

New Trend on Asian Studies

The Research Group of Maritime Asian History

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The Research Group of Maritime Asian History (the Kaiiki Ajiashi Kenkyūkai) was founded in 1993 when two research groups merged. One group, which read classical Chinese texts related to Southeast Asia at the Center for Southeast Asian Studies at Kyoto University, was led by the scholars, Momoki Shirō, Fukami Sumio, and Yao Takao. The other group was then researching the foreign relations of Japan and the Ryūkyūs at universities in the Kyoto-Osaka-Kobe region. Its members were specialists in the histories of Japan and the Ryūkyūs. The group was comprised of Fujita Kayoko, Ōnishi Nobuyuki, Fujita Akiyoshi, Maehira Fusaaki, and myself. Our two groups launched a research community based at Osaka University under the leadership of Momoki Shirō on the occasion of his receiving an appointment at Osaka University.

Through merging the two groups of researchers, we aimed to link Southeast Asian history with the history of Japan's foreign relations. We aimed to pursue a new historical perspective and framework by transcending the entrenched paradigms of national histories, histories of nation states, Euro-centric or Sino-centric histories, or the fixed frame of Chinese, Korean, and Japanese histories that has been the backbone of Japanese historical research on the East Asian world. Such collaboration among scholars of Southeast Asian history, Japanese history, and Ryūkyūan history was an innovative approach rarely seen in the past, and greatly differentiates our research group from others even today.

“Maritime Asia (Kaiiki Ajia)” is the term we coined when we founded our research group. Our intention was to avoid the expression, “Asian seas,” which encourages the traditional assumption that the sea is only an “appendage” to the Asian continent, the main stage of Asian history. Through stipulating and presenting a new hypothetical spatial concept of “Maritime Asia,” we proclaimed our interest in portraying a new Asian history centered on the seas or an image of world history seen from Asia. The spatial concept

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of “maritime Asia,” however, does not completely eliminate continental regions. Even while we maintain our emphasis and focus on the seas, we always keep the trends on the continent, which informs the backdrop of our research, in our line of vision. Our stance is to consider maritime history within the interconnectivity of both land and sea.

It might be considered surprising that the Research Group of Maritime Asian History is unlike other societies in that it is not a fixed or delimited organization that charges membership fees for support and operation. Our membership-specific mailing list is uploaded on the Web. By registering one’s name on the list, anyone can join the organization and receive information on regular meetings and study tours. Whoever can participate at any given time holds the regular meetings and various events, making operation of the research group very casual. As of December 2013 the number of our members totaled about two hundred. We have established an office in the research center of the Asian History Department at Osaka University in order to manage the mailing list and handle regular meetings and study tours. Graduate students and recent PhDs who majored in Southeast Asian history and are affiliated with the research center are in charge of managing the office.

The perennial activities of our research group are the regular meetings that are held every month except during extended university breaks such as in summer and spring. When the group was first founded, we took turns reading *Rekidai hōan* (Precious Documents of Successive Generations)—diplomatic records of the Ryūkyū Kingdom—and other historical materials, and gave presentations on our individual research areas. Today we only give presentations on our research. We also periodically conduct outings to exhibitions and sponsor study tours related to marine history. In recent years we frequently have sponsored joint meetings with other research societies and scientific research groups. Participants in the meetings often include scholars from Korea, China, Taiwan, Singapore, Great Britain, America, and other foreign countries.

Our research group celebrated its tenth anniversary in 2003. In November of that year, we held our commemorative symposium, titled “The Potential of Maritime Asian History,” in Naha, Okinawa. We chose Okinawa for our venue because Okinawa’s history, which has been a cornerstone of Maritime Asia, has played an enormous role in the area. The core members of our group, Momoki Shirō, Fujita Akiyoshi, Okamoto Hiromich, Fukazawa Akito, and myself, were the main speakers at the commemorative symposium. Our guest speaker was Geoffrey Wade from the Asia Research Institute at the National University of Singapore, who talked about research trends in Europe and America on Asian maritime history. The symposium provided a forum for

interaction with the world-famous scholar of Southeast Asian history, Anthony Reid, who was director of the Asia Research Institute, and led to his collaboration with the COE program, as I will discuss below.

When our research group celebrated its tenth anniversary, the Osaka University 21st Century Center of Excellence Program “Interface Humanities”(2002-2006) had just been launched. The core members of our group contributed to the field of historiography in the program along with other research groups in global history and Central Asian history. One of the accomplishments of the COE Program was the publication of a book edited mainly by Momoki Shirō, Fujita Kayoko, Hasuda Takashi, and myself. The book, entitled *Kaiiki Ajiashi kenkyū nyūmon* (Introduction to the Research on Maritime Asian History), was published by Iwanami Shoten in 2008. Although limited to scholarly trends in Japan, as an introductory text that surveys and explains the findings and trends in the enormous volume of scholarship on “maritime history”, it was a first in the world. The year the book was published, 2008, also marked the fifteenth anniversary of our research group. From the initial planning stages we had envisioned the book being translated into foreign languages. In 2012, four years after its publication, a Korean version was published by the Institute for Marine and Island Cultures at Mokpo National University. We are currently proceeding with plans for Chinese and English versions of the text. In addition, papers presented at international symposia jointly organized by the Maritime History cluster of the COE program and the Asia Research Institute at National University of Singapore have finally been compiled into a collection of essays edited by Fujita Kayoko, Momoki Shirō, and Anthony Reid entitled *Offshore Asia: Maritime Interactions in Eastern Asia before Steamships*, which was published by the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies in Singapore in 2013.

Our research group celebrated its twentieth anniversary in 2013 by holding an international symposium in Mokpo, Korea in December of that year. Mokpo was chosen as the venue because that area is where the Shinan shipwreck, which is a very valuable artifact for studying maritime Asian history, was discovered. The discovery has provided a focal point for momentous strides in Korean history of the seas and underwater archaeology. As mentioned earlier, the Korean translation of the book, *Kaiiki Ajiashi kenkyū nyūmon*, was done by the Institute for Marine and Island Cultures at Mokpo National University. As it happened, the thirtieth anniversary of the Institute of Island Cultures in 2013 coincided with the twentieth anniversary of our research group. The symposium at Mokpo was thus a commemorative event sponsored by both our research group and the Institute of Island Cultures. The symposium was entitled “Twenty Years from the Founding of the Maritime Asia History Society and Thirty Years since the Founding of the Institute of

Island Cultures: History as Seen from Islands and the Sea.” The National Research Institute of Maritime Cultural Heritage, which cosponsored the event and has a permanent exhibit of the Shinan shipwreck, was the venue for the symposium. Four members of our group, Okamoto Hiromichi, Hasuda Takashi, Nakamura Tsubasa, and myself, gave presentations in addition to, the presentations given by four members on the Korean side, Kang Bong-yong (Director, Institute for Marine and Island Cultures), Kim Gung-Ok (Professor of History, Mokpo University), Lee Kanguk (Professor, Mokpo University), and Kang Wonchun (National Research Institute of Maritime Cultural Heritage). The day following the symposium, students from Mokpo University joined us in exploring Jeongdo Island, from where we could see the site of the Shinran shipwreck.

In recent years the rapid development of maritime history research — as represented by the Maritime Cross-Cultural Exchange in East Asia and Formation of Japanese Traditional Culture: Interdisciplinary Approach Focusing on Ningbo sponsored by Scientific Research on Priority Areas (2005-2009, abbreviated as Ninpuro) — has drawn much attention within the field of Japanese history. Compared with such a large-scale research project, the research activities of our Research Group of Maritime Asian History seem minor. Nevertheless, as I have explained here, our own activities over the past twenty years have indeed contributed to the development of maritime history research in Japan, an achievement in which we take pride. We hope to continue to contribute fresh approaches to research on maritime Asian history from our locale in Osaka in order to develop further a global approach to maritime history research that includes Japan. Please see our public blog on the website below if you are interested in our organization.

<http://plaza.rakuten.co.jp/kaiikiofficial/>