

# Perry's Black Ships in Japan and Ryukyu: The Whitewash of History

Steve Rabson



On July 11, 2016, the organization Veterans for Peace issued a statement (see document below) observing the 162nd anniversary of the [Lew Chew Compact](#), popularly known as a “friendship” or “amity” treaty. In reality, officials of the Ryukyu Kingdom were forced to sign it by Commodore Matthew C. Perry who commanded a squadron of battleships invading the Ryukyus in 1853 and 1854. The Compact permitted unlimited visitation and residence to Americans in Ryukyu and mandated that American criminal suspects be turned over to U.S. authorities aboard American ships. Also in 1854, Perry forced Japanese officials under threat of bombardment to sign the “Convention of Kanagawa” compelling Japan’s ports to accept foreign trade and imposing a system of extraterritoriality which placed foreign residents under the jurisdiction of their respective nations’ consular courts, exempting them from Japanese law. This was gunboat diplomacy much like what the United States imposed on the nations of Latin America throughout the 19th and 20th centuries. Both of these “treaties” ominously foreshadowed postwar U.S. military policies toward Japan

where the Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) exempts Americans and their bases from key provisions of Japanese law; and, especially in Okinawa, where a disproportionate U.S. military presence remains despite overwhelming opposition expressed in elections, local government policies, and public protests.

Yet, in recent times, Perry’s forcible impositions of “friendship treaties” have become events to be commemorated, memorialized—even celebrated—in the United States, Japan, and Okinawa, the former Ryukyu Kingdom. School textbooks in America and Japan describe what Perry’s naval squadron did in 1853-54 as the “opening” of Japan. “Black Ships Festivals” are celebrated annually in both countries, at [Shimoda](#) and [Newport, RI](#), respectively. Both feature marching bands, fireworks, and a major military component. A crew of some hundred Japan Marine Self-Defense Forces participates at Newport where their destroyer docks at a local pier flying the Japanese navy flag with spreading sunrays that is the symbol of Japanese imperialism.

In Okinawa under U.S. military occupation (1945-72) the American administration promoted commemorations of Perry’s “visits” to Ryukyu as part of a campaign to encourage people they officially identified as Ryukyuan (not Okinawans) to embrace Ryukyuan history and culture, and abandon a Japanese identity. This strategy was intended to counter the rapidly growing reversion movement for an end to U.S. occupation and a return to Japanese sovereignty that would require the U.S. military to comply with tighter restrictions in Japan on

their operations. In occupied Okinawa the anniversaries of Perry’s “visits” to Ryukyu were commemorated by (1) U.S.-sponsored festivals and banquets; (2) a monument to him erected at Tomari Port; (3) postage stamps issued in 1954 to mark the 100th anniversary of the Ryukyu Compact; and (4) a ward in Naha City (Peruri-ku) named after him. (The name was changed after reversion in 1972.)



Okinawans easily saw through the American campaign against a Japanese identity as a device to prolong the U.S. occupation and military presence. In Oshiro Tatsuhiko’s Akutagawa Prize-winning novella *Cocktail Party*, published in 1967, a father seeks justice for his daughter, raped by an American soldier. Stymied by oxymoronic “occupation law” that exempts U.S. military personnel from local jurisdiction, he seeks the help of an influential American official who has befriended him, in exercising the father’s only option, to arrange for the soldier to be tried by court martial. But the official refuses to help him with the excuse that his involvement would damage American-Ryukyuan relations though, as the father points out, the damage has already been done by the rape. Furious, he leaves the restaurant on base where they had met, determined to pursue the case on his own.

Outside, a huge banner was stretched across the street in front.

PROSPERITY TO RYUKYUANS

AND MAY RYUKYUANS AND AMERICANS  
ALWAYS BE FRIENDS.

This was the toast Commodore Perry delivered in 1853 at an official reception for him in Okinawa. The banner had been hung about a week before ... as part of the 110th anniversary celebration of Perry’s landing. You took a long look at those words, then turned and walked toward the police station.

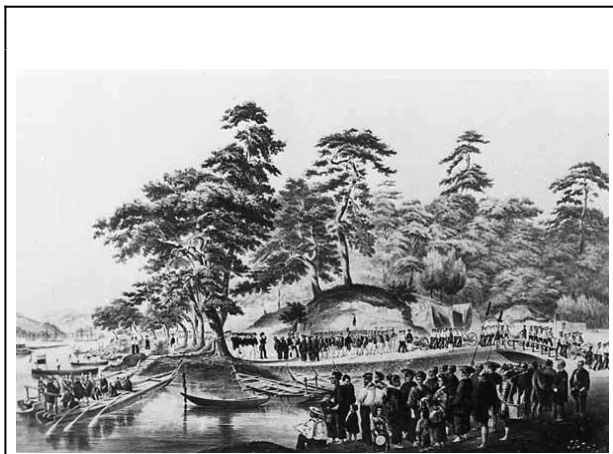


### American gunboat diplomacy

When Perry sailed his steam-powered warships, armed with the latest model cannons and high-explosive shells, into Edo (later Tokyo) Bay in 1853, he was convinced that force was the only way Japan, a nation without large ships of any kind, would accept trade relations with the United States. During this intrusion, the squadron fired blank rounds from its 73 guns, which Perry claimed was in celebration of American Independence Day. After delivering a letter stating U.S. demands, the squadron left Japan for Hong Kong. His fleet much enlarged, Perry returned in early 1854, forcing Japanese officials to sign an agreement to begin trade

relations.

Historian George Kerr called Perry “a statesman of high measure in the sense that he explored the meaning of technological change and economic expansion in terms of fundamental, long-range national policies and the continuing military needs of the United States. He foresaw, accurately, that Britain and Russia would become rivals to American interests and influence in the northern Pacific and Far East and, with this in view, shaped his policies of forcing Japan to come to terms.”<sup>1</sup> Kerr also described him as “humorless, immensely vain and, a hard disciplinarian.”<sup>2</sup> Perry maintained strict supervision of his crew, including treatment that would be considered abusive today. He regretted the decision of the Navy, shortly before his squadron’s departure for Japan, to ban flogging as a punishment.



**Perry’s landing at Shimoda (Shizuoka), 1854**

Perry’s squadron made its two intrusions on what was still the Ryukyu Kingdom in 1853 and 1854, before it was abolished and annexed by Japan as Okinawa Prefecture in 1879. *Narrative of the Expedition of an American Squadron to the China Seas and Japan*,<sup>3</sup> published in 1856, provides dramatic and colorful accounts of Perry’s visits to Ryukyu. Written by Perry’s close friend, author Francis L. Hawks, the *Narrative’s* lively descriptions of contemporary

Ryukyu are invaluable as history and compelling as literature.

Perry’s four warships approached the kingdom’s main port at Naha for the first of his unwelcome visits on May 26, 1853. The *Narrative* quotes Bayard Taylor, a journalist with the voyage, in a description of the scenery, which has much in common with the later impressions of first-time visitors to Okinawa:

The shores of the island were green and beautiful from the water, diversified with groves and fields of freshest verdure. The rain had brightened the colors of the landscape, which recalled to my mind the richest English scenery. The swelling hills, which rose immediately from the water’s edge, increased in height toward the centre of the island, and were picturesquely broken by abrupt rocks and crags, which, rising here and there, gave evidence of volcanic action. Woods, apparently of cedar or pine, ran along the crests of the hills, while their slopes were covered with gardens and fields of grain. To the northward, the hills were higher, and the coast jutted out in two projecting headlands, showing that there were deep bays or indentations between.<sup>4</sup>

First to board Perry’s flagship *Susquehanna* were officials of the kingdom:

The ships had not been at anchor two hours, before, notwithstanding the rain, a boat came off with two officials. On reaching deck, they made many profound salutations, and presented a folded red card of Japanese paper, about a yard long. The principal personage wore a loose salmon-colored robe of very

fine grass cloth, while the dress of the other was of a similar fashion, but of a blue color. On their heads were oblong caps of bright yellow; they had blue sashes tied around their waists, and white sandals upon their feet. Their beards were long and black, though thin, and their ages were seemingly some thirty-five or forty years. They had the Japanese cast of countenance, and in complexion were dusky olive... The commodore, however, acting on his previously determined plan, declined seeing them, or receiving any other than one of the principal dignitaries of the island: and they accordingly returned to shore.<sup>5</sup>

Having refused to meet the officials of Ryukyu sent earlier to greet him, Perry agreed a few days later to receive the regent of the kingdom, Sessei Ōzato Chōkyō, and his counsellors for an elaborate dinner on board the *Susquehanna*. During this meeting Perry announced that he and his crew would go ashore and that he would visit the royal palace, conveniently ignoring President Millard Fillmore's instructions for the expedition that he was to act in Ryukyu only "with the consent of the natives"<sup>6</sup> and Secretary of State Edward Everett's admonition to "see that your coming among them is a benefit and not an evil to them."<sup>7</sup>

### A Bully Intrudes

Perry informed his guest that he should do himself the honor to return his visit at the palace ...on the following Monday week (June 6th). This information caused some consternation and discussion between the regent and his counsellors; but the Commodore put an end to it stating that he had fully made a

determination to go to the palace on that day, and should surely execute it. He further added that he should expect such a reception as became his rank and position as commander of the squadron and diplomatic representative of the United States...

The regent attempted, unsuccessfully, to convince the Commodore to give up his intentions of entering Shuri Castle, and further tried, also unsuccessfully, to dissuade Perry and his men from going ashore. He was only able to "request that that they would in no case intrude themselves where their presence might seem to be disagreeable to the natives."<sup>8</sup>



Lithograph by Yamada Shinzan,

The *Narrative* quotes Bayard Taylor on how local residents reacted to the Americans' first visit ashore:

Several groups of Lew Chewans watched our landing, but slowly retired as we approached them. The more respectable,

distinguished by the silver pins in their hair, made to us profound salutations. The lower classes wore a single garment of brown cotton or grass-cloth, and children were entirely naked. Even in the humblest dwelling there was an air of great neatness and order. Most of them were enclosed within high coral walls, in the midst of a small plot of garden land, some of which contained thriving patches of tobacco, maize, and sweet potatoes... [Among] persons who had evidently received a special appointment to watch us [were] many fine, venerable figures—old men with flowing beards and aspects of great dignity and serenity; but no sooner were any of those addressed than they retreated in great haste. The houses were all closed, and not a female to be seen. The roofs were of red tiles, of excellent manufacture, and this, with the dark-green foliage of the trees which studded the city, the walls topped with cactus, and the occasional appearance of a palm or banana, reminded me of towns in Sicily.<sup>9</sup>

Unmoved by the regent's pleas that the queen dowager was ill and that the king was a mere boy of ten, Perry bullied his way into the palace on the morning of June 6. He was carried to the entrance in a sedan chair accompanied by a detachment of marines, the squadron's marching band, and two artillery pieces decked with American flags.

[T]he gate of the palace was closed. A messenger, however, was dispatched, at full speed, to cause it to be opened, and make preparations for the Commodore's

reception. On arriving at the entrance, the artillery and marines were drawn up in line, and the Commodore and his suite walked past them into the castle or palace; the troops presented arms, the ensigns were lowered, and the band played "Hail Columbia." ... The Commodore was conducted into the hall of audience, and placed in a chair at the head of the room; the officers followed, and were ranged in chairs on a single line, next to the Commodore, according to rank... . The queen dowager, who had been so pathetically represented as being sick, did not, of course make her appearance; nor did the boy prince, for whom the regent governed.<sup>10</sup>

Although unable to prevent him from entering the palace, Perry's reluctant hosts persuaded him to repair with his entourage to the regent's neighboring residence for an elaborate twelve-course banquet featuring Ryukyuan cuisine, some of which is recognizable today.

It was at once apparent that most hospitable preparations had here been made for the entertainment of the American visitors. Four tables were set in the central apartment, and three in each of the wings, and these were covered with a most bountiful collation... A pair of chopsticks was placed at each corner of every table; in the center was an earthen pot filled with *sake*, (the intoxicating drink made by Lew Chewans [having] the taste of a French *liqueur*) ... surrounded with four acorn cups, four large coarse China cups, with clumsy spoons of the same material, and four teacups... . [T]he

exact basis ... of some twenty dishes ... no America knoweth, [but] *possibly* it was *pig*... [T]here were sliced, boiled eggs, which had been dyed crimson, fish made into rolls and boiled in fat, pieces of cold baked fish, fragments of lean pork, fried, [and] salad made of bean sprouts.<sup>11</sup>

With his attitude perhaps softened by his enjoyment of this and subsequent social occasions provided by his reluctant hosts, Perry did not press further for a face-to-face meeting with the king during his two uninvited visits to Ryukyu. The first ended on June 9, 1853 with his ships sailing out of Naha for the Bonin Islands. However, upon the squadron's return on July 14, 1854, an impatient Perry "demanded at once an interview with the regent; the demand was immediately granted."<sup>12</sup> Again ignoring President Fillmore's instructions to "act only with the consent of the natives," he ordered the following of the regent through the squadron's interpreter S. Wells Williams as recorded in the *Narrative*:

"Establish a rate and pay for rent of a house for one year. State that I wish a suitable and convenient building for the storage of coal, say to hold six hundred tons... . Let the mayor understand that this port is to be one of rendezvous, probably for years, and that the authorities had better come to an understanding at once... . We should have a free trade in the market. And the right to purchase articles for the ships. It will be wise, therefore, for the Lew Chewins to abrogate those laws and customs which are not suited to the present age, and which they have no power to enforce, and by a persistence in which they will surely involve themselves in

trouble."<sup>13</sup>

Perry had earlier sent a letter to President Franklin Pierce proposing to seize Ryukyu as an American "protectorate" with permission for "the occupation of the principal ports of those islands for the accommodation of our ships of war." Pierce's advisors promptly rejected Perry's "embarrassing ... suggestion." Yet it anticipated events a century later when the U.S. military occupied Okinawa from 1945 to 1972, and has continued its disproportionate presence in this small island prefecture to this day.

### **Extraterritorial Precursor of SOFA (Status of Forces Agreement)**

Foreshadowing dangers posed today by this presence were crimes committed by Perry's sailors. The *Narrative* describes a drunken spree of mayhem by three sailors in Naha, starting with a robbery.

[O]ne of the sailors attempted in the market to take from the butcher certain of his meats without paying for them. The butcher naturally endeavored to secure his property, when the sailor struck him with a knife; a scuffle ensued, in which the sailor was beaten with a club. [T]he butcher, instead of resorting to force, should have reported the sailor. [H]owever, ... the general feeling on board the ships was that the sailor got no more than his deserts, as the matter seems to have gone no further.<sup>14</sup>

The *Narrative* reports "a far more serious incident" that followed.

[O]n the 12th of June, a man named Board was found dead in

Napha, under circumstances which justified a strong suspicion that he came to his end by violence... The Commodore, upon enquiry soon became convinced that the man's death, though unlawfully produced, was probably the result of his own most gross outrage on a female, and, in such case, not undeserved... The facts, as well as they could be ascertained, appeared to be these. On the 12th of June three American sailors, one of whom was named Board, passing through the streets of Napha, forcibly entered the house of one of the inhabitants, and taking therefrom some saki soon became intoxicated. Two of them found a sleeping place in the gutter, but Board, clambering over a wall, entered a private house, where he found a woman, named Mitu, and her niece, a young girl. He brandished his knife, threatened the woman, and attempted the foulest outrage; she cried out until she fainted and became insensible. Her cries brought some Lew Chew men to the spot, and circumstances clearly showed the purposes of Board. Some of the Lew Chewins seized him and threw him to the ground. More than half drunk, he rose and fled towards the shore, seeking to escape. Many persons had by this time assembled, and pursued Board, throwing stones at him, some of which struck him, and, according to the statements of the native witnesses, in his drunkenness, he *fell* into the water and was drowned.<sup>15</sup>

Though conceding that "a most gross outrage on a female" had

been committed and that Board "fell" into the water, Perry demanded a "judicial trial" for the Ryukyuan who had pursued him leading to his death. Officials duly rounded up two men they identified as the ringleaders, and later ordered them banished to outer islands in the Ryukyu chain, one to Yaeyama for life and the other to Miyako for eight years. Perry seemed satisfied with this outcome, though according to Hawkes, author of the *Narrative*, "It seems doubtful these sentences were rigorously executed."<sup>16</sup> For his part, Perry ordered court martials for the other two Americans responsible for that day's disturbance who were "dealt with according to their deserts."<sup>17</sup>

During his last uninvited visit to Ryukyu, Perry forced Ryukyuan officials to sign what he called the "Lew Chew Compact." According to the *Narrative*, "the articles of the compact [were] cheerfully assented to" by the regent and "arrang[ed] satisfactorily to both parties." However, an American observer, missionary-interpreter Samuel Wells Williams, reported coercion. According to his account, when first presented to the king's officers, they refused to put their seals to a document listing demands to which they were being forced to submit and to attest in writing that they were signing it "voluntarily." The officials wanted it clearly to show that they were signing under compulsion. Informed of their reluctance, Perry ordered a company of marines deployed to Ameku Temple at Tomari Port until they agreed to

sign the entire document. Signatures were exchanged at Naha Town Hall on July 1, 1894 after which Perry sent gifts to the regent and other officers as well as “a handsome present to the poor woman who had been the subject of Board’s outrage.”<sup>18</sup>

The “Compact” stipulated, among other things, that “The government of Lew Chew shall appoint skillful pilots ... to conduct [U.S. ships] in to a secure anchorage;” that U.S. ships “be supplied with food and water at reasonable prices;” that “whatever articles [American visitors] “ask for ..., which the country can furnish, shall be sold to them;” and that Americans “be at liberty to ramble where they please, without hindrance, or having officials sent to follow them.”<sup>19</sup>

Today, in addition to their exemption from key provisions of Japanese law, uniformed members of the U.S. military and its civilian employees enjoy the extraterritorial privileges as well as free housing and reduced-price shopping on the vast American bases. They can send their children tuition-free to American schools and use the generous recreation and entertainment facilities on base. In 1853-54, Perry euphemistically called his gunboat intrusions on Japan and Ryukyu an “Expedition.” Today, the Marines describe their Okinawa-based division in colonial terms as an “Expeditionary Force.”



Memorial to Perry’s arrival in Okinawa

**162-YEAR-OLD  
“FRIENDSHIP  
TREATY” BETWEEN  
USA & RYUKYU  
KINGDOM  
CONTINUES TO  
OPPRESS OKINAWA  
IN THE PRESENT**

Veterans for Peace July 11, 2016. “162 years ago today, a Treaty of Amity was signed between the USA and the sovereign nation of Ryukyu, now better known as Okinawa before it was unilaterally and illegally forced into a territory of Japan. While this treaty



affirms the historical independence of the Ryukyu Islands from both Japan and the USA, it also brings clarity to the historical context of Okinawa today, where the vast majority of Okinawans remain staunchly opposed to its continued US military occupation disproportionately concentrated on this small island chain, due to the continued colonial rule by both Japan and the USA where popular will expressed in local elections, legal challenges, non-violent civil disobedience and protest has been ignored for decades. Before this treaty between independent Ryukyu and the USA on July 11, 1854, Commodore Matthew Perry barged his way into the Ryukyu Kingdom en route to Japan to literally force open Japan's markets to US trade and commerce, making demands of the Ryukyuan people such as ship provisions and unrestricted movement for Americans in Ryukyu-or face seizure by America, while Japan distanced

themselves from Ryukyu as a distant foreign nation despite its centuries of extorting Ryukyu. Perry claimed residency for some crew members to stay behind in Ryukyu while they were trying to penetrate Japan, resulting in the first of many innumerable assaults and rapes against Okinawans in 1854-as well as stipulation in the Treaty of Amity that US soldiers were not to inflict violence against Ryukyuan women. This Treaty of Amity was one of the results of these initial interactions between Okinawans and Americans: that is, an "agreement" was made that enshrined terms clearly more favorable to the USA, while Ryukyu was expected to placate to the economic and political interests and priorities of the USA and cater to their needs. The significance of this 162-year-old treaty is that it established a relationship of Ryukyu dominated by the USA that continues in the present, with an infrastructure imposed by Japan that will

perpetuate the US military occupation, established over 70 years ago, into Okinawa's future. The dominating spirit of the Treaty of Amity continues in the present under the Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) between Japan and the USA. The current SOFA under the control of the USA and Japan maintains the current terms of US military forces in Japan, including Okinawa- of which Japan and the USA use to perpetuate their historical domination of Okinawa and the Okinawan people. Despite the clear support by the vast majority of Okinawan people reflected in local elections, referendums, rallies and polls for some degree of demilitarization, returning lands promised and no more new base constructions, the USA and Japan continue to ignore the will of the Okinawan people, such as with the insistence of building a naval port in the pristine, endangered sea around Henoko, Okinawa. Okinawans

have peacefully and democratically expressed their opposition to the myriad problems that come with foreign military occupation: lethal accidents, ecological destruction and poisoning, crimes including assault and rape, economic dependency and stagnation, among many other reasons such as the fact that military presence has largely invited and antagonized international conflict, as it did in the Battle of Okinawa, where almost one in three Okinawan civilians were killed in a war between Japan and the USA. We recall the memory of this 1854 Treaty of Amity between the USA and Ryukyu/Okinawa because its injustice continues in the present, and has not provided genuine human security, but rather an environment in Okinawa where citizens must be concerned for their personal safety, as well as the public health for clean air/water/land and other inevitable public safety hazards. We join the Okinawan

people's call to revise SOFA and to reduce the disproportionate concentration of military in Okinawa,

and to respect their right to self-determination, after denying it for 162 years now and counting."

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> George Kerr, *Okinawa: The History of an Island People* (Rutledge, VT: Tuttle Publishing, 1958), 297.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> Francis L Hawks, *Narrative of the Expedition of an American Squadron to the China Seas and Japan* (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2000).

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 152.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 153.

<sup>6</sup> Kerr, 310.

<sup>7</sup> Samuel Eliot Morison, "Old Bruin:" *Commodore Matthew Calbraith Perry* (Norwalk, CT: The Easton Press, 1990), 285.

<sup>8</sup> Hawks, 156.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 156.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 190.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 191.

<sup>12</sup> Kerr, 323.

<sup>13</sup> Hawks, 275.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 492.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 492-493.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 493-494.

<sup>17</sup> Hawks, 495.

<sup>18</sup> Kerr, 334-335.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 335-336.