

The Oldest Map Becomes the Newest: Takemori Dōetsu's 1696 Map of the Ryūkyū Kingdom

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The Ryūkyū Islands began to be formed into a kingdom around the 12th century. In the late 14th century, that kingdom entered into tributary relations with the Ming dynasty, newly formed in 1368. As a result, the Ryūkyū Kingdom was able to obtain huge amounts of Chinese-made goods through the tributary trade with Ming and to engage in a royally managed entrepôt trade that connected China, Japan, the Korean Peninsula, and Southeast Asia. By the beginning of the 15th century, Ryūkyū was enjoying commercial prosperity under the relative stability of the Ming world order.

Yet, the Ryūkyū prosperity did not last long. The 16th century saw a weakening of the Ming position and large-scale entry into the international trade scene by private Chinese merchants, who displaced Ryūkyū traders first in Korea and later in Southeast Asia. In addition to these troubles, the Ryūkyū Kingdom was unable to fend off an invasion by Japan in 1609 and found itself subject thereafter to both the Ming (and subsequently the Qing) dynasty of China and the Tokugawa shogunate.

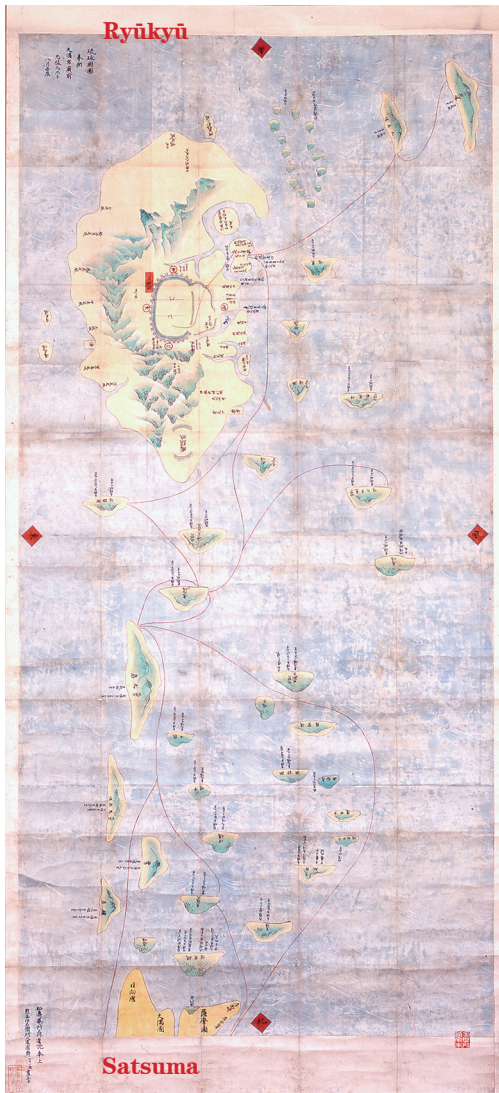
In 1696 during the Tokugawa period, a Fukuoka samurai, Takemori Dōetsu 竹森道悦, reproduced a map of the Ryūkyū Kingdom (*Ryūkyū-koku zu* 琉球国図) [Map I] and presented it to the locally famous Dazaifu Tenman-gū Shrine 太宰府天満宮. After spending decades in the storehouse of a museum, this map came to the attention of researchers in 2004 and has been much discussed since.

One major reason this map has so fascinated the academic community is that it closely resembles the oldest known printed map of the Ryūkyū Kingdom (*Yugung-guk chi t'o* 琉球国之図) [Map II], produced in Korea in 1471, but describes the kingdom in even greater detail than that earlier map had. *Map II* is contained in the *Haedong chegukki* 海東諸国紀, compiled by the Korean scholar-official Shin Sukchu 申叔舟, and it was most likely produced using another map [Map III] as a source. Although it does not exist now, according to historical records, *Map III* was presented to the Korean government in 1453 by the Hakata monk-merchant Dōan 道安, who traded heavily with Ryūkyū and Korea.

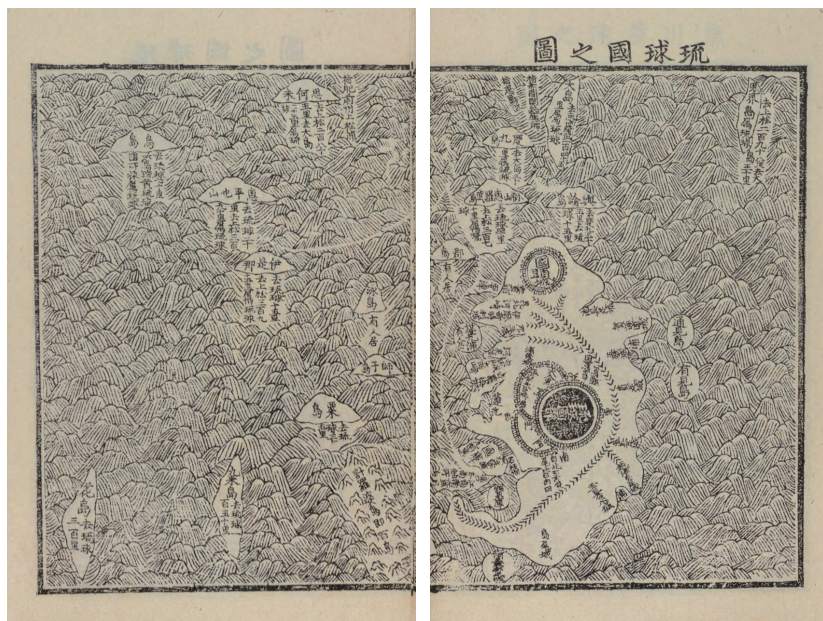
After careful analysis, it was determined that *Map I* consist only of the elements and information from between the late 15th and 16th centuries at the latest, and there is an even closer relationship between *Map I* and *Map III* than there is between *Map II* and *Map III*. Therefore, it seems likely that *Map I* was not a direct copy of *Map II* but a reproduction (maybe even a direct copy) by using *Map III* line as the basis for its cartography.

Thanks to the unexpected appearance of *Map I*, many scholars, including me, are now actively using its contents and advancing their research on the maritime interaction among Ryūkyū and the other countries during the 15th century. Additionally, I have been tackling research on Takemori Dōetsu's reproduction of *Map I* in the late 17th century, but these two researches have not met up with each other.

Simply thinking, however, why did Dōetsu pick up such a Ryūkyū map detailing the past conditions during the golden age of trade to reproduce and present to the shrine? To come to the point, it was highly probable that Dōetsu surely did not know that *Map I* was the old map but took it as the newest one so far that he could obtain. One reason behind this may be the great changes in the Ryūkyū-Japanese relations caused by the Japanese invasion in 1609. Because the Shogunate rule controlled strictly the communications and commodity distribution between Japan and Ryūkyū, for the overwhelming majority of Japanese, Ryūkyū became a more remote, inaccessible country than it had been previously.



Map I: The Ryūkyū Kingdom Map (琉球国図). Manuscript copy, approximately 88.0 × 176.cm. Courtesy of the Okinawa Prefectural Museum & Art Museum, Okinawa, Japan.



Map II: Map of the Ryūkyū Kingdom (琉球国之圖)]. Woodblock print. Reproduced from the website of National Diet Library's Digital Collections, Tokyo, Japan.