



Gregory Smits. *Maritime Ryukyu, 1050-1650.* Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2018. Maps. 318 pp. \$68.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8248-7337-0.

Reviewed by Michelle Damian (Monmouth College)

Published on H-Japan (June, 2020)

Commissioned by Martha Chaiklin

“This book is an interdisciplinary, revisionist history of the Ryukyu islands”: from his opening sentence, Gregory Smits unabashedly challenges the widely accepted narrative of the islands (p. 1). For most who study Japanese history, the Ryukyu islands are often largely absent from our general studies, usually being relegated to a brief nod in their role for facilitating trade in the premodern era and then taking on a greater prominence in the modern imperial and postwar eras. Smits notes that many of the modern views on Okinawa come from George Kerr’s *Okinawa: A History of an Island People* (1958) and that there has been no substantial reconsideration of Ryukyuan history since. This volume effectively encourages the reader to rethink our perception of the Ryukyu islands.

Smits’s work makes a number of valuable points, but I would like to highlight three here. First, a primary takeaway from this volume is the importance of marginalized places—in this case, the Ryukyu islands. Smits highlights not just the significance of the islands but also what they mean to the even more important control of the seas. This concept tends to be overlooked in favor of the main narrative of history in Japan (and elsewhere), which often focuses on control of the land: who owns how much land, who inherits the land, and how the land is overseen. Here, however, as the book’s title itself states, it is maritime Ryukyu

that matters; the sea is an active character. In Smits’s analysis, the Ryukyu islands therefore were more than an afterthought in the discussion of a historical trajectory. They were instead a coveted archipelago, and control not just of the islands but of the seaways shaped that trajectory.

The second point of note is the methodologies Smits uses to arrive at his conclusions. As he states, this is an interdisciplinary approach. He accesses sources in Japanese, Chinese, and Korean (albeit sometimes translated into Japanese). While he begins with the official histories describing the Ryukyu islands and incorporates other sources traditionally used by historians, such as military chronicles and household records, Smits also brings in less “standard” sources, such as monument and temple bell inscriptions, archaeological and landscape analyses, and even a collection of over 1,500 songs and chants (*Omoro sōshi*). I believe that this type of multifaceted approach to historical studies is of critical importance to the wider field, as it is through these nontraditional sources that we are able to better glean an understanding of those who do not feature in the “official” histories. Indeed, it is the use of the songs especially that allows Smits to flesh out his revisionist history of the archipelago, as he points out such instances as when the official recorded histories portrayed a

ruler as evil, but the songs created and sung by the local residents praised him as a king.[1]

Smits's willingness to reinterpret traditional histories allows him to reconsider the role of *wakō* as well, which is the third point to consider. Often translated as pirates, this term immediately calls to mind a particular preconceived image. Smits uses a phrase that I particularly like for *wakō*, referring to them as "seafarers on the margins" (p. 39). Note that this does not mean they were marginalized; they were simply operating away from the traditional centers of power. In doing so, he allows the *wakō* to take on a different kind of agency, showing them as influential intermediaries connecting Japan, Korea, China, and the Ryukyu islands. They became proxy warriors in the struggle between Japan's Northern and Southern Courts in the fourteenth century and facilitated trade with the Ming court. *Wakō* were the ancestors of kings and influential lineages throughout the Ryukyu archipelago and, again, were critical figures in shaping the control of the islands and the seas around them. They also were cultural carriers, bringing rituals and legends from the Japanese mainland with them to the Ryukyu islands. By focusing on the margins, Smits moves the *wakō* to the center of the story. In conjunction with prioritizing the maritime nature of the Ryukyu islands, he highlights these seafarers' roles and encourages the reader to reconsider their political, military, and cultural influences on the premodern development of the islands.

The work is not flawless. Smits packs a lot of information into the volume, and readers new to the study of Okinawan history will likely find the sheer number of names of people and places overwhelming. While Smits does include a number of maps, which are tremendously helpful, there is no genealogy table until nearly halfway through the volume even though many of the individuals are referenced far earlier. A glossary could also have been a useful inclusion. This would likely be a challenging book to use in most undergraduate classes.

Those with a particular interest in the Ryukyu islands or more general maritime studies, however, should find Smits's insights and revisions to the commonly held narrative of great interest.

Note

[1]. Smits does note that he was not the first to use the *Omoro* to supplement official histories, as Sakihara Mistugu did so as well in his *A Brief History of Okinawa Based on the Omoro Sōshi* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1987). But incorporating the songs with the other types of evidence Smits uses allows for an even more robust understanding of the topics at hand.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-japan>

Citation: Michelle Damian. Review of Smits, Gregory. *Maritime Ryukyu, 1050-1650*. H-Japan, H-Net Reviews. June, 2020.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=54553>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.