2019), pp.100.



Bingata with phoenixes, bats, and mt. Penglai (18-19th century, Naha City Museum of History)



Bingata with chrysanthemums, fishnets, flowing water, and hydrangeas (19th century, Joshibi University Art Museum)



Bingata with hemp leaves, mists, weeping cherry blossoms, swallows, irises, and snake cages (19th century, Joshibi University Art Museum)

5. Cross analysis

Most of the lacquering techniques in Ryukyu originated from Ming-Qing China, with the exception of the combined gold/silver foils and Raden technique, which were influenced by Namban lacquer. The shapes of Ryukyuan lacquerware were a blend of Chinese and Japanese styles, although the domed Ukufan sacrificial prop used by the royal family was a local invention. The decorative motifs, such as figural stories, dragons, phoenixes, peonies, and plums, as well as the geometric ground patterns like lozenges, hexagons, coins, and hemp leaves, can be found in Chinese porcelains and lacquerwares of the same era, although the Ryukyuan variety is not as rich. Some of these motifs, such as phoenixes surrounded by auspicious clouds, peacock and peony scrolls, and Raden plum blossoms, can even be traced back to Yuan prototypes. The humble Jikiro tiered food containers and round cabinets, used for religious purposes, also bear striking similarities to existing Yuan lacquerwares.



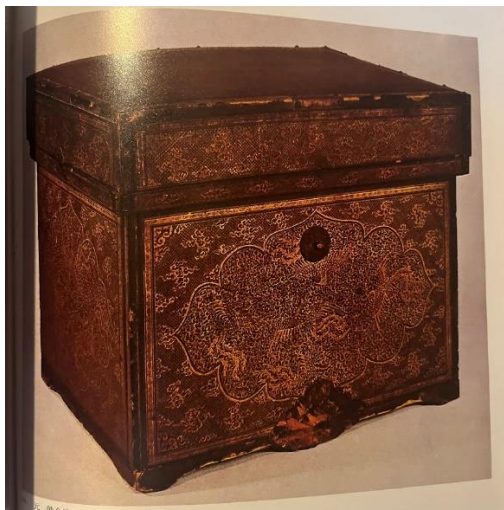
Chinkin Jikiro with peacock-and-peony design (16-17th century, Urasoe Art Museum)



Carved lacquer plate with peacock-and-peony motif (Yuan, National Palace Museum)



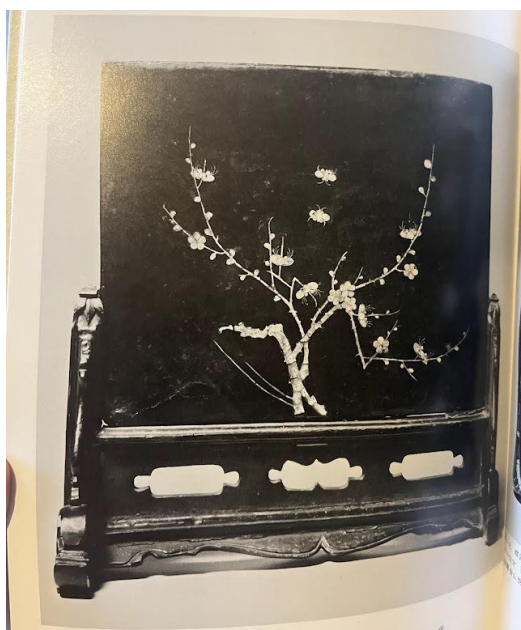
Chinkin round cabinet with phoenixes and auspicious clouds (16th century, Churashima Foundation)



Chinkin cabinet with phoenixes and auspicious clouds (Yuan, Tōdaiji Temple, Nara)



Raden hexagonal tray with plum blossoms under the moon (16-17th century, Urasoe Art Museum)



Raden screen with plum blossoms (Song-Yuan, Asian Art Museum of San Francisco)

Ryukyuan bingata can be considered an extension of Japanese kimonos in terms of its structure, and it incorporates a large number of highly stylized Japanese decorative motifs such as flowers, flowing water, mists, and sea waves.¹³⁷ Common ground patterns include hemp leaves (symbolizing vitality), checked *Ichimatsu/Ishidatami* (popular in Edo kabuki theater), fishnets (symbolizing harvest), and *Kagome* baskets or cages (believed to ward off evil spirits). *Bingata* displays its unique local character primarily through its vibrant use of color.

By comparing and cross analyzing these artistic forms, we can draw the following conclusions. Chinese auspicious motifs such as dragons, phoenixes, peonies, birds, plum blossoms, chrysanthemums, interlocking lozenges, hexagonal tortoise shells, coins, and hemp leaves are commonly shared by both Ryukyuan lacquerware and textiles. Dragons, symbolizing kingship, have limited usage and are primarily found on tribute lacquerwares and dynastic robes. The presence of grapes and squirrels, which were favored motifs, persisted until the 17th to 18th century, extending beyond the Namban period. Upon closer examination of these artistic mediums, we can summarize that Ryukyuan lacquerware was more closely aligned with Chinese arts, while *bingata* exhibited a stronger influence from Japanese aesthetics, reflecting the reality of "one country, two systems" (*J. Nitchu ryōzoku*)¹³⁸ in pre-modern Ryukyu history.

¹³⁷ Okamura Kichiemon, "Bingata no bi," *Ryukyu bingata no bi* (Nishinomiya: Otani Memorial Art Museum, 1983).

¹³⁸ Smits, Gregory, *Visions of Ryukyu* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1999), pp.155.



Raden incense container with kirin, grapes, and squirrels (17-18th century, Urasoe Art Museum)



Raden-Hakue ink box decorated with grapes and squirrels (17-18th century, Urasoe Art Museum)



Hakue octagonal tiered Jikiro with grapes and squirrels (17-18th century, Urasoe Art Museum)

Conclusion: from Ryukyu to Okinawa

In 1871, the policy of "abolishing the feudal domain and establishing the prefecture" was implemented across Japan. In 1872, the Ryukyu kingdom became a Japanese domain. Seven years later, the Meiji government annexed Ryukyu, abolished the Ryukyu Domain, and renamed it Okinawa Prefecture, which means "fishing grounds on the sea." The Ryukyu royal household was forced to move to Tokyo in the 1880s. The official *Kaizuribugyōsho* was dismantled, and the production of Ryukyuan lacquer was taken over by general workshops, which manufactured goods for daily use as well as souvenirs with tropical designs, such as papayas, which were unfamiliar to the local people. World War II was a catastrophe for Okinawans, as the prefecture became the only battleground within Japanese territories. Naha city, the capital, was burned down by the Allied powers, and over one-third of the island population was killed either by American soldiers or coerced into committing patriotic suicide by Japanese nationalists.

The precious Ryukyuan lacquerwares with a long history were almost devastated during the tragic Pacific War. Okinawa remained under American control after the war until 1972 when the United States decided to return it to Japan in response to popular

demands. Today, about 600 pieces of Ryukyu lacquer collections at the Urasoe Art Museum were all collected from mainland Japan, while nearly 60 pieces of dyed *bingata* and woven fabrics now housed in the Naha City History Museum were all donated by Shō Hiroshi, a descendant of the Ryukyu royal family, in 1996, and all of them have been designated as national treasures.

Before I formally engaged in research, I was captivated by a nineteenth-century Ryukyuan mother-of-pearl black lacquer round serving tray at the Museum Volkenkunde in Leiden. Its iridescent luster and striking twisting geometric ground patterns, surrounded by a grapevine border, immediately caught my attention. It reminded me of *Shonzui* porcelain made in late Ming Jingdezhen for the Japanese tea ceremony. This type of ceramics was highly prized, and there was even a trend of reproducing such heirlooms by nineteenth-century Kyoto wares. I immediately considered the possible connection between Ryukyu's lack of natural kaolin clay and its efforts to reproduce coveted porcelain through its highly prized lacquering technique. However, the more I delved into researching Ryukyuan lacquer, the more convinced I became that it would be overly simplistic to make such a claim. Arguing that Ryukyu lacquer was merely a copy or directly influenced by Chinese or Japanese ceramics would overlook the fact that it had its own visual language in terms of styles, compositions, preferred motifs, application onto different shapes and surfaces, as well as the choice of techniques. Furthermore, the artistic trends of Ryukyu were also reflected and enriched by its textiles, especially the dyed *bingata*, whose production was also supervised by the same state institution.

It is my sincere wish to contribute additional dimensions to current Okinawan studies, Japanese studies, and Asian studies in Europe through an intercultural approach. Ryukyu's diplomacy and the corresponding works of art have witnessed the prosperity and glory of the kingdom era and further enriched the significance of Asian art.



Raden tray with twisting panels and grapevines (19th century, Volkenkunde Leiden)



Wucan Shonzui plate, Jingdezhen, China (early 16th century, the Butler Collection)

Glossary

御冠船 Okansen
組踊 Kumiodori
雕漆 Diaoqi
螺鈿 Raden
貝摺奉行所 Kaizuribugyōsho
絵図奉行所 Eizubugyōsho
髹飾録 Xiushilu
沉金 Chinkin
巴文 Tomo-e
冊封使 Sappōshi
東道盆 Tundabun
御供飯 Ukufan
尚巴志 Shō Hashi
紅型 Bingata
緋 Kasuri
藍型 Eigata
食籠 Jikiro
籠目 Kagome
御徳盆 Utukubun
御絵図 Miezu
中山世土 Chū Zan Sei Do
首里 Shuri
日中兩屬 Nitchu ryōzoku
屈輪 Guri
剔犀 Tixi
歷代寶案 Rekidai Hōan
善鄰國寶紀 Zenrin kokuhōki
朝鮮王朝實錄 Joseon Wangjo Sillok
源道義 Gendōgi
堆錦 Tsuikin
密陀繪 Mitsuda-e
沉金 Chinkin
雕漆 Diaoqi
螺鈿 Raden
髹飾録 Xiushilu
戩金 Qiangjin

Appendix

name	material	period	place	Ground pattern	motifs
Yellow lined bingata robe (national treasure)	silk	18-19 th century	Naha City Museum of History	Peony scrolls	Phoenix roundels
Yellow lined bingata robe (national treasure)	silk	18-19 th century	Naha City Museum of History	N/A	Phoenixes, bats, clouds, precious objects, plum blossoms, mt. Penglai, and waves
White bingata robe (national treasure)	cotton	18-19 th century	Naha City Museum of History	N/A	Peonies, magpies, irises, and flowing waters
Blue bingata lined robe (national treasure)	cotton	18-19 th century	Naha City Museum of History	woodgrains	Seashells, plum blossoms, pine needles, and maple leaves
White bingata robe (national treasure)	cotton	18-19 th century	Naha City Museum of History	Ishidatami/ichimatsu checked lozenge	Pines, cherry blossoms, maple leaves, and turtles
White bingata robe (national treasure)	Ramie	18-19 th century	Naha City Museum of History	N/A	Irises and flowing waters, butterflies, and swallows

White bingata	unspecified	19 th century	Matsuzakaya Collection, Nagoya	N/A	Chrysanthemums, butterflies
White bingata	unspecified	19 th century	Matsuzakaya Collection, Nagoya	Vertical waves, checked Ishidatami	Folded fans, cherry blossoms
Blue bingata robe	ramie	18-19 th century	Naha City Museum of History	N/A	Seawaves, cherry blossoms, and cranes
Purple bingata lined robe	cotton	18-19 th century	Naha City Museum of History	lightening	Cranes, turtle, pines, bamboo leaves, and plum blossoms
White bingata upper garment	ramie	19 th century	Okinawa Prefectural Museum	lightening	Floral roundels
White bingata long-sleeved garment	cotton	19 th century	Okinawa Prefectural Museum	Peony scrolls	
Blue bingata winter garment	cotton	19 th century	Okinawa Prefectural Museum	Flowing waters	Round fans, chrysanthemums, cherry blossoms, plum blossoms, and bamboo leaves
Blue bingata winter garment	cotton	19 th century	Okinawa Prefectural Museum	Sea waves	Plovers and cherry blossoms
Blue	Sycamore	19 th century	Okinawa	Pine trees	Cranes, plum

bingata summer garment	fibers	century	Prefectural Museum		blossoms, and chrysanthemums
White bingata robe	ramie	18-19 th century	Churashima Foundation, Okinawa	N/A	Peony baskets, swallows, irises and water
Blue bingata robe	ramie	19 th century	Churashima Foundation, Okinawa	N/A	Pines, swallows, chrysanthemums, and weeping cherry branches
Pink bingata robe	cotton	19 th century	Churashima Foundation, Okinawa	bamboo	Pines, swallows, and distant mountains
Yellow bingata upper garment	cotton	19 th century	Churashima Foundation, Okinawa	clouds	Pines, cranes, chrysanthemums, and plum blossoms
Blue bingata child's garment	cotton	19 th century	Churashima Foundation, Okinawa	bamboos	Pines, chrysanthemums, plum blossoms, and bamboo leaves
Yellow bingata robe	silk	19 th century	Churashima Foundation, Okinawa	N/A	Pavilions, swallows, and weeping cherry blossoms
Yellow bingata robe	silk	19 th century	Joshihi University Art Museum, Tokyo	N/A	Mists with hemp leaves, weeping cherry blossoms, swallows, snake baskets, irises and water
Yellow bingata robe	cotton	19 th century	Joshihi University Art Museum,	N/A	Pines, clouds, weeping cherry blossoms, plum blossoms,

			Tokyo		chrysanthemums , cranes, irises and water
Red bingata robe	cotton	19 th century	Joshihi University Art Museum, Tokyo	Distant mountains	Waves and cherry tree blossoms
Blue bingata robe	ramie	19 th century	Joshihi University Art Museum, Tokyo	N/A	Drying fishnets, fish baskets, hydrangeas, chrysanthemums , maple leaves, morning glories, weeping cherry blossoms, and flowing water
Yellow bingata robe	silk	19 th century	Joshihi University Art Museum, Tokyo	N/A	Drying fishnets, fish baskets, hydrangeas, chrysanthemums , maple leaves, morning glories, weeping cherry or plum blossoms, and flowing water
Blue-dyed eigata robe	cotton	19 th century	Joshihi University Art Museum, Tokyo	N/A	Mists, weeping cherry blossoms, swallows, snake baskets, irises and water
White bingata robe	cotton	19 th century	Joshihi University Art Museum, Tokyo	lightening	Waves, cherry blossoms, maple leaves, swallows

Yellow/red bingata robe	cotton	19 th century	Joshihi University Art Museum, Tokyo	Clouds	Cranes, pines, plum blossoms, and chrysanthemums
Blue bingata	unspecifie d	19 th century	Matsuzakay a Collection, Nagoya	Clouds	Plum blossoms, peaches, peonies

Name	Size/shape	ground	period	technique	Place	pattern	motif
Serving tray	Round D.22.7cm	Black lacquer	early 19 th century	Raden	Leiden Volkenkunde	Sippo-tsunagi connected coins; lotus roundels; grapevines	Nejiribana twisting panels
basin	Round H.5.7cm D.34.4cm	Red lacquer	17 th century	Hakue	Kyushu National Museum, Fukuoka	Greek frets; bamboo leaves; plums; fruits and branches	Cormorants and reeds; grapevines and squirrels
Ukufan	Domed box on a hollowed base H.60cm D.48cm	Red lacquer	17-18 century	Chinkin	Okinawa Prefectural Museum, Japan	peonies	Tomo-e royal emblem
Serving tray	Round H. 3.9-4.9cm D.34.2-34.9cm	Black lacquer	18 th century	Raden	Kyushu National Museum/Urasoe Art Museum, /Tokugawa Art Museum, Nagoya	Hexagonal Kikko Hanabishi; eight Buddhist treasures	Two five-clawed dragons chasing a flaming pearl amid auspicious clouds
Serving tray	Cut corner square. H.4cm L.36cm	Green lacquer	16-17 century	Chinkin	Urasoe Art Museum, Okinawa	checkered Ishidatami	Peonies and Karakusa Chinese arabesque
Serving tray	Cut corner. square H.2.5cm L.36.8cm	Red lacquer	16-17 century	Chinkin	Urasoe Art Museum, Okinawa	unidentified	Peonies and birds
Tray with pedestal	Round H.22cm D.44cm	Red lacquer	16-17 century	Chinkin	Urasoe Art Museum, Okinawa	lozenge	Figures in landscape
Serving tray	Hexagonal H.6cm L.40.7cm	Red lacquer	16-17 century	Raden	Urasoe Art Museum, Okinawa	N/A	Plum blossoms under the moon
Writing box	Rectangular H.15cm L.31.2cm	Black lacquer	16-17 century	Raden+Hakue	Urasoe Art Museum, Okinawa	Grapevines and squirrels	Grapevines and squirrels

	D.41.5cm						
Small box	Square H.8.5cm L.12cm D.12cm	Gilded black lacquer	19 th century	Raden	Tokyo National Museum, Japan	Grapevines and squirrels	Grapevines and squirrels
Lidded Pot	Hexagonal H.16.4cm L.16.3cm	Black lacquer	17 th century	Raden	Tokyo National Museum, Japan	Yingluo hanging jewels; Sippo- tsunagi connected coins	Figures roaming in a pavilion; birds perching on branches
Mikiri layered food containers.	Round H.28.7cm D.27.9cm	Red lacquer	16-17 th century	Mitsuda-e+Hakue	Urasoe Art Museum, Okinawa	N/A	Birds, Camilla, and plum blossoms
Bowls	Round H.7.2cm D.9.7cm	Black lacquer	17-18 th century	Mitsuda-e+Hakue	Urasoe Art Museum, Okinawa	N/A	Camilla
Incense container	Round H.6cm D.10.8cm	Red lacquer	16-17 th century	Tsuikin	Urasoe Art Museum, Okinawa	lozenge	Tiger and peonies
Tray	Round H.3cm D.26.1cm	Red lacquer	18- 19 th century	Mitsuda-e	Urasoe Art Museum, Okinawa	N/A	Birds and Camilla
Tray	Round H.3.7cm D.36cm	Black lacquer	18-19 th century	Raden Mitsudae Hakue	Urasoe Art Museum, Okinawa	Asanoha hemp leaves	Birds, hibiscus, and reeds
Tray set	Cut-corner square H.5cm L.36cm	Red lacquer	18 th century	Mitsudae+Hakue	Tokugawa Art Museum, Nagoya	Plum blossoms; peonies	Two rabbits under the moon; two egrets with lotuses; two peacocks and peonies
Foundabun	Round	Red	18-19 th	Hakue	Urasoe Art	Sippo-tsunagi	Figures in

Candy box	H.30cm D.49.5cm	lacquer	century		Museum, Okinawa/Tokugawa Art Museum, Nagoya	connected coins; waves; peony scrolls; Karakusa scrolls	landscape
Inro case	Rectangular H.2.2cm L.9.8x3.1cm	Brown to black lacquer	18-19 th century	Tsuikin	Urasoe Art Museum, Okinawa	N/A	Landscape; dragon
Lidded stem cup	H.14cm D.14.4cm	Red lacquer	18-19 th century	Chinkin	Naha City Museum of History, Okinawa	Peony scrolls	Tomo-e emblem
Box	Double diamond H.13.1cm L.15.4cm	Black lacquer	18-19 th century	Raden	Naha City Museum of History, Okinawa	Sippo-tsunagi connected coins; plum blossoms; chrysanthemums	Grapevines; narcissus
Cabinet	Round H.21.5cm D.20.3cm	Black lacquer	16 th century	Chinkin	Churashima Foundation, Okinawa	Diagonal lattice	Phoenixes; clouds; one sun wheel
Cabinet	Round H.17.8cm D.22.8cm	Red lacquer	19 th century	Chinkin	Churashima Foundation, Okinawa	Sippo-tsunagi connected coins	Phoenixes; Tomo-e emblem
Wikipiro food containers	Round H.39.3cm D.34.1cm	Black lacquer	16 th century	Chinkin	Churashima Foundation, Okinawa	Sippo-tsunagi connected coins	Peonies
Wikipiro food containers	Round H.31cm D.34.5cm	Black lacquer	16 th century	Chinkin	Churashima Foundation, Okinawa	N/A	Grapevines and squirrels
Wikipiro food containers	Octagonal H.44cm L.36.5cm W.36.5cm	Black lacquer	16-17 th century	Chinkin	Churashima Foundation, Okinawa	N/A	Grapevines and squirrels
Wikipiro food containers	Round	Black lacquer	16-17 th century	Chinkin	Urasoe Art Museum, Okinawa	Peony scrolls	peacocks

	H.36.7cm D.33.6cm						
Wakiro food containers	Lobed H.29.6cm D.27.7cm	Black lacquer	17 th century	Mitsudae+Hakue+Makie	Churashima Foundation, Okinawa	N/A	Birds and Camilla
Wakiro food containers	Lobed H.30cm L.24.7cm W.24.7cm	Red Lacquer	17-18 th century	Haku-e	Urasoe Art Museum	Asanoha hemp leaves	Figures on a boat; peonies; chrysanthemums; narcissus
Wakiro food containers	Hexagonal H.20.6cm D.27cm	Black lacquer	18-19 th century	Raden	Urasoe Art Museum	lozenge	Figures playing Go and zither under the moon; trees and rocks
Low table	Rectangular H.31.8cm L. 47.3x31cm	Red lacquer	16-17 th century	Raden	Urasoe Art Museum	Floral scrolls	A long-tailed bird and peonies
Low table	Rectangular H.10.3cm L.36.5cm W.23.7cm	Black lacquer	18-19 th century	Raden	Urasoe Art Museum	Tatewaku waves; lozenge	Peony scrolls
Box	Square H.11.3cm L.12.5cm	Black lacquer	16-17 th century	Raden+Hakue	Urasoe Art Museum	N/A	Grapevines and squirrels
Box	Square H.12.6cm L.10.3cm	Black lacquer	17-18 th century	Raden	Urasoe Art Museum	Chrysanthemum scrolls; sippo-tsunagi connected coins; hexagonal kikko Hanabishi	Tokugawa crests (Aoi mon); four arts of the Chinese scholar
Saddle	H.26.5cm L.39.5cm	Black lacquer	16-17 th century	Raden	Churashima Foundation,	Scattered tomo-e royal emblems	Bird on a rock

	W.35.7cm				Okinawa		
Saddle	H.33.1cm L.41.5cm	Red lacquer	18-19 th century	Tsuikin+Chinkin	Urasoe Art Museum	Sippo-tsunagi connected coins	Peony scrolls
Bowl	Round H.8cm D.12.6cm	Red lacquer	Mid 16 th century	Hakue	Kunst Historisches Museum, Vienna	foliage	Flying birds
Serving tray	Square H.2.3cm L.19.5cm	Red lacquer	16-17 th century	Raden	Urasoe Art Museum, Okinawa	Hexagonal kikko hanabashi; floral scrolls	Kanzan Jitoku/Hanshan Shide Zen monks
Mikiro food containers	Hexagonal H.28.7cm D.29cm	Black lacquer	17-18 th century	Raden+Chinkin	Urasoe Art Museum, Okinawa	Karakusa Chinese arabesque	24 filial exemplars
Foundabun candy box	Square H.26.2cm L.34.5cm	Black lacquer	18-19 th century	Raden+Hakue	Urasoe Art Museum, Okinawa	Checkered	Flying phoenix over sycamore trees
Tray on tripod feet	Round H.8.5cm D.33.4cmb	Black lacquer	17-18 th century	Hakue+Chinkin	Urasoe Art Museum, Okinawa	Peony scrolls; Sippo-tsunagi connected coins	Plum blossoms
Screen	Rectangular H.76cm L.92.2cm D.38.8cm	Red lacquer	17-18 th century	Glass beads+Chinkin+Raden	Urasoe Art Museum, Okinawa	Peony scrolls; Sippo-tsunagi connected coins	Bamboo and tiger
Incense container	Square H.11.3cm L.10.3cm	Black lacquer	17-18 th century	Mitsudae+Raden	Urasoe Art Museum, Okinawa	N/A	Kirin; grapevines and squirrels
Ink box	Rectangular H.6.4cm L.26.6cm W.21.6cm	Red lacquer	17-18 th century	Raden+Hakue	Urasoe Art Museum, Okinawa	grapevines	Grapefruits, grape leaves, and squirrels
Scroll box	Rectangular	Black	17-18 th	Raden+Chinkin	Urasoe Art	Hexagonal	Two three-

	H.6.8cm L.37.5cm W.8.8cm	lacquer	century		Museum, Okinawa	kikko hanabashi	clawed dragons chasing a flaming pearl, phoenixes, and clouds
Plaque	Rectangular W.52.3cm L.68.5cm D.2cm	Black lacquer	16-17 th century	Raden	Urasoe Art Museum, Okinawa	Grapevines and squirrels	Chinese characters-family precepts of Sima Guang
Tobacco box	Melon H.7.5cm D.7.2cm	Black lacquer	17-18 th century	Raden	Urasoe Art Museum, Okinawa	Petals and lozenge	Shoulou and deer
Mikiri food containers	Hexagonal H.30.7cm D.29.4cm	Black lacquer	18-19 th century	Raden+Hakue	Urasoe Art Museum, Okinawa	N/A	Water weeds, fishes, and plovers
Box	Rectangular H.15.2cm L.40.5cm W.28.6cm	Black lacquer	17-18 th century	Raden	Urasoe Art Museum, Okinawa	lozenge	Concubine Ming (Wang Zhaojun) passing the border
Candy box	Rectangular H.56.2cm L.35.3cm W.34cm	Black lacquer	18-19 th century	Raden	Palace Museum, Beijing	hexagons	Five-clawed dragons chasing a flaming pearl and clouds
Bowl	Round D.12cm H.10.8cm	Black lacquer	18-19 th century	Raden	Palace Museum, Beijing	N/A	Five-clawed dragons chasing a flaming pearl and clouds
Box	Rectangular H.30.5cm L.23.2cm W.14.2cm	Red lacquer	18-19 th century	Tsuikin	Palace Museum, Beijing	N/A	Chrysanthemum scrolls

