

Conclusion

Building on the legacy of their Tokugawa forebears who bridged land and sea by peddling across the Japanese archipelago, merchants and other provincials of Shiga ventured abroad in the dawning age of global migration, capital, and empire. “Long cursed with flood,” inhabitants of the eastern littoral had completely “conquered the fear of water,” noted one reporter in 1916; now they shuttled between their home and foreign lands “more frequently than vessels plied across Lake Biwa.”¹ Their cyclical and seasonal voyages gave rise to what I have called a trans-pacific diaspora of Shiga people, who, regardless of family lineage or hamlet of birth, claimed the Ōmi shōnin as shared local inheritance.

Scholars for decades have shown how Japan, as a latecomer to imperialism and industrial capitalism, borrowed and adopted Western knowledge, techniques, and language of expansion. Few have explained how the nation’s provincials might have drawn inspiration from their own history of commerce. This book has highlighted the role of merchants of Ōmi, both as a template for and central actors in these processes of global engagement, conventionally framed as state-led projects. By the end of the Tokugawa era, Ōmi merchants had developed a distinctive culture and ethos of “expeditionary commerce” that extended from the mainland of Honshū to the northern island of Hokkaido. Local and national leaders of Meiji Japan turned to these merchants for initiative, exhorting them to not rest on their laurels but to steer the island nation into the global marketplace. Direct and self-proclaimed descendants of Ōmi shōnin responded by launching a flurry of projects, from spinning mills to vocational schools. A young generation of Shiga natives signaled a commitment to pursuing overseas careers as stewards of provincial heritage in Japan’s rising empire in East Asia. Even humble farmers viewed their seasonal work abroad as a seamless extension of ancestral commerce and an integral part of Japan’s imperial project, as they planted a mercantile colony on the Pacific coast of North America. Collectively, their activities and aspirations capture an overlooked dynamic that becomes legible at the scale of a region: how

the sinews of tradition were called up for the national goal of expansion through business, trade, industry, education, and migration.

Provincializing expansion through the lens of Ōmi, this book hopes to open a new methodological horizon for the entangled histories of empire and diaspora. Using diaspora as a conceptual aperture to widen the bounds of local history, my analysis of Ōmi merchants over the *longue durée* has aimed to uncover dynamics hitherto buried or isolated in the scholarship on imperial Japan: continuities from the early modern to the modern era in the process and ethos of border-crossing, and multiple vectors and modalities of expansion that led to the dispersal of Japanese around the Pacific world. In tracing the diasporic praxis and ethos of Ōmi merchants, I have conceptualized their portability across time and space in two broad ways. One is rescaling, a stretching across multiple spaces (local, national, continental, transpacific, and global) of economic activities, customs, values, and social relations rooted in the locality of Ōmi, which themselves were constantly invented anew. The other is grafting, a synthesis of non-synchronous and seemingly incompatible practices associated with new and inherited forms of commerce. I have deployed these spatiotemporal metaphors for elucidating both the role of provincials in overseas expansion and how these provincials understood their part in this process.

Throughout the long history of Ōmi merchants, the textile industry was one area where they left their lasting imprint on national and global scales. When viewed from the perspective of Kansai, the parallel histories of capitalism and colonialism would look interwoven as centuries-long processes led and mediated by regional actors, rather than a rupture from the provincial past instigated by the modernizing state. This long-term approach, taken by scholars of industrial revolutions in Japan and elsewhere, can also be applied to the empire, I contend, if we recognize it as growing out of the same incremental process that drove the industrialization of the Tokugawa countryside. Their interlocking vectors of expansion were first forged on the colonial frontier of Hokkaido. Seafaring merchants of Ōmi fueled the Matsumae regime of contract fisheries, importing textiles and mainland goods in exchange for marine products harvested by indigenous Ainu labor. They were followed by a new generation of Ōmi-born capitalists and industrialists, the so-called *Gōshū zaibatsu*, who spearheaded Japan's cotton imperialism in the treaty ports of China, while capturing markets around the globe. Their cousins in Korea and Manchuria also wielded empire-wide influence through mass retail and aided the colonial project of assimilation by molding a consumer society oriented to the metropole. Few among those who crossed the Pacific had direct merchant lineage, yet these Shiga migrants claiming shared patrimony led mercantile expansionism from their foothold in Vancouver. From Itōchū and Minakai in colonial East Asia to immigrant business owners in Canada, lineal and lateral scions of Ōmi shōnin continued to open new frontiers of trade, industry, labor, and migration beyond provincial and national borders. In linking Kansai directly to the world economy,

moreover, they displaced Chinese middlemen, overcame the dominance of foreign agents in Kōbe and Yokohama, and pushed the boundaries of Japanese power far across the sea, at times trailing, at times going ahead of the flag. The provincials of Ōmi-Shiga, in short, became global players on the strength of their lived tradition.

A closer look at some of these individuals and family records reveals how lessons of Ōmi commerce stayed relevant oceans away, braiding old and new in their operations. Store owners across the Shiga diaspora drew on a reservoir of accumulated wisdom about cross-border trading and strategies of business and risk management long known to Ōmi shōnin. Even as their family concerns morphed into modern corporations or diversified into new sectors, traditional bonds of trust proved durable, as did the system of apprenticeship, devotion to Shin Buddhism, and the ethic of social service. The store codes of Itōchū and Minakai continually reminded employees of their rootedness in the ancestral home of Ōmi, scattered as they were across overseas markets and branches. Most Ōmi-lineage businesses also remained within the bounds and dictates of patriarchal family. Kinship, the traditional hedge against the peril of long-distance commerce, shored up their business into the age of capitalism, and native-place loyalty functioned as a bulwark against its “radical uncertainties”²—whether market volatility inherent in the cotton trade, recurrent waves of racial exclusion in America, or general insecurities of operating in foreign markets. Just as risks were enclosed within social and family relations, what appeared to be modern corporate practices, such as diversification and joint stock ventures, were often built on early modern precedents set by Ōmi merchant families.

Provincializing empire also means capturing how provincials apprehended their place in the world on their own terms. Shiga natives, as I have shown, often made sense of regional heritage and of their overseas endeavors in diasporic terms. Whether textile trade, colonial business, or labor migration, each activity was rendered as a modern variant of translocal commerce pioneered by Ōmi merchant forebears, a spatial and scalar reconfiguration of their *modus operandi*. In turn, merchants, migrants, and students, through cross-cultural encounters abroad, reaffirmed their shared identity as the heirs of entrepreneurial pioneers, as they led and partook in the colonization of territories on one side of the Pacific or confronted white racism on the other. Ōmi as a “place embodies a historical layering of crystallized social relations.”³ So too the Shiga diaspora—Ōmi stretched across the ocean—embodied layerings of time, each grafted onto the existing foundation by those laying claim to expeditionary commerce as a defining province of Shiga people.

Their sense of local belonging, far from withering, grew only stronger through their increasingly globalized circuits of trade, work, and travel. While traversing overseas circuits and networks, indeed, the provincials simultaneously wove their place into global geographies and histories of expansion. I have tried to convey how these processes went hand in hand in the far-flung lives

and imaginaries of Shiga people. From a diary and letters of Ōmi businessmen to essays penned by students and teachers in Hikone, regional texts reveal how locally embedded actors were thinking globally about their place in the nation, empire, and the world. Through business, travel, and sojourns abroad, many provincials derived from their encounters transoceanic perspectives on commerce and world power, developing their multiscalar sensibilities as local cosmopolitans. Their private and published writings, in turn, drew analogies between mercantile people of Ōmi and diasporic communities across history, from the Hanseatic League to Jews, German immigrants, and Chinese overseas. Bringing the local into the global and vice versa, the provincials of Ōmi collectively crafted a global sense of their place as they participated in shaping the world of global exchange. Far from a static and fixed space on a map, Ōmi was enlivened by border crossings of its inhabitants, both real and imagined.

Looking at the emergent world of global capitalism through a provincial lens reveals further local-global interplay not registered at the state level. The worldly ethos and paradox of capitalist modernity, for instance, found echoes in the concerns and values shared by Ōmi shōnin: chief among them, how to balance profit making and charity, risk taking and security, faith and business. On their tours of Western nations, Itō Chūbē II and Nakae Katsujirō both conveyed a regionally inflected sense of affinity for Protestant culture and values, identifying in their industrious people an explanation for their ability to expand abroad. Christian businessmen were apostles of thrift and industry not unlike these merchants of Ōmi, who stressed the moral fiber of employees as a requisite for the success of family, corporation, and nation alike. What Ōmi shōnin inherited and passed on, ultimately, was an amalgam of values cherished not only locally but, as Itō and Nakae discovered on their journey, around the industrial world.

The transoceanic flows of provincials can also illuminate anew capitalism as a global phenomenon. To map such movements of Ōmi people around the turn of the twentieth century is to recognize the racial dynamics of the global capitalist system in which they were being embedded. Capitalism's entanglement with race was laid bare in different communities penetrated by Ōmi capital and labor—from the northern lands of Ainu to the fictional colony of *burakumin* in the South Seas, from the Chinese continent to the Canadian West—a transpacific space of flows where Shiga natives became both perpetrators and victims of racial capitalism. As they spread from one side of the imperial Pacific to the other, from a Japanese to an Anglo-Saxon "lake," their thoughts and activities as colonists and emigrants exposed the racial underpinnings of competing capitalist empires, a powerful ideology of difference bridging the Pacific and Atlantic worlds. What Nakae Katsujirō glimpsed and Shiga immigrants came to embody through these crossings was the ambivalent positionality of Japan as "a colored empire" at once dominant and oppressed in the racially partitioned Pacific.⁴

Tracing provincial lives through global circuits of empire brings into relief another critical point that a nation-based frame has obscured: region had its own distinctive relationship to the world, not routed through the metropolis. The cotton industry that connected Kansai directly to world markets was one manifestation of this autonomy. Ōmi's cultural ties to the continent, as imagined by scholars and created by intra-empire flows of Shiga people, represented another. Littoral Ōmi was but one of many "connected places" in Asia where "maritime networks and mobile livelihoods constructed the community" across multiple generations and multiple scales.⁵ Local educators and boosters of Shiga took this point further, as Japan embarked on building its East Asian empire. They strove to establish Ōmi's centrality in national life and imperial politics, stressing its primordial ties to the continent and urging littoral inhabitants to once again venture across the sea. Even as merchants rallied behind the state goals of industry and empire, they too viewed expansion through a distinctly regional lens: as a chance to revitalize their homeland and rehabilitate the name of Ōmi. Empire spawned complex politics of place-making vis-à-vis the center—as well as among localities within, as they competed over the claim to be *the* birthplace of Ōmi shōnin.⁶ Their overall effect was to reinforce rather than fragment a sense of belonging to both national and provincial communities, their loyalties in coexistence rather than in conflict. Overseas expansion not only bound provincials as a nation but simultaneously deepened their attachment and allegiance to native place.

Over the course of the diaspora's ebb and flow, the Ōmi tradition—the sedimented pasts of diasporic merchants and their self-proclaimed offspring—underwent constant reinvention. The "Ōmi shōnin" was a product of its time and place, born of an anxiety that Shiga people, in their peripheral status, might become decoupled from their vaunted commercial heritage. Through the national press and nativist discourse, the itinerant peddler with a balance pole, supported by his wife behind the scenes, came to stand for an indigenous culture of entrepreneurial daring and the expansive character of the Japanese ethnos. In the case of the Itō family, no sooner had the founder, Chūbē I, passed on than the mythmaking began; while he joined a long line of local luminaries as the "last Ōmi shōnin," his wife, not much later, was canonized in a roster of exemplars of Ōmi womanhood. And from this gendered discourse emerged a broader idea, actively disseminated by local boosters, of enterprise as genetic inheritance of Shiga natives: a commercially gifted people sired in a littoral province, with a record of achievements in maritime Ezo and with inborn skills worthy of the sobriquet "Jews of the Pacific." In a slew of biographies and hagiographies of big men, each success and each story of overcoming adversity continually reassured the public and themselves about their authenticity as Ōmi shōnin. The legend of Ōmi merchants, with all their virtues and warts, took shape through this mutually reinforcing dialectic between discourse and practice across the transpacific diaspora.

All of these ideas persisted into the postwar era, along with hundreds of businesses of Ōmi descent.⁷ Although Minakai Department Store perished with the empire after 1945, Itōchū and its affiliates came through the tumultuous years of transition to flourish as multinational firms. Silk-O-Lina is another, if rare, example of survival on the other side of the Pacific. In a 1954 roster of “Shiga people active outside the prefecture,” Itō Chūbē II appears alongside many others educated as “global Ōmi shōnin” at Hasshō and Hikone Kōshō who contributed to Japan’s postwar recovery and growth thereafter.⁸ And a cohort of drapers have stayed in business likewise to join the company of famous “*shinise*” (long-established stores) more than a century old.⁹

A transpacific diaspora of Shiga people also lives on through a global network of prefectural associations. Launched in 1989, the International Shiga People Association (Zenkoku Shiga Kenjinkai Rengōkai) today embraces members in over seventy locales, from Hokkaido to Vancouver, as well as countries in South America, Europe, and Southeast Asia—a scale unparalleled among provincial organizations in Japan. Members of the association stay connected to their ancestral home through a bulletin and a biannual “world conference of Shiga people” held at a branch location. This gathering of descendants of Ōmi peddlers, as the association identifies Shiga people scattered around the globe,¹⁰ is capped typically by a group dance to the tune of “Gōshū *ondo*” (folk song and dance of Ōmi)—the unofficial anthem of Shiga, whose choreography models the figure of an Ōmi shōnin toiling on foreign soil. Through this diasporic network, too, Ōmi-Hachiman in Shiga maintains a sister-city relationship with the town of Matsumae in Hokkaido, where a Buddhist service is jointly held every year to commemorate “the northern expansion of Ōmi shōnin” in the Tokugawa period.¹¹ Conspicuously absent is any acknowledgment of the exploitation of Ainu labor and lands, considered a “taboo topic” by contemporary boosters of Shiga, according to one local historian.¹² Today, as before 1945, state-sponsored remembrance of Ōmi pioneers, like family genealogies carefully curated for posterity, continues to perpetuate a public amnesia about their role in the history of colonial violence on the northern islands.

At their storied birthplace in Shiga, the material landscape once created by the transpacific flows of immigrants continues to distinguish the Kotō region from its rustic environs. What one visitor to the Kanzaki district had observed in 1931 still rings true: “As soon as you step into these small hamlets, you will be amazed by the rows of rich and powerful homesteads” lining their streets.¹³ These relics of the prewar diaspora are preserved in the town of Gokashō Kondō (today’s Higashi Ōmi City), which, as you approach by bus, looms like an island in the midst of paddy fields. Designated one of Japan’s Important Preservation Districts for Historic Buildings, Kondō is a museum unto itself—a dense cluster of tiled-roof houses with white walls formerly owned by merchant families, including the founder of Minakai, and outsize temples and shrines built by their donations. Such monuments to the past grandeur of Ōmi merchants are etched across the vernacular landscape of Shiga.



FIGURE 14. A scene of Hasshō students on a peddling trip in colonial Korea in the film *Tenbin no uta*. Source: Nihon Eizō Kikaku, 2007. Courtesy of Takemoto Kozue, Office Tenbin, Ōtsu, Shiga, Japan.

One of these living monuments is Hasshō. Elevated in status to a high school after war, Hasshō continues to abide by the Ōmi tradition that has become its trademark, engaging students in peddling over the summer.¹⁴ This rite of passage to merchanthood has even been dramatized in a local film production, *Song of a Balance Pole* (*Tenbin no uta*) (1988). Set in the province of Kyōngju in 1930s Korea, part 2 of the film, whose narrative pivots around postwar reminiscences of a fictional Ōmi-born entrepreneur, reenacts overseas peddling by Hasshō pupils, including the young narrator (fig. 14). Hawking miscellaneous Japanese wares to local villagers, their efforts eventually carry the day, but only after overcoming a series of obstacles: language barriers, hostility to the Japanese, and above all, the students' own cultural misunderstandings and ethnic prejudice. The overall message is to emphasize, as Ōmi merchants have done for generations, acceptance by locals as the key to trading with strangers, a lesson made plain by its colonial setting. The film is used widely for training new company recruits and vocational school students in western Japan.¹⁵

In more recent decades, Shiga people have launched renewed efforts to reclaim the history of Ōmi shōnin as their own. Since Japan plunged into prolonged stagnation in the 1990s, prefectural officials and businessmen alike have trained their attention on Ōmi merchants to reevaluate their legacies and draw lessons for local

renewal in the twenty-first century. And through countless forums convened to this end, their teachings have been all but distilled into the single concept of *santō yoshi*, or “three-way satisfaction.” Coined by the scholar Ogura Eiichirō, this credo of balancing the interests and needs of seller, buyer, and society has taken a life of its own. In popular histories of Ōmi merchants intended primarily for businessmen, *santō yoshi* is identified not only as a prescription to counter Japan’s economic decline but as an indigenous precursor of the concept of CSR (Corporate Social Responsibility)—an ethical alternative to the unbridled pursuit of profit driving global capitalism.¹⁶ Its ubiquity in the media and business literature suggests the term has already taken root in Japan’s corporate society and beyond.

Local boosters in Shiga, meanwhile, have come together to launch an ambitious campaign to “spread the spirit of *santō yoshi* worldwide.” A diverse coalition of officials, scholars, corporations, and non-profit organizations¹⁷ have rallied to rebrand their native place around this concept—a mission also advanced through a global network of prefectural associations.¹⁸ Underlying their movement is a desire to preserve the triumphalist narrative of Ōmi shōnin, unblemished by complicity with imperialism and war, as their regional heritage and identity. Among the self-appointed gatekeepers of memory, big corporations of Ōmi lineage have been particularly active in deploying this heritage as rooted cosmopolitans. As global capitalism has come under renewed attack, businesses around the world have seemed more eager than ever to pledge their commitment to ethical governance, aligning their corporate goals with broader movements for labor rights, the environment, racial justice, and social equality.¹⁹ The resonance with *santō yoshi* has not been lost on the various stakeholders in and outside Shiga. A global partner of the World Economic Forum, Itōchū has directly appropriated the concept as its corporate mission, leveraging the “signature stories”²⁰ of its founder to market itself as a stronghold of Ōmi merchant tradition. So have many other companies, with or without Ōmi descent, embracing what they take to be an indigenous version of ethical capitalism, putatively rooted in the deeds and maxims of provincial forefathers. Here again at work is a dynamic we have seen played out throughout the book: global flows of capital, labor, and commodities may have shrunk and collapsed space, but they have by no means undermined the centrality of place. The process of inventing tradition goes on, finding its application in our ever-globalizing world.