

Kijimun's Monologue —No.10—

Topic: The Path to Beijing

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Hi everyone, it's Kijimun. *Ī Soogwachi dēbiru* (It's such a happy new year)! It's going to be colder in Okinawa. Do you have a cold? We don't have a heating system so be sure to stay warm while you are in the library. Also feel free to use lap blankets available in the lobby. This time I would like to talk about "tributary envoys", the people who embarked for China all the way from Okinawa during this season.

What's A "Tributary Envoy"?

Kijimun's Monologue number two "*Here Comes a Chinese Envoy!*" explained that the Ryukyu Kingdom periodically dispatched the envoys to China during the Ming and Qing Dynasty to maintain a tributary relationship. The tributary envoy was a diplomatic mission that the Ryukyu Kingdom sent to the Chinese emperor once every two years. In total about two hundred people boarded two ships which were laden with presents for the Chinese emperor, including sulfur, copper, tin and items for trading purposes such as *konbu* seaweed and sea cucumbers. All envoys and the ship's cargo departed from Naha for Fuzhou, crossing the sea with the northeasterly wind.

The Path to Beijing

The voyage from Naha to Fuzhou took few days despite smooth sailing. The ships traveled via the Kerama Islands or Kume Island where they dropped anchor offshore. However, there were cases of the lack of favorable winds, they had to wait another few months at the special mooring there. Even if they had a successful departure, they occasionally faced a change of weather and eventually drifted toward unknown lands. In the Ryukyu Kingdom the word "*Tōtabi*" was often used in two ways, indicating the meaning of the tributary envoy and the journey to the land of death. This was because the voyage to China could be such a perilous journey.

The envoys were divided into three groups after their arrival in Fuzhou. The three groups included a group that returned home in the summer of the following year, the team to be stationed in Fuzhou for a while to engage in trade, and the legation party that went up to Beijing to be granted an audience with the emperor.

The group that proceeded toward Beijing was composed of about twenty people including the Ryukyu officers for instance, *seishi jimoku kan* (a court rank in the royal government), *fukushi seigi taifu* (a vice envoy, an official of upper or lower third rank), *chōkyō totsūji* (the Ryukyuan interpreters), other officers who accompanied them, and in addition, the Chinese officers *dotsūji* (the Chinese interpreters) and *bansōkan* (a Chinese legation official) all grouped together and forged ahead through a waterway and land route.

There was a variety of rituals and banquets in Beijing including a ritual called "*Jōhyōkōnō*" where documents and presents for the emperor were offered. The envoys from countries such as the Ryukyu Kingdom and Korea are depicted in a historical painting "*the Bankoku Chōraizu*" which is preserved at The National Palace Museum in Beijing. It was the Ryukyu envoys who entertained the emperor by giving Chinese poems when they were asked. After they

fulfilled their mission through attending the ceremonies in Beijing, they moved back to Fuzhou to meet the ships that the Ryukyu Governor sent. The ships sailed back to the Ryukyu Kingdom on the summer winds carrying returning envoys who had spent some time in China.

The writer of this article told me that they went to the Forbidden City, and were astonished by the size of the city. I can imagine those envoys must have felt the same and it must be very cold there.