RCYC LUMINARA · HONG KONG TO TOKYO
FEATURED GUEST LECTURE

The Islands Everyone Wanted

From Taiwan to the Ryukyu Kingdom

A Companion Guide to the Presentation Slides

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Executive Brief

This morning you were in Ishigaki. Yesterday you were in Taipei. Tonight you sail north to Naha. Three stops on the Luminara's itinerary — but for five hundred years, these were the most contested islands in East Asia.

This lecture tells the story of who wanted them and why. It begins with the Chinese trading networks that linked Fujian, Formosa, and Japan long before any European ship reached these waters. The Dutch East India Company built Fort Zeelandia on a sandbar off Taiwan's coast — not to claim territory, but to control a strait that carried silk, silver, porcelain, and deer hides. They ran the operation for thirty-eight years. Then a pirate's son took it from them.

Zheng Chenggong — known to the Europeans as Koxinga — expelled the Dutch in 1662 and built a Ming loyalist kingdom on Taiwan. His soldiers needed land, and they took it from the Siraya and Ketagalan peoples who had lived there for millennia. The flag changed. The plantation stayed. Dutch sugar fields became Chinese sugar fields. Every power that arrived did so for the strait and stayed for the sugar.

Meanwhile, the Ryukyu Kingdom governed a chain of islands stretching 700 kilometres from Amami to Yaeyama — the waters you have been sailing through. But 'Ryukyuan' was a label that concealed at least six mutually unintelligible languages and three distinct island worlds. The kingdom held them together through diplomacy, tribute, and taxation. Satsuma's invasion in 1609 turned the northern islands into sugar plantations. The poll tax ground the southern islands for two centuries.

The lecture closes with the event that tied these stories together: the Mudan Incident of 1871, when Miyako islanders were shipwrecked on Taiwan's southeast coast and killed by Paiwan villagers. Japan used the incident to launch its first overseas military expedition — and to begin absorbing the Ryukyu Kingdom. One shipwreck connected Japan to Taiwan and gave Tokyo a reason to claim the islands you have been sailing past.

Tomorrow in Naha, you walk through the heart of the old Ryukyu Kingdom. That is Talk Three.

About This Guide

This companion document accompanies the PDF slides from Dr Christopher Gerteis's guest lecture, delivered on Day 3 of the Luminara voyage after departing Ishigaki. It is designed to be read alongside the slides, providing the narrative and context that a live audience would hear during the presentation. Dr Gerteis is Senior Lecturer in Modern and Contemporary Japanese History at SOAS University of London. You can email him anytime at cg24@soas.ac.uk. All inquiries are welcome.

Slide-by-Slide Companion

Slide 1 — Title

The lecture title appears over an aerial photograph of Keelung harbour in Taiwan. The subtitle — From Taiwan to the Ryukyu Kingdom — signals the geographic arc of the talk: south to north, past to present, colony to kingdom. The QR code in the corner links to Dr Gerteis's website.

Slide 2 — Yesterday in Taipei

Three photographs from Taipei: Dihua Street, the merchant quarter built by Fujian traders in the 1850s; imperial jade seals from the National Palace Museum, shipped from Beijing in three convoys between December 1948 and February 1949; and Lungshan Temple, raised by settlers from Quanzhou in 1738. Five flags have flown over Taiwan. Every regime arrived from the sea. The lecture begins here because the passengers were in Taipei the day before — the images are fresh, the connections immediate.

Slide 3 — This Morning in Ishigaki

Ishigaki is 270 kilometres from Taipei and 410 from Naha — closer to yesterday than to tomorrow. The Yaeyama islanders spoke their own languages, governed themselves through their own chiefs, and had their strongest maritime links running south toward Taiwan and the Chinese coast, not north toward Shuri. When the Ryukyu Kingdom consolidated power in the fifteenth century, Yaeyama became a tax colony. The question on the slide — What happens to islands caught between empires? — is the question the entire lecture answers.

Slide 4 — Chinese Trading Networks, c. 1650

A custom map showing the maritime world the Dutch sailed into. Silk and porcelain flowing out of Fujian and Canton. Silver flowing in from Japan. Spices moving north from the Moluccas through the Sulu Sea and Manila. The densest tangle of routes sits between Fujian, Formosa, and Nagasaki. The map shows what is not there: no European flags. These are Chinese merchant networks — junks, not galleons. When the Portuguese, the Spanish, and the Dutch arrived, they inserted themselves into a system that had been running for centuries.

Slide 5 — VOC Trading Ports and Contested Waters, c. 1650

The VOC — the Dutch East India Company — was a joint-stock company with a charter to wage war, build forts, sign treaties, and mint coins. This map traces its network: Indian textiles heading east, Japanese silver and copper flowing south, Chinese silk moving through the strait. Fort Zeelandia sat at the junction. Taiwan was not the destination. It was the toll booth. Three European empires plus Chinese merchant networks competed for the same narrow passage.

Slide 6 — Trade, Not Territory

The painting is Johannes Vingboons's depiction of Fort Zeelandia, c. 1650s, from the Austrian National Library. The real fort sat on a sandbar called Tayouan, off Taiwan's southwest coast. The VOC had tried the Penghu Islands first, in 1622, but the Ming navy forced them out — Penghu was Ming territory. A Fujian official suggested they try Taiwan instead, a place the court did not care about. The three columns below the image summarise the Dutch operation: the gambit (build where no empire claims), the payoff (70,000 deer hides a year, plus sugar and camphor), and the transformation (recruiting Fujian settlers to farm Siraya land — the beginning of Taiwan's demographic displacement).

Slide 7 — The Pirate's Son

Zheng Zhilong was a pirate turned Ming admiral. His son Zheng Chenggong — Koxinga — refused to surrender to the Qing. Born in Hirado, Japan, in 1624 to a

Japanese mother, educated in Nanjing as a Confucian gentleman, he saw what the Dutch had built on Taiwan and decided to take it. In April 1661 he crossed the strait with 25,000 troops. Fort Zeelandia held out for nine months. On 1 February 1662, Governor Coyett surrendered. Koxinga was thirty-seven. Dead within five months — most likely malaria. He never saw China again. The portrait is a later depiction; the caption connects this slide back to the pirate-merchant continuum from Lecture 1.

Slide 8 — Koxinga 1661–62

The map shows the chain of positions Koxinga held: Kinmen (so close to the mainland you can see China from the beach), Penghu (ninety islands controlling the strait's shipping lanes), and Tayouan (the sandbar where Fort Zeelandia stood). He did not hold a fort. He held a network — coastal cities funding a navy that controlled the strait, with Taiwan as the base. It took the Qing twenty years to break it. Admiral Shi Lang took Penghu first in 1683; Taiwan surrendered without a fight.

Slide 9 — The Peoples of Taiwan

Two engravings by Olfert Dapper (1670) illustrate a section on the peoples who lived on Taiwan before and during the colonial regimes. The Siraya were Austronesian-speaking peoples on the southwestern plains — matrilineal, governed by women elders, with a seasonal rhythm built around the annual deer hunt. The Dutch converted their hunting grounds to sugar fields within a generation. Some Siraya communities defected to Koxinga during the siege — not from loyalty, but to escape Dutch tribute. What followed was not liberation: Koxinga's military colony system took their land. The Ketagalan, in the north, were displaced by successive waves of Fujian settlers. The slide's subtitle puts it plainly: the conqueror who expelled the Europeans was not a liberator.

Slide 10 — The Peoples of the Ryukyu Chain

A Perry Expedition photograph (c. 1856) and a woodblock image illustrate the three island worlds of the Ryukyu chain. Okinawa had a court culture built around diplomacy and a spiritual tradition governed by noro priestesses. Miyako and Yaeyama spoke languages unintelligible to Okinawans and had their own chiefly governance. Amami, at the northern end, was taken by Satsuma after 1609 — the Ōshima Tsumugi silk-dyeing tradition guests will see on the Amami shore excursion survived precisely because it had economic value to the domain that exploited the islands.

Slide 11 — Same Fields, Different Flag

A four-column timeline showing that every regime that governed Taiwan ran the same extractive economy. Dutch Formosa: sugar and deer hides exported to Japan via the VOC. Kingdom of Dongning: sugar monopoly exported to Japan for copper and lead. Qing Dynasty: sugar and camphor, with Taiwan only elevated to provincial status in 1887. Japanese Empire: Taiwan as the empire's sugar and rice supplier. The flag changed. The crop did not.

> ***Every power arrived for the strait. Every power stayed for the sugar.***

Slide 12 — Meanwhile in the Islands: The Ryukyu Kingdom

Four panels trace the Ryukyu Kingdom's arc from unification to annexation. The Shō dynasty unified the chain in the fifteenth century and positioned Shuri Castle as a diplomatic centre between China and Japan. The Satsuma invasion of 1609 created a dual tributary arrangement — the kingdom survived, paying tribute to both Beijing and Satsuma simultaneously. Amami's sugar plantations funded Satsuma's modernisation. The Yaeyama poll tax ground island communities for two centuries. In 1879, Japan abolished the kingdom, took the Ryukyu king to Tokyo, and created Okinawa Prefecture.

Slide 13 — The Shipwreck That Changed Everything

In December 1871, fifty-four Miyako islanders were shipwrecked on Taiwan's southeast coast. Paiwan villagers killed fifty-four of the sixty-six crew. Japan launched a punitive expedition in 1874 — its first overseas military operation. The Qing said Taiwan's indigenous peoples were 'beyond civilisation,' effectively disclaiming sovereignty over parts of the island. Twenty years later, at Shimonoseki, one shipwreck had connected Japan to Taiwan and given Tokyo a reason to absorb the Ryukyu Kingdom.

Slide 14 — What Comes Next

The closing slide returns to the lecture's central pattern: every power arrived for the strait and stayed for the sugar. The Siraya, the Ketagalan, the Paiwan, the Atayal paid the highest price. Tomorrow in Naha, a bell at Shuri Castle proclaimed Ryukyu 'a bridge between nations.' What happens when one nation decides the bridge belongs to them? That is Talk Three.

Slide 15 — Closing

The lecture title, the speaker's name and affiliation, and a QR code linking to Dr Gerteis's website.

About the Lecturer

Dr Christopher Gerteis is Associate Professor of Modern and Contemporary Japanese History at SOAS University of London. His books include *Gender Struggles* (Harvard University Press, 2010) and *Mobilizing Japanese Youth* (Cornell University Press, 2021). He is General Editor of the six-volume Bloomsbury *Cultural History of East Asia* and director of the Simulating Silence digital heritage project. His research examines how institutions produce the categories through which societies are governed — from postwar Japan to the contested islands of the Taiwan Strait. You can read more about Chris at https://christophergerteis.net