

Introduction

Most Americans know of Okinawa only as a forward Pacific outpost in the network of U.S. military bases that span the globe. Surprisingly, the situation is not all that different for the average Japanese, once we add an image of Okinawa as a "tropical" resort area filled with easy-going locals (a Japanese Hawaii, as it were) and a prolific producer of talented entertainers. Both Americans and Japanese mainlanders are taken aback when confronted with news reports of uncharacteristically prickly, and at times highly emotional, reactions by supposedly laid back Okinawans to such seemingly insignificant matters as how the Battle of Okinawa is portrayed in history textbooks, allegations of discrimination and second class status, and above all, the presence of the U.S. military bases on the island (*ergo*: that's where they are and somebody has to host them so get real and do your part for the greater good!). Japanese mainlanders specifically are mystified by what at times seems like a sense of entitlement among Okinawans toward mainlanders' hard-earned tax contributions that get channeled into Okinawa in the form of extra-generous public works, construction projects, central government subsidies, and so on that well exceed the norm on the mainland. A fundamental reason for these perplexities is that for Americans and mainland Japanese, Okinawa is peripheral and as such the situation of Okinawans and their distinctive concerns and perspectives are not well understood or taken account of when decisions are made that affect the vital interests of Okinawans. From the distant vantage point of most Americans and Japanese mainlanders it is difficult to see clearly the historical, geopolitical and sociological forces that are at work in Okinawa. As such it is difficult to imagine how differently things might appear from an Okinawan perspective and from there to conceive of truly just and effective resolutions to issues of mutual concern.

This apparent peripheral status, however, is deceiving. Although Okinawa might appear peripheral from an American and Japanese (one could also add, Chinese) perspective, it is in fact quite central from a geostrategic perspective due the fact that it is located at a point where the boundaries and interests of the great powers of East Asia and the Pacific intersect. It is precisely for this reason that throughout its history Okinawa has been regularly buffeted, and periodically overwhelmed, by the actions of the greater powers that are its neighbors, as the articles in this collection amply demonstrate. It is this centrality of Okinawa in the region, in short, that is the root cause of the contestation in the international arena, and the reason why minor developments in this seemingly minor peripheral entity can have such a profound global impact.

With these thoughts in mind, the following collection of essays from *Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus* "puts Okinawa at the center" and provides a vehicle through which to better understand how the world might look from an Okinawan perspective. The articles are grouped into three broad sections. First, the introduction provides a bird's eye overview of Okinawa's geography and its history from ancient times to the present. The next set of articles looks in more detail at specific developments in Ryukyuan/Okinawa history. The final six articles zero in on specific aspects of contemporary Okinawan society. It should be noted that most of the articles in the collection went through a substantial amount of editing in order to enhance the overall coherence of the reader as a whole, to eliminate duplicate content and to keep the collection at a manageable size. As such,

readers who seek a fuller discussion of the topics covered in the articles in the collection are encouraged to read the originals which are readily accessible on the *Japan Focus* web site. Additionally, it should be noted that there is minimal discussion in this course reader devoted specifically to the military base issue, a subject on which there is a tremendous amount of material in *Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus*. This omission was deliberate since it is anticipated that a course reader devoted to that topic will be compiled in the near future.