

The 1609 Satsuma Invasion of Okinawa

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Introduction

"Satsuma and Shuri, in close correspondence, served as 'go-betweens' in diplomacy and trade between Kyoto and Peking throughout the 16th century. It was a painful position for Shuri. Direct legitimate trade between the two powerful neighbors was coming to an end. War threatened, and the king at Shuri had to exercise utmost tact and delicacy in serving as a mediator between the two quarreling governments" (Kerr 144).

Indeed, on the eve of the seventeenth century, the future of Okinawa was unstable and bleak. For centuries the balance the tiny kingdom had struck between its two imperial neighbors, China to the west and Japan to the north, allowed the country to enjoy bountiful trade that brought it riches outside its own production possibilities. Tributary status to both countries allowed the Okinawans to appreciate and emulate both cultures, and in turn their respect of those cultures allowed the island to serve as a buffer that kept conditions calm enough for trade to continue. Eventually however, Sino-Japanese relations deteriorated completely and since trade was the life-blood of the Southeast Asian economy, Okinawa held an uneasy monopoly on all goods which intended to be shipped between those countries. Chaotic fluctuations in Japanese politics

led to Japanese poverty and a desperation in the country that soon was coupled with fear of Asian and European attack. A military and economic buffer was needed and a political mistake in the Ryuku Islands provided the perfect opportunity in 1603.

Political and Economic Ties to China

As early as the late fourteenth century Okinawa held status as a tributary of the Chinese empire (Kerr 130). However, due to the arrival of Western explorers and conquistadors, Okinawans withdrew from the South by the late sixteenth century and dealt with trade almost exclusively between China and Japan (as well as occasionally Korea) (Kerr 124).

Their tributary relationship consisted of sending envoys and embassies to Peking to present diplomatic pleasantries and symbolic gifts such as "sulphur, shells, copper, cloth, and trained horses" (Kerr 130). However, the Okinawans often went far and beyond their tributary duties and visited China at every available opportunity, from the birth or death of a Chinese royal to any Chinese ceremonies; the Okinawans "overdid a good thing" (Kerr 131). So much in fact that officials in the palace at Peking recommended Shuri (the capital of Okinawa) slow the number of ambassadors sent to China (Kerr 131). Much of the reason for this over-eagerness was China's position as one of the world's most powerful countries and a source of world-class culture. In fact, Okinawa annually sent students to Peking to study on scholarship from the Chinese government (Kerr 134). It seems that the Okinawans, like

much of the orient, we assume, admired Chinese culture and constantly sought to emulate it. The students that returned home after studying in Peking spread the Chinese language and culture and were given high-ranking jobs so that the governments at Shuri and Naha might replicate the one in Peking in both etiquette and function (Kerr 135). For the most part the relationship of Okinawa to China was much like that of America to Europe in the nineteenth century; American culture strived to equal the greatness of European art, philosophy and etiquette, but no matter how much respect they paid, they were still looked down upon and at best humored by the snobbish and more sophisticated European elite. And yet, the Chinese did on occasion recognize the Okinawan's devotion to their relationship. For instance, in 1554 the emperor gifted the Shuri king a large tablet. Inscribed on it were the words *Shurei no Kuni*, meaning Country of Propriety (Kerr 133). This gift, which to a degree probably would've been seen by the Chinese as condescending, so enthralled and honored the king at Shuri that he built a gate on the road to his castle and placed the tablet inside for all to see (Kerr 133).

While the Okinawan glorification of Chinese culture certainly paid a large part into their eager tribute, it

cannot be forgotten that economics played a huge part in Okinawan willingness to be a vassal. The profits that Shuri gained from trade with China were huge and they greatly helped the island survive its lack of many natural resources. It must also be emphasized that much like with the cultural aspect, China was not necessarily dependent on Okinawa for its trade; Okinawa was a relatively insignificant island in China's vast network of tributaries. It was Ryuku ignorance of this carefree Chinese attitude, coupled with the loyal pro-China sentiment in Okinawa that would eventually set the stage for invasion.

Economic and Growing Cultural Ties with Japan amid Sino-Japanese Conflict

Japan's relation to adjacent countries in the Southeast, and in particular China and Okinawa, was complicated. Although they were under the rule of a shogun-centralized government in Kyoto, many barons roamed their own territories as independent. Japanese piracy of Chinese vessels and coastal towns was rampant.

In 1369 a Chinese attempt at dealing with Japan diplomatically epitomized both the rebellious Japanese foreign policy and China's ineptness at enforcing its will. The Emperor Hung Wu sent an envoy to Japan ordering that

they appear at his court with tribute, or else face a "war of subjugation". The Japanese ignored the threat, increased raids on China, and no repercussions were ever faced. In fact, in order to maintain appearances, the court at Peking accepted tribute from a baron in Western Japan, recognizing him as "King", even though he had no such clout (Kerr 135).

Therefore, the relationship between China and Japan remained always contentious and broken. Okinawa, however, at this point remained free to trade with whomever they pleased. In 1395 Satsuma, a territory in the Southern Japanese region of Kagoshima and to be discussed later, established trade relations with Korea. Most of the shipments to Kagoshima were made by Okinawan ships, and due to the great profits available from this trade, the Lords at Satsuma patronized and protected the Okinawan ships as they traveled their routes (Kerr 136). This was one of the first records establishing a trade agreement directly between Okinawa and Japan.

In fact, from this point on, almost all Okinawan trade with Japan was done with Satsuma. Traveling through Satsuma to Kyoto in 1415, the Okinawans presented the Shogun a gift, and from that point forward the two islands formally recognized a tributary relationship in the Chinese

tradition (Kerr 136). This means that from 1415 on, the Okinawans had formal trade ties to both China and Japan.

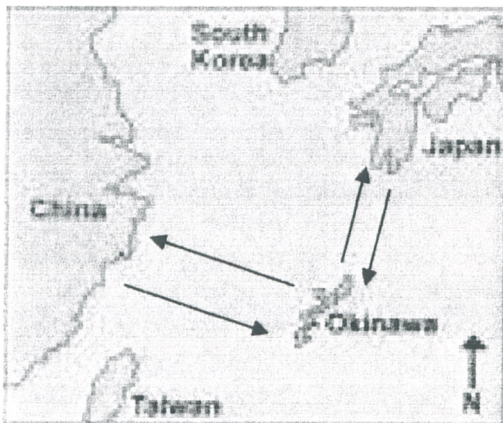
Soon after this time, Japan and China attempted to reconcile their conflict. China ordered Okinawa to send an envoy to Japan to criticize it for not sending tribute to Peking, but with the proper politicking, the Okinawan representative was able to improve relations (Kerr 137). A diplomatic system was established where the court at Peking was able to choose the priest at a Kyoto Zen temple called Tenryu-ji. This temple was very influential and so it allowed the Chinese to have a say in Japan without the Shogun really losing any power (Kerr 137). Both sides were pleased enough to resume direct trade but problems arose. The shogun was increasingly poor and powerless in his land; his agents were unable to collect the taxes they imposed. In addition, the revenues that should've been gained from direct trade did not accumulate, as corrupt priests farmed the rights to trade with China (Kerr 138). To further complicate issues, the weakness of the shogun meant that Japanese pirates were free to wreak as much havoc as possible on the Chinese coastline. Attacks became so bad that China began issuing passports and trade licenses necessary for all Japanese traders, and required that any

Japanese trade in China had to be done at the port of Ningpo.

The disappointing lack of revenue that was gained from direct trade with China led the Satsuma to expand their trade with Okinawa. Though they were only able to trade legitimately with Ningpo, Satsuma had access to as many Chinese wares as it desired through trade with Shuri and Naha. It could then forward the products to Kyoto for a fabulous profit. The Okinawans were more than happy to help the Satsuma since the profits there were great, and also because they required the protection of the Satsuma in expanding their own trade with Korea (Kerr 139).

However, the great amount of profit that occurred due to Shuri-Satsuma trade also attracted unwanted attention. The shogun in Kyoto recognized the immense potential wealth

the Ryukus represented, and in 1480 he appointed Lord Shimazu (Shimazu is a title meaning Lord of the Southern Isles, not necessarily specific to Satsuma [Kerr 56]) of the Satsuma clan to be the "supervisor" of



Okinawan trade (Kerr 140). This meant that the Japanese again adopted Chinese foreign policy, and required that all

Japanese ships trading in Naha have Satsuma-issued trading licenses and passports (Kerr 140). Thus Okinawa and Satsuma in Kagoshima effectively had a monopoly on trade between China and Japan; Okinawa would get Chinese wares relatively duty free, and Japanese traders could only get those wares by going through Satsuma.

This unique position of being in the middle geographically, also required that Okinawa continue be in the middle politically as Sino-Japanese relations again deteriorated in 1523. A Japanese trader at Ningpo carried valid documents in order to trade, however at the same time a daimyo from West Japan tried to trade with invalid and dated documents. The latter party began to quarrel over not being given a share of the goods and both parties began to fight. It soon erupted into riots and much of the city was burned to the ground. The outraged Chinese sent Okinawan envoys to deal with Kyoto, who did not even respond (Kerr 141-2). During this time, Japanese pirates also increased the number and intensity of their raids till in 1553 formal relations between China and Japan ceased to exist (Kerr 143).

Now that Okinawa was literally Japan's only method of gaining Chinese goods, interaction with Japan greatly increased in Shuri. The language and culture became more

and more prominent, and in 1572 Okinawa began sending its students to Kyoto to study in the same way that its students went to Peking. Slowly, pro-Chinese and pro-Japanese factions arose at Shuri, and a delicate balance was necessary (Kerr 143).

Satsuma Affairs

It has already been established that the Satsuma were key to Okinawa's trade fortunes not only with Japan, but with Korea as well. Okinawa and Satsuma had a symbiotic relationship that was able to flourish because the Satsuma's wealth was directly tied to Japan.

However, Japan's political sovereignty became unstable in the late 16th century. A military shogun named Hideyoshi gained supremacy in Japan in 1577, however he died by 1598 (Kerr 151-6). The vacancy left by his death created a chaotic power struggle as lords and barons converged upon Japan. Finally in the Battle of Sekigahara in 1600, Tokugawa Ieyasu emerged victorious as shogun. He immediately distanced all parties who had opposed him and stripped them of their power in the central government (Kerr 157). Among those groups was the Satsuma.

The chieftain of the Satsuma clan was forced to abdicate his throne. His son however, made the journey to Edo and presented Ieyasu with tribute and thanks. Ieyasu

was so impressed that he renamed the new Satsuma chieftain Iehisa and gave him the title of Shimazu (which again, means Lord of the Southern Isles) (Kerr 157).

Invasion and Loss of Independence

Shortly after gaining power of Satsuma and the favor of Ieyasu, Iehisa sent an envoy to Okinawa ordering they pay tribute to the new ruler of Japan (Kerr 157).

It is at this point that Okinawa made a terrible mistake. For so long they had maintained their sovereignty by keeping a delicate balance between Japanese and Chinese interests. However, when ordered to pay tribute to Ieyasu, the king decided not to do so. This decision was made with the strong advice of a Chinese loyalist named Jana Teido Oyaka. Had the king maintained objectivity and ignored Chinese sentiment, things might have gone well.

But as it was, Iehisa asked permission to reprimand the Okinawans for their disrespect. With the idea of Okinawa as a buffer between Japan and European threat to the south, Ieyasu granted Iehisa permission. In February of 1609, 3000 men set sail for Okinawa. They landed at Unten Harbor on the Motobu Peninsula and were challenged strongly by a resistance force, but they soon overpowered them (Kerr 158). Within two months, the Satsuma had captured Shuri and its King. The King and his officers were brought back to

Edo and forced to sign oaths swearing their submission to Japan based on an invented ancient tradition (Kerr 160). And back in Okinawan, Japanese officials evaluated the island's revenue capacity and decided to tax 12.5% of their total revenue, in addition to an 8,000 koku (1 koku= 5.11 bushels) of rice from the king's inventory. From this point on, Okinawa was no longer independent.

Conclusion

The major legend that surrounds almost all Okinawan karate styles is that in 1609 the emperor of Japan sent his elite samurai, the Satsuma, to take over the island of Okinawa for its trade potential, and while there the Satsuma were at first defeated by farmers who were trained in karate.

During the actual invasion, the resistance met at Unten Harbor could have very well been such karate-ka. However, records are not clear enough to be sure. What is clear is that the invasion of Okinawa was the result of complex cultural and political ties formed over hundreds of years. China was the artistic and diplomatic center of Asia while Japan was a rebellious and unstable military state who refused to respect that. In the middle were the Okinawans who managed to become fabulously wealthy exploiting those two countries' inability to co-exist. In the end however, Okinawa fell because they were unable to stay individual and unaffiliated with foreign interests.

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