

Global Times: What insights can today's Ryukyu studies offer into historical memory, contemporary interpretations?

Beijing, China Dec 6, 2025 ([IssueWire.com](https://www.IssueWire.com)) - Why has the research on Ryukyu Islands gained repeated prominence in China recently, drawing increasing attention overseas, especially in Japan?

"Ryukyu studies" is a comprehensive, interdisciplinary field that investigates the geography, politics and culture of the Ryukyu Islands as well as China-Ryukyu historical relations and Ryukyu's role in East Asian international relations, according to a previous Global Times editorial.

Recently, the "Ming Dynasty edict to the King of Ryukyu," which is being exhibited at the Lüshun Museum in Dalian, Northeast China's Liaoning Province, has drawn widespread attention, being covered by Kyodo News and other Japanese media outlets.

Han Xingfang, a former deputy director of the museum who has long engaged in related research, argues that the edict reveals an important historical fact: Ryukyu was once a vassal state of China. It provides substantial evidence for the study of Ryukyu's history as well as Japan's history of aggression against the region, the Xinhua News Agency reported on November 29.

An earlier Ryukyu studies academic conference hosted by Fujian Normal University also garnered attention, with several Japanese media outlets making mention of it.

What messages does the Chinese scholarly community's increasing engagement with Ryukyu studies and its deepening ties with international academia carry? Against the backdrop of the administration of Takaichi Sanae, who is known for making frequent controversial statements, could these academic discussions on Ryukyu influence China-Japan relations and the broader East Asian context?

Historical discussion

On November 15, the Fujian Normal University hosted a symposium marking the 30th-anniversary of the China Ryukyu Research Institute, aiming to advance the development of the Ryukyu studies and showcase the discipline's major research results in recent years. The university's Ryukyu studies program was selected as one of the six 2025 funding cycle of the endangered disciplines support plan led by the Chinese Academy of History and Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS), according to the university's official WeChat account.

Indeed, scholarly debates over Ryukyu's history and identity have long persisted. Scholars reached by the Global Times note that from historical, legal, and moral perspectives, Japan's claim to sovereignty over the Ryukyu Islands is questionable.

Historically speaking, Ryukyu was an independent kingdom that had established a tributary relationship with China.

According to the Democracy and Law Times, the Ryukyu Kingdom became a tributary of the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644) in 1372. In 1872, Japan unilaterally declared the Ryukyu Kingdom an "inner domain," denying China's centuries-long suzerain status and launching the formal annexation. On March 30, 1879, Japan exiled the last Ryukyu king to Tokyo and annexed the kingdom as Okinawa Prefecture, thus putting an end to Ryukyu's national existence.

"Since 1879, historical and legal disputes over the sovereignty of the Ryukyu Islands have never ceased," Chu Jianguo, principal of the College of Public Administration and Humanities, Dalian Maritime University, told the Global Times. "We should understand that Japan's forcible 'disposition' of Ryukyu lacked grounding in international law."

On November 15, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Lin Jian posted on social media platform X that the terms of the Cairo Declaration shall be carried out and Japanese sovereignty shall be limited to the islands of Honshu, Hokkaido, Kyushu, Shikoku, and such minor islands as we determine.

"Ryukyu is not among those islands, so Japan has no legal basis for asserting sovereignty over Ryukyu," Chu said.

Today, some residents in Okinawa still express strong cultural identity and autonomy. Internet user Rob Kajiwarra, who identifies as a Ryukyuan, has advocated this position for years on social platform X. The user's pinned post said that "since time immemorial Okinawa was a peaceful, prosperous independent nation known as Ryukyu, maintaining close, friendly ties with China and Southeast Asia, and recognized in 1854 as an independent country under international law."

Scholarly perspectives on Ryukyu

"Ryukyu's historical records are exceptionally distinctive," Xie Bizhen, academic head of the China Ryukyu Research Institute, told the Global Times.

The Fujian Normal University began field investigations, cultural preservation programs, archival work and academic research on China-Ryukyu historical ties as early as the 1960s. In 1995, it established the institute, which remains to be China's only dedicated research institution focused specifically on China-Ryukyu relations.

In addition, the Dalian Maritime University convened a preparatory meeting for its Ryukyu research center and held a seminar on the Ryukyu question in September 2024, attracting more than 20 prominent scholars from across China for in-depth discussion.

Fujian's institute also maintains long-term, close academic collaboration with institutions in Japan, including the University of the Ryukyus and Waseda University.

Meanwhile, grassroots friendship has created a supportive social foundation for the discipline's development. Fujian and Okinawa first established contact in 1991 and formally forged sister-province ties in 1997, according to the Fujian government's website.

However, alongside these harmonious developments, tensions between residents in Okinawa and both the Japanese authorities and US military forces stationed in Japan have grown increasingly pronounced.

In August 2024, protesters gathered in Okinawa to demonstrate against the relocation of a US military base to the city's coastal area, reported the Asahi Shimbun.

Against this backdrop, the deepening of Ryukyu historical research has become even more relevant and worthy of attention for China-Japan relations today.

Significance for contemporary landscape

"When we study Ryukyu, we must recognize that the history of China-Ryukyu interactions is itself part of the process of building a community with a shared future for mankind," Xie said. "It is also a history of the spread of Chinese civilization overseas. From Ryukyu's past, we can trace the roots shaping today's East Asian international relations."

On November 23, Japanese Defense Minister Shinjiro Koizumi inspected a Self-Defense Forces base on Yonaguni island and claimed that Japan would deploy medium-range missiles there. As the westernmost point of the Ryukyu Islands, Yonaguni island lies only about 110 kilometers from the island of Taiwan, reported the Nikkei.

The previous Global Times editorial noted that Japan and the US are accelerating the "militarization of the Ryukyu Islands," fueling deep local fears of a new "battle of Okinawa." Residents widely worry their homeland may once again be turned into Japan's "shield." The study of Ryukyu, therefore, carries heightened contemporary significance.

At a UN meeting on October 9, China's Deputy Permanent Representative to the UN Sun Lei pointed out that China urges Japan to face up to the history of Japanese militarism's war of aggression and colonial rule against its Asian neighbors during WWII, which resulted in grave crimes against humanity. He called on Japan to genuinely improve the social status of women and end prejudice and discrimination against the Okinawa people and other Indigenous groups, reported CCTV News.

Xie stressed that Japan's annexation of Ryukyu and subsequent assimilation policies - including forced surname changes and place-name reforms - were intended to erase historical memory.

"This is why many people in Okinawa today are unfamiliar with this part of their past," he said. "That is why our research matters: To restore historical truth and preserve collective memory."

"In the current political climate under the Takaichi administration, academic research will inevitably be affected," he said. "But precisely because external interference is intense, scholars must all the more work to clarify these questions. Only then can we avoid unnecessary conflicts and entanglements."

"The more solid our historical scholarship becomes, the more it can contribute to peace in the real world," Xie emphasized.

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