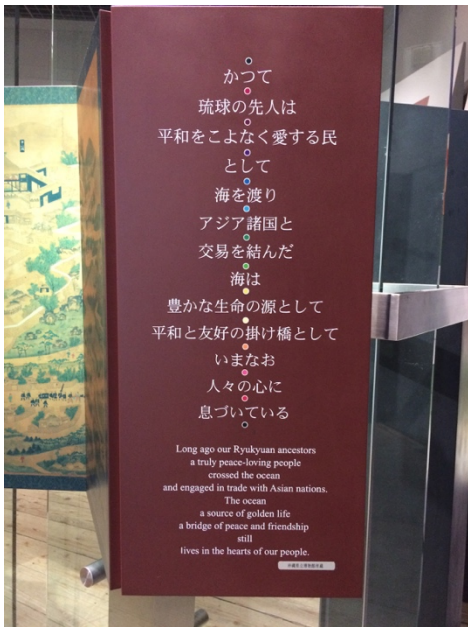


## Museums in Okinawa

With the help of the AURA grant, I spent two months in Okinawa, Japan, studying the representation of historical narratives in museums. My project was inspired by writing a research paper for the class ASIA/HIST 384 “Modern Girl in Asia”, where I wrote about the active ways Okinawans resisted assimilation into the Japanese Empire from 1879 to 1944. However, all this



*A poem displayed at the entrance of the Okinawa Peace Prefectural Museum.*

came as a surprise to me. My family is from Okinawa, and I had grown up hearing stories about my grandmother surviving the Battle of Okinawa and US occupation, but never about ways Okinawans resisted the Japanese. As I consider museums to be the public guardians of history, I decided to investigate if museums in Okinawa were showcasing these empowering stories of resistance.

My project focused on four museums and historical sites in Okinawa: the Okinawa Prefectural Museum; the Naha City Museum of History; the Okinawa Peace Prefectural Park and Museum; and the Shuri Castle Park and Museum. I initially intended to also study the Okinawa International Peace Research Institute, but unfortunately found they closed after I submitted my proposal. I visited each museum multiple times, focusing on two primary qualities: content and design.

For content, I analyzed what information the museum was giving the visitor about history, what events were highlighted, and what artifacts were featured. The content varied somewhat by museum, as each had a different time period it really emphasized, though all the museums claimed to cover the arc of Okinawan history. In terms of strict content, none of the museums addressed the actions Okinawans took to resist assimilation. In two museums, the Okinawa Prefectural Museum and the Okinawa Peace Prefectural Museum, there were exhibits on the assimilation policies. However, these exhibits focused on the cruelty of the Japanese officials and mourned the loss of cultural artifacts and traditions instead of honoring the Okinawans who protested.

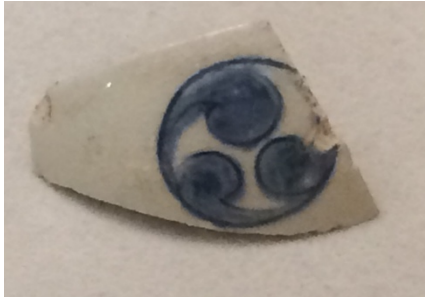
For design, I looked at the layout of the museums and how they framed the content. While the museums didn't address active forms of resistance, some did subtly include passive forms of resistance. The Naha City Museum of History, for example, held a miniature recreation of a Naha city street in 1935. The model featured women in public markets and walking around without shoes, practices the Japanese Empire tried to limit. The model was true to history, and therefore showed ways Okinawans didn't comply with Japanese

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*The entrance to Sefa Utaki, a UNESCO World Heritage Site in Okinawa.*

demands. The Japanese Empire demanded complete assimilation into Japanese culture and nationalism, yet the museums like the Okinawa Prefectural Museum and Okinawan Peace Prefectural Museum were critical of Japanese expansion and rule in Okinawa. Perhaps, I've begun to consider, the museums themselves are a form of resistance to the Japanese Empire.



*A shard of 19th century pottery with the symbol of the Ryukyu Kingdom, Naha City Museum of History.*

This experience was extremely enlightening about the construction of a historical narrative in Okinawa. There were certainly gaps in the historical timeline the museums presented, and I think the next steps are to explore the implications of the narrative that is featured in museums. This research project allowed me to combine my interests in history, museums, communication, and, of course, Okinawa in a creative way. While in Japan, I also had the opportunity to visit historical sites that I wasn't studying, adding to my knowledge of Okinawa's history. Travelling to Okinawa in the first place wouldn't have been possible without the AURA, and I'm grateful for the opportunity to learn more about history and how it's remembered.