

Chinese Coins in the Ryukyu Kingdoms

Beginning in the latter half of the fourteenth century, the kings of the Ryukyus entered into a tributary relationship with the Ming Empire of China, allowing them to conduct regular trade at Chinese ports. China was the dominant economic power in the Asian region, and its copper currency was widely circulated in many countries as the standard of payment for trade.

Thousands of ancient Chinese coins minted at different times and in different cities have been unearthed in Okinawa. They have been found during excavations of towns where commoners lived as well as at excavations of the castles and palaces of the elite. A description written in 1456 by a Korean whose ship had been blown off course noted that the coins were being used in a Ryukyu marketplace.

Analysis of the types of coins, their origin, and where they were found sheds light on the Ryukyu economy and its trade relations. By far the majority of the coins were unearthed in the economic centers of the kingdom: the capital city of Shuri, and Naha, the major port. Chinese coins were used regularly by people who lived and worked in these cities. Nakijin was fairly distant from the capital, but about 1,500 coins have been found at the castle and in nearby villages. Most of these coins, a total of 1,381, were found at the uppermost level of the castle, which indicates the wealth of the rulers and the scale of economic activity they conducted. The number of coins unearthed decreases in places where people were of lesser social and economic status.