

Introduction

Located at the heart of the Japanese main island, the province of Ōmi (present-day Shiga prefecture) is famous for many things. Japan's largest lake occupies about 16 percent of its land. Adjacent to Kyoto and once the seat of the imperial palace, Ōmi also produced its share of diplomats, monks, and scholars of (trans) national stature, who coursed the maritime circuits of exchange in East Asia. But of all the historical luminaries associated with the province, no figure has exerted more dominant influence over the cultural identity of Ōmi than its itinerant peddlers, the so-called Ōmi *shōnin* (merchants). Well known for their entrepreneurial success in long-distance trade, Ōmi *shōnin*, with their iconic image of hawking wares on a balance pole (*tenbinbō*), are a fixture in local and popular histories of early modern Japan (fig. 1). In the heyday of their commerce, when foreign trade was sharply limited by the Tokugawa shogunate (1603–1867), the wholesale activities of Ōmi merchants extended the length of the archipelago, circulating local specialties and commodities to and from areas as far as Ezo (Hokkaido) in the north and Kyūshū in the south (map 2). In the process, they helped spur rural production along the trade routes, bringing distant markets into expansive networks of translocal exchange. Their commercial prowess and techniques of long-distance trading not only resembled the diasporic vigor of overseas Chinese and European Jews, some scholars argue, but also anticipated the operation of modern-day corporations.

This book tells the story of merchants from Ōmi who, having traversed the early modern Japanese archipelago, ventured far across the sea from the turn of the twentieth century. Tracing their lives and careers over the *longue durée*, it considers some of the epochal processes that integrated Japan into the globalizing world—empire, diaspora, capitalism, war—through a regional lens. Rather than becoming relics of the bygone era, I argue, Ōmi merchants and their descendants played a pivotal role in these developments by extending the frontiers of commerce and migration around and across the Pacific. In turn, these businesspeople helped



FIGURE 1. Reenactment of itinerant peddlers from Ōmi in the Tokugawa period. Courtesy of the Archival Museum of the Faculty of Economics, Shiga University, Japan.

fuel the global economy, creating and coursing its networks and flows alongside or ahead of the state—and crafting their regional identity in the process.

The global history of Ōmi shōnin is a story of how provincials shaped the increasingly connected world, even while swept by its currents and crises. Generations of scholars in Shiga have devoted themselves to excavating the commercial exploits of their ancestors. But they have done so largely within the bounds of local and national history and the tradition of place writing invested in highlighting regional uniqueness. My contention is that the story of Ōmi shōnin, when placed in broader frames of analysis, can address questions relevant to all scholars concerned with provincial lives navigating a fast-changing world. In what ways can we understand such global phenomena as empire, emigration, and capitalism on the scale of a region? How do we tell a provincial history of commerce and industry in a transnational and transimperial context? How, indeed, might we bring the disparate archives of the local and the global into dialogue, without rehashing a familiar tale of conflict and difference? The history of Ōmi merchants provides new insights into these questions. Their documentary traces offer not only a vista of larger interlinked processes of capitalist modernity and mobility but an extended horizon from which to plumb their local origins and mediations below and beyond the national level.

For all their historical significance, Ōmi merchants have garnered little attention from scholars outside Shiga; they remain virtually unstudied abroad.¹ Even less known are their fates and activities after the fall of the Tokugawa regime, a central question that animates this study. It is commonly held that Ōmi merchants entered the twilight of their career after 1868. They faced precipitous decline amid Japan's rupture into modernity, the story goes, while the new Meiji government, in alliance with big *zaibatsu* (business conglomerates), commanded center stage in building their country as an industrial and imperial power. But existing records reveal a more complex story.

Away from the Tokyo metropolis, provincial merchants of Kansai (see map 2), many from Ōmi, continued to lead and dominate the cotton textile industry, which drove Japan's export-led economy into the 1930s. Ōmi merchants also remained actively involved in the economy of Hokkaido, where they had managed fisheries for their samurai owners. From the turn of the twentieth century, moreover, many fanned across the ocean, operating spinning mills in the treaty ports of China, expanding trade to Southeast Asia, and launching new retail businesses in Korea and Manchuria. The entrepreneurial legacies of Ōmi peddlers, too, lived on to inspire their young progeny to venture abroad, whether as students and businessmen in colonial Asia or as immigrants to North America.

Unearthing the overlooked role of Ōmi merchants in the early modern economy is, then, but part of a more ambitious aim of this book: to write them into imperial and global history by tracing their evolution across time and space. Having trekked the Tokugawa polity, as I demonstrate, merchants of Ōmi continued to search for new markets and opportunities, pushing the boundaries of Japan's nation and empire outward. They were joined by a new generation of Ōmi-Shiga natives, who pursued a variety of careers around a growing Japanese diaspora that stretched from Seoul to Vancouver. It was in the course of linking their homeland to overseas circuits of exchange that they cemented a claim of shared ancestry in Ōmi *shōnin*. Far from fading into oblivion, indeed, Ōmi merchants and their lineal and self-proclaimed descendants operated at the forefront of expansion, plying their custom and ethos of border crossing in a new, transnational context. The local and the global were seamlessly entwined in the lives of provincials, as were the past and the unfolding present, in a new history of Ōmi *shōnin* that I seek to tell.

ŌMI AS A GLOBAL PLACE

Like many other prefectures on the periphery of modern Japan, Shiga-ken is still referred to by its older label Ōmi (or more colloquially, *Gōshū*), one of the sixty-six provinces (*kuni*) that constituted the administrative map of the archipelago from the eighth century to the end of the Tokugawa period. This area sits roughly in the center of the Japanese main island, Honshū, and encompasses Lake Biwa, the largest lake in the country. The surrounding land is bordered by mountains,

including Mt. Hiei to the west, on which stands Enryakuji, a historically powerful monastery overlooking Kyoto. And a sprawling alluvial plain lies east of the lake, where commercial farming and cottage industry developed early.

The natural environment has accorded Ōmi a special place in national history. Located close to the ancient capitals of Kyoto and Nara and intersected by the Nakasendō, an inland passage that connected Kyoto to Edo, Ōmi had been a region of great strategic importance to military rulers, courtiers, and religious establishments since antiquity. A crossroads of trade between western and eastern Japan, Ōmi had also served as a gateway to the continent. It was settled by ancient immigrants and traveled by diplomatic envoys, whose designated passage in the Tokugawa era became permanently inscribed in the local terrain as the Korean Highway (Chōsenjin kaidō), which branched off of the Nakasendō (see map 3 in the next chapter).

In contrast to landlocked regions such as Shimoina in present-day Nagano,² the littoral Ōmi was a “space of flows” that had always conveyed “a global sense of place.”³ Throughout its history, Ōmi’s extroverted character was embodied and exhibited by the cross-cultural lives of its prominent natives—including Onono Imoko (dates unknown), who mediated early Japanese contact with the Chinese and Korean dynasties;⁴ Ii Naosuke (1815–1860), who signed a treaty in 1858 to open Japan’s ports to American trade; and Nakae Tōju (1608–1648), “the sage of Ōmi” who founded the Wang Yangming School of Neo-Confucianism in Japan. Yet none of them rivals the Ōmi shōnin in popular imagination and identification with the province as the reigning icon of its cosmopolitan bearing.

Although Ōmi has largely escaped their attention, English-language scholars have, for decades, engaged in efforts to reclaim the local vis-à-vis the center.⁵ They have depicted regions as key players in Japan’s transformation, hitherto discounted by nation-based narratives, by examining how they interacted and negotiated with, and often spoke back to, the political capital. Ōmi was one of many regions whose identity was shaped by such local-center interplay. But it was also a complicated periphery that saw itself as the nation’s core, long after its political significance had waned. Even after its administrative incarnation as Shiga Prefecture in 1872, Ōmi was kept alive in popular sentiments and local texts, from gazetteers to school songs, that claimed its uniqueness in the economic culture of the archipelago, its centrality in national geography and polity, and its primordial ties to the continent.

Such “practices and idioms of regional identification”⁶ capture the politics of place-making that immersed Ōmi-Shiga and other provinces, which were rendered into peripheries of a new nation centered on Tokyo.⁷ Ōmi remained a culturally salient, if politically subordinate, identity in the post-restoration era, not least because local boosters strove to ensure that their homeland would not devolve into the obscured fringe of the modernizing Japan. One of their strategies was to brand Shiga as the birthplace of Ōmi shōnin, the regnant symbol of native

enterprise before the arrival of Perry. A more ambitious agenda called for exporting its famed merchants and their offspring abroad, where they might reenact their early modern glory and revive the name of Ōmi on a global stage, beginning with the neighboring territories in Asia.

These efforts did not always proceed smoothly; Shiga had its share of internal dissension, as elsewhere on the national terrain. Nevertheless, they gave Ōmi, a mere congeries of domains before 1868, an identity more coherent than it had ever before possessed. The spirit of enterprise and adventure, along with the ideals of industry, economy, and endurance, were valorized by local writers as kernels of Ōmi identity every inhabitant was presumed to share. As we will see, the genealogical discourse on Ōmi people always pointed back to their “shared” ancestral origins in itinerant peddlers, a metaphorical pilgrimage bridging their proud past and their uncertain present and future. Their transoceanic visions and movements that ensued, consequently, signified the expanding scales on which the legacy of Ōmi shōnin was projected, as ever-wider geographies fell within Japan’s sphere of interest.

RETHINKING THE HISTORY OF JAPANESE CAPITALISM

Since the Meiji period, the study of Ōmi merchants has been the virtual preserve of scholars based in Shiga, occupying a small niche in the field of Japanese economic history. The earliest works cobbled together biographies of prominent local men—hagiographic narratives that outlined the origins and lineaments of Ōmi shōnin “past and present,” who were hoped would lead Japan “at the forefront of global commercial warfare.”⁸ From the 1920s, Ōmi merchants’ activities were contextualized as part of provincial history through the publication of local gazetteers. Academic inquiry, too, began in earnest among a group of scholars led by Kanno Watarō (1895–1976) at Hikone Higher Commercial School, an early hub for research on Japanese commerce.⁹ Historical and ethnographic in nature, their works on family precepts and store codes, supplemented by interviews with local merchants, parsed the trading activities and philosophy of Ōmi shōnin as a distinctive category of entrepreneurs. Their postwar successors at Shiga University, Egashira Tsuneharu and Ogura Eiichirō, delved further into the methods of business and accounting deployed by Ōmi merchant families ahead of their time. These works form the corpus of what are considered classics today.¹⁰

In contrast to the positive reappraisal of their Tokugawa-era commerce, however, most of these early studies painted a markedly pessimistic picture of Ōmi merchants post-1868 as losers of the Meiji revolution. This popular perception is linked to an equally entrenched narrative of Japan’s industrial revolution as led by the “developmental state” and big zaibatsu in Tokyo. Their partnership, to be sure, proved dynamic and enduring. Going beyond laying the basic economic

infrastructure, the Meiji government had an unusually visible hand in creating Japan's first industrial enterprises, from silk mills to coal mines and shipyards. Most of them were sold off in the mid-1880s to private entrepreneurs, who then leveraged their resources and political ties to transform them into industrial empires of their own. The most prominent among these zaibatsu families—Mitsui and Mitsubishi—began their careers as “political merchants” (*seishō*) in the 1870s and 1880s.¹¹ In an embryonic state of Japanese capitalism, they provided the crucial funds and services needed for the Meiji policy of primitive accumulation to “build a rich and strong nation” (*fukoku kyōhei*).¹² In turn, these merchants obtained lucrative contracts, direct subsidies, easy credit terms, and other forms of government largesse that allowed many to diversify and consolidate their family enterprises into giant conglomerates. By World War I, the collective dominance of zaibatsu sprawled across all sectors of the economy—from banking, trade, shipping, and mining to iron and steel, shipbuilding, and manufacturing.¹³

Largely written out of this master narrative is the role of provincial merchants in Kansai. From the Meiji to the early 1930s, Japan's export-led economy was built on the light industries of silk and cotton. These sectors, however, “remained outside the orbit of the zaibatsu,” which invested far less in textile manufacturing than in the making of steel, machinery, and ships.¹⁴ Employing the majority of factory labor before 1935, the cotton industry was significantly directed by the private enterprise and investment of merchants based in Osaka and its vicinity.¹⁵ As economic historians have recently stressed, indeed, industrial revolution was a regional rather than a national phenomenon. But in the case of Japan, it was led by the textile industry, where the “native merchants of Kansai” had figured centrally since the Tokugawa era.¹⁶

When probing these continuities further, another horizontal network emerges from a group of powerful Kansai merchants, one bound by native-place ties to Ōmi. Scanning a roster of leading textile firms, one is struck by how ubiquitous Ōmi merchants were: they were involved in every part of the industry, from the import of raw cotton to production and the wholesale, retail, and export of finished goods.¹⁷ Not only did they participate in the management of big spinning companies in Osaka, which were founded without government aid.¹⁸ Even more significant was their role in marketing, a skill many families had perfected as peddlers of textiles and other mass consumer goods before the age of industrial capitalism. Although Mitsui Bussan is well-known as the largest trading firm, many Ōmi merchants also restructured their family concerns or pooled their capital to launch “cotton trading companies”—an institution as distinctive to Japanese capitalism as zaibatsu—which played a critical role in capturing foreign markets for domestic spinners. By the late 1920s, as observers noted, Ōmi merchant capitalists formed a powerful business clique or “tribe” in Japan's industrial economy that resembled, if not rivaled, the organization and influence of a zaibatsu family.¹⁹

Taking cues from the new history of capitalism, but shifting its focus from the Atlantic to the Pacific, this book proposes to rethink the geography and chronology of capitalist Japan through the lens of businesspeople—a relatively understudied group in the economic historiography of both oceanic worlds centered on the mill and the machine.²⁰ To focus on provincial merchants in Kansai is also to interrogate the relationship between business and political power beyond the bourgeois alliance of Tokyo and zaibatsu families. As compared to the new industrial dynasties in Kantō, the old merchant aristocracies of Kansai were characterized by relative distance and autonomy from the political center.²¹ They cultivated government authorities and stayed active in local politics, but none of them came to match the proximity to state power and influence of major zaibatsu, cemented by ties of patronage, marriage, and political money.²²

Yet the activities of Kansai merchants were no less intertwined with Japan's national interests and imperial ambitions. Business was tightly meshed with colonial politics in East Asia, where cotton goods, a significant share of which were handled by Ōmi merchant firms, led in expanding the frontiers of commerce, following as well as advancing the flag. Ōmi-born businessmen perceived their trade as fulfilling higher national goals—and some sought and attained a greater voice in imperial affairs—as much as obeying the dictates of their family ancestors to stay focused on commerce. The collective action of Kansai merchants vis-à-vis foreign rivals and their collaboration with the colonial regimes in Korea and Manchuria each demonstrated an inextricable link between imperial expansion and industrial capitalism, a dynamic seen across the global history of cotton, masterfully told by Sven Beckert.²³

Treating Ōmi merchants as political and not just economic actors, I seek to show how individual exploits and organized activities of provincials played a part in shaping the political economy of the Japanese empire and its connections to the global world of capitalism.²⁴ Economic historians based in Shiga have already done foundational research in this direction. Since the 1990s, their longitudinal studies have mounted a powerful challenge to the old hypothesis of decline, examining modern corporations created by or descended from Ōmi merchant families that have survived to the present.²⁵ Suenaga Kunitoshi and Seoka Makoto have taken this inquiry further, tracking a young generation of Shiga natives who left their homeland to manage a company's branch, launch a retail store, or sojourn in various overseas locations.²⁶ My study draws on this specialized body of research, integrating it into broader frames of analysis offered by the new historiography of capital and empire. In doing so, I also balance the “rediscovery of the state” in recent studies of Western capitalism²⁷ with a stronger call for shifting our attention off-center, to view the globalizing process from a regional perspective. Eschewing the narrative of “success” characteristic of place writing, this book retells the story of old and new Ōmi merchants as the global history of connections and interactions—of capital, trade, empire, and emigration—lived and shaped by provincial actors.