

# **How Okinawa's Socioeconomic History in East Asia Shapes Current Society and Its Implementation to AFLSP Scholars, Kyoto University, and BXAI Foundation**

Irhasy Muhamad Maulad

Graduate School of Engineering, Kyoto University

Report history: Submitted on October 31, 2025

## 1. Abstract

This report examines the experience-based learning journey in Okinawa, investigating the island's historical role as the royal centre of the Ryukyu Kingdom through to its position as a hub for culture, environment and innovation. The findings show how Okinawa has sustained multilateral partnerships, from tributary diplomacy to international research cooperation. The region demonstrated a leadership model based in mediation, dialogue and stakeholder coordination. Through heritage sites, craft districts, memory museums and innovation campuses, the project revealed how a place managing multiple external influences can maintain internal identity while adapting to modern challenges.

The discussion and conclusion emphasize the implications of these observations for institutions engaged in East Asian regional education and cooperation. For the Bai Xian Foundation (BXAI), the recommendation is to incorporate Okinawan industries and cultural-exchange models into programs that connect textile, craft and cross-region networks. For Kyoto University, the report suggests developing experiential tour-based learning in Okinawa, leveraging the Blue-Zone environment and the Okinawa Institute of Science and Technology (OIST) ecosystem to foster research and innovation collaborations across East Asia.

## 2. Background

### 2.1 The Ryukyus Kingdom's Role in East Asia Socioeconomic History

Located between China, Japan, and Southeast Asia, the Ryukyu Kingdom (1429–1879) developed as an important center for trade and diplomacy. Its geographical position allowed the kingdom to act as a bridge in regional affairs at the time. Due to this uniqueness, the kingdom's foreign policy was shaped by interaction and negotiation, instead of conquest. Through the tributary relationship with Ming China and later dual subordination to both China and Japan under the Satsuma Domain after 1609, Ryukyu Kingdom maintained a multilateral relation with several neighboring countries. Interestingly, while acknowledging external authority during this period, the kingdom retained distinct local institutions and culture.<sup>i</sup>

Around 15<sup>th</sup> to 16<sup>th</sup> century, supported by commercial activities including silk, ceramics, and dye materials, the kingdom managed to expand their multilateral regional trade with ports such as Fuzhou, Nagasaki, Siam, Luzon, and Java. The surplus from this trade supported the government and cultural development at the kingdom's royal capital, Shuri. Within the kingdom, Confucian, Buddhist practices, and local traditions shaped a distinct Ryukyuan identity. Alongside this coexisting culture, mixed architectures and building practices from China, Japan, and native coral limestone materials formed its famous building to this date, including Shurijo Castle and Shikinaen Garden.<sup>ii</sup>

The 1609 attack by the Satsuma Domain of Japan made Ryukyu a vassal state, requiring it to send tribute to Edo in addition to Beijing. Despite the tributary system with China, the kingdom

appeared independent from China. However, after the invasion, its foreign relations were controlled by Japanese authority. This situation continued until Japan's Meiji government formally annexed the kingdom in 1879, creating Okinawa Prefecture and implementing new policies that discouraged local language and customs. Due to the new regulations, the regional economy shifted away from foreign trade and focused instead on agriculture such as sugar production. At the same time, Okinawa became more closely tied to mainland Japan.

In the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, World War II brought severe destruction to Okinawa. The 1945 Battle of Okinawa resulted in large-scale loss of life and widespread damage to historical sites, including Shuri Castle. After the war, Okinawa was placed under United States administration until 1972, when it was returned to Japan. U.S. military bases established during this period have continued to have a significant social and economic impact.<sup>iii</sup>

Since reversion to Japan, Okinawa has worked to develop its economy and preserve its heritage. Recent efforts to rebuild landmarks such as Shuri Castle, promote tourism, and establish institutions like the Okinawa Institute of Science and Technology reflect these goals. Today, Okinawa's history illustrates its changing relationships with neighboring countries and its ongoing adaptation to modern challenges.

## **2.2 Aim of the Study**

This study aims to explore how the historical development of Okinawa, from Ryukyu Kingdom in the 15<sup>th</sup> century to postwar reconstruction, shapes its current society and culture. By investigating the overlapping of foreign influence, war history, and scientific advancements, this study attempts to understand how Okinawa continues to serve as an East-West bridge even to this date.

Specifically, this Experience-Based Learning project explores three topics:

- (1) Cultural identity, planned as visits to heritage landscapes such as Shuri Castle and Ryukyu Village;
- (2) History through visits to multiple museums across Okinawa, and
- (3) Nature and preservation, through participation in volunteer activities and a visit to the aquarium. Additionally, a visit to OIST is also planned to learn about its innovations.

By learning from these places, this study aims to draw lessons applicable to constructing intercultural understanding and sustainable development across East Asia.

## **2.3 Literature Review**

Based on current findings, research on Okinawa in East Asian studies identifies four primary areas of focus as follows.

First, researchers have studied the Ryukyu Kingdom’s diplomacy. They analyze the kingdom’s position in the Ming China tribute network and its later dual subordination to both China and Japan after the 1609 invasion. Rekidai Hoan, one study that draws on primary sources (e.g. archives), reveals how Ryukyu built commercial and diplomatic links to China, Japan, and Southeast Asia.<sup>iv</sup>

Second, studies related to political and sociological look at the impacts of the Meiji state’s incorporation of Okinawa after 1879. These research show how Okinawa held a semi-colonial status for decades after annexation. The introduction of Japanese administrative, education, and language policies led to both adaptation and resistance in local identity and society. Discrimination and marginalization continued, as Okinawa was treated differently from other parts of Japan.<sup>v</sup>

Third, research that explores the effects of the United States military presence after World War II. Studies focus on the US administration period (1945–1972), land use conflicts, and the economic and social influence of US military bases within the region.<sup>vi</sup>

The fourth major area, discussed in more recent studies, involves environmental issues and regional development. Projects like OIST Innovation and sovereign fund management partnership with Lifetime Ventures (VC), managed by the Okinawa Institute of Science and Technology (OIST), monitor and research biodiversity, climate resilience, and sustainable resource management in Okinawa.<sup>vii</sup>

While these research provide insights to the development of present Okinawa, many studies concentrate on specific topics within separate academic fields. Interestingly, only a few reports connect history records, cultural identity, environment, and community engagement in an integrated manner. There is also a lack of thorough exploration into how local organizations, such as museums and research institutes, use historical legacies to build contemporary leadership and sustainability initiatives.

This Experience-Based Learning project aims to address this gap by combining field observations from history, peace, nature, and innovation sites. The study aims to demonstrate how Okinawa’s past continues to shape its present identity as a bridge between cultures and a model of resilience in East Asia.

### 3. Method (Planning & Activity)

While the itinerary largely followed the approved proposal, adjustments were made according to local conditions and schedule.

Date (Day)	Time	Location & Activity
Day 1 – Sept 27 (Sat)	16:00 – 19:00	<b>Kokusai-dori (Naha)</b>

Day 2 – Sept 28 (Sun)	10:00 – 12:00	<b>Shurijo Castle Park</b>
	12:30 – 14:00	<b>Okinawa Prefectural Museum &amp; Art Museum</b>
	14:30 – 17:00	<b>Tsuboya Pottery District</b>
Day 3 – Sept 29 (Mon)	10:00 – 12:00	<b>Peace Memorial Museum</b>
	12:00 – 14:00	<b>Former Japanese Navy Underground Headquarters (Tomigusuku)</b>
	15:00 – 17:00	<b>American Village</b>
(Sept 30 – Oct 1 / Gap Days)		
Day 4 – Oct 2 (Thu)	10:00 – 11:30	<b>OIST Campus</b>
	12:00 – 14:00	<b>Ryukyu Mura Open-Air Village</b>
	14:30 – 17:00	<b>Tancha Beach Cleaning Program</b>
Day 5 – Oct 3 (Fri)	10:00 – 12:00	<b>Churaumi Aquarium</b>
	13:00 – 15:00	<b>Nago Museum</b>
Day 6 – Oct 4 (Sat)	Morning	Return from Nago to Naha → Flight to Itami Airport

## 4 Experience Based Results (Observation)

### 4.1 Shurijo Castle Park

In Shurijo Castle Park, I learned about the history and role the site has served in the Ryukyu Kingdom’s political formation. The castle was used as the royal residence and administrative center for roughly 450 years, from the early fifteenth century until the late nineteenth century. In the process, it served as the main venue for diplomatic and ceremonial functions, including receiving diplomats from other areas in East and Southeast Asia. Architecturally, the site shows a combination of Chinese, Japanese, and native Okinawan elements, showing their relationships through tribute relations and trade.

The castle is huge, and largely different from traditional Japanese castles that were built in Tokyo, Nijo (Kyoto), Osaka, and more. The complex was structured into three principal zones, which are an area for rituals and ceremonies, residential quarters for the royal family, and offices for administrative affairs.

Through the historical explanations, I also learned about the damage and reconstruction cycle of Shurijo Castle. It was destroyed multiple times, including during the Battle of Okinawa in 1945, and by fire in 2019. The record shows that each rebuilding reflected changes in the political or cultural context of its time. The ongoing restoration that began after the 2019 fire

continues this historical pattern of renewal, maintaining continuity in craftsmanship and historical research.

The visit also taught the transitions of foreign control and modernization post-World War II. After the 1609 invasion by the Satsuma domain, the Ryukyu Kingdom retained limited autonomy while paying tribute to both China and Japan. The annexation in 1879 ended the kingdom, and the castle was later used as a military base and school. In 2000, the castle is included as a part of the UNESCO World Heritage listing.



Figure 1 Shurijo Castle

#### 4.2 Okinawa Prefectural Museum & Art Museum

The Okinawa Prefectural Museum & Art Museum's exhibition presents Okinawa's history through eight chronological sections.

- (1) The Paleolithic and Shell Mound galleries document early habitation through tools and skeletal remains from sites such as Minatogawa.
- (2) The Gusuku and Sanzan sections illustrate the emergence of fortified settlements, local leadership, and unification under King Shō Hashi in 1429. Shows from the Ryukyu Kingdom's maritime period highlights the kingdom's function as a regional trading state, featuring artifacts like tribute ships, and imported ceramics.

- (3) The Satsuma invasion (1609) and Meiji annexation (1879) sections examine the transition from dual subordination to full incorporation into Japan, highlighting how external control reshaped governance and daily life of Ryukyuan.
- (4) Fourth galleries address the Battle of Okinawa, U.S. administration, and reversion to Japan, using wartime relics, photographs, and oral histories to depict societal loss and reconstruction.

Aside from the timeline exhibits, (5) exhibits on folk culture and daily life include farming and fishing tools, musical instruments, textiles, and household objects, showing local traditions that were lost after Japan annexation and discouragement to use the local language and culture. (6) The final gallery documents contemporary Okinawa, linking current social issues and environmental challenges to the historical trajectory presented earlier.

Here, the museum also functions as a research institution, collaborating with universities and local communities in archaeology, folklore, and regional studies. Its rotating exhibitions expand on topics such as ancient tombs, folk rituals, and postwar recovery, maintaining relevance for both residents and visitors.



Figure 2 Okinawa Prefectural Museum & Art Museum

### 4.3 Tsuboya Pottery District

The Tsuboya Pottery District in Naha is the center of Okinawan ceramic production, remains a well-known tourist destination to this day, locally known as yachimun. The area was designated as the kingdom's official pottery district in 1682 by royal order, bringing together potters from across Okinawa to a single site near Shuri Castle and the port. This movement allowed access to clay resources and established Tsuboya as a long-term base for ceramic craftsmanship at the time.

Today, not merely a tourist site but also remains a compact area combining production, display, and preservation functions. The main street, Tsuboya Yachimun Street, hosts numerous

workshops, studios, and stores that produce both traditional and modern Tsuboya-yaki. The original townscape is preserved through stone-paved paths, climbing kilns, and historic wells. Many of the workshops continue to use hand-forming and wheel-based techniques that have been transmitted since the Ryukyu Kingdom period.

Several studios in the area offer hands-on workshops, allowing visitors to learn shaping and painting techniques. Based on interactions with potters in the area, I learned that some potters relocated to rural areas following urban expansion. However, Tsuboya remains active through the continuation of both traditional and government-supported tourism. The area also holds the annual Tsuboya Pottery Festival in November, which includes demonstrations, sales, and exhibitions that maintain local engagement with the craft.



Figure 3 Souvenir Shop in Tsuboya Street

#### 4.4 Peace Memorial Park

On the second day, the visit to Peace Memorial Park in Itoman City represented a completely different point of view compared to the kingdom's history I learned on the first day. The site shows a comprehensive record of the Battle of Okinawa (1945) and its civilian impact.

The main exhibition area is divided into five chronological and thematic sections covering Okinawa's modern history from the Meiji annexation to postwar recovery. The park displays include records, maps, and artifacts such as weapon fragments and daily-use items collected from battle sites.

Notably, there is one section called 「Words of Survivors」 that presents transcribed accounts, diaries, and video interviews conveying the experiences of civilians, students, and families affected by the conflict. There are also special exhibitions that focus on themes such as women in wartime, postwar reconstruction, and peace movements.



Figure 4 (Left: Peace Memorial Park; Right: Former Japanese Navy Underground Headquarters)

#### 4.5 Former Japanese Navy Underground Headquarters (Tomigusuku)

The Former Japanese Navy Underground Headquarters, in Tomigusuku, preserves a part of the bunker complex built by the Imperial Japanese Navy in 1944 as a command facility during the Battle of Okinawa. The tunnels within the site contain former command offices, communication rooms, and sleeping areas. Many of the walls are still marked with shrapnel marks and some with damage from hand grenades.

The on-site museum displays letters, uniforms, photographs, and other materials related to the final phase of the battle. At the center of display hangs the farewell telegram written by Rear Admiral Minoru Ota, acknowledging the hardships endured by Okinawan civilians and the deaths of his personnel.

#### 4.6 Mihama American Village (Chatan)

While I was amazed by the different types of stores and shops in this area, through interaction with the locals, I came to understand that the Mihama American Village in Chatan was a post-war redevelopment area built on land previously used as a U.S. military airfield. Redevelopment took place during the 1980s and 1990s following the return of the land and transformed this area into a mixed-use commercial and leisure complex.

Designed in U.S. West Coast style, the layout houses low-rise buildings with wide pedestrian areas and palm-lined streets. The area is modernized with retail shops, restaurants, cafes, and cinema.

From continuous visits to museums of memorials, visiting American Village, where locals and foreigners easily interact, relatively easy to use English everywhere, it shows a cultural hot spot in Okinawa, not limited to East Asia seen by numerous visitors from South Korea and China but also from across the globe.



Figure 5 (Top: American Village; Bottom: Okinawa's Specialty Cuisines)

#### 4.7 Okinawa Institute of Science and Technology (OIST)

The Okinawa Institute of Science and Technology Graduate University (OIST), located in Onna Village, was established in 2011 as part of national efforts to promote science-based regional development. The institution operates in English and emphasizes interdisciplinary research, combining science and engineering fields in an international academic setting.

Before visiting the campus, I had the chance to interact with the OIST Innovation team, who mainly support the commercialization of research coming out of the labs. Also, through interactions with several former colleagues who are now studying at OIST, I learned how research-focused the campus is.

During the campus visit, participants observed the open-laboratory design intended to encourage collaboration across disciplines such as neuroscience, marine science, materials science, and physics.



Figure 6 (Left: OIST Campus; Right: Startup Elevate OIST Startup Event)

#### 4.8 Ryukyu Mura (Ryukyu Village)

Ryukyu Mura, located in Onna Village, not very far from OIST, is an open-air cultural park established in 1982 to preserve and demonstrate traditional Okinawan lifestyles. The site consists of ten relocated Ryukyuan residences, including the former Nakasone family house (built in 1808), seven of which are designated as Nationally Registered Tangible Cultural Properties.

The architecture shows premodern Okinawan construction architectures adapted to island conditions, showing red-tiled roofs, coral limestone walls, and open courtyards. Staff wear traditional clothing and guide visitors through activities such as pottery, weaving, and sanshin instrument playing. In the village, I can also enjoy performance of eisa drumming, folk music, and seasonal ceremonies occur during the visit.

The park's arrangement and reconstructed buildings allow visitors to observe historical domestic spaces and crafts in practice. It also functions as a frequent filming location for historical productions from Japan and other East Asian countries. The site contributes to the preservation of Okinawa's vernacular architecture and intangible cultural heritage.



Figure 6 Ryukyu Village

#### 4.9 Beach Cleaning Activity

A community-based beach cleaning activity was conducted near Onna Village. The program focused on collecting coastal waste and raising awareness of marine ecosystem protection. Through interactions with other volunteers, mainly OIST members and locals living around Onna-son, I learned about the locals' point of view regarding their current environmental conditions, how tourism is affecting them, and what their aspirations are for their natural environment. Most importantly, being able to build relationships with those colleagues during the event was the highlight of this activity.



Figure 7 Beach Cleaning Activity in Onna-son

#### 4.10 Okinawa Churaumi Aquarium

While completely unrelated to the historical and cultural development of present-day Okinawa, the visit to Churaumi Aquarium was very interesting especially after joining the beach cleaning activities, where I learned about the nature preservation in coastal areas from colleagues in Onna-son. The aquarium houses whale sharks and manta rays, highlighting the uniqueness of their Blue Zone location where various animals and plants can thrive. Especially, the Coral Sea Tank showcases native coral colonies that live in the Okinawa region.

Additionally, the aquarium's programs emphasize marine biology research, conservation, and education. Not only does it showcase whale sharks and manta rays, but it also highlights breeding successes of these species, which have contributed to public understanding of tropical marine ecosystems.

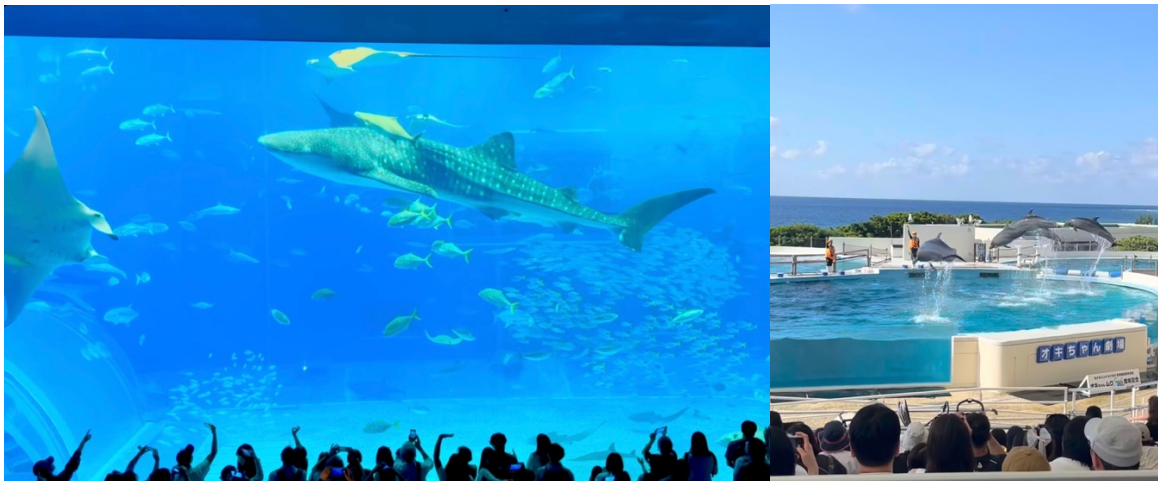


Figure 8 Churaumi Aquarium

## 4.11 Nago Museum

Additionally, the aquarium's programs emphasize marine biology research, conservation, and education. Not only does it showcase whale sharks and manta rays, but it also highlights breeding successes of these species, which have contributed to public understanding of tropical marine ecosystems.



Figure 9 Nago Museum

## 5 Discussion

### 5.1 Overall Reflection

The experience-based learning in Okinawa revealed how the island's history, society, and contemporary initiatives are deeply interconnected and collectively form a living example of East Asia's multilateral relations in practice, a point that is highly regarded for AFLSP scholars as a learning foundation. From multiple sites ranging from museums, historical sites, nature-related areas, taught about connections with multiple stakeholders and how each adapt to shifting geopolitical and social conditions dated from early 15th century.

All combined, the observations show that Okinawa operates as a microenvironment of East Asia's historical and contemporary multilateral relations. From the Ryukyu Kingdom's tributary diplomacy to OIST's international research collaboration, the same principle stays the same, that is preservation through dialogue and institutionalized cooperation. Moreover, from the visit I able to derive that Okinawa's leadership model is not based on hierarchy or domination but on mediation. Even to this date, with tensions arising between countries not limited to only Asia, this approach remains relevant to the wider East Asian context.

Combining these insights with experience from Bai Xian Summer Program 2025 in Tokyo (August 2025), gave me a new perspective that bridge between culture in Asia have been long established in Ryukyu Kingdom, and possibly in other regions as well. Learning the details of history and interacting with the locals who have the stories can bring insights that is completely different from learning it from the textbook. This rationale is also supported from Kyoto University

AFLSP Scholar service-learning activities where we talked in-person with locals in Miyama (October 2025).

Implementing the findings of this experience-based learning for self-development, the mediation, negotiation, and dialogue in multilateral regional cooperation captivated me to further hone my leadership skills. Furthermore, as an enthusiast in technology, learning about innovation and research within OIST and utilizing Okinawa's Blue Zone environment for healthcare and sustainability-related technologies captivated me and helped shape my future career goals as well.

## **6 Conclusion and Further Gap**

### **6.1 Conclusion**

The Okinawa experience-based learning project provided not only historical and cultural knowledge but also a practical model for leadership and regional cooperation for me, and hopefully the same framework for other Bai Xian Scholars. Observing how Okinawa sustained its identity through dialogue, negotiation, and multilateral engagement, rather than war, helped me understand how leadership in East Asia can function effectively across cultural and institutional boundaries. I intend to implement this perspective in my own leadership development, drawing from Okinawa's example of balancing cultures and changes. Additionally, as someone deeply interested in technology, observing innovation and research at OIST, especially within the context of Okinawa's Blue Zone, inspired me to focus my future career on developing healthcare and sustainability-related technologies that integrate local wisdom with scientific advancement.

### **6.2 Further Gap and Future Exploration**

The Bai Xian, which promotes cross-cultural understanding and collaboration across East Asia, could benefit from integrating Okinawa's historical and cultural frameworks into its programs. Additionally, given the foundation's main industry focus on textiles and cultural craftsmanship, Okinawa's traditional textile-making, might provide strong examples of how material culture reflects diplomatic and trade networks.

For Kyoto University, the Blue Zone environment of Okinawa offers potential as a living laboratory for interdisciplinary research. For Bai Xian Scholars whose focus are on overlapping topics, designing similar field-based learning programs would extend the impact of this study. By investigating the Okinawa itinerary, combining visits to historical landmarks, scientific institutions, and environmental projects, scholars can experience how traditional culture, innovation, and ecological balance coexist.

## 7 Disclaimer and Reference

### 7.1 Disclaimer

The observations and contents were written by scholars, and generative AI (ChatGPT-5) was used to refine the clarity and coherence of the text. The scholars reviewed the content after the generative AI revision and take full responsibility for the final version of the report.

### 7.2 Reference

---

<sup>i</sup> Farinaccia, G. (2025). Identity, Language and Negotiation in Okinawan Literature (1910s–1930s) [Doctoral dissertation, Sapienza University of Rome]. IRIS Uniroma. [https://iris.uniroma1.it/retrieve/8a44042d-712c-484b-a9a9-71d8dfd15c59/Tesi\\_dottorato\\_Farinaccia.pdf](https://iris.uniroma1.it/retrieve/8a44042d-712c-484b-a9a9-71d8dfd15c59/Tesi_dottorato_Farinaccia.pdf)

<sup>ii</sup> Smits, G. (2006). The Rekidai Hoan: Documents of the Ryukyu Kingdom. *Kyoto Review of Southeast Asia*, (3). <https://kyotoreview.org/issue-3-nations-and-stories/the-rekidai-hoan-documents-of-the-ryukyu-kingdom/>

<sup>iii</sup> Naval History and Heritage Command. (n.d.). Battle of Okinawa. <https://www.history.navy.mil/browse-by-topic/wars-conflicts-and-operations/world-war-ii/1945/battle-of-okinawa.html>

<sup>iv</sup> Smits, G. (2006). The Rekidai Hoan: Documents of the Ryukyu Kingdom. *Kyoto Review of Southeast Asia*, (3). <https://kyotoreview.org/issue-3-nations-and-stories/the-rekidai-hoan-documents-of-the-ryukyu-kingdom/>

<sup>v</sup> Farinaccia, G. (2025). Identity, Language and Negotiation in Okinawan Literature (1910s–1930s) [Doctoral dissertation, Sapienza University of Rome]. IRIS Uniroma. [https://iris.uniroma1.it/retrieve/8a44042d-712c-484b-a9a9-71d8dfd15c59/Tesi\\_dottorato\\_Farinaccia.pdf](https://iris.uniroma1.it/retrieve/8a44042d-712c-484b-a9a9-71d8dfd15c59/Tesi_dottorato_Farinaccia.pdf)

<sup>vi</sup> University of Hawai'i at Mānoa Library. (n.d.). Postwar Okinawa Under U.S. Occupation. HIST 296: Okinawa (Research Guide). [https://guides.library.manoa.hawaii.edu/hist296/okinawa/US\\_occupation](https://guides.library.manoa.hawaii.edu/hist296/okinawa/US_occupation)

<sup>vii</sup> Okinawa Institute of Science and Technology. (n.d.). Innovation. <https://www.oist.jp/ja/innovation>