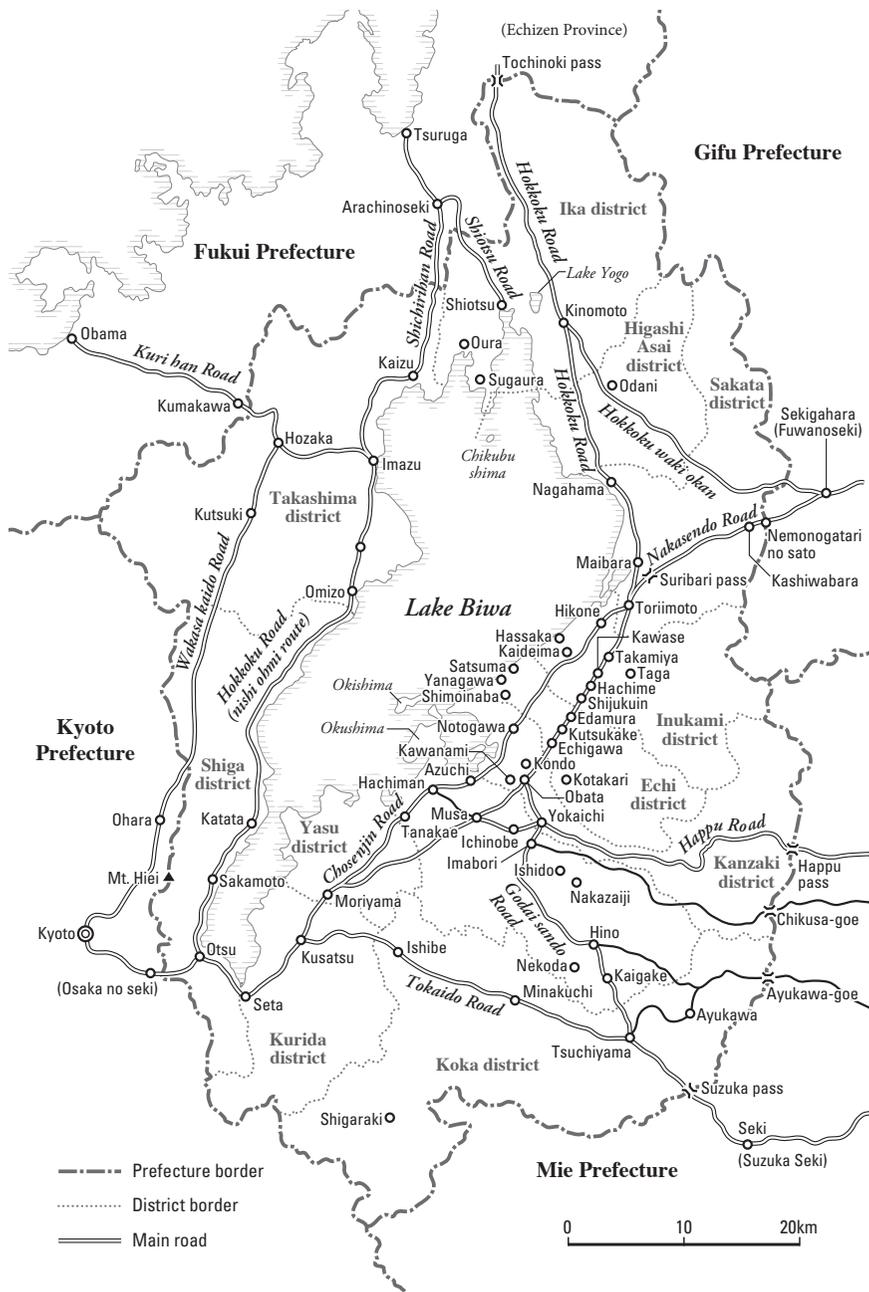

The Rise of Ōmi Shōnin as Diasporic Traders

Why did so many long-distance merchants hail from a single province of Japan? Since as early as the Meiji period, this historical puzzle has captured the imagination of generations of Japanese writers. Early commentators spilled much ink over the origins of Ōmi shōnin, tracing them to hard-pressed peasants,¹ former warriors,² even ancient immigrants from the Korean peninsula.³ Beyond speculating about their provenance, scholars have also pondered the regional particularities—geographical, political, and economic—that made Ōmi conducive to the rise of merchants in a predominantly agrarian society. The explanation lies in a fortuitous conjunction of these locally specific and shifting circumstances that constituted Ōmi as a place.

Among the well-documented factors, Ōmi's geographical placement and its network of transportation offers the first set of clues.⁴ Located roughly in the center of the archipelago and close to the imperial court in Kyoto, Ōmi since ancient times served as a crossroads between the west and the east. Overland routes to the west connected Ōmi to the economically advanced regions of Kyoto and Osaka, while the three major turnpikes—Tōkaidō, Nakasendō, and Hokkoku Kaidō—linked the province to eastern Japan and Hokuriku. The waterways of Lake Biwa also conjoined with three roads leading to the port cities of Obama and Tsuruga on the Japan Sea coast, from which ships sailed eastward to Ōu and Ezo (map 3).⁵

Its proximity to Kyoto—and the fact that Ōmi itself had briefly hosted Emperor Tenchi's palace in 667–672—also made Ōmi politically important as a space of transit for various groups: imperial envoys to and from the Chinese continent,⁶ provincial warlords who vied for control over the eastern approach to Kyoto, and the Korean embassies to the Tokugawa shogunate that used a designated passage known as the “Korean Highway.”⁷ According to a recent study by Sujung Kim, Ōmi was enmeshed in a larger network of continental Buddhist culture and trade (which



MAP 3. Shiga Prefecture (Ōmi Province), showing hometowns and trade routes of Ōmi merchants. *Note:* Gamō district is an unlabeled area encompassing Hachiman and Hino. *Source:* Suenaga 2019, 40. Reprinted with permission from Japan Publishing Industry Foundation for Culture.

she calls the “East Asian Mediterranean”), forged by an influx of immigrants from Silla from the late fourth to the seventh centuries.⁸ All of these ensured that Ōmi remained a hub of commerce and national politics throughout Japanese history.

But geography alone does not suffice to explain the growth of market activity and mobility among peasants, which was tightly controlled by feudal authorities. The recorded activities of merchants in Ōmi date as early as the Kamakura period (1185–1333), when peasants in the Kinai (Kyoto-Osaka) region forayed into part-time commerce by forming *za* (guild-like trade associations). Having obtained monopoly rights to trade in return for paying taxes to local proprietary lords (especially Enryakuji on Mt. Hiei), members of *za* began peddling their wares throughout Ōmi and in the neighboring provinces. Their border-crossing activity, registered in occasional turf disputes over the use of mountain passes to Ise,⁹ increased after these medieval markets were abolished by domain warlords and gradually replaced by *rakuichi* (free markets) and *rakuza* (open guilds) in the sixteenth century. The creation of a castle town in Azuchi by Oda Nobunaga (1534–1582), who sought to gain control of the fertile plains of Ōmi as a base from which to launch unification efforts, had the effect of further spurring commerce along the southeastern shore of Lake Biwa.¹⁰ Local authorities also encouraged the growth of merchants; Ōmi-born lord Gamō Ujisato (1556–1595) turned the mountain-girt town of Hino into a free market under his reign.

Contingency played an even bigger part in opening avenues to commerce in areas far beyond Ōmi. These opportunities came with the abolition of castles or fief transfers of daimyo, which occurred often during this period of political transition. When Gamō was transferred to Ise Province, for instance, many townsfolk of Hino followed their beloved lord to the castle town of Matsusaka, where he created a new ward to house them and their commercial activities.¹¹ A similar pattern of mobility was discerned in the townspeople of Hachiman, many of whom had relocated from Azuchi in the wake of Nobunaga’s fall. The removal of the lord of Hachiman, Toyotomi Hidetsugu (1568–1595) in 1590 (and of his successor within five years of his arrival) led to the demolition of Hachiman Castle, providing yet another occasion for the unmooring of local residents. They ventured out to Edo, some even as far as Ezo, in hopes of “reviving their declining commercial fortunes.”¹²

Scholars today have moved beyond a simple search for origins—an exercise in linear history of reading them back into the medieval past when “Ōmi shōnin” did not yet exist as a category. But they continue to agree on one central point: the peak of the activity of itinerant merchants from Ōmi lay squarely in the Tokugawa era, a period of peace and stability from the seventeenth through the nineteenth centuries that brought unprecedented prosperity to a land torn by a century of civil war. The entrepreneurial merchants of Tokugawa, some insist, were qualitatively different from their medieval antecedents, who traveled in armed caravans to nearby towns and cities and operated “conservatively” on the basis of monopoly

privileges.¹³ A pithy definition of Ōmi shōnin, offered by a prolific writer of their business history, Suenaga Kunitoshi, highlights their operation much further afield: “extra-provincial income-earning (*takoku kasegi*) merchants, who peddled and managed stores far outside of Ōmi Province while keeping their family home in Ōmi.”¹⁴ In short, what we now understand as the Ōmi shōnin—an itinerant peddler who daringly trekked across the archipelago carrying merchandise on a balance pole—was more a product of the Pax Tokugawa than a carryover from the medieval world of closed markets. If so, the question still remains: what enabled and motivated so many merchants from Ōmi to venture beyond their provincial borders during the two and a half centuries of Tokugawa rule? We must begin by understanding their growth as part of a countrywide phenomenon: expansion of commercial and industrial life across the early modern archipelago. Making sense of their cross-border activity and its unusual scale in an era of domain monopolies also requires broader points of reference. What follows is a preliminary attempt to place merchants of Ōmi in global and comparative context, which invites a fundamental reconceptualization of their mobility as diasporic traders.

ŌMI MERCHANTS IN THE TOKUGAWA ERA

Castle demolitions and fief transfers, which purportedly supplied dislocated residents the initial incentive for peddling, augured a broader realignment of the Japanese political economy. The establishment of the Tokugawa bakufu (shogunate) in 1603, and prolonged stability that ensued, promoted greater economic integration of the country, which was crisscrossed by expanding networks of transportation and infrastructures for commerce. In the eighteenth century, farmers across Japan were drawn into a well-developed system of interregional markets, with a good number of rural families engaged in part-time manufacturing for urban consumers. The rise of cottage industries was particularly prevalent in the Kinai region, economically the most advanced part of Japan. Located in the Kinai basin, Ōmi both benefited from and took part in the region’s overall growth, which accelerated after 1700.¹⁵ Local peasants had, from the medieval era, begun producing tea, tatami matting, ceramics, lacquerware, hemp cloth, and mosquito nets, and these became the central articles for peddling, along with the cotton goods of Kinai.¹⁶ By the Tokugawa period, most local farm families engaged in by-employments, with nonagricultural earnings constituting as much as 40 percent of household income.¹⁷ “Tens of thousands of people . . . made their living from weaving,” lifting the villages out of “wilderness,”¹⁸ as an Ōmi sericulturist, Narita Jūbē, observed in his *Yōsan kinuburui* (1813).

It was in this context that merchants from Ōmi set out for distant lands in large numbers, forging new networks of exchange and bringing more residents along the Nakasendō highway into export industries. It roughly coincided with the “prosperous age” under the Qianlong reign (1736–95), when commercialization

and population growth propelled the overland expansion of Shanxi and Huizhou merchants, along with the trade diasporas of Hokkien and Cantonese overseas.¹⁹ The mobility of Ōmi merchants, which spanned a wider geography than the average distance traveled by Tokugawa farmers (and is likened by some scholars to that of daimyo in the system of alternate attendance [*sankin kōtai*]),²⁰ owed to their proximity to the commercial heart of Kinai but also to Ōmi's unique political economy. As a critically important region adjoining Kyoto, Ōmi was strategically divided by the Tokugawa shogunate into a multitude of small fiefs and estates, owned by a remarkable total of 254 proprietors, a situation quite unseen in other provinces. The largest domain in the province was Hikone, held by the Ii family. But Ōmi also seated eight smaller domains in addition to a host of lands owned by extra-provincial daimyo, the Tokugawa shogunate and its liege vassals, the imperial family, and religious establishments such as Enryakuji. These landholdings were randomly scattered across the province; in the most extreme example, one village was divided among as many as eleven proprietors.²¹

In addition to this fragmented state of jurisdiction (a condition that extended to the Kinai at large), Ōmi represented a sort of anomaly in the system of domainal economies (*ryōiki keizai*) governed by the principle of self-sufficiency. The political pluralism under the Tokugawa regime encouraged many of the over 250 domains (*han*) to pursue “aggressively mercantilist policies,” which, paired with sharp restrictions on foreign trade, turned their fiefdoms into semiautarkic economies.²² In contrast to the case of Shimoina (studied by Kären Wigen), Tosa (studied by Luke Roberts), or Hirosaki, Yonezawa, and Tokushima (studied by Mark Ravina), none of the nine daimyo resident in Ōmi consistently adopted a policy of *han* autonomy or a mercantilist ideology of *kokueki* (prosperity of the country) centered on the domain.²³ From very early on, for instance, the Zeze domain allowed local farmers to engage in nonagricultural production outside Ōmi as a means of paying taxes.²⁴ Even the largest Hikone domain, which strictly regulated movements in and out of villages, began to relax its physiocratic policy in the mid-Tokugawa period, eventually permitting farmers to hawk local manufactures during the agricultural off-season.²⁵ In the case of one local estate belonging to the imperial family, villagers apparently had no trouble traveling or peddling beyond the province, assured of easy access to passes required to go through the barrier stations installed on the main roads leading to Edo.²⁶

This lack of domainal cohesion—a phenomenon that scholars have described as “non-domainality” (*hi-ryōgokusei*)²⁷ or “parcellized sovereignty”²⁸—rendered political boundaries porous enough for local inhabitants to cross frequently.²⁹ Ōmi peasants seized on the ensuing opportunities to expand their commercial horizons beyond the home province. The local domainal lords had no reason to prohibit such activities. They could maintain a good source of revenue through contributions the peasants made from their “foreign” commercial earnings, in addition to annual rice taxes.³⁰ Their high mobility further suggests that a “consciousness

of common membership in a ‘Japanese state’” developed early among itinerant merchants from Ōmi.³¹ As they traversed the administrative boundaries of the early modern polity—alongside other Tokugawa commoners who circumvented a web of official restrictions to go on pilgrimage and recreational travel³²—Ōmi merchants experienced “a Nihon in motion.” They did so practically—as operators of retail and wholesale stores and as daily users of inns, post stations, and highways—and conceptually—as readers of maps, travel guides, and urban directories that listed these spaces of exchange, binding their users as a collectivity.³³ As a result, they developed a multiscale awareness of operating within a federation of localities, while sharpening their sense and claim of belonging to Ōmi. As in the experience of Huizhou sojourner-merchants in late Ming–Qing China, whose “sense of home-place identity” emerged through traversing a “centralized empire of distinct localities,” the two processes went hand in hand.³⁴

Not surprisingly, their cross-border mobility, which belied the Tokugawa principle of village residence,³⁵ was perceived as a threat to social order in some distant domains that merchants from Ōmi penetrated over time. In the Kaga domain, for instance, their activities were seen to interfere with its efforts to cultivate economic self-sufficiency. By the mid-nineteenth century, Ōmi peddlers “were lending money” to villagers on the Noto Peninsula to engage them in the production of hemp yarn for export. Indebted to these merchants, local producers were “forced to sell their thread at low prices.” To wean its economy away from outside capital, the Kaga domain endeavored to redirect the supply of locally produced yarn to the manufacturers of Noto *chijimi* (hemp cloth), a regional specialty.³⁶ The example shows the extent to which wholesaling merchants from Ōmi had extended control over the industrial economies beyond the Kinai region. Operating lines of credit out of the financial hub in Ōmi, their peddling circuits connected these spatially separated sites of production and helped to draw hinterlands into integrated networks of trade that encouraged commodity manufacture for extra-domainal markets.

The peddlers from Ōmi, like itinerant tradesmen in the Qing empire, encountered still greater hostility from Confucian and agrarian critics of commerce. They condemned consumption as extravagance, viewing the goods imported by merchants as emblems of moral decay. In a 1754 memorial submitted to the lord of Sendai, Ashi Tōzan (1696–1776) complained: “Recently merchants from other provinces, especially from Gōshū [Ōmi] have flocked” to the domain to entice local farmers with a range of merchandise, from “medicine and fancy goods, [to] cotton and silk cloth.” By selling on credit articles of daily use the peasants would have produced themselves and siphoning off their money, Ashi bewailed, peddlers from Ōmi endangered the domain’s self-sufficient economy and seeded poverty among its people.³⁷ His invective against merchant capital was echoed by another Confucian scholar, Ogyū Sorai (1666–1728), who objected to nearly everything, including cottage industry, that took labor away from agriculture.³⁸

Nonetheless, changing economic realities increasingly rendered agrarianist policies obsolete. Throughout the Tokugawa period, local authorities attempted at one time or another to limit or ban merchant and manufacturing activities in the rural areas or “to restrict permanent out-migration from the farming communities,” but all these efforts were in vain.³⁹ Lords of Ōmi and the abutting provinces of Kinai more often than not let the forces of the market take their course. Taking advantage of these circumstances, Ōmi peasants one after another left for peddling, alone or in small groups of two to three, carrying local products to distant markets, where they would eventually set up shop and diversify. The peak of their commerce corresponded with the rise of the credit and money economy from the mid-Tokugawa on, when large-scale networks of interregional trade grew to knit the country together. Ōmi natives operated at the center of this expanding world of commerce as retail merchants, moneylenders, and manufacturers, who epitomized the entrepreneurial skills and vigor associated with the Ōmi shōnin, as they came to be so collectively known by the Meiji era.

SUBCATEGORIES OF ŌMI SHŌNIN

Although the proportion of peasants who left Ōmi for long-distance commerce was significant and rising over time, not all who tried their luck at peddling returned in glory. Those who achieved success hailed largely from a handful of districts located east of Lake Biwa (map 3), where local farm families, compared to residents in the rest of Ōmi, relied more heavily on by-employments, the prime motor of rural industrialization.⁴⁰ Three main “diasporic trajectories”⁴¹ emerged to connect particular locales in eastern Ōmi to particular destinations away from home: those from Hachiman, Hino, and the broader “East Lake” (*kotō*) region.⁴²

The earliest to emerge were merchants from Hachiman, once a castle town under the lordship of Toyotomi Hidetsugu, which, after his downfall, evolved into a purely commercial city. Hachiman merchants sold mosquito nets,⁴³ straw matting, cloth, piece goods, and paper. They were the first to set up shop along the streets of Nihonbashi, a mercantile heart of the shogunal capital of Edo. One of these pioneers was Nishikawa Jingorō I (1549–1644). From his humble beginnings as a fishmonger in Echigo, Nishikawa opened his own shop in 1586, selling Ōmi specialties of hemp mosquito nets and tatami matting. Having peddled in the Noto region, he expanded his business to Edo. His successors further burnished the store’s reputation in Nihonbashi by cultivating a mass market among the townsfolk. In what was then a bold sales strategy, Jingorō II had the drab mosquito nets “dyed in light green” to appeal for its “coolness,” which was rewarded with “an explosive demand” in the summer. In such small innovations lay the opportunity for business expansion. More merchandise such as bows, fancy goods, and futon were added by the next generations of Jingorō, who laid the foundation for today’s Nishikawa Sangyō, a leading manufacturer of bedclothes.⁴⁴

Many natives of Ōmi apprenticed with these thriving merchant houses and later became big themselves. Mori Gorobē (?-1703) clerked at Ban Denbē's store before peddling tobacco on his own and eventually opening a dry goods store in Edo.⁴⁵ Mori represented the upward mobility of peddlers from Hachiman, which caught the attention of the popular writer Ihara Saikaku (1642–1693). These Hachiman natives attained their stature, explained Ihara, by steadily scaling up their trade and opening branches in multiple provinces to purvey Ōmi's famed hemp cloth, a popular gift to bakufu officials;⁴⁶ some also "supplied striped cloth every year" to retailers in Kyoto or sold tatami matting in Osaka.⁴⁷

By the Tempō era (1830–1844), a contemporary scholar, Okada Bun'en (Kei; 1780–1860), observed, Hachiman merchants came to possess "vast marketing networks that extended not only to Nagasaki and Satsuma in the west and Tsugaru in the north, but farther still to Matsumae, Hakodate, and Ezo." In all of these places, he noted, they typically "opened a shop or transported goods [of various origins] over land and sea, earning enormous profit beyond the reach of merchants from other provinces."⁴⁸ Easy access via Lake Biwa to the port towns of Obama and Tsuruga afforded Hachiman residents ample opportunities to sail along the Japan Sea coast to the northeastern region of Ōu. Many set up shop in the castle town of Morioka and then moved on to Ezo, where they came to trade with the Ainu (chapter 2).

Prior to the official restrictions on foreign trade in the 1630s, a few daring natives of Ōmi apparently crossed the ocean to reach even more faraway lands. Surviving trade documents suggest that merchants from Obata of the Kanzaki district had been involved in overseas trade with Annam (Vietnam). Since the Ashikaga period (ca. 1336–1573), some had also sailed from the port of Sakai to China and the South Pacific for trading purposes.⁴⁹ Among the most celebrated "overseas pioneers" who became part of local and national legend were from Hachiman.⁵⁰ Nishimura Tarōuemon (1603–1651) joined other Japanese merchants in the officially sponsored "vermillion ship trade" with Vietnam.⁵¹ Okachi ("Shamuroya") Kanbē (1566–1649) allegedly mastered a special technique of dyeing in Siam and returned home to sell printed cotton cloth he christened "Siam dye."⁵² Although records of their activities remain spotty, these provincials may be counted among the early modern globetrotters: along with Hokkien migrants and the Spaniards directing the Manila galleon trade, Ōmi natives, too, coursed through the widening circuits of exchange across the Pacific and helped form Japan's earliest trading diaspora in Southeast Asia.⁵³

Trailing slightly behind Hachiman natives were merchants from Hino.⁵⁴ Having prospered as the castle town of Gamō Ujisato, Hino momentarily lost its vigor after Gamō was relocated to Aizu. But his transfer created new commercial contacts between Hino and the northeastern provinces, prompting local merchants to form a guild (*nakama*) in the late seventeenth century. Hino merchants handled a different set of local specialties: lacquerware, patent medicines, and tea, in addition to cloth and textile goods purchased in Kyoto. The epithet *Hino no senryōdana*⁵⁵

captured their distinctive strategy of setting up myriad small shops throughout the country. They are estimated to have ranged from 260 to 440, of which 170 survived into the Taishō era (1912–1926),⁵⁶ concentrating in Kantō and Kinai. In 1690, Hino merchants of all sizes coalesced to form the Hino ootōban nakama (Association of Hino Merchants on Duty) with the blessing of the Tokugawa. In recognition of their role in interregional trade, the shogun guaranteed as policy timely settlement of credit accounts across the diverse domains they conducted business. Members of the association also coordinated their activities along the Tōkaidō and Nakasendō highways by staying at designated inns, where they exchanged the latest news about prices and local markets, settled payments, and entrusted their cargo to fellow merchants from Ōmi.⁵⁷ These inns, which helped to sustain the diasporic trajectory from Hino to eastern and northern lands, illustrate how a subcommunity of Ōmi merchants employed ties of native place to overcome the perils of long-distance trading voyages. As seen also among overland and maritime Chinese migrants in the Qing empire, native place was construed flexibly and mobilized on a variety of scales, from a hamlet to the whole province, in organizing commerce away from home.⁵⁸

Hino merchants were equally known for their contribution to large-scale brewing and the production of lacquerware. Merchants from Hino and elsewhere in Ōmi launched and operated most of the sake breweries in Kantō. The famed lacquerwares of Aizu, Shinshū Iida, and Nagoya, too, are said to owe their origins to Hino merchants. Indeed, so many of their descendants lived to carry on their commerce that, one 1922 gazetteer quipped, “Aizu may as well be called a colony of Hino shōnin.”⁵⁹ Medicine was another area of specialty that took them far and wide beyond the home province. The most enterprising was Shōno Genzō (1659–1733), who, after peddling to Echigo for some time, ventured into manufacturing. With money borrowed from relatives, Shōno in his mid-twenties opened a shop to sell a dozen medicines of his own concoction. Especially popular was Kannōgan. As its reputation grew, the medicine was sold on commission through a network of stores (*tokuyakuten*) that by 1856 stretched from Ōu province to Shikoku, a retail strategy of franchising that anticipated modern-day pharmaceuticals.⁶⁰ Kannōgan spread the name of Hino across the country—and around the Japanese transpacific diaspora in the twentieth century⁶¹—until it rivaled Hangontan sold by the famed medicine peddlers from Toyama.⁶²

But none of the Hino merchants rivaled the scale and scope of business achieved by Nakai Genzaemon I (1716–1805). Having peddled medicine since nineteen to recover his family’s diminished fortune, Nakai opened a pawn shop in Shimotsuke and then moved to Sendai, where he began trading in safflower and raw silk. He steadily expanded his wholesale business, building branches in neighboring cities and stretching his network westward to Osaka, Chūgoku, and Kyūshū. As became customary for Ōmi storeowners, Nakai placed a manager at each store, and he himself returned to Ōmi to direct all branches from the residence of the stem

family. By the time of his retirement in 1794, Nakai operated some fourteen stores through which commodities of various locales circulated between Tōhoku and the Kyoto-Osaka region, while managing a brewing business on the side.⁶³

Merchants from Hachiman and Hino were followed by those who hailed from the eastern shores of Lake Biwa: Gokashō and Noto River in the Kanzaki district, and the region along Echi River in the Echi district. Collectively known as East Lake (*kotō*) merchants or Gokashō merchants, they burst onto the commercial scene in the late Tokugawa period, surpassing their Hachiman and Hino counterparts in number after the Meiji Restoration. As late developers, East Lake merchants carved out a niche for themselves by avoiding the trading networks of established merchant houses; they operated on side streets rather than main roads, selling mass consumer goods on consignment to merchants in rural hamlets.⁶⁴ Plying their trade from Matsumae in the north to Shikoku and Kyūshū in the south, they supplied hemp cloth and other local manufactures of Ōmi in exchange for silk, hemp, and safflower from Kantō, Shinano, and Ōu.⁶⁵

One of the most esteemed merchants was Matsui Kyūzaemon III (Yūken) (1770–1855) of Kanzaki. Matsui from a young age engaged in peddling raw silk and textile goods, as expected of a second son of a merchant family. After years of toil, sustained only by religious devotion that became part of local lore, he set up shop in Edo and Kyoto, soon opening branches in Fukushima and Osaka.⁶⁶ Tonomura Yozaemon V (1682–1765) was born into a wealthy peasant family, but he too chose peddling as a career, selling hemp cloth. After initial struggles, Tonomura expanded his business from Osaka to Edo, using horses and couriers to transport a cargo of merchandise for his store. This move, taken before many in the same trade to overcome distance, kickstarted its ascent into a leading cloth wholesaler, Tonoyo.⁶⁷

Echi River produced its own cast of entrepreneurs. Among the most ambitious was Kobayashi Ginemon II (1800–1873), who peddled straw hats and cloth from the age of fifteen. Around 1828, Kobayashi began manufacturing dyes by importing safflower from Tōhoku; three years later, he opened a textile wholesaler called Chōjiya (later Chōgin) in Edo. The enterprising Kobayashi continued to diversify his business by opening money exchanges in Edo, Osaka, and Kyoto. At the same time, he cultivated ties of patronage with the lord of Hikone, Ii Naosuke (1815–1860), who designated his store as an overseer of the domainal fisc. For his close relations with Ii (who would become the great elder of the shogunate), his store would endure a financial setback during the final chaotic years of Tokugawa rule. But Chōgin managed to come through and maintained its status as a powerful merchant house long beyond the restoration.⁶⁸

Merchants from regions in Echi abutting the lake (specifically the villages of Satsuma and Yanagawa) also joined Hachiman merchants in crossing over to the northern island of Ezo or Hokkaido.⁶⁹ More is discussed in the next chapter, but these merchants, in the spirit of translocal unity, formed a trade association to

facilitate the Matsumae domain's trade with Ainu, serving as its shipping and marketing agents. The most successful ones became managers of fisheries that drove the Matsumae export economy. They built large vessels to transport their marine products to the Japan Sea ports and ferry back to Ezo a variety of mainland goods that reached deep into the Ainu communities.

The last to emerge were merchants from the districts of Inukami and Sakata. Many of them, like the owner of Chōgin, survived the turbulent years of restoration to thrive in the modern era of open trade. Merchants from Inukami belonged to the lineage of East Lake merchants who mainly traded in dry goods and Ōmi hemp cloth. One of them was Itō Chūbē I (1842–1903), whose family in Toyosato Village had sold fabrics for generations. After peddling hemp cloth with his elder brother in Kyūshū, in 1872 Chūbē I opened a store of his own in the commercial town of Senba in Osaka—the precursor to a trading firm, Itōchū (chapter 5). By the time Chūbē arrived in Senba, apparently, merchants from Ōmi had all but colonized the commercial town, sending its original inhabitants into steep decline after the restoration.⁷⁰ Those from Sakata specialized in the famed *crêpe* (*chirimen*) of Nagahama and fertilizers, as did Ōmura Hikotarō (1636–1689). Having worked as a lumber dealer in Kyoto, Ōmura switched his career to dry goods and moved in his late twenties to Edo, opening a modest wholesale store, Shirokiya, on the street of Nihonbashi. As a storeowner, Ōmura periodically reinvested the capital, once it had accumulated to a certain level, into enhancing the range and quality of merchandise, a strategy continued by his successors to transform Shirokiya into one of Edo's finest drapers within two generations.⁷¹

METHODS OF CROSS-BORDER TRADE

Merchants from Hachiman, Hino, and the East Lake districts in essence represented subcategories of Ōmi shōnin, reared on the rich and variegated social geography surrounding Lake Biwa. Although they hailed from different locales at different times, each developing their own traits and areas of specialization, they all clustered on the eastern shore. Home of many itinerant merchants, the eastern littoral of Ōmi constituted a kind of “ecological frontier,” a dividing line between mobile and sedentary communities shaped by their varied resource endowments.⁷² From a long-term perspective of maritime East Asia, it was an integral part of the “East Asian Mediterranean” (where Japan's largest lake, Biwa-ko, “functioned as an inland sea,” according to one scholar), comprised by littoral and coastal communities that produced many border-crossing traders and possessed their own cultures of migration.⁷³ Although this metaphor cannot be stretched too far in the Tokugawa era of limited foreign contact, placing Ōmi merchants in broader context helps us ponder their distinctive business culture without exaggerating their uniqueness. When juxtaposing their biographies sketched out above, their career arcs converge on a set of practices, customs, and ethics that made them a

sui generis community of long-distance merchants. Yet their unusually far-flung operation, we learn, was also underpinned by business methods and maxims that were characteristic of merchants not only in Tokugawa Japan but in the early modern world of cross-border exchange at large.⁷⁴

Regardless of their regional origins, merchants of Ōmi who left their vital traces in local memory invariably began as humble peddlers. If merchants elsewhere also began this way, Ōmi natives never ceased peddling even after setting up shop, turning each commercial destination into a new point of departure. Peddling was at once a mode of business expansion and a means of conducting market research, filling the manifold functions of a modern-day business trip.⁷⁵ While creating commercial networks across distance, they gathered critical information on foot by observing firsthand what was produced and consumed in various localities to gain a comprehensive and tangible sense of market supply and demand.⁷⁶

The defining feature of Ōmi shōnin as itinerant peddlers was their expansive geographical operation, which scholars have variously described as “*kōiki shikōsei*” (wide-area orientation),⁷⁷ “cosmopolite-ness,”⁷⁸ and “*hi-ryōdosei*” (non-territoriality).⁷⁹ This was the corollary of Ōmi’s non-domainality noted earlier, where sovereignty and territoriality could not be readily mapped onto the lives of local inhabitants, especially among sojourning merchants. In a phenomenon also seen throughout the global history of capital, the expanding scales on which commerce spread over time transcended the administrative “matrices of state territoriality”⁸⁰ that shaped the mercantilist policies of most domains. I call the modus operandi of Ōmi merchants “diasporic” to underscore their spatial dispersion across the Japanese archipelago and beyond. As long-distance entrepreneurs, they embodied “the spatial peculiarity of capital,” mobility that obeyed its own logic in traversing the fragmented Tokugawa polity. Viewed through a comparative lens, they appear less anomalous and more typical of diasporic traders, who were engaged in varying degrees of cross-cultural exchange around the early modern world.⁸¹ Their commercial activity, which stretched across the Tokugawa realm, involved crossing clearly delineated political boundaries, forbidding physical barriers on land and sea, and widely divergent local customs and mutually unintelligible dialects in a federation of largely autonomous fiefdoms where traveling merchants—or anyone from outside the village or province—were treated as strangers.

The multiscale activities of Ōmi merchants, in turn, shaped their distinct identity as “local cosmopolitans,” to borrow from Enseng Ho’s study of Hadrami *sayyids* in the Indian Ocean: lives and sense of belonging defined as much by their integration into host societies as their translocal mobility.⁸² Such “translocality” also shaped lineage and other practices of “rooted mobility” among Huizhou merchants, who forged and traversed new social spaces between the home and host places across late imperial China.⁸³ Some adventurous souls had already exhibited this character through their involvement in maritime trade before the mid-seventeenth century. But it was ironically under the Tokugawa regime of

limited foreign trade that merchants of Ōmi manifested their diasporic orientation fully, when they mediated the growth of a market economy and cottage industries, processes driven almost entirely by domestic demand before the 1860s.

Once cultivating a clientele in a region, Ōmi merchants typically established a small store (*demise*) there and moved on to the next peddling destination, where they might build a branch (*edamise*). Even then, they continued peddling in search of new markets. A precept followed by one merchant family urged its members to “establish branches in every place where people live and eat within a radius of three leagues.”⁸⁴ Successful merchants expanded their business by establishing a web of *demise* and *edamise*, run by kith and kin, which ramified like a family tree across provincial borders.⁸⁵ Ōmi people peddled away from home, initially during off-seasons in farming but increasingly (as long-distance commerce was officially permitted and even promoted) throughout the calendar year.

But while their locus of business activity lay outside Ōmi, they remained rooted in the home province—what Uemura Mashiro has termed *zaichisei*. Not only did they establish their stem family (*honke*) and keep their wives and children in Ōmi, but they also remained enmeshed within kinship and native-place ties through customs of labor recruitment and apprenticeship. After launching several stores, Ōmi merchants typically returned home, entrusting their daily operation to managers (*shihainin*), who were family relations or fellow Ōmi natives. Though they settled back in Ōmi, storeowners made a tour of branches regularly to inspect their performance and local market conditions. In the case of the Nakai Genzaemon family, whose business network spanned multiple provinces, the family head spent a good couple of months, from spring to autumn, inspecting remote branches located in Kantō and Tōhoku.⁸⁶

In short, the diasporic identity of Ōmi merchants as local cosmopolitans was shaped by a complex relationship between *space* (i.e., sphere of their business activity, driven by the logic of continual and borderless expansion) and *place* (i.e., a fixed ancestral home in Ōmi that doubled as the business headquarters). Their place of origin and space of work remained geographically separated but genealogically intertwined, not unlike the case of foreign merchants or seasonal migrants, their cosmopolitanism deriving from their provincialism.⁸⁷ Family strategies adopted by Chinese migrant communities, from the inland province of Huizhou to the southeastern coasts of Fujian and Guangdong, demonstrated this logic, with multiplex ties of consanguinity, native place, and dialect binding the spatially dispersed loci of commerce and seasonal labor well into the age of mass migration.⁸⁸ So, too, the spatial workings of Ōmi commerce resembled the “multinodal’ but monocentric network” of Armenian merchants from New Julfa. These “transimperial cosmopolitans,” according to Sebouh Aslanian, operated across the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean but traded within even tighter networks of trust based almost exclusively on native-place ties to New Julfa. For the Armenian merchants, as for Ōmi shōnin as explained later in this section, long-distance

trading required not just high mobility but a fixed center at home as well as sedentary nodes outside, “anchor points” for the circulation of capital, personnel, and information.⁸⁹ It was also through this mechanism that itinerant peddlers simultaneously developed a grasp of the larger geo-body of Tokugawa and forged a sense of belonging to Ōmi: multiple and overlapping loyalties that characterized their disposition as expansive and parochial in equal measure as local cosmopolitans.

As a method of accumulating capital, Ōmi merchants employed a distinctive sales strategy known as *mochikudari akinai*, efficient wholesale-style peddling of local products during their travel to and from commercial destinations. During their early phase of peddling, most merchants trekked to the provinces in Kantō and Tōhoku, hawking manufactures of Ōmi and finished goods from the Kyoto–Osaka region. For their return journey, they purchased raw materials and local specialties of these eastern and northeastern provinces (collectively called *noboseni* [goods going up]), to be sold en route to and back in Ōmi and its vicinity. *Mochikudari akinai* was not a one-time business. As Suenaga Kunitoshi explains, “It required traveling every year to a province or region they had laid their eyes on, and cultivating a clientele (among local merchants) where they had no prior face-to-face contact.”⁹⁰ For Ōmi merchants who traded with strangers rather than fellow villagers, uppermost in their minds was gaining trust and acceptance among the locals—a task made all the more critical by the use of Ōmi natives in running their distant branches.

Enterprising merchants, who set up shop in multiple key places of operation, carried out *mochikudari akinai* on a greater scale—a commercial method known as *shokoku sanbutsu mawashi*, literally “rotating products of the provinces.” Utilizing the distribution and information networks between branches, the strategy of *shokoku sanbutsu mawashi* coordinated supply and demand across long distance and duration, allowing merchants to monitor and take advantage of the price differentials between regions.⁹¹ Hachiman merchants had by the early nineteenth century perfected this technique of conducting trade on both legs of their journey on a wide geographical scale. For instance, the scholar-official Okada Bun'en explained that they “bring over local specialties of Kyoto, Osaka, and the entire provinces of the west, not to mention products of Ōmi, to the eastern provinces for sale. On their return journey they purchase *hakama* fabric of Sendai, striped cotton textiles of Shimotsuke, safflower of Dewa, trendy textile goods of Jōshū [Kōzuke] and Kiryū, and kelp and herring roe of Ezo, (all of which) to sell off in Jōshū and the western provinces.”⁹²

Before the age of wheels and telegraph, commercial exchange in Japan and elsewhere was embedded in what Jonathan Levy calls the “space-time of the physical economy—the temporal rhythms and geographical settings of production, distribution, and consumption.”⁹³ The production of crops and commodities—from hemp in Ōmi to herring in Hokkaido—grown, harvested, and sold at different times and in different provinces, generated space-time discontinuities in

production and marketing,⁹⁴ which remained unsynchronized well into the Meiji period. They were compounded by a distinct configuration of the Tokugawa political economy, where material goods were traded across segmented spaces with varying regulations on cross-border exchange set by individual domains. For Ōmi merchants as long-range distributors, opportunities for profit accrued from these space-time disunities that existed between seller and buyer in the parcellized and mountainous terrain of Japan. The physical and political obstacles to communication and transportation, for instance, allowed merchants, with their exclusive knowledge of markets in other provinces, to “set prices of goods at will” capitalizing on the ignorance of consumers. Likely engaged in this practice of monopolistic pricing, one Ōmi merchant, Kawashima Matabē, told his peddling companion while crossing Usui Pass, “If there were five or six tall mountains like this one, the profit would be all the more,” thinking it “most regrettable that there was only one.”⁹⁵ Far from free-market advocates, they were cousins of the long-distance merchants in “Old-Regime capitalism” described by Fernand Braudel, who strove “to keep supply and demand so effectively separated that the terms of trade were entirely dictated by [themselves].”⁹⁶

In forging new frontiers for commercial exchange, Ōmi shōnin also consigned their cargos, shipped in bulk, to local merchants for sale and sought their aid in procuring regional commodities in turn. The strategy of *shokoku sanbutsu mawashi* grew out of a translocal network of these business partners, who were non-Ōmi people.⁹⁷ The importance of trust and social capital among medieval merchants has long been noted. But shared lineage by no means guaranteed the success of a trading diaspora, as Francesca Trivellato has demonstrated through the case of Sephardic merchants. Their cross-cultural trade was facilitated, but not ensured, by intragroup trust; cooperative credit relations with a broad array of non-Jewish agents, to whom key business decisions were entrusted, proved more reliable.⁹⁸ Although Ōmi merchants relied more heavily on kin and native-place ties, the creation of trust with strangers was equally critical to their success and survival as “outsiders” in their business loci. As their network of stores and the range of merchandise grew, some big merchants managed provincial branches by pooling capital from multiple investors (from local merchants as well as the home village), a prototype of the joint-stock venture called *noriai akinai*. It was a strategy to supplement one’s limited capital as much as to disperse risks to offset uncertainties that arose from diversifying business and trading across distance.⁹⁹ Through this partnership, the merchants also shared management assets, among them trust, customers, specialties, and domestic servants (*hōkōnin*) dispatched to oversee branches. This form of business cooperation was prevalent among merchants from Hino.¹⁰⁰

As the well-studied case of the Nakai Genzaemon family shows, some of these merchants adopted a sophisticated system of double-entry bookkeeping in running their business. Their method of reporting profit and loss—entering

each transaction as a debit in one account and a credit in another on a balance sheet—resembled but developed entirely independently from the European counterpart.¹⁰¹ One of Nakai's joint ventures—to export dry goods of Kansai to the Ōu region and import raw silk, in turn, for local textile manufacturers in Kansai¹⁰²—demonstrated another progressive aspect of Ōmi commerce. It stipulated not simply that dividends be allocated according to the amount of capital invested in the partnership but that additional contributions (*tsuikakin*) be assessed likewise in the case of business loss. Equivalent to the “unlimited liability of a modern corporation” that holds all partners liable for debts, this obligation made Nakai's venture also comparable in operation to the East India Company, which assessed such mandatory contributions on a pro rata basis.¹⁰³

Merchants from Ōmi occasionally found themselves competing with one another over provincial markets, as evinced by not a few instances of conflict between Hino and Hachiman natives or rivalries between individual stores.¹⁰⁴ Apart from cultivating trust with the host community, generating networks of trust and solidarity among themselves involved effort and delicate negotiation of their boundaries. It was a matter of equal or greater concern to Julfan Armenians, who used only fellow Julfans as trading agents. In the northern borderland of the Qing empire, sojourner merchants of Shanxi relied similarly on native-place ties, transferring the tradition of temple-centered self-governance (*she*) from their villages to foster business cooperation and collectively cope with “the precarity of frontier life.”¹⁰⁵ As businesses expanded, so did the daily costs of running branches. To keep overhead low, Ōmi merchants often consigned their goods to fellow peddlers from home, rather than trading on their premises. To minimize internecine competition, too, they formed mutual trade associations (known as *kumiai* and *kō*)¹⁰⁶ in provincial centers of their operation, which in some cases became joint ventures.

Ōmi merchants, once established, proffered advice as well as capital to novices and young villagers seeking to start a business of their own. Even when they defaulted on loans, the merchant lenders customarily accepted a rewritten “promise to repay when one's business improved [at an indefinite time] in the future.”¹⁰⁷ In another gesture of their camaraderie, as noted earlier, merchants from Hino utilized a network of inns designated for overnight guests from the same locality.¹⁰⁸ These inns and other diasporic institutions like mutual trade associations constituted a vital part of Ōmi information networks, along with flows of business correspondence and family letters that similarly sustained the far-flung communities of Sephardic Jews, Armenians, and Hokkien Chinese and their “social and cultural integrity” across borders.¹⁰⁹

Many Ōmi merchants diversified their careers over time by adding different businesses to their portfolio. Big merchants, once attaining a measure of wealth, typically used that reserve of capital to engage in moneylending, a strategy commonly adopted by diasporic traders around the world. They opened pawnshops and money exchanges in the cities of Edo, Osaka, and Kyoto, catering to a diverse

clientele ranging from daimyo down to impoverished samurai and peasants.¹¹⁰ The *Seji kenmonroku* (A Record of Worldly Affairs Seen and Heard; 1816), an anonymous commentary on cultural life in Edo, noted the ubiquity of money exchangers from Ōmi. Along with their rivals from Ise, they ran “many varieties of shops named ‘Ōmiya,’ reported the author, “from pawnbrokers and money exchangers to sake dealers.” “Their head stores and branches, [managed by] family members, continue to prosper,” while their owners resided back home in Ōmi, “year after year gathering in enormous profit from Edo without expending much effort.”¹¹¹

If this multinodal-cum-monocentric network of Ōmi stores resembled the operation of Julfan traders and their Multani Indian counterparts,¹¹² the internal organization of their home headquarters had much in common with fellow “lineage businesses” in the greater Kyoto area.¹¹³ Ōmi merchant households followed a variation of the system of labor hierarchy and apprenticeship shared broadly by their western neighbors. Although harnessing kinship ties was customary in early modern commerce, Ōmi merchants took particular pains to hire apprentices from their home village or its vicinity. The closer to the stem family, the more favored and trusted they were to manage distant branches in the future. The apprentices were nurtured and trained through a system locally known as *zaisho nobori* (returning home). In what amounted to a lifelong apprenticeship, male store clerks typically began as *decchi* in their early teens and advanced through the ranks of *tedai* and *bantō*. After working for about twenty years, they eventually became a manager and set up a branch family in the early to mid-thirties, when they were permitted to marry.¹¹⁴ Stationed in faraway branches, apprentices rarely saw their families in Ōmi. Depending on their rank, they were allowed to return to Ōmi once every five to seven years for a period of about fifty days (including the days of travel).¹¹⁵ During this period of homecoming, each employee’s performance was evaluated by the store. Ideally, they would resume work and get promoted as a result of a review, but in the case of poor performance, they were retrained by the stem family in Ōmi or simply discharged. Dropout rates were high. In the Tonomura Uhē family, for instance, more than half the 179 apprentices hired between 1856 and 1907 left the store within five years of employment for a variety of reasons: death, illness, “misconduct,” dismissal, and “running away.”¹¹⁶ In the all-male shop environment, the temptation was also great for apprentices to “occasionally slip out of the house at night to play (with geisha) at tea houses”¹¹⁷; the discovery of such misdeeds could send them back home.¹¹⁸ Thus, while allowing employees to reunite with their families, the system of *zaisho nobori* functioned more critically as a mechanism for identifying superior prospects and weeding out the incompetent. But herein lay the irony built into this system of “perpetual dependency” on the employer: the more successfully an apprentice performed, the more delayed was his manhood—that is, the masculine imperative to have a family and a store of his own.¹¹⁹

Another practice common to the greater Kyoto area was to place emphasis on merit rather than heredity (or primogeniture) in selecting the head of the family

business. In an Ōmi merchant household, everyone from lowly store clerks to managers was held to high standards of conduct. Established houses followed a strict policy of replacing an errant master with another relative or an elder employee. This practice of “forced retirement” was codified and sanctioned by their family creeds, which defined maintaining the family fortune as a moral duty to their ancestors.¹²⁰ Even the omnipotent head of a household was not spared the blame for business failure, especially when understood as the moral failings of individual character (such as dissipation and neglect), rather than the inevitable corollary of risk taking.¹²¹ Although rare, such forced dismissals do appear in some family records. The eighth head of the Nishikawa Jingorō family was compelled to retire in 1812, having squandered the store’s reserve money and neglected his managerial duties. Pressured by their own clerks and apprentices, a few heads of other Ōmi merchant houses were discharged on the grounds of fecklessness.¹²²

This style of business, which gave every employee a stake in management, also made the role of women indispensable to merchant households in Ōmi and its vicinity. Whether housemasters or servants, Ōmi merchants could not have conducted their duties were it not for the help of their wife, who took care of the home in her husband’s recurrent absences—for such a long stretch of time, indeed, that wives of Hino merchants sojourning in eastern Japan were dubbed “Kantō widows” (*goke*). In addition to raising children, wives of employees had to manage a family budget and handle all interactions with the stem family. As for wives of storeowners who routinely conducted a tour of stores and branches for several months to half a year,¹²³ their responsibilities were boundless. Apart from managing her own family, the wife of an established merchant also managed daily aspects of business, such as shipping food and supplies to distant branches and handling their money and merchandise stock stored at a warehouse back home. She was solely responsible for taking care of new apprentices, whom she helped to hire; she not only sewed their kimono, robes, and aprons but also taught these children practical skills (reading, writing, arithmetic) and ethics. While engaging them in various household chores, the wife evaluated the abilities of individual apprentices before assigning them to specific branches, which involved making managerial decisions about who should serve which positions and where. At times she took charge of “reforming” employees who had fared poorly by drilling them in the ways of commerce and family tradition, in the hope of returning them to work. In the event of the death of the master, the wife’s tasks further multiplied, as she had to ensure the survival of the family business by anointing and nurturing a successor.¹²⁴ In a spatial division of gendered labor, one that also underpinned “split families” of Chinese migrants, Ōmi women assumed a critical role in managing business as well as nurturing human capital required for diasporic commerce.¹²⁵

To prepare for these duties, well-to-do families in Ōmi began sending daughters of marriageable age to apprentice with an established merchant household. During this period of service (known as *shiofumi*), a young woman waited on the

master and his wife as “a head female servant” and learned manners and skills essential for becoming the wife of an Ōmi merchant. These skills involved hosting visitors and long-term guests, including men of letters like masters of tea and flower arrangement.¹²⁶ The importance of cultivating sociability was codified by some family creeds. The Fujii family code (1902), which drew on “customs inherited from the family ancestors,” provided detailed instructions for wives and especially mothers on educating children and serving as a “moral exemplar.” Designed to “nurture future business partners,” they encouraged mothers to “go outdoors and travel” with their children as an opportunity to teach them new knowledge.¹²⁷

If Ōmi merchants were agents of the emerging market economy governed by the logic of competition, so were they products of political patronage. In an era of domain monopolies, the success of merchant houses was necessarily dependent on the good will of local lords, who granted them permission to trade in the first place. Even more so were itinerant peddlers, who expanded their business turf by plying in distant communities without preexisting ties or initial feudal protection.¹²⁸ Local domain authorities commonly lent support to Ōmi merchants by granting them trading privileges and access to markets in return for license fees, levies, and various forms of financial contribution. Given their chronically stretched coffers, many daimyo turned to highly capitalized merchants from Ōmi as a source of credit to keep up their consumption or undertake public works projects. And in many cases, the merchants obliged by serving as moneylenders and financiers to the provincial lord. The result was a relationship of interdependence, reflective of the Tokugawa realities of the merchant and samurai classes at large, in which the former enjoyed advantageous connections to the latter, while generally refraining from politics and respecting the feudal status quo.¹²⁹ This appears to have been part of a broader pattern discerned among early modern diasporic traders, according to Philip D. Curtin—though their distance from politics should not be equated with political indifference.¹³⁰ The way some merchants of Ōmi were woven into the feudal structure of power resembled the “symbiotic relationship” Shanxi and Huizhou merchants formed with the late imperial state. Salt merchants of Huizhou maintained their dominant status in the government monopoly by making extra-tax “donations” to the Qing’s privy purse. More “expansionist” were Shanxi merchants, who played a central role in frontier trade and governance on the Mongolian steppe. They also developed an empire-wide network of remittance banking that from the mid-nineteenth century began to serve local gentry and officials.¹³¹

For Ōmi merchants, whose family creeds often explicitly admonished against meddling in politics, connections to political power could work both ways. On the one hand, they brought commercial privileges and official patronage, as enjoyed by Kobayashi Ginemon in his close ties with the Hikone domain. On the other hand, they could impose an onerous burden on the merchants, many of whom ended up having to write off bad debts of their increasingly impoverished samurai

clientele. A mutually binding relationship with the regional lord could even lead to the family's ruin, as happened to Nakai Genzaemon, a pawnshop owner from Hino. The Nakai family was ensnared in credit relations with the Sendai domain, whose authorities abused their demand for *onkokuon* (a return of one's debt of gratitude to the country) to have their debts revoked. As the domain's financial situation grew worse, Nakai was compelled to annul his request for repayment in exchange for the right to bear a surname and a sword. Unable to extricate itself from the domain's treasury and its deepening trouble, Nakai's store in Sendai eventually went bankrupt.¹³²

MAXIMS OF ŌMI SHŌNIN

In a practice borrowed from the samurai class, Ōmi merchant households set down codes of business practice for all members to follow in family creeds (*kakun*), accompanied by a more detailed set of store regulations (*tensoku*).¹³³ To historians of Ōmi shōnin, these are among the trickiest documents to read: they are rules of conduct, not records of their actual deeds. Biographies left by their families offer us anecdotes and fragments of lived experience, but prone to adulation, they seldom contain evidence of profiteering members or wayward sons. Keeping these limitations in mind but without entirely discounting the elocutionary force of these in-house documents, I will attempt to unpack a set of maxims that merchants from Ōmi were *expected* to observe in trading across distance.

Tokugawa writers and guidebooks advised travelers to other provinces to be mindful of being in unfamiliar territory and respectful of "local language and customs."¹³⁴ So did Ōmi merchants, reminding their posterity to beware of their station as outsiders during their sojourn. This mindset as "foreigners"¹³⁵ engaged in cross-cultural trade can be traced to the family creed of a hemp merchant from Kanzaki, Nakamura Jihē II (1684–1757). One article reads: "When peddling in a foreign province, think of serving and bringing joy to all people in the province, instead of thinking only of your own affairs or coveting high profit" and "maintain faith in the gods [*kami*] and Buddha at all times."¹³⁶ In these words left to his adopted heir in 1754, Nakamura stressed the larger duty of Ōmi peddlers as "servants of the people," one that required deepening religious belief and checking personal greed. "Commerce is the work of Bodhisattva," intoned Itō Chūbē I, another celebrated pious merchant from Ōmi. He expounded on the spirit of *kyōson kyōei* (coexistence, co-prosperity), reportedly preaching to his employees daily that "the value of commerce was to benefit both the seller and the buyer, and to fill the needs of society in accordance with the wishes of Buddha."¹³⁷

The words of Nakamura and Itō capture the central ethos of Ōmi merchants, which is often summarized in terms of *sanpō yoshi*: "three-way satisfaction for the seller, the buyer, and the community." Coined by a postwar scholar Ogura Eiichirō, *sanpō yoshi* means that business should not only benefit the parties involved in a transaction but also promote the overall welfare of society. The concept

underscores the premium Ōmi shōnin as long-distance traders placed on service to the broader public beyond the temporal authorities. In accord with the Shin-Buddhist doctrine of *jiri-rita* (profiting both self and others),¹³⁸ they were expected to treat their business as a public good rather than a profit-making enterprise: to “deliver merchandise to places with a shortage.”¹³⁹

Paired with the spirit of service was the principle of *hakuri tabai* (low profit, large return) that guided Ōmi merchants who dealt in mass consumer goods. One clause in the house code of Nishikawa Jingorō, dated 1807, stressed the policy of “selling many at low margin” and “at fixed prices instead of haggling”; it admonished against hiking prices even in times of shortage to avoid doing anything harmful to society.¹⁴⁰ A book of “directions” compiled in 1856 by the Tonomura Yozaemon family¹⁴¹ summed up “the ultimate essence of business” as “selling at low prices to the point of regretting.”¹⁴² Though altruistic in rhetoric, *hakuri tabai* was another savvy strategy adopted by Ōmi merchants to ensure their success in the long run. It was in this vein, one suspects, that Tsukamoto Sadaemon II (1826–1905), a Gokashō merchant from Kanzaki, reversed his sales policy from “high profit, small volume” to “low profit, large volume” after inheriting his family business in 1851.¹⁴³

Prominent merchants from Ōmi gave generously in times of need, ostensibly abiding by another Buddhist ethic, that of *intoku zenji* (secret acts of charity [are good]). They built bridges and roads and put up streetlamps, made large donations to local shrines and temples, and distributed rice to the poor during periods of bad harvest.¹⁴⁴ They also assisted those in dire straits by helping them find work or foregoing their debt payments. And to the extent possible, Ōmi merchants renovated or repaired their stores during recession as a way to help boost the local economy. The translocality of sojourning merchants demanded they demonstrate their commitment to both home and host places through these acts of charity. Rendered as a means of repaying the communities to whom their success owed, their contributions to public projects in business locales were assuredly calculated to gain the trust of locals and allow entrepreneurial “outsiders” to operate in their midst.¹⁴⁵ Making good deeds in accordance with one’s fortune was stressed by Nishikawa Riemon (1591–1646), a merchant from Hachiman. As his house code held, a family “would prosper if righteousness [*gi*] were prioritized over profit”¹⁴⁶—or to put it the other way around, a merchant should strive to become a man of virtue as his business prospered.

This emphasis on ethical obligation resonated with the philosophical agenda of Tokugawa thinkers who emerged from the eighteenth century to justify the moral worth of commerce. To a largely merchant audience in Kyoto, Ishida Baigan (1685–1744) preached the “study of the heart” (*Shingaku*), defining wealth as righteous and its accumulation intrinsically beneficial to “society” and in accord with “Heaven’s will” (which echoed the notion of “enlightened self-interest” in English classical liberalism).¹⁴⁷ While Ishida stressed devotion to mundane duties as a path of enlightenment, merchant-scholars of the Kaitokudō Academy in Osaka (1726)

searched through Confucian texts for an alternative epistemology to locate virtue in their commercial endeavors.¹⁴⁸ Ōmi merchants were exposed to, if not directly taught, these ideas, which elevated merchants without fundamentally eroding the Tokugawa order centered on the samurai class.¹⁴⁹ One study points to their many parallels with long-distance merchants of Shanxi, who also embraced the Confucian values of honesty and loyalty and “an ascetic ethic” to legitimate and apprehend the status of merchants relative to warriors and bureaucrats.¹⁵⁰ Sojourner merchants of Huizhou went further, deploying the image of their native place and themselves as exemplars of Zhu Xi Confucianism to justify their economic dominance in the eyes of hostile locals.¹⁵¹

Emphasis on frugality and diligence, if ubiquitous in Tokugawa merchant houses, was codified as the *raison d'être* of Ōmi shōnin; they were instructed from a young age to regard hard work as their calling and a path to salvation. The majority followed the Shin sect of Buddhism (Jōdo Shinshū), whose doctrine stressed these very qualities to reconcile the pursuit of profit with religious devotion. For its emphasis on “diligence and economy, and an inner-worldly asceticism” and for its separation of political obligations to one’s feudal lord from religious values, Shin Buddhism has been called “the closest Japanese analogue to Western Protestantism.”¹⁵² This Protestant analogy would work only if one made sweeping assertions about the religion and its relationship to “economic rationalization” regardless of doctrinal differences or treated “extraordinarily generalized phenomena like self-discipline or individual spiritual autonomy . . . as theological universals.”¹⁵³ The flaws in this Weberian comparison aside, Ōmi merchants came to be closely associated with these highly idealized traits as devout practitioners of Shin faith (their modern successors, as we will see, would relish the exercise of finding such alleged affinity). Their biographies, indeed, read like morality tales, each of which portrays the family founder as an exemplar who made a religion of industry and austerity or, as one commentator put it, made “diligence the flesh and perseverance the bone.”¹⁵⁴

For his descendants and admirers alike, Matsui Kyūzaemon III was Shin Buddhism incarnate. Matsui’s store was named Hoshikyū, and its trademark depicted a balance pole with two dots above and below denoting stars, both central symbols of diligence in Ōmi. According to his biography, the logo signified “a dedication to work and perseverance” wherein “one leaves in the morning carrying a balance pole with stars over him [i.e., before dawn], and returns in the evening treading stars [i.e. after dusk].” Matsui apparently “put this trademark into practice” daily, whether peddling afar or working at home. His industry was matched only by his frugality. For all public occasions, he “never once wore silk,” “putting on nothing other than hand-woven cotton,” and wearing straw sandals (instead of rain- or snow-clogs) in all weathers.¹⁵⁵

Though such a life of extreme economy was portrayed as an expression of piety, the family creed of Nakai Genzaemon made no effort to hide a profit motive behind the daily preachings of frugality: “If you want to make money, you must

first of all be thrifty and dedicate yourself to commerce, abstaining from banquets, amusements, and extravagance, and maintaining good health.”¹⁵⁶ While shunning “wasteful expenditures,” merchant devotees “lavished money on donations” to shrines and Shin-sect temples that dotted the landscape of Ōmi, with a particularly dense cluster east of Lake Biwa.¹⁵⁷ The “Ōmi merchant ethos” was reared in this religious milieu rich in the historical influence of Rennyo,¹⁵⁸ but driven no less by the desire to enrich one’s own family and boost its fortune.

Merchant house codes often harped on the need to obey the government and observe its laws, but the ultimate loyalty of Ōmi merchants lay with their progenitors. “The house itself is a sacred entity,” observed Robert Bellah, where “all members including the living head” considered themselves, first and foremost, servants or “clerks [*tedai*] of the ancestors” to whom they owed their gratitude and service.¹⁵⁹ For Ōmi merchants to run a family business meant to maintain their patrimony in a shrine of commerce, as it were. But this seemingly timeless sense of ancestral duty, in fact, gained in weightiness over time: as the family tree grew more branches, a thickening network of stores served to reinforce the importance of the stem family as a central unit of Tokugawa economic life.¹⁶⁰ Beyond a religious commitment, ancestor worship was part of a strategy of maintenance and growth to Ōmi merchant houses, who understood business as a “semisacred” form of labor demanded by the family.

Many basic tenets of the Ōmi commercial philosophy outlined above were echoed by merchants elsewhere. Interwoven with Buddhist precepts and elements of Confucian and Shinto thought, the house codes of Mitsui and other merchant families in Edo or Osaka demonstrated a similar mix of economic pragmatism and conservatism. They preached devotion to commerce, reminding the progeny that family business took precedence over all other obligations including government service, while cautioning them against risky ventures and urging them to guard family fortune.¹⁶¹ What permeated their family creeds was an overarching ethic that had internalized “the moral philosophy of the samurai class”: its emphasis on “diligence, frugality, obedience to the government, and concern for the reputation of the house.”¹⁶² The effect of this imitation was to portray merchants as no less virtuous and righteous than the Confucian-minded warriors who considered commerce beneath their station. In short, the house codes did for their employees what the aforementioned thinkers such as Ishida Baigan did for the Tokugawa merchant class at large.¹⁶³ To the extent that merchant houses abided by a shared ethic and concern to justify their worthiness, then, Ōmi shōnin represented not so much a regional peculiarity as a universal aspiration for recognition as the early modern merchant at his finest:¹⁶⁴ one who steadfastly applied himself to work by following the dictates of family, religion, and society as a whole.

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For all their commonalities with tradesmen elsewhere, merchants from Ōmi came to be perceived widely in Tokugawa Japan as being in a class of their own. Their

competitors from the neighboring province of Ise also operated beyond its borders, but their activities were largely limited to Edo.¹⁶⁵ Collectively, Ōmi peddlers came to distinguish themselves as diasporic traders, a geographically dispersed group of merchants bound by their own networks of markets, transportation, capital, and trust. Admittedly many fewer than the Greek, Jewish, Armenian, or Chinese merchants who operated across seas and continents, Ōmi shōnin, I submit, were different in scale but not in kind from these early modern contemporaries. They developed broadly similar strategies, logic, and organization of cross-border commerce that come into view when considered parallel to, rather than in isolation from, one another. Within the circumscribed context of the Tokugawa polity, Ōmi merchants forged a loosely organized network through which they coordinated risky, long-distance trading voyages, exchanging market information, lending money to one another, pooling capital to launch joint ventures, and in some cases, chartering and building ships to transport cargos, as we will see below. In the way some large storeowners coordinated demand and supply over multiple provinces and semiautonomous fiefdoms, Ōmi merchants also anticipated the operation of modern trading firms¹⁶⁶—much like their European counterparts trading across the eastern Mediterranean, the Black Sea, and Northern Europe.¹⁶⁷

By the early nineteenth century, Ōmi merchants had not only spread themselves far and wide across the archipelago; they had been firmly lodged in Japan's biggest cities, which functioned as nodes of their trading diaspora. They were involved in "virtually every business transaction in Osaka,"¹⁶⁸ the central entrepôt from which goods were distributed to the rest of the Tokugawa realm. The thoroughfares of Honmachi in Osaka and Sanjō in Kyoto were lined by large and small stores named Ōmi-ya, while merchant tycoons like Nishikawa Jingorō and Tonomura Yozaemon ensconced themselves at the heart of Edo's Nihonbashi district, carrying their cachet well into the Meiji period.¹⁶⁹ Through their pawnshops and money exchanges, Ōmi merchants also provided a crucial source of funds for samurai, who increasingly strained to maintain their standard of living. And they extended credit to daimyo, if with grudging obedience, so frequently that one scholar has called Ōmi "the center of finance" in the Tokugawa money economy.¹⁷⁰ A status shared by Osaka, Ōmi's role as financier placed its merchants modestly in the company of merchant-bankers of Shanxi, whose remittance business made the northern hinterland the financial hub of the Qing, or their counterparts of Frankfurt, who supported royal and princely excess and carried their influence into the twentieth century, along with a reputation for greed, acumen, and "efficiency."¹⁷¹

Ōmi merchants' influence was also visible in provincial urban centers. Their trading activities helped to spread the process of rural industrialization and regional specialization at both ends of their journey. In marketing the products of their home province and its vicinity, Ōmi merchants fostered the growth of local cottage industries such as sake brewing and the manufacturing of medicine and lacquerware, techniques they transplanted to their business locales in Kantō

and Tōhoku. By penetrating distant sites of production and transporting their commodities up and down the archipelago, they also boosted interprovincial trade and connected the advanced economies of Kinai to markets as far away as Matsumae and Kyūshū.

In sum, Ōmi merchants facilitated the process of economic integration under the Pax Tokugawa by mediating all aspects of its market economy, from commerce and manufacturing to finance: the growth of Japanese “capitalism from within.”¹⁷² The same mercantile policies that harnessed residents of many domains to the production of export commodities called the diasporic Ōmi shōnin into being. Unburdened by similar obligations at home, they operated between semiautarkic economies, capturing a share of wholesaling rights over the export of local products for distant markets. Conversely, unrelenting quest for profit allowed Yamanaka Riemon (?–1879) to even break into Tosa’s protected economy, winning the exclusive right to purvey hemp cloth to the domain that upheld a universal ban on wearing silk.¹⁷³ In integrating dispersed spaces and smaller units of production into a larger circuitry of exchange, itinerant merchants of Ōmi epitomized the role of “circulating capital” that shaped most early modern economies “in the period before industrialization.”¹⁷⁴ As they extended their capital over a wide geography, so did they exert indirect control over rural industries and labor, as illustrated by the case of the Noto Peninsula.

This control spread from the main islands of Honshū across the waters to Hokkaido. Claimed by the Tokugawa rulers in the 1650s, the northern frontier of *Ezo*—a term used to refer to its Ainu inhabitants as well as their land—was the site of early Japanese colonization and settlement “overseas” along with the southern Pacific region. Matsumae domain’s consolidation of this frontier encouraged an extension of trading networks by Ōmi merchants into Ainu territory—not unlike the way diasporic trajectories from Shanxi stretched along and across the Inner Asian frontiers of Qing state expansion.¹⁷⁵ Among the first to set up shop in Matsumae, merchants from Ōmi fueled and financed its export industry and inshore fisheries, which worked profound and devastating effects on the Ainu communities. The forces of the market and colonialism intertwined in their subsumption of native labor to mainland capital, turning Hokkaido into yet another node of their trading diaspora.