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BOOK REVIEW

Review of *The Ryukyu Islands: A New History from the Stone Age to the Present* by Gregory Smits. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2025. 488 pages.

The history of the Ryukyu Islands has generated a substantial and growing body of scholarship across multiple languages, reflecting the multiple forces that have shaped the archipelago. Within English-language scholarship, Okinawan scholars such as Tanji (2006), Matsumura (2015, 2024), and Shimabuku (2019), among others, have discussed the shifting regimes of sovereignty and governance that have shaped the islands at local and transnational levels. Their work constitutes a critical historiographical intervention grounded in different historical narratives, as well as in the lived experiences of Okinawan communities, making them accessible to broader audiences beyond Japan. Within this expanding field, much of the most recent contributions have been on critical reexaminations of the conceptual framework of “Okinawa”, encouraging scholars to interrogate the assumptions through which the region is defined and how its history has been narrated (Mori and Takahashi 2025: 4). For example, academics such as Kiyohiro Yamane (2017) have developed the path of “de-Okinawan” studies as a field to destabilize the epistemic frameworks that have reduced “Okinawa” to a fixed and self-evident object of analysis. This is especially relevant for scholarship produced by Western scholars, as these recent contributions highlight the methodological challenge of engaging histories



deeply entangled with long-term imperial and colonial dynamics without reproducing their epistemic assumptions.

Within this broader scholarly context, Gregory Smits' *The Ryukyu Islands: A New History from the Stone Age to the Present* (2025) is one of the most recent surveys of Ryukyuan history in English, providing a brief look into the more foundational aspects of this region from the earliest accounts of human presence to the year 2024. According to Smits, the work was conceived as a graduate-level textbook, combining a fact-based approach with recent historiographic trends and discussions "to provide a bibliography sufficient to facilitate more detailed study and research by interested readers" (p. 1). In this sense, it aims to be both an introduction and a point of entry into specialized literature, condensing Smits' forty years of experience in the field. Throughout the book, the author offers historiographical interventions, which are best understood as careful, and in many respects conservative, rearticulations of established analytical traditions within Anglophone and Japanese historiography.

The book is organized into four chronological parts, preceded by an introductory chapter offering a broad overview of Ryukyuan history and historiography. Part One, "Prestate Societies, 35,000 BP–1490", opens the narrative with six chapters that trace the islands from their earliest inhabitants to the emergence of the first Shō dynasty. Part Two, "Development and Transformation of the Shuri Empire, 1490–1630", follows over three chapters spanning from the consolidation of power under Shō Shin to the Satsuma invasion. Part Three, "The Mature Theatrical Kingdom and Its Collapse, 1630–1880", spans six chapters covering the kingdom's peak and eventual annexation by Meiji Japan. Finally, Part Four, "The Modern Era, 1880–2024", closes the book with four chapters bringing the history of Okinawa up to the year before the book's publication.

In the opening chapter, Smits outlines a number of "common misconceptions" he intends to address, such as a belief in the unbroken descendancy of the Ryukyuan population and notions of isolationism, unification, and independence that remain in contemporary narratives (pp. 2–7). The introductory chapter also provides a basic framework for understanding Smits' position on the most controversial topics regarding Ryukyuan history, to which he offers a critical analysis based on "past historical reality" (p. 4). Smits' historical perspective accompanies an open critique of the overuse of early narrative sources, legends, and later official histories that most of traditional historiographical approaches have been built upon, sources he treats as unreliable or "not ideal" (pp. 25, 42, 87, 329). This does not mean that such sources are absent from the book, but rather

that Smits treats them as secondary to material evidence. As he notes, “if read cautiously and against the grain, they can reveal useful hints about early Ryukyu” (p. 58). Accordingly, he places these textual sources within an interpretive framework grounded primarily in archaeological data, physical anthropology, political economy, institutional development, and long-term structural change, with a particular emphasis on maritime exchange networks and evolving regimes of sovereignty and diplomacy as key drivers of historical transformation (pp. 27, 28, 61). This choice points to a methodological commitment to materialist-structuralist history, which allows Smits to formulate a structured account of early historical dynamics and to challenge traditional historiography with well-established analytical tools. On the other hand, his approach also narrows the range of local written sources and, consequently, the historical voices that are incorporated into the narrative.

This position becomes clear in the first part of the volume, on “Prestate Societies”, where Smits reconstructs the demographic and political foundations of early Ryukyuan history. He advances the thesis that large-scale immigration during the Gusuku period (ca. 1100–1500, p.18) produced a decisive break with earlier populations, arguing that the groups responsible for early state formation were more “physically and culturally closer to mainland Japanese populations” than to the islands’ prehistoric inhabitants (pp. 43, 55, 64). This claim is supported by a generalized synthesis of archaeological and genetic evidence (albeit without precise citation), reflecting an effort to situate Ryukyuan historical developments within broader regional patterns of migration and institutional diffusion. The conceptual terminology used by Smits in this section – particularly the category of “prestate” – is analytically problematic insofar as it transforms heterogeneous historical narratives into a singular, implicitly teleological temporality structured around a state-centered genealogy. This terminology risks reproducing the homogenizing historicism that has been subject to sustained critique by Walter Benjamin (2012 [1940], VII, 256), Edmundo O’Gorman (1977 [1958]), Michel Foucault (2012 [1996]), Reinhart Koselleck (2004, 19–21), Dipesh Chakrabarty (2007), and Masashi Haneda (2018).

Smits’ most original contribution in this section lies in his reinterpretation of early political organization. Rejecting agrarian surplus models derived from mainland state formation theories, he argues that maritime trade, raiding, and tribute relations constituted the primary motors of political authority in the archipelago. The so-called “three principalities” are redefined as competing centers of control over long-distance exchange,

oriented toward managing access to Chinese tribute networks rather than administering land and population (p. 93). In this framework, the formation of a unified bureaucratic state in the 15th century marks the gradual consolidation of a tribute-oriented polity whose sovereignty was defined primarily through external recognition.

Part two of the book traces the consolidation of court institutions, the standardization of ritual and bureaucracy, and the elaboration of what Smits calls “classical Ryukyuan culture” (p. 137). This cultural development is interpreted primarily through processes of reappropriation of practices mainly from Korea and Japan, with the production of sacred spaces, rituals, and court ceremonies. The transition to the early modern period introduces the concept of an “empire within empire” to describe Ryukyu’s ambiguous sovereignty under Satsuma after 1609, a process which is analyzed through Ryukyuan administrative centralization and diplomatic constraint, while the Satsuma rule was systematized mainly through taxation and fiscal supervision (p. 218). Here, however, the analysis rests more on secondary literature, with comparatively limited engagement with primary sources.

Taken as a whole, the first half of *The Ryukyu Islands* provides a reconstruction of state formation models based on maritime political economy, and the integration of archaeological and institutional evidence. These chapters present the book’s most substantial contributions, particularly in their challenge to agrarian determinism and territorial conceptions of sovereignty. At the same time, because the framework remains within a strictly materialist and structuralist tradition that has long shaped East Asian historiography, rather than fundamentally reshaping the conceptual field the book refines and consolidates an existing analytical paradigm, offering a coherent synthesis that is methodologically conservative even where its conclusions diverge from the traditional historiography.

In part three, Smits moves on to the history of the Ryukyu Kingdom from the reforms associated with Shō Shōken and Sai On in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries to its formal dissolution in the 1870s through the process known as *Ryūkyū shobun* (the Ryukyu Disposition). Smits characterizes this long period as the era of the “Mature Theatrical Kingdom”, a concept intended to capture the relative political stability achieved through institutional consolidation and performance of Ryukyu’s diplomatic relations with China and Japan. According to this interpretation, the kingdom’s survival after 1609 depended largely on its ability to manage the “theatrical” dimension of diplomacy while concealing its political subordination to the Tokugawa *bakufu* and the Shimazu domain (pp. 227,

230). Alongside this conceptual framework, Smits provides detailed institutional analysis of the Shuri royal government, examining reforms to customary practices, legal structures, and administrative procedures aimed at strengthening economic efficiency and political control. Smits highlights the kingdom's diplomatic position between the tributary systems of Ming dynasty and Qing dynasty China and its subordination to Satsuma, thereby underscoring the challenges Ryukyuan authorities faced in navigating competing and often contradictory frameworks of sovereignty (pp. 234, 243).

He also provides a critical examination of the exploitative practices imposed on the northern and southern islands of the Ryukyus, where poll taxes, sugar monoculture, and forms of indentured labor produced long-lasting experiences of hardship and resentment toward Shuri-centered rule (pp. 253, 259, 268, 273). In doing so, he explicitly acknowledges the imperial dynamics through which the Ryukyu Kingdom itself exercised domination over other islands, demonstrating a notably critical stance toward the kingdom's power structures.

This section also introduces Smits' discussion on ethnogenesis, the formation of an ethnic group (pp. 224, 292–295, 319–320, 357). One of his main arguments is that there is no evidence that the Ryukyu Islands constituted a single ethnic or cultural group in the sixteenth or early seventeenth centuries. He contends that, under early modern conditions, new ethnic identities emerged “not necessarily in terms of objective reality but in terms of people's imagination” (p. 224), a theme he had looked at in his previous book (Smits 1999). He states that the first ones to regard themselves explicitly as Ryukyuan were the elites in the Shuri-Naha region in the late eighteenth century, then among northern islanders, and only later among southern and ordinary populations. Furthermore, he argues that Ryukyuan identity developed in parallel with the emergence of Japanese national identity in the early 1880s (p. 293–294).

Smits ties these discussions together in the fourth part of the book, in which he turns to the “modern period”. Drawing on Wendy Matsumura's book *The Limits of Okinawa* (2015), he begins the section by acknowledging that “Okinawa, however conceptualized, was inadequate to describe, contain, or label the diverse communities across Okinawa Prefecture” (p. 350). Smits traces the uneven processes through which Ryukyuan were redefined as Okinawans and incorporated as Japanese subjects through the creation and consolidation of Okinawa Prefecture. Smits highlights the “Culture Wars”, a series of assimilationist interventions through which Okinawans were constructed as racially distinct and culturally backwards – most visibly in

events such as the Hall of Peoples (*Jinruikan*). At the same time, pressures toward assimilation were evident in school uniforms and the use of local-language tags (*hōgen fuda*) to punish students for speaking Ryukyuan languages. The author shows how these practices together sought to regulate bodies, language, and everyday conduct, reinforcing the constructed superiority of mainstream Japanese culture and promoting the belief that conformity to it was necessary for economic and social advancement in Okinawa Prefecture (pp. 366, 368–372). He critically shows how comparisons between Okinawans and colonial subjects of the Japanese Empire became a common rhetorical strategy for asserting Okinawan cultural inferiority (p. 370), and therefore shows that cultural differences were real and existed at multiple social levels, varying between and even within the islands.

Smits states that in the present it is “relatively easy for people living in Okinawa Prefecture to combine local and national identities” and that in the early twentieth century “real and imagined layers of possible identity were often in conflict” (pp. 366–367). In this same section, he asserts that “the vast majority of people who live in the Ryukyu Islands today unproblematically regard themselves as Japanese and with good reason. People who dream of a restored Ryukyu Kingdom are unlikely to be found in Okinawa Prefecture or any other part of Japan” (p. 357). While Smits recognizes the coexistence of local and national identities, this assertion raises significant analytical concerns because it conflates two distinct issues. Although most people in Okinawa do not seek the restoration of the Ryukyu Kingdom, this does not translate into, nor does it necessarily relate to, the claim that people “unproblematically” regard themselves as Japanese. Making such an assertion carries important political, academic, and social implications, particularly when studying, teaching, and conducting research in Okinawa. The absence of widespread support for restoring the Ryukyu Kingdom does not necessarily imply that people “unproblematically” regard themselves as Japanese, nor does it adequately capture the layered, and often critical forms of identification that could be articulated by many Okinawans (Inoue 2007; Ginoza 2015, 2016; Yamashiro 2019; Kishi 2020).

As argued by scholars such as Ginoza (2015) and Kishi (2020), Okinawan identity is fluid (in the sense of being relational and historically conditioned), shaped by the persistent presence of U.S. military bases; the economic disparities between Okinawa and mainland Japan; and the ongoing erasure of Japanese and U.S. state violence against Okinawans. From this perspective, the lack of support for restoring the Ryukyu Kingdom does not preclude the coexistence of Okinawan and Japanese identifications,

even when these are complex or internally contradictory. Rather, such identifications may be shaped by critical understandings of Japan's historical and ongoing discrimination against Okinawa and the Ryukyuan islands that are revealing of how people regard and position themselves (Ginoza 2015). Indeed, some of the survey data Smits himself cites, such as the high percentage of respondents who acknowledge persistent structural disparities between Okinawa and mainland Japan (p. 407), point precisely to these unresolved tensions rather than to an unproblematic identification with the Japanese nation-state.

The importance of recognizing this complexity is also related to the way Smits presents the Battle of Okinawa, the subsequent U.S. occupation, and Okinawa's contemporary history. The limitations of this section become most apparent in his treatment of the Battle of Okinawa and its aftermath. While his account rightly emphasizes the responsibility of the Japanese state in the mass suicides – during which the Japanese military pressured Okinawan civilians to take their own lives prior to the arrival of U.S. forces – the narrative remains largely linear and gives comparatively little sustained attention to U.S. responsibility or to how wartime devastation became structurally linked to the long-term militarization of the islands (pp. 383–386).

The transition from wartime to U.S. occupation is covered overly briefly, moving quickly from the appropriation of land for military bases to the claim that rent payments and base employment ultimately benefited the local economy (pp. 393, 397, 399). Although Smits acknowledges sexual violence, political repression, economic dependency, and the dispossession of land under U.S. rule, the analysis lacks the same degree of sustained critical engagement that characterizes earlier sections of the book. This is not to suggest that Smits fails to provide a historiographically grounded account of the U.S. occupation, but that the way this history is narrated reflects a form of critical selectivity. While he successfully documents the subordination of Okinawan populations under U.S. military authority, the analysis stops short of situating these processes within a broader framework of U.S. imperial governance, not just in Okinawa and Japan, but in East Asia. This absence is particularly striking given Smits' earlier critical attention to the imperial dynamics of both the Ryukyu Kingdom and the Japanese Empire. While he carefully analyzes the structures through which the Ryukyuan state exercised extractive domination over peripheral islands and the mechanisms that the Japanese Empire implemented assimilationist and racializing policies through, he does not apply a comparable analytical framework to the U.S. military presence. As a result, the problems associated

with U.S. rule appear less as manifestations of an overarching imperial-colonial structure and more as distinct historical developments.

After briefly addressing the period of U.S. occupation, including the long-term governance of the islands by U.S. military authorities and the popular mobilization for reversion to Japanese sovereignty in 1972, Smits turns to the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Here, he draws on surveys conducted by the *Asahi Shimbun* to examine Okinawan perspectives on key political questions, including attitudes toward Japanese sovereignty, regional inequality, and the continued presence of U.S. military bases. He also examines the rise of tourism as a dominant sector of Okinawa's postwar economy, gradually displacing the military base system as its primary foundation. In doing so, Smits critically examines Japanese nationalist narratives that portray tourism as peaceful and restorative while obscuring its entanglement with the legacy of war and militarization. Yet, his analysis again centers primarily on Japan and gives comparatively less attention to the role of the United States (pp. 409, 411).

In this final chapter, Smits refers to the present and to future challenges facing the Ryukyu Islands, addressing the local economy, regional geopolitics, and environmental concerns. He emphasizes Okinawa's strategic role within Japan's relationship with China, presenting it as increasingly central and potentially destabilizing. He also examines ongoing environmental conflicts surrounding U.S. military bases, particularly the controversy over Henoko, highlighting the extensive ecological damage associated with their continued presence (pp. 415, 420, 423). Although the chapter succeeds in condensing a long and complex historical trajectory, its analytical depth appears to cover only until 1995, following the rape of a minor by U.S. servicemen and the emergence of the so-called third wave of protest (Tanji 2006). Subsequent feminist, environmental, human rights, and anti-base movements, central to Okinawa's contemporary political landscape (Tanji 2006; Abe 2011; Shimabuku 2019; Mori 2023), receive comparatively limited attention.

If this section seeks to cover Okinawa's history until 2024, its comparatively muted critical stance toward the U.S. military empire becomes especially significant, as it limits attention to and understanding of its ongoing impact on Okinawa's contemporary condition and its position within the U.S.-Japan security alliance. The absence of explicit engagement with U.S. imperialism as a structuring force is particularly consequential, as it obscures the extent to which Okinawa's postwar condition has been shaped by its incorporation into the global network of U.S. military power. This analytical asymmetry becomes especially significant in light of the book's broader argument,

which otherwise demonstrates considerable rigor in identifying imperial formations as central drivers of historical process and change. As recent scholarship has emphasized, a postcolonial analytical perspective is necessary to understand how Okinawa's incorporation into U.S. military networks has continuously shaped its economic and political constraints, as well as the local realities, and how this process remains central to the regions' present situation (Oshiro 2025: 76).

It is also important to note that Smits' treatment of Okinawa's contemporary economy reflects an analytical separation between tourism and militarization that overlooks their structural interdependence. While tourism is presented as the primary driver of economic activity, the U.S. military presence is addressed only marginally in economic terms. Although this may show the historical shift from an economy once centered on military bases to one increasingly oriented toward tourism, this framing leaves insufficient attention to the ways in which these sectors remain historically and structurally interconnected. As Okinawan scholars have argued (Ginoza 2016; Oshiro 2025), analyses of Okinawa's postwar economy must attend critically to the interlocking operation of "the three k's" – *kichi* (U.S. military bases), *kōkyō kōji* (public works), and *kankō* (tourism) – and US geopolitical objectives in Asia. Ayano Ginoza applied the concept of "militourism" (drawing from Teresia K. Teaiwa) in the context of the Ryukyus, to highlight how Okinawa is produced as a space in which militarization and tourism are mutually reinforcing: Okinawan land, labor, and culture are mobilized for tourism in ways that materially sustain the U.S.-Japan security alliance. Similarly, Akino Oshiro argues that Okinawa's economic growth has been structured in ways that sustain U.S. strategic presence and influence, while constraining local economic development within the imperatives of broader geopolitical agendas (Oshiro 2025: 76).

Taken together, Smits' approach to ethnogenesis and identity, along with his analysis of imperial formations in the Ryukyu Kingdom and the Japanese Empire – and his more limited engagement with the structural implications of U.S. imperial power – becomes especially significant in the final pages. These analytical choices heavily inform one of his most important conclusions, shaping how he interprets the relationship between historical population dynamics and contemporary claims to Ryukyuan indigeneity. He argues that the Ryukyu Islands were inhabited by diverse Paleolithic and Neolithic populations that no longer exist as distinct groups, and that the most significant demographic shift occurred between the eleventh and twelfth centuries with the arrival of migrants from Korea and Japan, as well as smaller numbers of Mongols and Alans. On this basis, he concludes that

this complex population history “complicates the narrative of certain social activists who claim that there exists today a group of people that we could reasonably describe as indigenous Ryukyuan” (p. 416).

This assumption reveals that Smits’ definition of indigeneity is limited to biological continuity or genealogical purity and overlooks how it is also constituted through historical notions of ancestry and land, as well as through processes of dispossession, marginalization, and resistance to colonial and imperial interests. In the case of the Ryukyus, dismissing contemporary indigenous claims through the lens of ancient population heterogeneity risks obscuring the historical processes through which such claims have emerged. The successive colonialisms of the Japanese Empire and U.S. military occupation have been central to shaping the conditions under which indigenous consciousness and epistemologies have emerged and continue to develop in Okinawa. The Ryukyuan people remain unrecognized as an indigenous group by Japan, and claims to indigeneity, while neither monolithic nor directly analogous to other indigenous frameworks, constitute an important dimension of culture, memory, political struggle, and self-understanding in Okinawa and across the Ryukyu Islands (Ginoza 2015; Chibana 2020; Oyakawa 2025; Heianna 2025).

This section of the book is also notable for the density and explicitness of its engagement with existing scholarship as Smits directly cites and debates other authors more than in earlier parts of the book. While this approach strengthens the chapter’s historiographical grounding, it also raises a methodological question regarding the uneven distribution of citations across the volume. Earlier periods, for which sources are sparse, are often narrated with minimal explicit referencing, whereas the “modern period” (precisely the period for which substantial English-language literature exists) shows a more carefully situated scholarly dialogue. This contrast highlights how Smits tends to present his arguments regarding the earlier periods in a more authoritative and direct way, making claims without the same degree of explicit engagement with historiography.

Smits’ work can be placed alongside a broader tradition of structural and political-economic histories of the Ryukyus and East Asia that have emphasized long-term causality, institutional developments, and regional integration (Kerr 2000 [1958], Akamine 2016). The book’s principal contributions lie in its archaeological synthesis and diplomatic reinterpretations, many of which build directly on arguments developed in Smits’ *Early Ryukyuan History* (2024). Moreover, his long engagement with Japanese historiography makes the volume a valuable resource for early-stage scholars and an important point of reference for readers seeking to

understand the foundational debates and interpretive frameworks that structure the more traditional approaches to Ryukyuan history. At the same time, the placement of references at the beginning of each part – rather than alongside the specific claims they support – undermines the book’s pedagogical premise as an introductory “graduate-level textbook”, limiting both its transparency and its utility for “interested readers” seeking to trace specific claims to their original bibliographical sources. Furthermore, his theoretical standpoint, although not clearly indicated by the author, shows a separation from more recent historiographical currents concerned with narrative, colonial epistemology, and historical subjectivity, which becomes increasingly significant in the later chapters of the volume where issues of identity and domination become more pressing.

In conclusion, this book constitutes a fairly orthodox contribution to a mainstream historical approach to Ryukyuan history. Its synoptic character can prove particularly useful for readers seeking an introduction grounded in materialist and structural analysis, and its attention to economic and institutional histories provides a coherent account that reflects the foundations of Smits’ historiographical tradition. However, by remaining largely within an established structural-materialist framework, the book gives limited attention to claims from more recent scholarship that have highlighted questions of positionality, epistemology, or narrative authority. Examples of this issue can be seen in the book’s prioritization of material and institutional sources over cultural productions such as local written sources (including the “official histories”), legends and myths, as well as in its reliance on English-language analytical categories rather than engaging with local conceptual vocabularies (pp. 88–89). While these methodological choices do align with a longer historiographical tradition, they also reproduce this tradition’s constraints—particularly its tendency to privilege state-centered narratives and structural processes over narrative voice – and neglect Indigenous epistemologies (Smith 2012; Ginoza 2015, 2016). For the “modern period”, this stance shows the relative marginalization of the ongoing material and social consequences of U.S. military domination and the contemporary base economy (Abe 2011; Mori 2023; Oshiro 2025), which represents less an interpretive error than a methodological constraint inherent to the analytical tradition in which Smits operates. Ultimately, Smits’ approach can be understood as a moderate reassessment of well-established narratives surrounding Ryukyuan history within the limits of traditional historiography, with a limited engagement with recent historiographic trends.

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