

# FRONTIER IN THE FAR EAST

## GEORGE H. KERR'S HISTORICAL NARRATIVE OF THE RYUKYU ISLANDS

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### ABSTRACT

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George H. Kerr (1911–1992) is an American historian who authored *Ryukyu: Kingdom and Province before 1945* (Kerr 1953a), the sole general history of the islands in English; he was also a Taiwan specialist in the military and government whose book won him the reputation as the ‘father of Taiwanese independence’ (Lu 2006). He rearranged fragmented memory and recorded it in such a way as to justify a separate people, the Ryukyans or the Taiwanese, from the nation-state to which they may belong—Japan or China—so that the United States could strategically exploit their home islands. While mainly focusing on Kerr in the Ryukyus and unveiling the process of his writing, this paper offers a bridge to Kerr in Taiwan and addresses the question of a common interpretive framework underneath his historical narratives.

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### *The ‘father of Taiwanese independence’*

From 1937 to 1940, while in his mid-20s, American George H. Kerr taught English in a Japanese government school in Taipei. His rare first-hand knowledge took him into wartime US military intelligence, where he was eager to call attention to the high level of industrialization in Taiwan under Japanese colonization. Kerr recommended that the United States put a military base on the island and make the best use of its products in post-war reconstruction. At the Cairo Conference, however, President Roosevelt allowed Chiang Kai-shek to take over Taiwan, and subsequent looting by Chiang’s military destroyed precious infrastructure. On 28th February 1947, when a Taiwanese mass uprising broke out, Kerr, then the US vice-consul in Taipei, maneuvered for, but failed to instigate, American intervention and trusteeship.

Kerr thereafter continued open criticism of Chiang’s regime, which made him unpopular with Cold War American Sinologists. The publication of his history of post-war Taiwan, *Formosa Betrayed* (Kerr 1965), was much delayed. A second book managed to appear as *Formosa: Licensed Revolution and the Home Rule Movement, 1895–1945* (Kerr 1974), but the remaining third of his work, on pre-modern Taiwan, has remained in manuscript form. The American Sinologist society had shifted their support from Taipei to Beijing but still barred Kerr’s publication. No one welcomed the view of Taiwan expressed in the manuscript: ‘The record shows it [Taiwan] to have been part of the maritime world of

the Western Pacific, thrusting toward the continent throughout most of its history, rather than as a continental outpost and *bona fide* “part of China” (Kerr n.d.: 1).

One important exception was his work’s reception by the Taiwanese. *Formosa Betrayed* became a scandalous disclosure of the February 28th Incident, the memory of which had been repressed. A Chinese translation appeared in Tokyo and New York but was banned in Taiwan, where only its abridged bootlegs were sold on the underground market. The Incident, however, suddenly came into the limelight in a dramatic change of Taiwanese politics in the 1980s. While memoirs and research articles flourished, a new Chinese translation was published in Taipei in 1991. The revaluation reached its zenith on the 60th anniversary of the Incident under a pro-independence government. The Chinese translation recorded a sale of some ten thousand copies within a month. Kerr’s reputation as the ‘father of Taiwanese independence’ was part of this explosive popularity.

### *Scientific investigations of the Ryukyu Islands*

Kerr’s path to the Ryukyus crossed that of George Murdock at the wartime Naval School (Columbia), where Murdock’s research team was editing *Civil Affairs Handbooks* for the occupation of the Ryukyus and the islands of Micronesia. Kerr directed another team for the planned but postponed invasion of Taiwan. Murdock participated in the military government on Okinawa and, after his discharge, continued his support for the navy by establishing the Pacific Science Board in the National Research Council. After fairly successful academic-military collaboration in Micronesia, the Board geographically extended its activities. The Scientific Investigations of the Ryukyu Islands (SIRI)—not unlike the well-known Coordinated Investigations of Micronesian Anthropology (CIMA)—sent scholars and specialists into the field to furnish basic information for the Army’s civil affairs office. In January 1952 Kerr, then a Hoover researcher at Stanford, visited Ryukyu for the first time with Murdock to plan second-year projects. It was concluded that not only military personnel but also native youth should be informed of Ryukyuan history and Kerr was requested to write a book that could later be translated into Japanese for use at Ryukyu University (Kerr 1956).

During his field research, Kerr received enthusiastic responses from local people longing for an opportunity to resume their cultural life. The city of Shuri, once the capital of a Ryukyu kingdom, had boasted ancient buildings and gardens which had provided evidence of past distinction for Ryukyuan gentry forced to live under Japanese dominance in modern times. These were all destroyed in a fierce battle in 1945 leaving behind a slum for the next generation of Ryukyuan youth; the prestigious Shuri Middle School, of which virtually all Ryukyuan leaders were graduates, remained a desolate ruin (Kerr 1952a). In April 1952, when Kerr was touring the islands, the Peace Treaty came into effect; as Japan regained its full independence, it became politically attractive for Ryukyuan still under US occupation (Kerr 1952b: 1), who started to lobby for reversion to the Japanese administration. In the October report summarizing his field activities, Kerr wrote:

The ‘reversionist movement’ constitutes a threat to our position in political warfare. These minor projects [US aid towards reconstruction of the tombs of Ryukyuan kings, removal of war-wrecked buildings of the former Shuri Middle School, financial aid towards the construction of a museum] are part of the pattern of psychological warfare. (Kerr 1952c: 5)

The history of the Ryukyus that Kerr was about to start writing was also expected to become one of the 'weapons' with which the United States would equip herself in this psychological warfare.

*One hundred years after Commodore Perry's Ryukyu visit*

Early drafts of Kerr's history were prepared on the advice of two authorities, Nakahara Zenchu (1890–1964) and Higashionna Kanjun (1882–1963). According to Nakahara, Kerr ranged extensively over the literature in European languages in making his contribution to Ryukyuan historical studies (Nakahara 1955: 595). He illustrates this point with Kerr's description of Commodore Matthew Perry's visits to Japan in July 1853 and again in the following year, when he induced Japan to discard her policy of seclusion. During this successful diplomacy, Perry's fleet was based at a Ryukyuan port. Kerr introduces readers to two dispatches that Perry wrote to the Secretary of the Navy, and one reply. The first dispatch stated that in order to maintain American influence over the islanders, he wanted to receive instructions to act promptly, otherwise 'some other power, less scrupulous, may slip in and seize upon the advantages which should justly belong to' the United States (Kerr 1953a: 146). The second dispatch transmitted his stronger determination 'to take under *surveillance* of the American flag (...) this island of Great Lew-Chew' (Kerr 1953a: 146; italics original). Perry referred again to a 'political precaution' or the 'Russians or French, or probably the English, will anticipate the design'. However, he met with a flat rejection: Perry's proposal lacked sufficient urgent and potent reasons to occupy a distant island without the authority of Congress (Kerr 1953a: 146–147 n. 123).

Nakahara revered Kerr as a 'true historian, who writes disinterested with the current political situation'. Perry's 'political precaution' resembles a Cold War theory of 'power vacuum'. Nakahara was impressed by Kerr, who, nevertheless, shows no hesitation in describing Perry's move as unacceptable conduct (Nakahara 1955: 602, 594, 599). Kerr was certainly suspicious about Perry as an individual, but he actually identified the two American occupations with each other. While his project was still in progress, Nakahara published the high-school textbook *Ryukyu no Rekishi* (History of Ryukyu) (Nakahara 1952–1953). In reply to an enquiry from the Defense Department, Kerr explained that his project would not be duplicating Nakahara's book as the latter was inappropriate for university education since it failed to bring out clearly the 'role which the Ryukyu Islands have played and most continue to play as a frontier area in the Western Pacific' (Kerr 1953b: 2). For one thing, Nakahara did not recognize the Russian threat in the northern Pacific, which, in 1800, had spurred the Japanese to establish a ring of outer defense which included the Ryukyus. For another, Nakahara did not adequately present the 'temporary importance of the Ryukyu Islands to Washington and London' in the nineteenth century though it would provide 'understanding of the necessity of our presence in Ryukyu in the 20th century' (Kerr 1953b: 2). In short, Russian aggression was the source of tension, whereas American involvements were defensive. This pattern, in Kerr's view, was being revived after a century. In *Okinawa: The History of an Island People* (1958), Kerr introduces readers to 'Perry's Grand Design', in which Japan was to be brought into Western communication under American patronage and Taiwan placed under American

authority while its 'residual sovereignty' rested with the Chinese (Kerr 1958: 302). This joint administration resembles the plan that Kerr drew up in his military and government service—not realized in Taiwan but coming into effect in the Ryukyus with nominal Japanese sovereignty. Obviously, Perry was just borrowed to describe the US Cold War strategy in the Far East.

With the opening of the Shuri Museum in 1953, Kerr's reinterpretation of Perry's visit was expressly combined with his cultural rehabilitation projects. The museum's construction began as a local initiative but was frustrated due to the lack of funding. As mentioned above, Kerr recommended that the occupation authority supply financial aid and eventually the US Army offered money and building materials on condition that a Commodore Perry Memorial be attached to the museum. The museum/memorial opened on May 26th, the day of Perry's landing, as the climax of a series of public events that commemorated the centennial of his historic visit.

### *Rememberings of a Ryukyu kingdom*

The excuse for US occupation does not entirely constitute Kerr's historical narrative. He observed Ryukyuan leaders 'searching their own history', whose main theme was that 'Ryukyu has always been sacrificed to Japanese interests' (Kerr 1952a: 12); it was also his mission to give this readable form. Of obvious importance in this context was Ryukyuan royal history, as its heritage in Shuri—by that stage only existing in people's memory—was a point where 'the distinction between Okinawa and Japan Proper reached its most definitive expression' (Kerr 1952a: 9).

However, historical events are one thing and their interpretation is another. The kingdom flourished through Southeast Asian trade particularly in the 15th to 16th centuries—yet modern Ryukyuan historians interpreted this as proving 'Japanese' vigor. Writing in 1942, Higashionna Kanjun—a renowned expert in this field of study—held the view that 'the establishment of the Great East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere has revived our vigor of 500 years ago' (1942: 579). War-time nationalistic fever was evident, but his immersion in Japanese nationalism was not a temporary exception. In 1609 forces from the Japanese feudal area of Satsuma successfully attached the kingdom and placed it under Satsuma's indirect control for the following two and half centuries. Modern Ryukyuan historians harbored a consuming grudge against this interference, which had shriveled their ancestors' overseas ambition. It was not their point, however, that the Japanese had exploited the Ryukyuan. They complained that Satsuma had forced Ryukyuan to assume a non-Japanese outlook just to avoid offending China's suzerainty. Ryukyuan's alienation from the Japanese national community, they thought, originated from this hindered assimilation. Moreover, life under complicated bi-lateral subjugation to China and Japan was thought to ferment negative characteristics, such as insincerity, irresponsibility and dependency, which were still affecting the minds of modern Ryukyuan (Ifa 1921).

While pre-1945 works were biased in this way, the major post-war revisions had not yet appeared in spring 1952 when Kerr began his project. Notable exceptions were two booklets produced by Higashionna and immediately translated into English: *Outline of Okinawan History* (1950), and *History of Foreign Relations of Okinawa* (1951). Working under severe time pressure, Kerr extensively used these booklets. The destruction of his

home island had made Higashionna regret the support he had offered for the war (see above), but he seems not to have changed his main thesis that the Ryukyus are part of Japan. In his *Foreign Relations* (Higashionna 1951: 103), he wrote:

The rule of the southern islands was restored after an interruption of three hundred years since Keicho [1609 invasion by Satsuma]. [Ryukyuan] recovered self-consciousness of loyal Japanese nationals, and came to claim to be a vanguard of Japan's advance to the south; and it was this self-consciousness that made the Okinawans sacrifice themselves in the national crisis.

It should be noted that 'self-consciousness' as Japanese is something to be 'recovered', not created or indoctrinated. Comparable sentences appear in the conclusion of *Outline*, in which he sees post-war Japan 'is now heading for the construction of a peaceful and cultural nation (...) exactly the idea which Okinawa, since her defeat three hundred years ago [1609 invasion by Satsuma], has cherished until today' (Higashionna 1950: 50). In this way, whether Japan heads toward militarism or pacifism, Ryukyu has always been a 'vanguard of Japan's advance'.

As long as Kerr's main objective lay in encouraging the Ryukyuan to recover their sense of identity as Ryukyuan, he could not reproduce Higashionna's history as it was. As a result, we see significant but subtle discrepancies between the two historians. A typical example can be found in their evaluations of the administration of Chancellor Sai On (1682–1716) who, in striking a balance between China and Japan, created the kingdom's second golden age. Perhaps the most popular figure in local history, Higashionna commented upon Sai On as follows:

In order to maintain the prestige of a monarch out of keeping with the nation's capacity, Sai-On adopted a non-partisan attitude in his policies toward Japan and China. It was indeed an inevitable step. Certainly Okinawans owed their cozy living within the islands to Sai-On's policies. But it may not be very far from the truth that *the backward, lukewarm and apologetic character* of the islanders was thus nurtured. (Higashionna 1951: 44; italics added)

While he admires Sai On as an individual, Higashionna does not recant his view that the kingdom was a historical anomaly. It is evident that Kerr's description comes from Higashionna. The following excerpt is most likely to be Kerr's paraphrase of the above statement:

The state organization and the educated man were concerned with accommodation to demands of both Japan and China. To this policy of Sai On and his successors, Professor Higashionna suggests, we may trace *the quality of neutrality and accommodation* which is so marked in the character of contemporary men of Ryukyu. (Kerr 1953a: 111; italics added).

Although it is not entirely clear whether this paraphrase was willful distortion or hasty misreading, I suspect it was caused by a predetermined framework, which will be made evident in comparison with Kerr's history of Taiwan.

#### *'Taiwan: An Island Frontier'*

Kerr's historical writing concerning Taiwan begins with the article 'Formosa: An Island Frontier' (Kerr 1945) and ends with an unpublished manuscript 'Frontier Island: Taiwan

and Separatist Tradition'. 'Frontier' is the key concept used to interpret events on and around the island. The Dutch East India Company developed a colony on the island in the seventeenth century, met with a check from Spanish forces dispatched from Manila, but drove them off. The Dutch were then expelled by a Chinese general, Koxinga, whose refugee principality was eventually forced into submission by the Manchurians. In the nineteenth century, England and Germany both planned a Taiwan colony; Perry envisaged a joint Chinese-American administration; and the French Navy temporarily seized the island. The century closed with a southward shift of the Sino-Japanese border over the island. In Kerr's favorite phrase, Taiwan has been a 'frontier area of the Western Pacific': a front-line between competing powers.

The term 'frontier', however, also refers to the meeting point between civilization and savagery: an area of social evolution. At the end of the nineteenth century, as the North American frontier vanished, Frederick Turner (1983) argued that the continent was not somewhere Europe could have simply reproduced itself but one where a 'new product that is American' was generated. His frontier theory was celebrated in and out of academia until the 1960s heralded in the appearance of New Western History—focusing on Native Americans, race relations and women's experience (Furniss 2005). Richard Slotkin's work (1992: 347–486) illuminates the influence of Turner's frontier theory on Cold War America which he redefines as a 'frontier myth' in terms of which American society made sense of world events. The genre of 'Western' movies, for example, which rapidly rose in popularity before fading at the end of the 1950s, displayed themes which strikingly corresponded with strategic problems which the United States faced in anti-Communist counterinsurgency during the same period.

Taiwan would also be a 'frontier' in this second meaning when described by an American historian, such as Kerr, embedded in the era's social environment. Most of the islanders were descendants of Chinese refugees who escaped from political confusion and economic hardship at the end of Ming Empire. Kerr describes their move in the following language: 'Refugees poured across to Taiwan in uncounted tens of thousands, eager to reach an open frontier where land was to be had for the effort necessary to clear it and to defend it from the uncivilized aborigines' (Kerr 1945: 80). At that time, the Dutch had already succeeded in controlling the aborigines but met with 'resistance among the Chinese settlers anxious to minimize government of any kind'. Before long the Dutch colonizers were replaced by Manchurian officials, against whom the Chinese settlers continued their resistance: 'every three years an uprising and every five years a rebellion' (Kerr 1945: 80–81).

Kerr's subtitle, 'Island Frontier', implies that the default concept was a continental frontier—the American West—where, in coping with a new environment, European settlers developed distinct social qualities, notably individualism and democracy. As these behavioral standards were contrasted with oligarchy in Europe, highly positive ethical value was ascribed to them. Similarly, the Taiwanese separatist tradition was morally supportable, as well as strategically desirable. In a preface prepared for the unsuccessful publication, Kerr wrote:

Formosan Chinese pioneers (...) were Chinese in race and language, but had left the mainstream of Chinese life. On the wilderness frontier they developed distinct character, just as their contemporaries—pioneers in the American colonies, Canada and Australia—developed individuality despite a common British heritage (Kerr n.d.: 1).



*Okinawa: A Sea Frontier*

Parallels between Kerr's histories of Taiwan and Ryukyu are easy to find. He describes human migration into the Ryukyu Islands from China, the Philippines and the Japanese archipelago under the heading, 'The Sea Frontier and Ancient Settlements' (Kerr 1953a: 1–3), adding that it 'is not unreasonable to suppose that immigrants from the south came less often in organized number, and with less burden of cultural equipment' (Kerr 1953a: 4). He seems to suggest that the ancestors of the majority of Ryukyuan were linguistically Japanese and had closer genetic connections with the people of the Japanese mainland than those of other surrounding areas. However, the new environment nurtured their distinctive character. The pioneers found themselves surviving on a tiny, infertile island without sufficient water supply, obviously unsuitable for developing an agriculturalist civilization in the Japanese style. Yet, surrounding open seas encouraged them to live by oceanic trade, in which self-restraint became second nature. Kerr (1953a: 45) notes that the 'Okinawans seem to have established and maintained good relations everywhere, exhibiting a mild and friendly character' in their trade contacts around Southeast Asia.

Kerr's portrait of the Ryukyuan, a peaceful people who extended commercial activity to foreign countries without recourse to military force, was appreciated by the islanders and has become one of the popular self-portraits. If, however, Kerr's interpretive framework was embedded in American society, there would be no reason for its also being shared by the islanders. A difference in attitude toward the issue of descent implies that Ryukyuan readers actually accepted his historical narrative within a different framework from the one used by Kerr.

The hypothesis of common ancestry between Ryukyuan and Japanese played a decisive role in the process in which the subjects of a Ryukyuan king assimilated themselves into the Japanese national community. Higashionna (1906, 1908), otherwise a positivist historian, unreasonably asserted that the Tametomo legend was a real historical event: Minamoto Tametomo (1139–1170?) was a heroic warrior of imperial descent who was eventually banished to an island of exile from which he escaped to Okinawa to father the first Ryukyuan king. In his post-war revision, however, Higashionna gave up this assertion. In addition to the dubious authenticity of the legend, the kingdom was ruled in succession by six dynasties of unrelated blood. Therefore, according to post-war Higashionna, the 'argument based on the "Imperial descent" of the rulers of Okinawa was a flimsy reasoning' (Higashionna 1951: 64). Kerr certainly knew of Higashionna's recant. Nevertheless, he gave the legend considerable attention, concluding that 'although evidence to support the Tametomo legend in Okinawa is yet to be forthcoming, there is nothing in the details that are incompatible with the general conditions of that age' (Kerr 1953a: 20).

Kerr seems lenient in his examination of Ryukyuan-Japanese common ancestry probably because ancestry is of minor importance in frontier theory and hence not worth debating. This lenience, however, made it possible for his readers to use his history for their own purposes. For example, Ota Masahide—governor of the Okinawa prefecture in the 1990s and a leader in legal resistance to the Japanese government which had allowed US forces to be stationed on his home island—has repeatedly quoted the following sentences in books and public lectures:

The record shows that the people of Ryukyu are much more eager to be recognized and accepted as 'Japanese,' than the people of Japan are ready or eager to claim them without reservation (...) Japan is prepared to use the Ryukyus in any way to gain advantage for Tokyo; it is ill-prepared to make sacrifices for the island people (Kerr 1953a: ii).

Five years before Ryukyu's reversion to Japan, Ota (1967: 1) first referred to Kerr's work in his book, which began with a rhetorical question:

The Japanese living in Okinawa (...) have been left under the American military government since Japan's defeat. If this were the case of any other prefecture of Japan, would the Japanese government and the Japanese citizens leave it untouched?

In other words, Ota can find in Kerr's work the guarantee of Ryukyuan's Japanese identity and then claims equal treatment as the Japanese. Does this reading not betray Kerr's original intention and flatly oppose what he expected of his readers?

That 'Ryukyu has always been sacrificed to Japanese interest' was a thesis which emerged among awakened Ryukyuan leaders, with whom Kerr tried to identify himself and whose voices he wished to represent in his work. It was his failure, however, that he was not fully aware that the frontier theory was not persuasive in East Asia, where national affiliation tended to be defined in terms of descent. It was also his failure that he missed the fact that the islanders regarded the American presence as yet another case of their being 'sacrificed to Japanese interests'. Unlike the descendants of Euro-American pioneers, those in the Ryukyus chose to return to their mother country.

### *Conclusion*

In writing a history of the Ryukyus, Kerr was certainly concerned to maintain an American advantage in the struggle against Communism in the Far East. This political intent, however, was mixed with his sympathetic concern for local people who, in turn, accepted his narrative but actually used it for their own purposes. His interpretive 'frontier' framework derived from Americans' collective memory of their nation-building, and was not shared by Ryukyuan readers.

Political forces by which collective memory is influenced are not limited to those within the social collectivity at issue. In examining an exemplar case, this paper has demonstrated that the main difference lies not between historical events remembered, but between one remembrance and another. It has further indicated that the essential cause of such difference is found not so much in apparent political intentions as in the particular ways in which one makes sense of one's present existence in relation to the past events.

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