

Ryukyu-Northern Malay Archipelago Relations from the 14th to the 17th Century

Hubungan Ryukyu-Utara Kepulauan Melayu dari Abad Ke-14 hingga Ke-17

KU BOON DAR

ABSTRACT

The record of the trading enterprises of the Ryukyans in the late 14th to the early 17th century constitutes not only an important chapter in the Ryukyuan history, but also a notable part of the history of the Malay Archipelago as a whole. This study will be exploratory in nature as it looks into several key questions. These include the nature of the relationship between Ryukyu and the Northern Malay Archipelago and how their relationship was developed during this particular period. To do this, the paper will first examine and reconstruct the history and historiography of the Ryukyu-Northern Malay Archipelago relations. Secondly, it will explore their maritime network during the rapid cultural development of the Ryukyu Kingdom. This study also hopes to shed new light upon the historical connection of the two regions while at the same time offer some new perspectives on their politics as well as their maritime network and bond.

Keywords: Ryukyu-Northern Malay Archipelago relations; socio-economic history of South Seas; tributary trade; Japanese traders; Southern articles

ABSTRAK

Rekod hubungan perdagangan orang Ryukyu pada akhir abad ke-14 hingga awal abad ke-17 bukan hanya merupakan catatan penting dalam sejarah Ryukyu, tetapi juga sebahagian besar daripada sejarah Kepulauan Melayu secara keseluruhannya. Kajian ini akan cuba meneliti beberapa persoalan penting mengenainya. Antaranya, bentuk hubungan antara Ryukyu dan Utara Kepulauan Melayu dan bagaimana kedua-dua kuasa ini menjalin hubungan antara satu sama lain dalam tempoh masa tersebut. Justeru, artikel ini pertamanya akan mengkaji dan mengkonstruksi sejarah dan historiografi hubungan Ryukyu-Utara Kepulauan Melayu. Keduanya, artikel ini juga akan meneroka rangkaian maritim mereka semasa kepesatan perkembangan kebudayaan Ryukyu. Kajian ini diharap dapat memberi pencerahan kepada sejarah hubungan kedua-dua wilayah ini dan pada masa yang sama menawarkan beberapa perspektif baru mengenai rangkaian dan jalinan aspek-aspek politik dan maritim antara mereka.

Kata kunci: Hubungan Ryukyu-Utara Kepulauan Melayu; sejarah sosioekonomi Laut Selatan; tributari perdagangan; pedagang Jepun; hasil-hasil Selatan

INTRODUCTION

The relationship between Ryukyu and the Malay Archipelago was very significant because the two clusters were connected in trade from as early as the 14th century before Japan introduced the *shuinsen* trading system. This system officially sanctioned armed ships operated by Japanese traders to sail to the Malay Archipelago for trade. During the Tokugawa Shogunate era (1600-1868), these ships were permitted to sail with the grant of a red seal. Therefore, they were also known as the *red-seal ships*. It is noted that in the first half of the 17th century, around 1600 to 1635, more than 350 Japanese ships travelled overseas under the *red-seal ship* system. However, Hamashita (2008: 57)

stresses that Japan (more specifically, the Ryukyus) had access to the Malay Archipelago products only through Ryukyu Island.

The period from the late 14th to the early 16th century was one of the most prosperous in the history of Ryukyu, due largely to the far-flung trading activities of its people who traversed the seas of the East and the Malay Archipelago as agents of entreport trade among the countries bordering those seas (Hamashita 2003: 68). The term Malay Archipelago refers to the region encompassing Annam (Vietnam), Phnom Penh (Cambodia), Ayutthaya and Pattani (Thailand), Burma (Myanmar), Malacca (Malaysia), Java, Palembang, Aceh and Sunda-Kalapa (Indonesia). Specifically, the countries located on the mainland are known as the Northern Malay Archipelago

while those in the archipelago are known as the Southern Malay Archipelago. The focus of this article is more on the states in the northern part of the Malay Archipelago as there is still not much research done to highlight the relationship between these territories and Ryukyu especially in the areas of their political and maritime relations. Therefore, this study employs the method of qualitative analysis, in an attempt to fill the gap with particular reference to the *Rekidai Hoan* (Precious Documents of Successive Generations). The *Rekidai Hoan* is an official compilation of a large number of diplomatic documents of the royal government of the Ryukyu Kingdom, covering the period from 1424 to 1867.

With the help of this voluminous document and others, this paper will examine and reconstruct the history and historiography of the Ryukyu-Northern Malay Archipelago relations, especially in view of the fact that the Ryukyuan trading enterprises have contributed significantly to the history of not only Ryukyu itself, but also Southeast Asia (Malay Archipelago) as a whole.

RYUKYU-MALAY ARCHIPELAGO TRADE RELATIONS

The Japanese began to be actively involved in trade with the Malay Archipelago in the 16th century. However, Japanese interests in this region can be traced back to earlier times, that is, before the 10th century. During the Heian period (794 - 1185), the Japanese were able to import goods such as spices, medicine and other commodities from the Malay Archipelago through China. This Japan-Malay Archipelago via China relationship could meet the requirements of the Japanese society up to the Kamakura period (1185 – 1333) at the end of the 12th century.

Between the 14th and the 16th century, it was Ryukyu that served as the broker for the major trade in East Asia. It acted as an entreport port where Japanese products such as silver and swords were exchanged for other items in China, such as sappan wood and deer hides, which were sourced from the Malay Archipelago. However, the *Rekidai Hoan* (Precious Documents of Successive Generations), its annotated translation by Atsushi, Kobata & Mitsugu, Matsuda (1969) and also Ishii Yoneo's research (1990: 362-363) have documented that Ryukyu's close trade relationship with the Malay Archipelago was only achieved in the late 16th

century when, for instance, out of 317 Ryukyu ships which sailed out, 107 were bound for the Malay Archipelago as shown in Table 1.

TABLE 1. Ryukyu's trade Relations with the Malay Archipelago

Destination	Number of Ships
Ayutthaya	61
Malacca	20
Pattani	10
Java	6
Palembang	4
Aceh	3
Sunda-Kalapa	2
Annam	1

Sources: Kobata & Matsuda (1969); Ishii (1990: 362-363)

This table demonstrates the importance of the Malay Archipelago to the Ryukyu trade which was basically, an entreport trade in the South and East Seas. Ryukyu had the geographical advantage in this area covering China, Japan and Korea. Ishii sees its importance as a trading centre that could produce valuable goods, like sulphur and horses, to expand its external market. Besides these two items, it was left with no choice but to source for other products from its trading partner, the Malay Archipelago (Ishii, Yoneo 1990: 354-355).

The southern articles, the products of the Malay Archipelago, brought in by the Ryukyu merchant ships were in great demand in Japan and so were some of these commodities much valued in China. The ships carried cargoes of sulphur and horses from Ryukyu itself; porcelain, silk, brocade, satin and other cloths, copper coins, metals and other metal finishes, medicine, aluminium, wheat, musk and mallow plants from China, as well as swords, spears, bows, shields, helmets, horse saddles, fans, screens, lacquer, gold and gold dust from Japan. Their fixed return cargoes consisted mainly of sapan wood and pepper. Sapan wood, derived from soluble reddish plants (found in Ayutthaya and Malacca), was used to make red and purple dyes. It was usually cut into one inch diameter and two feet long pieces. The wood was sold in China for a hundred times the price it could fetch in Ryukyu and a few hundred fold its original price in other countries within the Malay Archipelago. Likewise, pepper was sold in China for between 750 to 1500 times its original value. Other commodities exported from the Malay Archipelago included nutmeg, camphor, gold, tin, tusks, sandalwood and perfume (Kobata & Matsuda 1969: 204-207).

In the context of Ryukyu's relations with the Malay Archipelago, Siam was the first country that the kingdom established trade with in the late 1380s. According to the *Rekidai Hoan* (Precious Documents of Successive Generations) record, the Ryukyu-Ayutthaya trade ties grew from at least an average of one ship sailing to Ayutthaya each year to three in 1419. Ishii Yoneo (1990: 356) points out that the Ryukyu trade in the Malay Archipelago until 1427 was confined to Ayutthaya alone.

TABLE 2. Ryukyu's trade Relations with the Malay Archipelago

Destination	Period
Ayutthaya	Late 1380-1564
Malacca	1463-1511
Pattani	1490-1543
Java	1430-1442
Palembang	1428-1440
Aceh	1463-1468
Sunda-Kalapa	1513-1518
Annam	1509

Sources: Kobta & Matsuda (1969); Ishii (1990: 362-363)

In an effort to expand to other areas of the Malay Archipelago as shown in Table 2, Ryukyu began to send its merchant ships to Java and Palembang (Indonesia) in 1430 and 1428 respectively; to the kingdom of Malacca and Aceh at the northern tip of Sumatra in 1463; to Pattani in 1490; to Annam (Vietnam) in 1509, and to Sunda-Kalapa, now known as Jakarta, in the Sunda Straits in 1513.

RYUKYU IN SOUTH SEA TRADE ACTIVITIES

Ryukyu, a small country with limited natural resources, was forced to make its maritime trade sector its economic driver. It carried out its international trade by buying items, especially sappan wood and pepper, from the Malay Archipelago, and then reselling them in the Northeast Asian markets such as China, Japan and Korea where they were highly sought after. Meanwhile, states Geoff Wade (2007), Ryukyu also bought silk and ceramics in bulk from China and later marketed them to the Malay Archipelago. Its trade with China ran smoothly because of the tributary relationship that existed between the two countries. Trade was allowed in the context of this tributary tie-up which was a form of court monopoly. This means that there was no

room for private trading at all. Sakamani Shunzo (1964: 385) mentions that the diplomatic association between Ming dynasty China and the Chuzan government of the Ryukyu Kingdom prevailed in the context of their tributary relations. Chuzan was one of the three kingdoms which controlled Ryukyu in the 14th century. These united states were called the Ryukyu Kingdom, but continued to be referred to as Chuzan in various official documents of the Ryukyuan royal government and those of many other states in the region.

The Ming court was generous towards the Ryukyuan missions. Among the advantages granted to the missions, courtesy of the Ming court, were the ample returns that helped to buy exotic items to be sent back to Ryukyu. China, in return, received a number of gifts in the form of cash and southern articles, which generated a very good profit. For several decades, the Ming dynasty also provided ships to Ryukyu and repaired and re-assembled their vessels for free every time they arrived at China with gifts as a sign of respect as reported by Geoff Wade (2007).

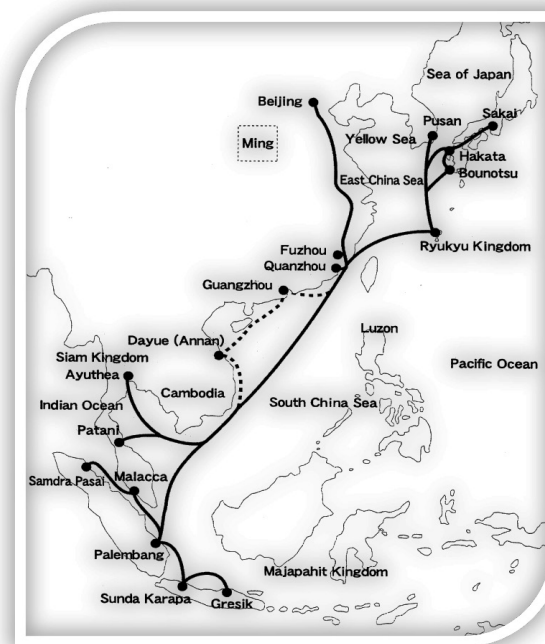
Meanwhile, Japan enjoyed an expansion in its international trade after the 14th century. An important basis for this development was its economic growth during the early years of the Ashikagaa shogunate (1336-1573). Agricultural productivity had visibly increased while production levels in the handcrafting sector also saw a rise, in line with the development of technology. Production levels in both sectors grew in such dimensions that it could satisfy not only the domestic market but also cater for international trade purposes. Therefore, the activities engaged in by the craftsman and traders were highly regarded. This gradually led to a desire to develop international markets. As observed by Cho Hung-Guk, the various political powers in Japan, which fully recognised the profitability of international trade, were constantly striving to promote an active trade relationship with China after the mid-14th century.

Eventually, Japan experienced a booming growth in its foreign trade, thanks to its trade connection with China via their diplomatic link. The shogun, Yoshimitsu (1358-1408) sent his emissary to the Ming court in 1403 to declare Japan as a protectorate of China. This, actually, went against the mainstream thinking as traditional Japanese policies had always striven to put the country on par with China. However, with Shogun Yoshimitsu's declaration, Cho Hung-Guk (2000: 84) claims that

Japan was then placed under the international limits of the South and the West Sea, with the Chinese Emperor as its centre. With the intercession of the tributary system which came about this way, the tally trade between China and Japan thus began in 1404, and tributary missions to China were deployed 19 times from the beginning of the 15th century until 1547 (Chan Ying Kit 2010).

Towards the second half of the 16th century, the ships plying the Japan-Malay Archipelago trade route through China had stopped entirely. Ryukyu by then had grown into Japan's asset in its direct trade with the Malay Archipelago. On the one hand, this was the result of Ryukyu's heightened interest in foreign trade as mentioned above and on the other, it was spurred on by Toyotomu Hideyoshi's (1537-1598) efforts to expand Japan's influence to beyond its shores as well as to extend its venture into international trade to the Malay Archipelago (read: Nanyang). Hideyoshi, who united all of Japan towards the end of 1580 and conquered Ryukyu in 1587, was much feared by the latter which began to pay tribute to Japan in 1589. In 1590, Hideyoshi was even rumoured to have long desired to conquer the Malay Archipelago countries (Cho Hung-Guk 2000:85).

Even though Japanese military encroachment into the Malay Archipelago territories never occurred, the fact above demonstrates how highly the Japanese ruler regarded these foreign trade markets as shown in Map 1. Hideyoshi strongly encouraged international trade but at the same time he tried to place these countries under his rule within the framework of a tributary system. The *shuinsen* system which began in 1592 was born of this background. Hideyoshi's international trade policies were later replaced by those of Tokugawa Ieyasu's which strove to promote robust trading activities with the Philippines, Siam, Vietnam and other countries, as well as the Europeans whose trade enterprises had then begun to flourish in the Malay Archipelago (Cho Hung-Guk 2000:85).



MAP 1. Trade routes of the Ryukyu Kingdom, fourteenth to mid-sixteenth century.

Source: Takeshi Hamashita (2008:67)

RYUKYU-NORTHERN MALAY ARCHIPELAGO RELATIONS: MOVING BEYOND TRADE

The increase in trading activities between Japan (more specifically, the Ryukyus) and the Malay Archipelago created further interaction between the two communities. This was due to the increase in the number of Japanese traders in the ports of the Malay Archipelago. A study conducted by Kim Yong-gon finds a large number of them settling down in the major ports in the region. He also came across, in his research, early 17th century records known as *nihon machi* or Japanese Path which contain significant examples of streets said to have been constructed and still detectable not only in Ponhea-lu, the outpost of Oudong, the capital of Cambodia, but also in Phnom Penh. Here, as reported by Kim Yong-gon (1943:80), there are scattered Japanese streets. In Ayutthaya too, there is a Japanese village with about 1,000 to 1,500 Japanese settlers. Based on his findings, Cho Hung-Guk (2000: 67-107) assumes that, all in, approximately 10,000 Japanese were spread out across many states in the Malay Archipelago. It can then be concluded that the role of the Japanese traders residing in these

states is seen as being vital in linking Japan to the Malay Archipelago, as did the Chinese traders in strengthening the relationship between China and the archipelago.

Indeed, the Japanese played a prominent part in trade, for example, with Vietnam and Thailand although their trading activities were nowhere near as bustling as those of the Chinese who had already taken a firm hold on the trading business within the region of the South and West Seas for centuries. Nevertheless, the Japanese existence and significance within the Malay Archipelago were unique and distinctive. A good example would be the role of the Japanese in Vietnam in the 17th Century. At the time, Vietnam was in the midst of political decay due to the division of power between the Trinh family, which controlled the northern region and the Nguyen family, in power in the southern region. The Japanese made their presence felt in both the regions. For instance, in the northern Vietnamese area of Tongking, there were Christian Japanese who helped spread their religion to the local folks. The rise of Christianity was not only widespread amongst the nobles and scholars but also amongst a large number of farmers in the north. Li Tana (1998: 64) reveals that the growth and spread of the religion in Vietnam was not due to the presence of the French alone but it was also thanks to the Japanese. Moreover, in the Malay Archipelago, Vietnam was the only country which was more tolerant towards Christianity. She also discovers that this faith was more widespread in Annam (Southern Vietnam) than in the other places in the Malay Archipelago. This is supported by the fact that there were many Catholic missionaries in Annam who were actively spreading the word of God in the country. These missionaries came from Portugal, Spain, France and other countries (Li Tana 1998: 64).

Though their presence was much evident in both the north and the south, the Japanese operated largely in Annam, which was under the control of the Nguyen family. This was because Annam was more actively involved in foreign trade. A comparison of the rapid growth in both areas shows Annam coming out on top as it could lay claim to 84 Japanese *shuinsen* granted with the *shuinjo*, an official permit which allowed the Japanese traders to sail across the Malay Archipelago. This system had been running effectively from 1604 until 1635. In comparison, the areas in Tongking, according to Li Tana (1998: 62), had only 36 *shuinsen* issued with the red seal. The Nguyen family's active involvement was obvious

when they selected Hue as their capital city and granted concessions to the Japanese traders in the early 17th century in an effort to boost the trade sector in the region. This encouraged the migration of the Japanese to Cochin-China as they took advantage of the concessions given in the *shuinsen* system to head for the Malay Archipelago. Wheeler (2006: 169) also points out that in the 16th century, the Nguyen Vietnamese court at Hue re-established the prominence of the central Vietnamese region. Its mixed ethnicities of maritime sojourners, based in its Hoi An port, were keen competitors along the South China Sea maritime passageway, with solid networked connections to southern Japan, south China, and the archipelago regions to its south and east.

FACTORS FOR THE DEGRADATION OF TRADE RELATIONS

Ryukyu's trade relations with the Malay Archipelago including Siam was not pursued after 1564. The end of this relationship was caused by a series of events and various other reasons. The first was the political and social turmoil in Ayutthaya after the mid-1560s. Piyada Chonlaworn is of the opinion that this was the main factor which affected the trade ties between Ryukyu and Siam. The Ayutthaya kingdom, which had been suffering from Burmese attacks since the end of 1563, finally surrendered to the aggressor in 1564. During the conflict, Pattani, a protectorate of Siam, went to war for Ayutthaya but alas, its assistance came too late as affirmed by Cho Hung-Guk (1999: 52-54). According to Cho, the Pattani soldiers only came to the defence of Ayutthaya in trying to retake the palace when the latter was already in a critical state. Hence in 1569, Ayutthaya was defeated and for the next twenty years was governed by the Burmese. As a result, its trade with foreign countries, which was made illegal, was abruptly ended. This means that the existing trade relations with Ryukyu also came to an untimely end (Cho, Hung-Guk 1999: 52-54).

The second factor was the advance of the Portuguese in the Malay Archipelago and their attempt to gain control over the trade routes in the Straits of Malacca. Since the beginning of the 16th century, the Portuguese had begun penetrating the Chinese market in droves, thus presenting competition for Ryukyu which only acted as a trade intermediary between the Malay Archipelago and

China in the South Sea. Upon their arrival in the region, the Portuguese tried to undermine Ryukyu's position, specifically in terms of the importation and exportation of the local produce. Furthermore, the *haijin* (maritime ban) decree issued by the Ming dynasty also curbed the international trading enterprise between China and the outside world. Conversely, this ban had resulted in the emergence of Chinese private traders in the South Sea, for example, the Zheng family which was based in Taiwan from where it later on managed to penetrate the trade routes within the Malay Archipelago (Ku 2018).

Additionally, the decline of Ryukyu's trade relationship with the Malay Archipelago was triggered by the Tokugawa Shogunate factor. Ever since the *shuinsen* institution was formed in 1603, the Tokugawa government had vigorously encouraged Japanese maritime trade. The issuance of the royal red seals to the merchant ships propelled a wave of Japanese traders to the Malay Archipelago. In the end, Ryukyu's unique first attempt in exploring trade markets in the region was curtailed by the Tokugawa Shogunate's policy. This led to the loss of Ryukyu's position as the only party which could provide southern articles from the Malay Archipelago to the Japanese, Korean and Chinese markets since these countries now had alternative sources to procure the foreign goods they desired.

The weakened Ryukyu-Malay Archipelago trading link, in turn, led to the deterioration of Ryukyu's trade with China and Korea. Since it could no longer easily obtain the tropical goods, it had nothing to offer the Chinese and Korean markets. In 1609, the final blow to the Ryukyu-Malay Archipelago trade relationship was the conquest of Ryukyu by Satsuma, a nation located at the south end of Kyushu Island. Since then, all its activities had been halted and to make things worse, all foreign trading ventures were banned altogether. Based on Sakai Robert's (1964: 391-392) research, Ryukyu was no longer allowed to import or export goods from or into foreign countries. This prohibition forced Ryukyu to eventually abandon its trade interest in the Malay Archipelago.

CONCLUSION

In sum, the period from the late 14th century to the 17th century was one of the most glorious in the history of the Ryukyu Kingdom. Its prosperity was

due, in a large measure, to the far-flung trading activities of its people who plied the East and the South Sea trade routes. Not only were they in contact with China and Japan but they had also established and maintained relations with Korea and the Malay Archipelago countries. In fact, Ryukyu's trade relations with the Malay Archipelago was very close because of the available supply of a large number of southern articles from the archipelago states. Thus, the trade connection of the two clusters of islands has always been seen as being much more vibrant than Ryukyu's relations with all the other countries, especially in terms of the frequency and duration of the visits of the fleet from Ryukyu to the Malay Archipelago.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The paper is part of an on-going research project supported by the Grant Program of The Sumitomo Foundation (168491) 304/PJJAUH/650891/T136. It has been presented in Kongres Sejarah Malaysia III: Sejarah Malaysia Pasak Masa Hadapan Negara, 28th-29th August 2018 at Anjung Wisma Sejarah, Kuala Lumpur.

REFERENCES

- Chan, Ying Kit. 2010. A Bridge between Myriad Lands: The Ryukyu Kingdom and Ming China (1372-1526). ScholarBank@NUS Repository. Retrieved 15 March 2018 from <http://scholarbank.nus.edu.sg/bitstream/10635/20602/1/ChanYK.pdf>
- Cho, Hung-Guk. 1999. Thai-Malay Conflicts in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries. *International Area Review* 2(2): 47-68.
- Cho, Hung-Guk. 2000. The Trade between China, Japan, Korea and Southeast Asia in the 14th Century through the 17th Century Period. *International Area Review*. Winter. 3(2): 67-107.
- Hamashita, Takeshi. 2003. Malacca, Ryukyu and South China Relations from the 15th to the 18th Centuries as Observed through Lidai Baoan. In Ding Choo Ming & Ooi Kee Beng (Eds.). *Chinese Studies of the Malay World: A Comparative Approach*. Singapore: Eastern Universities Press.
- Hamashita, Takeshi. 2008. *China, East Asia and the Global Economy: Regional and Historical Perspectives*. New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group.
- Kim, Yong-gon. 1943. Indoshina to Nihon tono kansei. Tokyo: Husanbo. In Cho, Hung-Guk. (2000). The Trade between China, Japan, Korea and Southeast Asia in the 14th Century through the 17th Century Period. *International Area Review*. Winter. 3(2): 80.

- Kobata, Atsushi & Matsuda, Mitsugu. 1969. *Ryukyu Relations with Korea and South Sea Countries: An Annotated Translation of Documents in the Rekidai Hoan*. Kyoto: Atsushi Kobata.
- Ku, Boon Dar. 2017. Port Cities in Maritime Southeast Asia in the 17th and 18th Centuries: Trading Network with the Koxinga Dynasty. International Conference on Tainan Area Studies, National Cheng Kung University, Tainan, Taiwan, 20-21 October.
- Li, Tana. 1998. *Nguyen Cochinchina: Southern Vietnam in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries*. Ithaca: Southeast Asia Program, Cornell University.
- Robert, Sakai. 1964. The Satsuma-Ryukyu Trade and the Tokugawa Seclusion Policy. *Journal of Asian Studies* 23(3): 391-403.
- Shunzo, Sakamaki. 1964. Ryukyu and Southeast Asia. *Journal of Asian Studies* 23(3): 383-389.
- Wade, Geoff. 2007. Ryukyu in the Ming Reign Annals 1380s-1580s. ARI Working Paper, No. 93, July. [20 July 2018] from http://www.ari.nus.edu.sg/wps/wps07_093.pdf
- Wheeler, Charles. 2006. One History, Two Regions: Cham Precedents in the History of the Hoi An Region. In Nguyen Tran and Anthony Reid (Eds). *Viet Nam: Borderless Histories*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.
- Yoneo, Ishii. 1990. The Ryukyu in Southeast Asian Trade in the 15th and 16th Centuries. In K. M. de Silva, Sirima Kiribamune and C. R. de Silva (Eds.). *Asian Panorama: Essays in Asian History, Past and Present*. New Delhi: The Executive Committee, 11th Conference of IAHA.

Ku Boon Dar
History Programme, School of Distance Education,
Universiti Sains Malaysia,
11800 Minden, Penang,
Malaysia.
E-mail: kubd@usm.my

Received: 05 October 2018

Accepted: 05 March 2019

