

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.

TOWARD A DIASPORIC PERSPECTIVE

My starting point for analyzing Ōmi merchants and their descendants is to conceptualize their history and genealogy in terms of a diaspora.²⁸ I will deploy the term in two senses. First is a specific framing of the long-distance activities of Ōmi merchants as a trading diaspora. Second is a broader usage of the concept, to bring within its compass the far-flung lives, networks, and movements of Ōmi-Shiga people across the early modern and modern eras of cross-border exchange.

To most scholars of Ōmi shōnin, my conceptual framework would seem bold and unorthodox, but the notion of trading diaspora is apt for characterizing the early modern activities of Ōmi merchants for several reasons. Although they were technically classed as farmers, their primary income derived from sojourning outside the home province for an extended period of time, with the intention of eventually returning to Ōmi (where they kept their families). In an era when the Japanese terrain was encumbered by travel restrictions, merchants of Ōmi traversed disproportionately long distances.²⁹ As itinerant peddlers, most of them initially ventured to the eastern and northeastern provinces in Kantō and Tōhoku, toting local manufactures of Ōmi such as mosquito nets and hemp cloth, along with textile goods from the Kyoto-Osaka region. For their return journey, they purchased local commodities and specialties of these distant provinces to sell en route to and back in Kansai. After accumulating a certain amount of capital this way, Ōmi merchants set up shop in key commercial destinations. Some diversified their business into moneylending; others continued peddling in search of new markets.

Through seasonal treks between their home and distant markets, Ōmi merchants developed their own trade routes and transport networks that crisscrossed the archipelago. And their wholesale activities created new linkages between the Kyoto-Osaka region and the hinterlands, from Kyūshū to Hokkaido. This is better seen as external trade than as commercial traffic within a bounded economy. In a polity that mandated village residence for all rural commoners, the peripatetic merchants of Ōmi inhabited a distinctive cultural milieu shaped by absence and mobility.³⁰ Operating across a federation of domains with clearly defined borders and semiautarkic economies—quasi-“states” within a “state”³¹—these provincials were engaged in a type of cross-cultural trade with strangers under the Tokugawa realm. Their success as “extra-provincial income earning merchants” (*takoku kasegi shōnin*) has also spawned a proverb dear to generations of Shiga people: just as the tiny sweetfish (*ayu*) of Lake Biwa would grow in size if released in rivers outside the province, so the merchants of Ōmi would not make it big unless they ventured beyond the home turf.³² A provincial perspective afforded by merchants of Ōmi, in short, draws for us a new national geography of economic exchange.

For the central role they played in the growth of interregional trade, money economy, and capital accumulation, merchants of Ōmi were (and still are) frequently compared to Chinese migrants and European Jews,³³ “two of the most

prominent entrepreneurial minorities in the modern world.³⁴ As entrepreneurial “outsiders” (*gairai shōnin*),³⁵ Ōmi shōnin occupied commercial, moneylending, and other specialized niches in a “foreign” economy. Spatially and economically, they constituted a kind of borderless community,³⁶ with networks of stores extending across multiple provinces, while remaining socially anchored in Ōmi.

In their amphibious operations, and in their relationship to the native place especially, Ōmi merchants appear most akin to the diasporic Chinese in their provincial variety.³⁷ Seafaring merchants and migrants from the southern coasts of Fujian and Guangdong are well-known and often evoked as a comparator.³⁸ But overland commerce within the borders of the Tokugawa polity more closely resembled that of sojourner-merchants from Shanxi and Huizhou, who, from their peasant origins, expanded their trading networks in the Qing territorial empire.³⁹ Inland and overseas, scholars have noted, the mobility of Chinese as cross-cultural traders and laborers entailed not so much exile or displacement as dispersion. Unlike the Jewish expatriate community, “a prototypical diaspora” shaped by the loss of the homeland and “uprootedness,”⁴⁰ Chinese migrants stayed connected to their native land through a nexus of social institutions and family or place-based ties, what Philip A. Kuhn has conceptualized as a cultural “corridor.”⁴¹ This spatial metaphor can be extended to the *modus operandi* of Ōmi shōnin, who plied on land and at sea and sojourned in distant communities without being assimilated by them. Far from being diluted, their sense of belonging to the homeland was heightened by their diasporic activity and a host of practices to reify and reinforce bonds of kinship.⁴²

By no means, however, were Ōmi merchants “stateless” actors or free-market agents, as Philip D. Curtin’s formulation of “a trade diaspora” might suggest.⁴³ As members of the merchant class, they were thoroughly integrated into the political and ideological order of the Tokugawa regime; they also needed official permission and often relied on samurai patronage to operate in outside domains, where many served as purveyors, moneylenders, and town elders. But when looking across the early modern world, dependence on the state did not necessarily appear to work against or undermine the agency of diasporic traders.⁴⁴ This was certainly the case for Ōmi merchants in Tokugawa Japan: they prioritized their family business as dictated by their progenitors and guided by their Buddhist belief, while rendering services as demanded by political authorities. And they carried this pragmatic spirit into the modern era—especially to the empire, where they found themselves obliging as much as taking advantage of the strong state presence.

Family and business records of Ōmi merchants suggest a broad, if unarticulated, grasp of the territorial and ethnic boundaries of the early modern polity they traversed. As some Tokugawa scholars have ventured, the movements of people, goods, information, and ideas had already bound the inhabitants of the Japanese archipelago into a set of extra-domainal relations within a national frame, or in the provocative observation of Ronald Toby, “nation” in advance of the onset of “Nation” in the late nineteenth century.⁴⁵ The full articulation of the identity of

Ōmi people vis-à-vis the national center awaited the advent of mass print and education. Yet Ōmi merchants, through their transborder activities, which extended to the northern and southernmost reaches of the archipelago, developed a keen awareness of belonging to a larger polity composed of multiple sovereignties.⁴⁶ To attend to their diasporic past, I submit, is to address a critical dialectic between continuity and change in Japan's transformation into a modern nation-state.

In the second sense in which I deploy the term *diaspora*, it refers to visions, movements, and linkages of Shiga natives across national borders in the intertwined contexts of imperialism, capitalism, and migration, a temporal focus of this study. If modern Japan began as "a nation of provincials,"⁴⁷ one could equally speak of its overseas extension as an empire of regions. From old and new studies that track the flows of people, goods, and money abroad⁴⁸ emerge distinctly regional contours of expansion, as illustrated by the demographic makeup of migrants in each territory. Since the late Tokugawa period, soldiers and farmers from Tōhoku had crossed the Tsugaru Strait to settle in Hokkaido and Karafuto, while many Okinawans, joined by poor tenant farmers from Tōhoku, sailed southward to take up seasonal labor in Taiwan, Micronesia, and Southeast Asia.⁴⁹ Throughout the colonial period Kyūshū, Chūgoku, and Kansai natives formed a dominant stream of migrants to the Korean peninsula,⁵⁰ and an even greater number of agrarian colonists from central Honshū (especially Nagano) flocked to Manchuria in the 1930s.⁵¹

Meanwhile, a number of scholars have dissected the demography of Japanese diagonally across the ocean to speak of multiple "diasporas" emanating from the nation's peripheries—be it Okinawa,⁵² Toyama,⁵³ or Yamaguchi⁵⁴—charting the flow of local inhabitants to colonial territories in Asia and sites of labor migration in Hawai'i and the Pacific Coast regions of America.⁵⁵ I join these scholars in talking broadly and loosely of an Ōmi diaspora, a network of people bound by shared cultural heritage and regional sentiment through which goods, capital, and ideas also circulated beyond the national frontier, linking Ōmi to various overseas destinations. What set this diaspora apart from other provincial trajectories was its supposed origins in the trading diaspora of Ōmi forebears already in the business of border-crossing on the home islands—a genealogical discourse deployed actively for Japan's expansion from the Meiji era onward.

As Adam McKeown, Robin Cohen, and others have shown, the concept of diaspora, when used flexibly or adjectivally, opens up a horizon of new analytical possibilities to rethink transnational processes as diverse as labor migration, cross-cultural trade, and colonial settlement by providing "a needed supplement to nation-based histories."⁵⁶ Its analytic purchase has been expanded still further by Steven B. Miles in his recent global history of Chinese diasporas. Miles has usefully distilled the essence of diaspora as "a claim of belonging, an assertion of connection to a homeland," while warning against treating it as "a bounded entity."⁵⁷ Following his lead, I discuss Ōmi merchants' activities not as a single diaspora but in terms of "diasporic trajectories"—diverse and overlapping networks that emanated from specific locales around Lake Biwa, which only gradually congealed

into an idea and identity of Ōmi. More broadly, diaspora offers a productive way to historicize the expansion of Ōmi people beyond the assumed dichotomy of “internal” and “external” migration—not least because this was also how local thinkers in Shiga made sense of their community and history.⁵⁸

Although Ōmi merchants emerged in conditions specific to Tokugawa Japan, their history addresses issues generic to diasporic traders in the early modern and modern world. Looking past their obvious differences in size and scale of operation can broaden our understanding of trading diasporas beyond the existing typologies, based primarily on ethno-religious groupings and centered on the Mediterranean Sea and the Indian Ocean (the “classic diasporas” of Jews, Armenians, and Greeks). The story of Ōmi shōnin, like that of Shanxi merchants in the Qing empire, is a history of how long-distance traders, who operated largely within the borders of a “national” polity, fashioned a distinct community and identity around commerce away from the homeland.⁵⁹ My greater focus and contribution perhaps lies in tracing the “afterlife” of this diasporic community into the modern era, to probe its articulation and integration with the nation-state and industrial capitalism from the late nineteenth century, a usual coda to most existing studies. On this issue, the post-Tokugawa history of Ōmi merchants would seem to align with recent scholarship on Eurasian trade, which demonstrates the resilience and adaptability, not presumed demise, of diasporic traders and their family- or place-based business strategies in the age of global and managerial capitalism.⁶⁰ The present study adds to the ongoing debate by showing, among other things, that closed networks of trust—which became an obstacle to market expansion and diversification for the Julfan Armenians and Multani Indians⁶¹—could be a lasting source of strength for Ōmi merchants, as it was for Chinese and other diasporic communities, in the changing world of trade and industry.⁶²

At the same time, what I discuss below is a more complicated diaspora: a trading diaspora that evolved into multiple forms of transoceanic activity, a diaspora as genealogy- and place-making, a diaspora made in imagination and in dialogue with these early modern diasporas around the globe. In deploying a diasporic perspective, indeed, the book’s interventions extend beyond the analysis of Ōmi merchants and their business methods. Its broader purpose is to bridge what I see as three long-standing disciplinary divides in the study of Japanese activities overseas: between the early modern and the modern, between the local and the global, and between colonization and emigration.

BETWEEN EARLY MODERN AND MODERN

The first dichotomy this book seeks to challenge is an old but enduring temporal division between early modern and modern. Whereas historians elsewhere have often searched deep into the early modern past for an explanation of industrial growth, scholars of the Japanese empire have rarely looked prior to the Meiji era. Most existing studies view empire as a modern state project, treating the nineteenth-century

“opening of the country” as the onset of Japan’s colonial activity. Yet a generation of early modern historians following Amino Yoshihiko⁶³ have demonstrated that overseas engagement was hardly a post-1868 phenomenon. Far from being isolated or landlocked (as a conventional focus on rice-cultivating farmers would have us believe), the Japanese had been active as a seafaring people and embedded in transoceanic processes of exchange since at least the medieval era.⁶⁴

Drawing on the insights of these historians, this book traces the activities and legacies of Ōmi merchants across the Tokugawa-Meiji divide to illustrate how a modern empire, in conception and in practice, was built on an early modern template of expansion. Unpacking this dynamic process of fusion offers us a more nuanced explanation, one that assumes neither simple displacement of the local nor the “beginning” of empire in the Meiji period. If Japan’s capitalism developed on the industrial foundations laid by regional economies of Tokugawa,⁶⁵ I contend, so its overseas empire drew on the pattern and ethos of “foreign commerce” demonstrated by traders of Ōmi and elsewhere. This was also how local and national leaders construed expansion around the turn of the century (chapters 3 and 4). Scholars have long shown the Meiji Japanese to be avid students of Western colonial practices, but this narrative of borrowing reveals as much as it obscures. Overseas expansion for Japan entailed not merely catching up with the imperial West but also living up to the entrepreneurial legacy of its provincial ancestors—from the merchants of Osaka, Kyoto, and Nagasaki who sailed to the South Pacific in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries to those from Ōmi who journeyed across the archipelago under the Tokugawa regime.

An often-cited case in point was Ōmi merchants’ involvement in the Tokugawa colonization of Ezo, or Hokkaido. As commercial agents for the Matsumae domain, merchants of Ōmi sold manufactured goods from the mainland to the indigenous people of Ainu in exchange for fish, fertilizers, and other local products, using large cargo ships to transport these commodities along the Japan Sea lanes to and from the Kinai (Kyoto-Osaka) region. This interregional trade ushered in the capitalist transformation of Hokkaido’s fishing industry, as David Howell has shown, but it also wrought a devastating impact on the Ainu culture and ecology, as detailed by Brett Walker.⁶⁶ In a triumphalist narrative that has lingered well into the postwar era, local leaders in Shiga and the Meiji bureaucrats upheld the role of Ōmi merchant “pioneers” in Hokkaido as a historical precedent for overseas expansion—or conquest of the indigenous economy by foreign capital from the Japanese mainland (chapter 2).

The example of Hokkaido serves as a good point of departure for uncovering critical continuities amid revolutionary changes in the centuries-long trajectory of Japanese capitalist and colonial activity. The core chapters of this book investigate how diasporic pursuits of Ōmi merchants, having culminated in Ezo, were subsequently *transmuted into* various forms of expansion overseas, from foreign trade and emigration to work, study, and travel abroad. In this process of reconfiguration, a new diaspora of Shiga people emerged across Asia and the Pacific. Tracing the

transoceanic lives of these provincials also contributes to decentering nationally scaled narratives of modernity: it reveals how practices and principles of regional commerce, inherited by merchant families or invented anew by Ōmi boosters, carried across 1868 to bolster Japan's project to become a world power.

Above all, it allows us to better capture how expansion was understood locally. From the vantage point of an elongated horizon, Shiga natives often described their far-flung endeavors, whether in colonial East Asia or Canada, as a logical extension of the entrepreneurial spirit of their Ōmi forefathers. For direct descendants of merchants, overseas business was not fundamentally different from overland commerce in anything but scale and scope of operation: a matter of grafting new knowledge onto their tradition of trading across distance and enlarging their business, rather than venturing into completely uncharted territory. Borrowing the conceptual vocabulary from Kären Wigen and other historical geographers, the core chapters (in parts II and III) attend to these spatiotemporal dynamics of *grafting* (or braiding the local with the global) and *rescaling* (reconfiguring tradition on a variety of scales) in analyzing the changing economic life of Ōmi people from the late nineteenth century.⁶⁷ Conceiving of the global capitalist economy as a complex “spatiotemporal system,” I aim to show in high resolution how these processes played out in the internal operations of merchant (and migrant) families—and how their scalar adjustments to the age of “time-space compression” mirrored Japan's metamorphosis from an island nation into a transoceanic empire of capital.⁶⁸

Highlighting continuities, however, does not mean postulating a simple and linear progression from the premodern to the modern era. My concern with tracing the lives and genealogies of Ōmi merchants lies as much in the evolution of their business activities as in how they were narrated, represented, and mobilized for new purposes. In particular, I pay attention to the dialectic between practice and discourse in unpacking the invention of the Ōmi shōnin (including the very etymology of the term). By the nineteenth century, their influence was felt in every sector of the Tokugawa market economy. Ōmi merchants had become a virtual synonym for enterprise, and their success an object of envy, as expressed in the epithet “Ōmi dorobō, Ise kojiki” (Ōmi thief, Ise beggar).⁶⁹ Strictly speaking, however, the phrase “Ōmi shōnin” did not exist before Meiji.⁷⁰ Coined most likely in the last decades of Meiji, “Ōmi shōnin” was a neologism on the order of *koku-min* (nation or people). It was, indeed, one among many invented traditions of the era, the most notable of which was the emperor system, whose evocation of Japan's “ancient past” masked a strategic fusion of imported and inherited practices and symbols of regal authority. Recasting rupture *as* continuity was a strategy also deployed by local leaders and scholars in Shiga, to make the Ōmi shōnin “an unproblematic part of received Tradition.”⁷¹ As later chapters will make clear, Ōmi merchants as a social category emerged in the context of local struggles to adapt to revolutionary change while seeking to restore Ōmi's place in national life as a

fount of enterprise. The overarching function of *Ōmi shōnin*, a historical artifact invented by nativist discourses and practices, was to essentialize regional identity across a fragmented local geography: to bring all people of Ōmi descent, with lineal or lateral ties to merchant families, into a single genealogy, where commerce signified both a celebration of and a return to common ancestral origins.⁷²

BETWEEN LOCAL AND GLOBAL

The conceptual separation between local and global is the second dichotomy this book calls into question. Its aspiration is to provide a methodology for studying the seldom-paired histories of region and empire by highlighting their dynamic and unexpected intersections. I want to illustrate how to rethink empire on the scale of a region and, conversely, to understand how regional identity took shape in the global and imperial context—a two-way exercise in “provincializing empire.”⁷³ Since Japan’s empire took shape through its integration into global circuits of exchange, this exercise enables us to examine the worldwide forces of capitalism and imperialism as entangled with and refracted through the transnational lives of provincial actors. My methodology here resonates with Sebouh David Aslanian’s call for microscale analysis of the global, or “a global microhistory,” one that productively combines the Braudelian concern with continuities in the *longue durée* and microhistory’s attention to human agency. Focusing on “unusually cosmopolitan individuals who led ‘global lives,’” as Aslanian does in his study of Armenian merchants from New Julfa,⁷⁴ I want to explore the global processes of expansion and exchange that shaped the “spatial multiplicity” of Ōmi people.⁷⁵

Historians of Japan have scrutinized center-periphery relations after 1868 to show how region, once “apart from the nation,” gradually became a locus of national belonging through cooperation and contestation with Tokyo.⁷⁶ Fewer scholars have considered how empire became a space of regional identification—that is, how regional identity was shaped and reinforced through overseas and diasporic experience. If consolidation of regional identities facilitated national integration, my contention is that so, too, did it contribute to imperial expansion, which drew on local attachments both inherited and invented. In spearheading this line of inquiry, Martin Dusinberre and Catherine Phipps have each taken a deep dive into a regional level of engagement with the empire,⁷⁷ while Michael Lewis and others have usefully brought the local and the imperial into a single analytic of “local [or municipal] imperialism.”⁷⁸ Addressing a dynamic a national frame has downplayed, their works reveal that local boosterism, in its parochial guise, did not preclude enthusiasm for overseas expansion; quite the contrary, the two impulses remained closely entwined.

Building on these and other exemplary studies that place localities in global circuits of exchange,⁷⁹ this book takes an explicitly regional approach to expansion. It focuses on how empire was shaped from its margins and in local spaces, while

heeding the less-studied reverse dynamic—how region itself was brought into being in imperial and transnational contexts.⁸⁰ A place with “a global sense of place,” Ōmi provides a fitting location for illustrating this process. In analyzing provincial visions and reverberations of empire, I will treat Ōmi and its archive as a local-global nexus⁸¹ where commerce became a powerful signifier of regional identity as well as affinity with the world’s leading diasporic communities. When calling on fellow natives of Shiga to aspire abroad, local proponents of expansion frequently brought their merchant ancestors into comparison with global trade diasporas, from the aforementioned overseas Chinese to the Hanseatic merchants of medieval German cities, identifying in them a compelling, if contrived, logic of equivalence.

A similar interplay between local and global is discerned in a variety of texts left by other residents of Shiga—from travel accounts and newspaper columns to student essays and course syllabi. My analysis will zoom in and out from macro-level developments to micro-level experiences as it weaves together an array of private and published archives. Juxtaposing family genealogies and biographies with company histories and government publications, for example, reveals previously overlooked encounters and connections between Ōmi and the world. So does integrating insights from other regional centers of the globalizing economy into analysis. Treating Ōmi merchants’ “uniqueness” as inherently comparative allows us to identify seldom considered parallels and aspects of cosmopolitanism in their business culture, from methods of cross-border trade and risk management to the enduring role of kinship and religion in enterprise. Recasting provincials as players in world history, this study contributes to the ongoing work of explaining the local in connection with, rather than opposition to, the imperial-cum-global and elucidating their mutually constitutive dynamics.⁸²

BETWEEN COLONIZATION AND EMIGRATION

Finally, the ideas and activities of Ōmi people reveal previously understudied linkages between colonial expansion and overseas emigration, a central agenda in the growing field of transpacific history.⁸³ Joining scholars such as Eiichirō Azuma and Takashi Fujitani, whose pathbreaking works have bridged the two distinct histories of imperial Asia and immigrant America,⁸⁴ I propose to explore their intersecting geographies and chronologies, as they emerge from the maritime visions of local ideologues of empire (chapters 3 and 4), the global marketing networks of Ōmi-based trading firms (chapter 5), and the transpacific encounters between Ōmi-born merchants in Asia and immigrants in North America (chapters 6 and 7). Wherever relevant, I also investigate the racial and gendered dynamics of capitalism⁸⁵ that underlay the histories of colonists and emigrants on both sides of the imperial Pacific.

Like the study on the Okinawan diaspora, I will treat two Ōmi diasporas—“one within the Japanese colonial empire and one beyond”—as parts of a connected

process of overseas activity of Shiga people in a larger Pacific world.⁸⁶ Such distinctions were elided in the minds of many who crossed the sea; despite their varied statuses in host societies as immigrants or colonists, they typically imagined themselves as part of a diaspora rooted in the common ancestral home of Ōmi. The overall vision of expansion shared by local boosters was also diasporic rather than narrowly imperialistic, in the sense that they were concerned less with amassing overseas territories than with scattering Japanese goods, capital, and people around the globe—though they never ruled out military conquest as part of an arsenal of strategies for expansion.⁸⁷ The result was a frequent conflation of colonization (*shokumin*) and migration (*imin*), which remained conceptually distinct in the minds of Meiji policy makers but inextricably bound in the eyes of local boosters in Shiga, who viewed projecting Japan's national power and sending Ōmi merchants abroad as a mutually reinforcing symbiosis.

PROVINCIALIZING EMPIRE

The chapters that follow collectively represent a twinned attempt to write a global history of Japanese expansion through a provincial lens and to write the nation's provincials into world history. I propose to do so by showing how Ōmi merchants and their heirs circulated around the globe and, more significantly, how their commercial legacies translated into various modalities of expansion that took Shiga natives across the sea in both rhetoric and reality. In reconstructing their networks of trade, business, travel, and migration, I will examine each facet of their overseas activity as an interface of previously disconnected histories: the provincial archives on Ōmi, the national records of expansion, and the global history of capital, empire, and diaspora. How Ōmi merchants and their offspring navigated these multiple scales of experience is part of a larger story of the Japanese transpacific diaspora that provides the backdrop for the book.

I begin with an overview of the history of Ōmi *shōnin* in chapter 1, considering their genesis and the causes and consequences of their geographical mobility as itinerant peddlers. Through periodic comparison with diasporic traders elsewhere in the early modern world, I identify the business methods and maxims that made border-crossing merchants from Ōmi both distinctive and characteristic of the Tokugawa era. Chapter 2 zooms in on their role as agents of the Matsumae domain's trade in Ezo.⁸⁸ The growth of Hokkaido's fishing industry fueled the capitalist transformation of Tokugawa Japan as well as its colonizing endeavors on land and at sea, where the regional economies of Ainu labor and Ōmi capital met. As Ōmi merchants dominated local commercial rights from the eighteenth century into the nineteenth, Hokkaido became an integral part of their trading diaspora based in Honshū. By channeling mainland goods into Ezo, operating fisheries with indigenous Ainu labor, and building infrastructures, they promoted Matsumae's expansion vis-à-vis the ethnic "other" and helped to demarcate the northern borders of the early modern Japanese polity.⁸⁹

Moving on to the Meiji period, chapter 3 examines the early vision of maritime Japan as articulated by an Ōmi-born nationalist, Sugiura Shigetake (1855–1924)—an influential yet overlooked opinion maker whose discourse on expansion harked back to the genius of his provincial ancestors. Through editorials for mass dailies, Sugiura proposed redirecting Japan’s colonial drive from Hokkaido to the Chinese continent and islands in the South Pacific, with Ōmi shōnin as an economic vanguard setting the template for their countrymen to follow. In the hope of transforming a sedentary community of farmers into a seafaring nation of traders and sailors, he called on all Japanese—from scions of merchants to social outcasts—to venture abroad. Japan must build its strength beyond the archipelago, he argued, to surpass the imperial West and the diasporic Chinese in the global economy.

Like many Meiji ideologues, Sugiura construed “overseas expansion” in the broadest possible terms, encompassing everything from foreign trade to education and emigration, while viewing military conquest ancillary to commerce. All coalesced into a global vision of creating a Japanese diaspora around the Pacific world. With this conceptual map in place, the remainder of the book will explore four main areas of activity through which Ōmi merchants and their descendants strove to carry on their tradition of expeditionary commerce abroad: vocational training to nurture a new breed of “global Ōmi shōnin,” overseas trade and production of cotton textiles, retail business in colonial East Asia, and mass immigration to North America.

Sugiura’s call was energetically taken up by teachers in Shiga, intent on educating a new generation of businessmen ready to compete in the global marketplace. Chapter 4 examines these efforts by focusing on the prefecture’s two leading commercial schools: Hachiman Shōgyō Gakkō (also known as Hasshō) and Hikone Kōtō Shōgyō Gakkō (or Hikone Kōshō). Both schools expressly trained their pupils as successors to Ōmi shōnin by integrating peddling and other local customs into modern vocational curriculum. A close analysis of course syllabi reveals how the wisdom of Ōmi merchants informed their pedagogical emphasis on practical training and fieldwork, as well as extracurricular activities. More broadly, Hasshō and Hikone Kōshō functioned as institutional hubs of local imperialism. Through a network of alumni working in China, Manchuria, and Korea, both developed close ties to the continent, building a vast archive on colonial and overseas affairs. Faculty and senior students were also dispatched to the Asian mainland, the moving frontier of Japan’s multiethnic empire they trekked and surveyed for knowledge and control, with a renewed sense of mission as global Ōmi shōnin.

The alumni of these schools joined a growing number of Shiga people, who shared and mobilized a claim of descent from merchant ancestors to seek new opportunities abroad from the Meiji era. Many families drew on the diasporic lessons of Ōmi forebears to advance into trading activities or launch new businesses; others, mostly of peasant background, translated their legacies into sojourning abroad. Chapter 5 investigates the role of Ōmi merchants in Japan’s textile industry,

highlighting their dominance in import-export trade.⁹⁰ A historical center of hemp production and part of the industrial complex of Kansai, Ōmi became the cradle of textile firms, the most powerful of which constituted the so-called *Gōshū zaibatsu*. At its center was the Itō Chūbē family from Toyosato who founded Itōchū, the provincial forerunner of Japan's general trading companies. Focusing on the Itō family enterprise, I show how Ōmi merchant capital expanded to the Chinese continent to lead Japan's "cotton imperialism," while building trading networks around the Pacific and beyond. The seemingly remarkable trajectory of Itōchū from merchant into multinational owed as much to managerial innovations as to the old strategies of family capitalism: capitalizing on kin and native-place ties, without jettisoning what the Itō family regarded as the cardinal maxims and practices of Ōmi *shōnin*.

Building on their long expertise in textiles, Ōmi merchants also spearheaded a retail revolution across Japan's colonial empire in East Asia. Chapter 6 explores the case of Minakai, launched by Nakae Katsujirō (1872–1944) and his brothers from Kondō (Gokashō), who moved their family business to Korea shortly before it was annexed by Japan in 1910. Minakai's transformation into a department store—indeed, the empire's largest chain by 1940—took inspiration from the transpacific tour of North America by president Katsujirō in 1924. Katsujirō's discoveries of Western mass retail, as well as the grim realities of Asian immigrants chronicled in his diary, provided the key impetus for Minakai's rapid expansion and active cooperation with the colonial state in the years to follow. I also compare Minakai to a rival chain, Chōjiya, founded by another family of Ōmi ancestry, whose network of branches similarly extended into Manchuria and North China by the 1930s. By spreading a new culture of consumption centered on the metropole, the two stores joined other department stores in advancing the colonial goals of assimilation and accumulation. Yet their retail dominance derived not only from state patronage but, as I show, also from the methods and principles of long-distance commerce pursued for generations by their Ōmi forefathers.

Shifting the focus from Asia to North America, chapter 7 traces the movements of Shiga people across the Pacific to the Canadian West. Most immigrants hailed from the eastern shore of Lake Biwa—a historic birthplace of Ōmi merchants—and settled in Vancouver. Forming the largest Japanese community, Shiga natives supplied the majority of sawmill labor and dominated the retail districts of Japantown. And despite their parochialism, they led mercantile expansionism through recurrent waves of white exclusion in British Columbia, earning the moniker "the Jews of the Orient." Their immigrant diaspora was sustained by a chain migration of family relations and fellow villagers, their frequent Pacific crossings forging a "cultural corridor" through which money, goods, ideas and faith shuttled between two sides of the ocean. Using the case of Isoda and other "emigrant villages," I also analyze the transformative impact of immigration back home. From the gender imbalance and a flow of remittances to cosmopolitan lifestyles of returnees and their children, each phenomenon embodied and evoked the diasporic past of Ōmi *shōnin*.

To trace the lives and careers of Ōmi merchants and their offspring in the diverse realms of trade, industry, retail business, education, and emigration is to track the ever enlarging contours of a diaspora that—as Shiga-born natives came to render it—built on and extended their regional “tradition” of expeditionary commerce across multiple spaces and scales. Together, their visions and activities represented a resolutely local project of expansion that placed people of Ōmi descent at the heart of Japan’s transoceanic imaginary. What follows is an alternative story of empire as manifested in local practices, institutions, and discourses designed to boost the status of Shiga while serving national goals. Spawned by this dialectic, the Japanese transpacific diaspora was saturated with the regional interests as well as the global aspirations of the nation’s provincials.