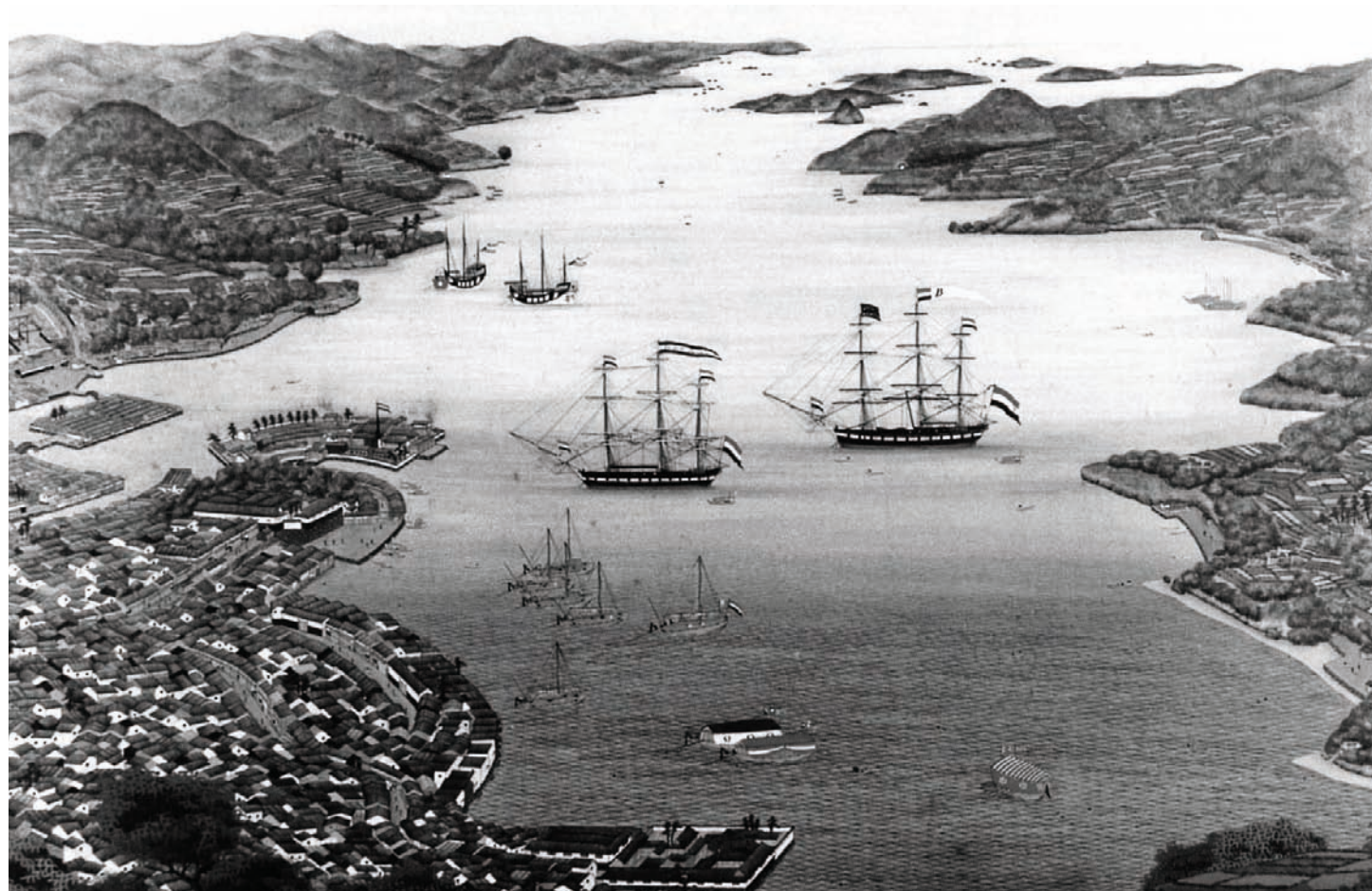


Courtesy of the Maritime Museum Rotterdam, the Netherlands (P1574)



Nagasaki Bay, c. 1820

# Maritime Asian History

Report >  
East Asia

While intra-Asian trade, domestic ethnic diversity and the foreign relations of pre-modern Japan have been in the Japanese academic spotlight since the early 1980s, maritime Asian history has only recently received the attention it deserves.

by Fujita Kayoko and Yamauchi Shinji

1-2 November 2003  
Naha, Okinawa,  
Japan

In 1993, a handful of young researchers in the Kansai district formed the *Kaiiki Ajiashi Kenkyukai* – the Research Group of Maritime Asian History or *Kaiikiken*. Its members, many of whom were dissatisfied with conventional divisions in historical study, sought to break new ground in the study of maritime Asian history. *Kaiikiken*'s monthly meetings, consisting of presentations and critical readings of historical documents such as the *Rekidai hōan* (*Lidai baoan*, a compilation of diplomatic documents of the Ryukyu Kingdom) stimulated a group of young historians over the next decade. *Kaiikiken* is now one of the major academic organisations in the field.

## The symposium in Okinawa

'The Potential of Maritime Asian History: The 10th Anniversary Symposium of the Research Group of Maritime Asian History' was held 1-2 November 2003 at the Research Institute of Okinawa Prefectural University of Arts in Naha, the former capital of the maritime Kingdom of Ryukyu (1429-1879). Supported in part by the 21st Century Centre of Excellence Program *Interface Humanities* at Osaka University, fifty faculty and students from all over the Japanese archipelago, China, Thailand, and Singapore attended the symposium.

The symposium began with Geoffrey Wade's lecture 'The Pre-Modern East Asian Maritime Realm: An Overview of European-Language Studies' which overviewed, in English, the past fifty years of Western scholarship on pre-colonial maritime East and Southeast Asia.<sup>1</sup> Wade's presentation, referring to more than 600 works, covered eight themes: (1) the Austronesians; (2) East Asian nautical technologies – e.g. shipbuilding; (3) maritime activities – e.g. tributary systems,

trade, piracy, religious interactions; (4) maritime routes and trade networks – e.g. the trans-Marey Peninsular routes, the coming of Islam to maritime Asia; (5) major ports and port-polities; (6) shipwrecks; (7) traded commodities – e.g. ceramics, textiles, spices, animals; and (8) classical texts relating to maritime East and Southeast Asia.

King and Queen of the Ryukyu Kingdom leave Shuri Castle to greet Chinese delegates at the harbour, 2 November 2003, Naha, Okinawa



by Fujita Kayoko

Wade's lecture was followed by five presentations in Japanese by members of *Kaiikiken*. First, Momoki Shiro, a researcher on Vietnamese history and *Kaiikiken*'s leader since its founding, recounted the group's past activities and outlined strategies for the coming decade.

This was followed by four empirical papers on maritime Asian history. Based on archives concerning Qing-Ryukyu relations such as the *Qindai zhongliu guanzi dang'an xuanbian* and *Rekidai hōan*, Fukazawa Akito examined the Qing government's granting of diplomatic documents to Ryukyuan envoys for an island group close to Fujian. Noting the effects of piracy, Fukazawa emphasised the need to combine micro-level examination of river transportation and macro-level examination of trans-oceanic interaction to reconstruct the past.

Fujita Akiyoshi then presented his database of statues of the Mazu goddess (including items such as place names, material, technique, date and place of manufacture, form of

hands, aliases of statues) in the Kyushu and Okinawa regions, used to investigate the pre-modern diffusion of folk beliefs in the China Sea area. Particular attention was given to the geographical distribution of Overseas Chinese in the early sixteenth century.

Okamoto Hiromichi, a specialist on the role of the Ryukyu Kingdom in pre-modern maritime trade networks, argued for statistical studies of all participants of Chinese tributary trade during the Ming. Introducing part of a comprehensive table of tributary cases based on the *Ming shi-lu*, Okamoto claimed that previous statistical studies used improper historical sources and suffered from a narrow geographical focus and vague definitions of 'giving tribute'.

Yamauchi Shinji then examined transnational folk beliefs in the pre-modern Northeast Asian maritime area and gave Japanese, Korean, Ryukyuan, and Chinese examples of prayers for safety at sea taken from sources from the twelfth to the nineteenth centuries. Yamauchi argued that early-modern Japanese and Korean nautical beliefs contained similar features to earlier Chinese beliefs. This hypothesis runs contrary to conventional theory, held by many Japanese ethnologists, which emphasises the indigenous character of Japanese folk beliefs.

## Towards the new decade

Wade's lecture provided Japanese scholars with a rare opportunity to learn of recent Western research, convincing them of the necessity to interact with colleagues abroad. Momoki suggested *Kaiikiken* members publish their research in English as well as in Asian languages. He also pointed out that research results should be reflected in Japanese secondary education, in textbooks and seminars for secondary school teachers.

Concluding his lecture, Momoki asked: 'Are we going to establish maritime Asian history as a discipline or should it remain a loose bond of people whose research involves maritime aspects?' In other words, can the study of maritime Asian history evolve without becoming a rigid discipline? Just as trade and cultural interaction via perilous sea routes resulted in unique maritime cultures in pre-modern Asia, international collaboration may lead to new breakthroughs in the study of maritime Asian history. <

## Information >

For further information on the activities of *Kaiikiken*, please visit its website: <http://homepage2.nifty.com/PHASU/mah-mirror/index.html> (most of the contents are in Japanese). *Kaiikiken* is currently organising the workshop *Northeast Asia in Maritime Perspective: A Dialogue with Southeast Asia* (Mielparque Okinawa, Naha, Okinawa, Japan, 29-30 October 2004), hosted by the 21st Century COE Program *Interface Humanities*, Osaka University, and the Asia Research Institute, National University of Singapore. Around twenty scholars from Northeast and Southeast Asia, Australia, and the United States will discuss maritime trade and its impact on states and societies in Northeast Asia from the fourteenth to the seventeenth centuries. The workshop will be in English. For further information, please see: <http://www.ari.nus.edu.sg/conf2004/okinawa.htm>

*Fujita Kayoko* is a researcher with *Interface Humanities*, Graduate School of Letters, Osaka University, Japan. (<http://www.let.osaka-u.ac.jp/coe/>) Her Ph.D. thesis on Tokugawa Japan's foreign policy as observed by agents of the VOC will soon be submitted to CNWS, Leiden University. [kfujita@let.osaka-u.ac.jp](mailto:kfujita@let.osaka-u.ac.jp)

*Yamauchi Shinji* is senior researcher with *Interface Humanities*. His latest work is a monograph on the history of maritime East Asia in the Nara and Heian periods (Tokyo: Yoshikawa Kobunkan, 2003) [Shanneij@aol.com](mailto:Shanneij@aol.com)

## Note >

- 1 Abstract and full text (ARI Working Papers Series 2003, No. 16) are available online: <http://www.ari.nus.edu.sg/pub/wps2003.htm>