

# Comments on the Session 1

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The purpose of this Session was to hold discussions based on reports by three speakers on diplomacy and trade involving Japan, Vietnam, Ceylon and other locales in Asia in the 17th and 18th centuries while viewing such diplomacy and trade as cultural interaction.

It is possible to say that the greatest interest of this Session, which is also expected to broadly contribute to historical research, was its framework itself in which records kept by the Dutch East India Company and the Ryukyu Kingdom were synchronically treated and interlinked as related historical documents. It has been customary to base historical studies of Southeast Asia, East Asia, South Asia and the Indian Ocean region covering an extended period from the 16th to 18th century on the documents of the East India Company, an entity embodying the Asian policy of the Netherlands as well as Britain and France. The East India Company's documents have traditionally been regarded as canonic reference for their continuity, systematized descriptions, clarity of expressions and other such traits. They have served as the basis of a voluminous amount of research thus far.

On the other hand, historical records of Asian sources available for research covering the periods after the Great Yuan Empire and Zheng He's westward expeditions in the early 15th century are generally fragmental and limited in their geographical or temporal scope due to the successive Ming and Qing dynasties' ban on maritime activities, Japan's seclusion policy and Korea's similar policy. Meanwhile, the historical records of the Ryukyu Dynasty are more consistent and longer-range than the East India Company documents since the Ryukyu Dynasty maintained active and constant contact with the outside world in the form of tributary trade in the 15th century and onward.

The Session's speakers shared in their reports a part of their research achievements that were clearly proof of their daily hard work with an enormous amount of historical data. Their reports were something that only researchers who

have completely assimilated their material can present, sometimes revealing a distinctive method or style that is the “privilege” reserved for young researchers struggling with primary data. I found the reports excellent and enterprising.

I would like to summarize the key points of each of the reports below.

In the first report, “Structural Transformation of Ryukyu Kingdom in the 17th and Early 18th Centuries: as an Intersection of Cultural Interaction,” Dr. Hiromichi Okamoto viewed the Ryukyu Kingdom’s diplomacy as process of formation of cultural strategies, and pointed out that the Ryukyu Kingdom repeated cultural trial and error as its diplomatic positions changed vis-à-vis Japan and China throughout the period of confusion from 1609 to 1635, the period of transition from 1635 to 1684 and the period of stability after 1684. In these periods, the Kingdom pursued not only diplomatic relations at the sovereign level but also cultural strategies covering social characteristics, which later developed into what can be termed as “Okinawa-ness,” which has remained to date. Researchers have had a general tendency to discuss Ryukyu’s tributary-suzerain alliance with the Ming and Qing Dynasties from the early 15th century or Ryukyu’s relations with Japan or the Satsuma clan following the latter’s invasion in 1609 from the perspective of China’s or Japan’s Ryukyu policy. Dr. Okamoto, on the other hand, has consistently maintained the Ryukyu perspective, expanding his scope of research to the cultural domain including ordinary people. This is an extremely important attempt, and I expect that the study from this standpoint will eventually develop to examine other questions such as, for example, how the “Okinawa-ness” can be linked with Southeast Asia and the Korean Peninsula.

In the second report, “Vietnamese-Japanese Diplomatic and Commercial Relations in the Seventeenth Century,” Dr. Hoang Anh Tuan clarified, based on mostly trade-related documents of the Dutch East India Company, how during a period in the first half of the 17th century Japan was absorbed into the void generated in the traditional Vietnamese-Chinese-Dutch relationship based on silk and silver trade due to differences in interest that the Qing, Japan and the Netherlands had in their respective newly developing relations with North and South Vietnam. Dr. Hoang Anh Tuan’s research focus has steadily been the relationship between the Dutch East India Company and Vietnam. He is the author of a major work on the subject, *Silk for Silver: Dutch-Vietnamese Relations 1637–1700*. His report in the Session mainly concerned the relationship between Japan and Vietnam based

on the historical documents. His presentation of China and Japan as major factors in the North-South Vietnamese confrontation is particularly noteworthy since this can be viewed as a precondition for the later French intervention.

Dr. Li Tana of the Australian National University, who joined the discussion from the floor, has studied the production of copper coins in Vietnam and their distribution in Southeast and East Asia. It would be quite interesting to look into the multifaceted relationship between Vietnam and East Asia with regard to the distribution of silver and copper coins, as in Dr. Li's research and in Dr. Hoang Anh Tuan's research into the Vietnamese silver.

The third report was "Dutch Political Attitudes in Asia: Diplomacy in Eighteenth Century Ceylon as Example" by Dr. Alicia Schrikker. This report was characterized by its demonstration that the diplomatic relations between the Dutch East India Company and the Kandy Kingdom in Ceylon in the 18th century developed in accordance with the traditional local protocol.

The report showed a full circle of diplomatic strategies that the Netherlands pursued in Ceylon from the 17th century, when the Dutch East India Company commenced cinnamon trade with the Kandy Kingdom, until the Dutch exit prompted by the arrival of Britain after 1790: first, diplomacy respecting the traditional local protocol, followed by relations shaped by warfare and post-war negotiations and a return to the protocol. The illustrations from the period presented during the report were intriguing: the nature of relationship suggested by gestures showing respect to authority seemed quite similar to that of the Dutch mission engaged in tributary trade with the Qing Dynasty. In this report, a model of the Dutch diplomatic policy for Asia was presented: the incorporation of elements of the traditional Asian protocol into diplomatic strategies. It is suggested that the Dutch foreign policy for Ceylon, Dutch East India and China followed the same model.

Finally, I would like to comment on how these three reports and the Session's overall theme are interrelated. In response to the commentator's question and in the general discussion, Dr. Schrikker mentioned that information and culture were important elements of the Dutch East India Company's diplomatic strategies, as suggested by the characteristics of information on Asia that the East India Company provided to its trade partners such as the Edo shogunate. In other words, diplomacy could be defined as cultural interaction. The Ryukyu Kingdom, in its historical position, shared the same challenge of maneuvering cultural inter-

action as the Dutch East India Company, as reported by Dr. Okamoto and attested by documents from the same period. Dr. Hoang Anh Tuan also stated in his report the importance of clearly defining even trade-centered diplomacy as a form of cultural interaction. At the same time, the need for future research was also pointed out concerning differences in images of the times and self-other awareness as indicated respectively in the Dutch and Ryukyu documents.