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Foreign Trade and Domestic Networks — A Few Remarks on the Organisation of Tributary Embassies to China in the Muromachi Period*

Abstract

The aim of this article is to rethink the connection between foreign trade and domestic economy in late medieval Japan. The article takes a look at the financial side of the tributary missions to Ming China, investigating how commodities for tribute and for trade were organised. In the 1970s, Sasaki Gin'ya was the first to criticise that research on foreign trade and research on the domestic economy were being conducted separately. He emphasised the importance of complex interdisciplinary research in order to reveal the connection between foreign trade and the domestic economy. Even though this issue had been previously raised, no research had been conducted with the explicit purpose of connecting foreign trade and the domestic economy during the Muromachi period until the past two decades. Contributions that have been made in recent years have aimed at revealing the connections between domestic commercial or religious networks with foreign relations, mainly focusing on the role of Zen monks in diplomacy and trade and on the import and distribution of commodities from China. In Western scholarship, this topic is still under-researched and provides potential for further investigations.

Thus, the paper tries to provide an inventory of case studies that help us imagine and understand what kinds of connections existed between domestic networks and foreign trade in medieval Japan that made the procuring of tribute items and commercial products for official trade in China possible. Being aware of networks in medieval society, such as the religious network—and also closely connected to that the commercial network—of Honganji or Tenryūji, can help us connect the scattered and loose information in the sources, in order to explain what contributed to the development of foreign trade. The paper argues that despite the weakening of shogunal power, tributary trade continued because the structure of ship management transformed. Tribute ships became part of commercial ventures backed by the flourishing late medieval Japanese economy, and the increase of capital led to an increase in investors who were ready to participate in trade with China. The way that products were procured shows different patterns that provide good examples to help us understand how local commercial, social, and religious networks were utilised for procuring Japanese commodities.

Keywords: Muromachi period, Ming China, tributary trade, Honganji, Gozan, Tenryūji, Boshi nyūminki, folding fan, inkstone, agate

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Introduction

In Muromachi Japan, the right to send official diplomatic missions to Ming China was in the hands of the Ashikaga shoguns who bore the title ‘King of Japan’. The Chinese emperor invested foreign rulers with the title of ‘king’ (*wang* 王) during embassies as part of the Chinese tributary system (C: *cefeng*, J: *sakuhō* 冊封), and this investiture was officially conveyed by an imperial order. In the Muromachi period (1336–1573), tributary trade with China started in fact only after Ashikaga Yoshimitsu 足利義満 (1358–1408) received an investiture from Emperor Jianwen 建文 (1383–1402?) in 1402 and thus received the right to send official diplomatic (tributary) missions.¹ This was the beginning of almost 150 years of Sino-Japanese trade within the framework of the Chinese tribute system.²

For the Japanese, when organising tributary missions, the most difficult task was to put up the money and provide the necessary financial support to send the tribute ships bearing tribute items and trade commodities to China on behalf of the shogun. Officially the shogun provided the capital for the preparation of tribute ships, since they were sent in the name of the ‘King of Japan’, but the economic reality of the funding for the missions was more complex.³

All of the costs for the preparation of tribute items and trade commodities, and the organisation of ships and crew, had to be provided by the shogun as ship manager⁴ or, in later years as the shogunal family faced greater financial difficulties, by ship managers who represented religious institutions or warrior families. Because of these financial complexities we can only get a complete picture of foreign trade under the tribute system if we understand the domestic networks behind foreign trade and identify patterns that we can see in primary sources that reveal how domestic society and the domestic economy contributed to foreign trade.

¹ For a recent discussion on the investiture of the Ashikaga shoguns, see Murai 2018, Seki 2021.

² For an overview of Sino-Japanese relations in the Ming period, see Kobata 1969, Verschuer 2006, Olah 2009.

³ On the preparation and funding of Japanese tribute missions, see Suda 2012: 54–58.

⁴ They are called in modern historiography ‘managers’ (*keieisha* 経営者) or ‘main dispatchers’ (*haken shutai* 派遣主体) of tribute ships to China. This term is used for those who organised the ships for tributary missions and raised the capital necessary for organisation and preparation. On the organisation and commercial profit of tributary ships see Hashimoto Yū 橋本雄 1998. ‘Kenminsen to kenchōsen no keiei kōzō 遣明船と遣朝船の経営構造 [The structure of management of ships to China and Korea].’ *Haruka naru chūsei* 遙かなる中世 17: 34–58.

In the 1970s, Sasaki Gin'ya was the first to criticise that research on foreign trade and the domestic economy were being conducted separately.⁵ He emphasised the importance of complex interdisciplinary research in order to reveal the connection between foreign trade and the domestic economy, even though he was aware that it is difficult to find connections due to the scarcity of information in extant primary sources. Contributions that have been made in recent years have aimed at revealing the connections between domestic commercial or religious networks and foreign relations, mainly focusing on the role of Zen monks and Zen temples in diplomacy and trade and on the import and distribution of commodities from China.⁶ In order to get a sharper picture of the connection between foreign trade and the domestic economy, not only is it essential to have further case studies, but it is also necessary to re-evaluate primary and secondary sources in the field of foreign relations and economy history.

The aim of this article is to rethink the connection between foreign trade and the domestic economy in late medieval Japan and to provide some examples that will help us understand this question more clearly. The article will take a look at the financial side of the tributary missions, investigating how commodities for tribute and for trade were organised, and it will explain the individuals or institutions who contributed to the preparation of the tributary ships.

The Ashikaga shogunate and moneylenders

By the 1380s, in the midst of the Nanbokuchō War (1336–1392), the Ashikaga shogunate finally managed to establish its legitimacy in Kyoto, when aristocratic families and religious institutions accepted its presence and realised its necessity as an administrator and protector of Kyoto and the surrounding the Kinai area.⁷ Still, even if it became stronger in a political sense, it remained weak economically, with a rather modest income compared to the large estate owners of the *kenmon* 権門 blocks (i.e., aristocratical families and religious institutions).⁸ These families and institutions possessed large estates surrounding Kyoto and in remote provinces and thus exercised rights and interests over a large amount of land taxes.

The shogunate possessed, however, only a small number of estates. Moreover, its income from those lands was insufficient for maintaining its finances, because the transportation of the land tax from remote places was impossible.

⁵ Sasaki 1994: 3–22, 35–48.

⁶ Itō 2002, Seki 2014, Okamoto 2022.

⁷ Wintersteen 1974: 201–209.

⁸ On the *kenmon* theory, see Adolphson 2000: 10–20.

This was due to the fact that landholdings under the direct control of the shogunate (*kubō goryōsho* 公方御料所) were occupied by supporters of the Southern Court during the war or because the shogunate used its landholdings to reward loyal vassals.⁹

Recent studies emphasise, however, that among the landholdings that were directly controlled by the shogunate, there were larger landholdings with high income that were entrusted to members of the Ashikaga family, provincial warrior governors, or vassals. According to Yamada Tōru, previous studies underestimate the importance of such landholdings that should be considered as part of shogunal landholdings even if they were not under the direct control of the shogunate.¹⁰

Although this idea is fairly convincing, we have to consider that the Ashikaga shogunate also understood that maintaining control over landholdings was a fragile issue and that stable income could not be drawn from landholdings that were only under their loose or temporary control. Thus, in order to secure income, the Ashikaga turned to collecting commercial taxes from merchants, artisans, and moneylenders in and around Kyoto.

In 1393, the shogunate issued the law of ‘taxation on storehouse-keepers and sake-brewers scattering in Kyoto and its outskirts’ (*rakuchū hendo sanzai dosō narabi ni sakaya yaku jōjō* 洛中辺土散在土倉并酒屋役条々).¹¹ The shogunate prescribed that a tax in the amount of 6,000 *kan* per year must be paid by storehouse-keepers and sake-brewers, who were at the time generally exempted from other taxes.

The shogunate established the position (or according to some scholars an institution) of *nōsenkata* 納銭方, who was responsible for the collection and storing of taxes on behalf of the shogunate.¹² The shogunate selected the most wealthy and powerful sake-brewers and storehouse-keepers for the position of *nōsenkata*, who were expected to serve as treasurers or chamberlains of the shogunal storehouse (*kubō o-kura* 公方御倉). The *nōsenkata* not only collected taxes, but, as becomes obvious from sources about their later actual daily practice, they also provided space in their own storehouses for storing shogunal taxes and objects.

Over time, those who were selected to this position were responsible for the administration of shogunal finances, which included the collecting and storing of taxes and the supervision of incoming and outgoing payments on behalf of the shogunate. One of the further duties was also to store shogunal documents,

⁹ Kuwayama 2006: 92–125.

¹⁰ Yamada 2014: 32–57.

¹¹ *Chūsei hōsei shiryō shū* 2: 60, Grossberg 1981: 82.

¹² Tanaka 2001: 651–683, Kuwayama 2006: 136–175.

precious objects, and commodities that the shogun received as gifts, and if the shogun needed those documents or objects, the treasurers had to send them to the shogun from the storehouse.

Further, if the shogun needed money but the storehouses were empty, it was also the duty of the treasurers to procure money, often by borrowing it from moneylenders. As it is obvious from the explanation above, the service provided by moneylenders were essential for the daily operation of the shogunate, and even if they received no payment in exchange for their services, the protection provided by the shogunate seemed to be sufficient compensation for continuing their activities.

The financial challenges of sending official tributary embassies to China would have been insurmountable if the shogunate did not have financial security from additional resources, such as the taxes paid by sake-producers and storehouse-keepers, who established themselves as moneylenders in medieval society. This was obviously the best solution for the shogunate to raise the income it needed to send tributary missions to China.

In addition to the moneylenders, the treasurers also played an important role in the tributary missions to China, since they were responsible for providing the capital for those missions as treasurers of the shogunate.

Tribute items and trade products of the shogun

The shogun, or as he was called in the Sinocentric world, the 'King of Japan', was expected, as a formal vassal, to send tributary commodities to the Ming emperor as a sign of his acknowledgment of the superiority of Ming China and as an expression of his admiration towards the Chinese emperor and the Chinese culture.

Tribute products were expected to be precious local commodities (*fangwu* 方物). In the case of Japan, the main tribute products included weapons (spears, swords), armour, handicrafts (including fans, folding screens, inkstones), horses, sulphur, sapanwood, and agate. Except for sapanwood, which was imported from Southeast Asia probably via the Ryukyu Kingdom, these commodities were procured from different places in Japan. Some of them were originally gifts to the shogun that were 'reused' as tribute commodities, while others were purchased by the shogun as the official manager of the shogunal tributary ships. Ship managers were responsible for organising the ships for the tributary mission and for raising funds in order to cover the necessary expenses. Thus, in this case, the shogun, as manager of the shogunal ships, was responsible for fundraising and for the preparation of local commodities as tribute items.

Historians agree that in the early decades of the 15th century, the treasurers, one of the most significant being the Momii 籾井 family, procured the tribute items by themselves at the request of the shogunate. According to a list in *Boshi nyūminki* 戊子入明記 that contains the prices paid for tribute commodities for the mission of 1432, the amount was 694 *kan* 980 *mon*.¹³ The list does not mention, however, who provided the money for purchasing the products or through what channels the shogunate procured them, and therefore another interpretation of the list is also possible: namely that the treasurers did not provide the capital and instead used the money of the shogun that was deposited in their storehouses to buy the necessary items, or that at least not every item was purchased and provided for tribute by the treasurers.

On the other hand, there is a list from the same year about the prices of commercial commodities that the shogun sent to China.¹⁴ These items were sent to China to be sold as part of official trade, but of course the Ming state had the right to refuse their purchase. For two of the seven items on this list—gold ingot and sapanwood—there is a comment on their value and another comment that explains that they were ‘provided from the [shogunal] storehouse’ (*o-kura yori idasu* 自御倉出).¹⁵ This can mean simply that the items were provided from the shogunal storehouse or that the shogun ordered the treasurer to provide the money from the shogunal storehouse to purchase the items. The list contains no reference to the price of another item, copper alloy. The shogun gave orders to four provinces (Tajima, Mimasaka, Bitchū, and Bingo) to send this item to Kyoto, and because it was not purchased but rather was provided on shogunal orders by leading warriors from those provinces, it is not listed with a price.

This would mean that the other four items without comments were paid for and procured by the storehouse-keeper, who filled the position of treasurer on behalf of the shogun. Based on the same logic, the tribute items could be also interpreted as having been purchased and paid for by the treasurer, since the items do not contain a comment about from where the money came. Thus, the model of financing the purchase of tribute commodities was based on the wealth of these treasurers—as long as they could continue their business as storehouse-keepers, there was enough profit in their storehouses that they could share with the shogunate and provide financial help in purchasing tribute commodities.

However, as described in the following record in *Boshi nyūminki*, during the preparations for the mission in 1468 the situation changed completely.¹⁶

¹³ Igawa 2007: 133–134.

¹⁴ *Boshi nyūminki*: 348.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ For a detailed analysis, see Igawa 2007: 140–142.

Regarding tribute commodities, according to former precedents, it was the Momii [family] that used all their efforts to procure them, but they are now in financial difficulties and cannot afford anymore [to purchase tributary commodities]. Therefore, under the guarantee by Lord Ise, Shōbon agreed to make efforts to procure [tribute commodities].¹⁷

As this source shows, in the first decades of the 15th century, when a diplomatic mission was sent to China, the shogunate asked the storehouse-keeper Momii family, as shogunal treasurer, to purchase tribute commodities on behalf of the shogun. The description that the Momii were in financial difficulties and not able to procure commodities as before clearly indicates that they were expected to buy commodities on behalf of the shogun using their own resources. Otherwise, even if the Momii had been in financial need, the shogun could have provided the necessary money for purchasing the commodities, but that did not happen. The shogun, with the help of Ise Sadachika 伊勢貞親 (1417–1473), chief of the Administrative Board of the Shogunate (*Mandokoro shitsuji* 政所執事), was able to find another solution to this problem.

The Momii were possibly not the only storehouse-keeper family who worked for the shogun, but without any doubt they were the most important one. Still, because of their financial difficulties, the Momii family was not able to continue providing financial support for the shogun. The reason for the impoverishment of the Momii—and other moneylender-storehouse-keepers around the mid-15th century—was an increase of uprisings and attacks on moneylenders. These uprisings were led by debtors who borrowed money from moneylenders but could not pay it back, and in the uprisings the moneylenders often even lost the objects that they used as collateral. The debtors attacked moneylenders, tried to get back their collateral, and demanded debt cancellation from the government. The most significant of these was the Kakitsu uprising (1441), which had enormous effects on the business and financial affairs of moneylenders.¹⁸

It was not only the attacks and uprisings that caused great losses for the moneylenders. The debtors who demanded the cancellation of their debts forced the shogunate to take action in order to stop the turmoil and restore social order in and around Kyoto. Finally, after the Kakitsu uprising, the shogunate ordered the cancellation of debts, which made the lenders dissatisfied and led to a decrease in the number of moneylenders, because they could not continue their business after the attacks and they had suffered losses because of the decision of the shogunate about debt cancellation. The shogunate could not make both parties satisfied—tax income was of course important for the shogun but to keep

¹⁷ *Boshi nyūminki*: 348.

¹⁸ On uprisings and attacks, see Gay 2001: 128–148.

order in Kyoto and in the surrounding areas was given higher priority. Thus, finally the shogunate ordered debt cancellation, which made ordinary people satisfied but led to the decrease of moneylenders.

Even influential storehouse-keepers such as the Momii lost their wealth as a consequence of the attacks, and they had no surplus for financing the purchase of tribute commodities for the shogunate's diplomatic missions to China. The angry debtors even burned down storehouses, and thus many storehouse-keepers were not able to continue their moneylending activities.

At the same time, the income of the shogun from moneylender taxes rapidly decreased, but the shogun could not manage to acquire tax income from different sources. The decrease of wealthy moneylenders made the preparation of tribute products impossible.¹⁹

The situation of the shogunal storehouses is unknown because of the lack of an inventory, but it is quite likely that it did not contain enough copper coins for purchasing Japanese commodities for the China missions. In letters to the Ministry of Rites in Ming China, the shogunate often claimed that there was a lack of copper coins in Japan and that the shogunal storehouses were empty. This claim was often combined with a request to send more coins to Japan.²⁰ The greatest opportunity to receive copper coins was during official trade. If the Japanese claimed that the official prices for trade items were too low, the court may have decided to provide the Japanese embassy with additional coins.

Still, if we believe the diplomatic letters, then the shogunal storehouses were empty, and the shogunate really needed copper coins. It is possible that this statement displayed the reality, and in that case, it is highly possible that the Momii as shogunal storehouse-keepers used their own money to prepare tribute items and trade products for China, because the shogunal finances were not sufficient.

On the other hand, what we know is that the shogunal storehouse, already at the beginning of Muromachi period, was full of import commodities from China. Ichijō Tsunetsugu 一条経嗣 (1358–1418) praised both Ashikaga Yoshimitsu's karamono collection and the decoration of his rooms during his visit to Kitayama villa together with Emperor Gokomatsu 後小松天皇 (1377–1433) in 1408. He mentioned that the shogun had a collection of precious karamono that 'were even rare in China', including Chinese paintings, vases, incense burners, folding screens, and other items.²¹

¹⁹ Hashimoto 2013: 197–198.

²⁰ *Zenrin kokuhōki*: 198, 234, *Zoku Zenrin kokuhōki*: 266.

²¹ Harada 2011: 21–22.

Organisation of tribute items and trade products in the Ōnin period

The shogunal storehouse was filled with imported commodities, but copper coins were lacking, and the capital for furnishing tribute ships to China was not sufficient. Originally, it was the shogun who had to organise and send tributary ships, but the financial situation of both the shogunate and the shogunal treasurer around the Ōnin period (1467–1469) made the preparation of tribute commodities impossible. Still, the sending of Japanese tribute ships in the name of the King of Japan continued even after the Ōnin period.

The organisation of tribute ships during the Ōnin period marked an important turning point when the role of the shogun, who formally dispatched the tribute ships, was separated from the role of the ship manager, who had de facto control over preparing the tribute ship. The shogun formally remained the dispatcher of shogunal ships, but it was the manager who made the decisions regarding the management of the ship.

Since tribute was essential for a mission to be accepted in China as an official tributary embassy, the Japanese continued to send ships loaded with tribute commodities that were presented to the Chinese emperor in the name of the King of Japan. The preparation of tributary commodities despite the lack of sufficient capital was only possible because *kenmon* power blocks (i.e., religious institutions and warrior clans) occasionally took over the costs of financing those commodities at the request of the shogunate. This was the secret for how the shogun was able to send ships in his own name without providing any capital for them. The shogun still served formally as the ship manager of the shogunal ship, but representatives of *kenmon* power blocks became the de facto ship managers. The tribute items that were sent in the name of the King of Japan were in fact collected and paid for by wealthy ship managers and not the shogun.

After this change in the financial organisation of the embassies, the profit of the shogun was quite scarce. Since the shogun received from the Ming government the tallies that were necessary for official tribute ships to be acknowledged in China, only he could decide on their distribution. Since the shogun received the tallies for free and distributed them for an average of 300 *kanmon* in copper cash, he profited extremely well from tribute trade with China: with zero investment he received Chinese commodities and the fees for the tallies.²²

It was then the responsibility of the ship managers to provide funding not only for the necessary costs for chartering and sending a ship but also for covering the procurement costs of the tribute items. The ship managers used the revenue from boarding fees and cargo charges that were paid by traders in order

²² Suda 2012: 55–56.

to prepare the tribute items, but the procurement costs for tribute items were fairly high. When Ōuchi Masahiro 大内政弘 (1446–1495)—influential provincial lord from Suō Province—once planned to participate in the tribute mission of 1483 with his own ‘Ōuchi-ship’, the shogun asked him to donate money for the purchase of tributary products. This was the reason for why he finally refused to participate in the mission and abandoned his plan of sending a ship under his name at that time.²³

The Ōnin-Bunmei War (1467–1477) made the sending of tribute ships difficult, but it was a good opportunity for wealthy *kenmon* groups to participate in and profit from the venture. As mentioned in the previous source, the shogun could no longer rely on moneylenders, but Ise Sadachika then recommended Shōbon 紹本, a monk of Tenryūji temple (and head of the temple office, *tsūsu* 都寺),²⁴ who took over the function of ship manager backed by the wealth and broad commercial network of Tenryūji.

Tribute commodities were acquired from different places via different channels. Some of them were donated (*shinjō* 進上) to the shogun by leading warrior families, which means that the shogunate did not need to pay for those items that they then used as tribute products or in some cases as shogunal trade products. For example, in the case of the Ōnin tributary ship, armour was sent by the Toki 土岐 family, sulphur was provided by the Ōtomo 大友 and Shimazu 島津 families in Kyūshū, and horses were sent by warrior families from the Kinai region.²⁵

A regular tribute item—20 pieces of agate

For the same tribute ship, 20 pieces of agate were also donated to the shogun for tributary purposes.²⁶ Five of them were donated by the Togashi 富樫 clan, a warrior family from Kaga 加賀 Province, whose members had acted as governors of Kaga Province for generations. It was not a coincidence that agate was provided by the Togashi family since minerals such as agate, opal, and rock crystal were produced in the Enuma 江沼 district in Kaga Province. As we know from later sources, when Ōuchi Yoshitaka 大内義隆 (1507–1551) was preparing tributary ships in the name of the Muromachi shogunate in the Tenbun period (1532–1555), he asked Honganji monk Shōnyo 証如 (1516–1554) to obtain agate. In 1536, Shōnyo contacted Natadera 那谷寺 in the Enuma district,

²³ Hashimoto 2010: 123, Suda 2011: 61.

²⁴ On the officer-monks in Zen temple communities, see Collcutt 1996: 236–243.

²⁵ *Boshi nyūminki*: 348.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

and the latter sent the requested agate to Shōnyo, who then sent them to the Ōuchi in 1537.²⁷

The Togashi were an influential warrior family of Kaga Province, and the power of the Honganji temple of the Jōdo Shinshū sect gradually became enormous in the region. Honganji did not always have a peaceful and harmonious relationship with other Buddhist sects there. After the sons of Ren'nyo 蓮如 (1415–1499), the founder of Honganji 本願寺, moved to Kaga and established their own temples, Honganji started to exercise its religious and political control in the region. Shōnyo could preserve the influence of Honganji and the religious connection to other sects and played an important role in Kaga Province.²⁸ Since Shōnyo had his network and influence in Kaga, he could ask Natadera for help in acquiring agate for Ōuchi Yoshitaka. Procuring commodities for tribute or trade depended not only on commercial networks but also on religious networks, which was also true for Shōbon, who earlier used the religious network of Tenryūji and Gozan Zen temples to procure tribute items or commercial products at the request of the shogun.

Some tribute items or commercial commodities of the shogun were delivered by religious institutions during the preparation of the tribute ship during the Ōnin period. For example, among the 20 pieces of agate that were sent to China in the name of the shogun as tribute item, 12 were delivered by the shogun's attendant chief priest (a Zen priest who closely served the shogun) on behalf of the network of Gozan temples.²⁹

The title 'attendant chief priest' refers to Kikei Shinzui 季瓊真蘂 (1401–1469), chief abbot of Inryōken 蔭涼軒 (a sub-temple of Shōkokuji 相国寺 in Kyoto), who also confirms the sending of 12 pieces of agate to the shogunal official Inoo Mototsura 飯尾元連 (1431–1492) in the official diary of the Inryōken. As he explains, the shogun gave the order to deliver the pieces of agate, in order to bring them to China, because there was a precedent.³⁰

What he means is that there was a precedent for the shogun to send agate to the Ming emperor as tribute. In fact, we find the same amount of agate on

²⁷ *Tenbun nikki*, 1536 (Tenbun 5), 12/24, 12/28.

²⁸ On the religious activities of Shōnyo in Kaga Province, see Hayashima Yūki 早島有毅. 'Sengoku bukkyō no tenkai ni okeru Honganji Shōnyo no rekishiteki ichi 戦国仏教の展開における本願寺証如の歴史的位置 [The historical role of Shōnyo from Honganji in the development of Buddhism in the Sengoku period].' In: Kusano Kenshi 草野顕之, Hayashima Yūki 早島有毅 (eds.) *Taikai Shinshū shiryō* 大系真宗史料. *Monjo kiroku hen* 文書記録編 8. *Tenbun nikki* 天文日記 I. Kyoto: Hōzōkan, 2015, 485–531.

²⁹ *Boshi nyūminki*: 348.

³⁰ *Inryōken nichiroku*, 1465 (Kanshō 6), 1/30.

the existing lists of tribute items to China from both 1432³¹ and 1492.³² Also, later in the Tenbun period, the Ōuchi clan took great efforts to procure agate. It seems from these examples that the sending of 20 pieces of agate as tribute had become a regular custom in Sino-Japanese tributary relations already from the early beginnings.

Now, we may suppose that Kikei Shinzui did everything to procure the necessary number of pieces of agate, having received the order from the shogun. Finally, the 12 peices of agate were donated by two powerful head temples of the Rinzai Zen sect (Shōkokuji and Kenninji 建仁寺); three sub-temples of Rinzai Zen head temples (Inryōken, Rokuon'in 鹿苑院 [Shōkokuji], and Seishin'in 栖真院 [Nanzenji 南禅寺]); four temples and sub-temples related to the Tenryūji lineage of the Rinzai Zen sect founded by Musō Soseki 夢窓疎石 (Tōjiji 等持寺, Tōji'in 等持院 [also called Kita Tōji 北等持], San'nein 三会院 [Rinsenji 臨川寺], and Saihōin 西芳院 [Tenryūji]); and one Sōtō Zen temple called Gyokusenji 玉泉寺. Rokuon'in and Gyokusenji provided two pieces of agate each and the other temples one piece each. Tōjiji and Tōji'in were temples with the family graves of the Ashikaga clan, and this may explain why they became involved in the sending of agate and other tribute items, which will be discussed later. The deep involvement of Tenryūji is also clear from the list, which is not surprising since the manager of the ships was the Tenryūji monk Shōbon.

We may assume that Kikei Shinzui and Shōbon used their contacts with the Zen network and this proved to be useful. Due to their co-ordination and organisation, the necessary items were procured and Kikei Shinzui was able to provide them to the shogun as ordered. Similar to the aforementioned Togashi clan that used its connections to Kaga Province, Shōbon and Kikei Shinzui also relied on their network with other Zen temples. When the author of *Boshi nyūminki* mentions that the shogun's attendant chief priest Kikei Shinzui 'provided [agate] from the Gozan [temples]' (*sho gozan yori kore wo idasu* 自諸五山出之),³³ he clearly refers to the network of Gozan temples, including both the five main Kyōto Gozan temples and further Zen temples that belonged to the Zen Buddhist temple network in the broadest sense of the word.

Even so, it seems that collecting the necessary number of agate pieces was not possible. Adding the number of pieces of agate donated by the Togashi clan and the Zen temples, only 17 pieces could be collected. In order to prepare the proper amount of agate, three pieces were purchased,³⁴ supposedly by the manager of the ship. Moreover, regarding other items as well, it is obvious that

³¹ *Boshi nyūminki*: 348.

³² *Inryōken nichiroku*, 1492 (Entoku 4), 2/6.

³³ *Boshi nyūminki*: 348.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

for commodities that could not be procured by donation, the managers had to purchase them, probably from artisans or merchants, for money.

Inkstones

At the time, during the Ōnin period, Gozan temples were also ordered by the shogun to provide inkstones for tribute.³⁵ ‘Our Lord [the shogun] ordered that the Gozan [temple network] should donate five hundred Jakuōji inkstones in order to send [them] to China’ (*Taitō ni tsukawasu beki tame no Jakuōji sekiken, sho gozan yori gohyaku men shinjō su beki no yoshi ōseidasaru nari* 為可使于大唐釈王寺石硯、自諸五山五百面可進上之由被仰出也).³⁶ Shogunal officials Ise Sadachika and Inoo Mototsura, who also served as the administrator for China-bound ships (*kara bugyō* 唐奉行 or *karabune bugyō* 唐船奉行), advised the shogun that instead of desperately focusing on sending this large amount, the shogun should give an order to find inkstones that were really valuable. The administrators emphasised that the quality of inkstones was more important than their quantity.³⁷ This warning shows that Japanese shogunal administrators were aware that the Ming court had the right to refuse items if, for example, their quality was not sufficient. The shogun followed their advice and gave an order to announce it to the temples.

In *Boshi nyūminki*, we find the item of Jakuōji inkstones on the list of commodities prepared for the shogun’s tributary ship. It contains, written below this item, the remark ‘*shōbaigata* 商買方’, which can be interpreted as ‘for commercial use’. Another list of shogunal commercial products recorded in the same source clearly shows that these inkstones were used for commercial purposes and not as tribute.³⁸

The reason why shogunal administrators emphasised quality over quantity so much may lay in the fact that Jakuōji inkstones were supposed to be sold in China during official trade as commercial items of the shogun and not to be delivered to the emperor as tribute items. The profit from the inkstones depended on their quality.

It is interesting to note that the shogun in his order specified that the donated inkstones must be made of stone from Jakuōji Mountain 石王寺山 in Tanba

³⁵ Igawa 2007: 123.

³⁶ *Inryōken nichiroku*, 1464 (Kanshō 5), 6/15.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ A few items on the list contain the same remark. If we compare the list of donated items with the list of shogunal trade products, then it becomes clear that a great part of the donated or purchased commodities were intended to be sold during official trade and were expected to be bought by the Ming court. *Boshi nyūminki*: 348, 354.

Province. Black inkstones with white or silver streak patterns and made of stone from Jakuōji Mountain were famous and were regarded as a precious and elegant type of inkstone in Japan.³⁹ It is not surprising that because of the inkstones' fame and location—being in the vicinity of Kyoto—the shogun decided to send them to China. Following the advice of shogunal administrators, the shogun made the decision that the inkstones were of good enough quality to sell in China.

Kikei Shinzui, again, was expected to co-ordinate the collection of inkstones from Gozan temples, but, similar to the case of the agate, we may assume that the shogun was referring in this case to the broad network of Gozan temples. The temples followed the order, and in the end 180 inkstones were collected from different Zen temples, a much lower number than had been originally sought.⁴⁰

One of the temples that provided the shogun with inkstones was Tōjiji temple, which had also sent agate, as mentioned before. On the 15th day of 6th month, 1464, the shogun visited Tōjiji temple where he participated in a ceremony relating to the former shogun Ashikaga Takauji 足利尊氏 (1305–1358), who was buried there. Since the request of the shogun concerning the donation of inkstones had already been promulgated, we may understand this visit as both a religious occasion and also as part of a visit organised for collecting the required inkstones. In fact, as part of this visit, the shogun received 12 inkstones donated by Tōjiji temple. Similar to the pieces of agate, it was Inoo Mototsura who was appointed to receive the inkstones.⁴¹

The shogunal tactic was brilliant. The procuring or securing of a donation of Japanese commodities was ordered by the shogun to Zen temples, and they were ready to follow the order. In addition to this, temples in general always welcomed—or at least tried to show that they welcomed—the shogun, who appeared for an official visit (*onari* 御成). On the occasion of these visits, the temples always provided precious gifts (e.g., Japanese and Chinese goods) to the shogun to celebrate his coming and to show their acknowledgment of his shogunal power.

The reason behind this was that the shogun was regarded as the protector of Buddhism and Buddhist religious institutions. The shogun often visited Zen temples and temples of other sects as well. Moreover, depending on the occasion, he asked Buddhist priests to pray or to organise religious ceremonies. Religious leaders of different sects visited the shogun at the beginning of the year to deliver their greetings to him on the occasion of the New Year. Religious institutions of all existing sects acknowledged the political power of the shogun, and that is why they maintained close ties to the shogun during ceremonies

³⁹ Shimofusa 1996: 32–33.

⁴⁰ *Boshi nyūminki*: 348.

⁴¹ *Inryōken nichiroku*, 1464 (Kanshō 5), 6/15, 6/19.

throughout the year.⁴² Over time, however, the number of such official visits increased, and even though shogunal visits to temples became a burden, the temples continued to provide gifts to him.

What happened to the inkstones in China? Even though the inkstones were considered as precious tribute gifts to the Ming emperor, there is an interesting case where one of them was refused by the emperor and returned to Japan. According to the inscription on the back of the inkstone, it was a stationary utensil that originally belonged to the sub-temple San'ne-in (Rinsenji). This inkstone was common property (*jōjūmotsu* 常住物) of the temple and was used on a daily basis by the monks. As mentioned before, the shogun ordered Zen temples of the Gozan network to deliver inkstones to be used as commercial items, and it seems evident from the sources that, following the shogunal order, San'ne-in of Rinsenji, a Zen sub-temple of the Tenryūji lineage, decided to provide the property of the temple for the shogun. The inkstone was sent to China during the Ōnin mission, but the Chinese court did not purchase it during official trade. Finally, it was given back to San'ne-in. The person who wrote this short inscription on the back of the inkstone, in the 8th month of 1468, was Shōbon. He contributed to the preparation of the shogunal ship (*kubō-sen* 公方船) as ship manager, representing Tenryūji, then travelled to China with the tributary embassy and acted as *koza* 居座 (monk administrator or monk official) on the same shogunal ship.⁴³

Folding fans to China and folding screens

Japanese folding fans, used as tribute or trade products, were also occasionally donated by Zen temples.⁴⁴ For example, *mina-eribone* fans (*mina-eribone sensu* 皆彫骨扇子), which were folding fans decorated with carvings on both the guards and sticks, and 300 *mon* fans (*sanbyaku mon sensu* 三百文扇子), which had the value of 300 *mon* copper coins, were originally donated to the shogun on the occasion of the New Year's ceremony or official visits to Zen temples. Since these were the most expensive fans and the shogun possessed a great amount of them, he decided to use some of the donated fans as tribute items and the rest as trade items to be sold as part of official trade.

The shogun's storehouse was filled with not only Chinese commodities but also Japanese commodities that were presented as gifts to the shogun on the occasion of visits or audiences. It was quite usual that the shogun redistributed

⁴² Sueki 2010: 276–277.

⁴³ *Daikakuji shōgyō mokuoku*: 733.

⁴⁴ *Boshi nyūminki*: 348.

gifts that he received; it was a common act in medieval society in general. This example also indicates that the shogun stored commodities that were regularly donated by Zen temples or others, such as fans, in his storehouses and redistributed them as tribute as necessary, which represents a refined system for preparing tribute ship and tribute items, together with commercial items, without investing the shogun's own money.

Different from agate and inkstones that were donated by temples on the order of the shogun, in the case of fans the donation took place—at least on the surface—voluntarily, without an order from the shogun. Still, as pointed out by Sakurai Eiji, the temples were aware of the fact that their fans donated to the shogun might be used as tribute fans to China. That is why they ordered fans before the shogun came to visit with the purpose of sending them to China. When they ordered the fans, they always paid attention to their quality. They were careful to order them from craftsmen who were able to deliver good quality fans.⁴⁵

The awareness of the monks is also clear from the fact that they call the fans 'fans to be sent to China' (*kentō sensu* 遣唐扇子) or 'fans to China' (*kara-sensu* 唐扇子). When the shogun visited several sub-temples and buildings of Shōkokuji in 1459, he received 10 pieces of 'fans to China' at each stop.⁴⁶ Official visits to religious institutions not only were not only important for religious purposes or for facilitating conversations about Chinese art objects or topics with Zen monks, but they were also beneficial because of the gifts that could be redistributed in Japan or China. Japanese fans were popular in China, often used as gifts for Chinese officials or literati.

Here we see the connection of Gozan Zen temples and the shogunate. Since the shogunal ship in the Ōnin period was managed by Shōbon, it is not surprising that Gozan temples used their networks and helped Tenryūji to acquire the products. If we look at the donations, we also see that not only Zen temples donated commodities to the shogun; on the list there is Sanbōin 三宝院, a sub-temple of Daigoji 醍醐寺 (Shingon sect) that provided a folding screen as a tribute product to China. Sanbōin was a temple where the head priests were originally of aristocratic lineage. In the Muromachi period, Mansai 満濟 (1378–1435), who originally served for the wife of shogun Ashikaga Yoshimitsu and established close ties with Yoshimitsu, became the adopted son of Yoshimitsu. Shortly after that, in 1395, he was appointed as head priest of Sanbōin and at the same time as chief abbot of Daigoji temple. The practice that the head priest of Sanbōin acted also as chief abbot of Daigoji temple would later be inherited, and just like Mansai, the subsequent head priests would serve as protector monks of

⁴⁵ Sakurai 2017: 104–108.

⁴⁶ *Inryōken nichiroku*, 1459 (Chōroku 3), 1/18–1/19.

the shogun.⁴⁷ The head abbot of Sanbōin during the preparation of the Ōnin ships was Giken 義賢 (1399–1468), the son of Ashikaga Mitsukira 足利満詮 (1364–1418), younger brother of the third Muromachi shogun Ashikaga Yoshimitsu. His close relationship may explain why he also included a folding screen in the donation.

Looking at the inventory of commodities from 1433 selected as tribute or trade products in the name of the shogun, it seems that the ship managers basically tried to prepare the same items in the same amounts for the Ōnin ship in 1468, and later data from 1492 also supports this assumption.⁴⁸

The preparation of tribute items and trade products through donation by temples and provincial warrior lords reflects an important characteristic of the financial system of the shogunate, which relied entirely on the practice of gift-giving. This system and its practice connected the shogunate to the world of artisans and the world of distribution and created a circulation of commodities both in Japan and as part of foreign trade.⁴⁹

Problems with the quality of tribute items and return gifts

The basic principle of Ming China regarding trade within the framework of the tribute system was ‘giving generously, taking slightly’ (*houwang baolai* 厚往薄来). This is why, in the early decades of the Ming period, roughly until the 1430s or 1440s, the Ming court basically accepted all kinds of tribute commodities and provided precious Chinese products—more valuable than the tribute commodities—as return gifts (*huici* 回賜) in exchange for tribute.⁵⁰

This was a sort of trade that was highly profitable for members of foreign tribute missions. Still, maintaining the tribute system and receiving an increasing number of tributary embassies caused a severe financial burden on the Ming court. It became inevitable for the court, on the one hand, to lower the costs for return gifts and, on the other hand, to drastically decrease the amount of commercial commodities purchased during official trade. They also tried to reduce the prices of foreign commercial products and, in that way, to force foreigners to abandon selling them to the court. From the second half of the 15th century, this led to an increase in the importance of private trade.⁵¹ Still, the reaction of the foreign ‘barbarians’ was very different. Some of them completely stopped send-

⁴⁷ Mori 2004: 32–52, 53–59.

⁴⁸ *Inryōken nichiroku*, 1492 (Entoku 4), 2/6.

⁴⁹ Sakurai 2017: 87–88.

⁵⁰ Olah 2009: 38–39.

⁵¹ Olah 2022: 299–304.

ing tribute, while others, like the Japanese, continued sending tribute missions but increased the number of members and the amount of lower quality commodities, attempting to sell them privately during officially allowed and supervised private trade. Private trade, even supervised by the state, caused many troubles, however, and foreigners were sometimes deceived by Chinese broker-traders.⁵²

The quality, quantity, and variety of return gifts for the King of Japan were also affected by the financial straits of the Ming state. We can explicitly see the obvious tendency of the state to gradually reduced both the amount and variety of items for return gifts, which was presumably linked to the trend of the shrinking trade volume that characterised official trade after the Jingtai period (1450–1457). If we examine the existing lists (*beppuku* 別幅) of return gifts from the Ming emperor, recorded in *Zenrin kokuhōki* 善隣国宝記 and *Zoku Zenrin kokuhōki* 続善隣国宝記, it is obvious that, for example in 1433, the amount and variety of return gifts was abundant and included different utensils, silk fabrics, and other precious Chinese commodities. If we add to this the amount of copper cash that was paid by the state for official trade commodities sent by the King of Japan, it is doubtless that the Ming state bore high costs in order to maintain the tribute system. From 1436 onwards, however, the wide range of variety of return gifts was gradually reduced, so that by 1478 the Ming court sent almost only silk fabrics as gifts, which gives the impression that the amount of gifts basically decreased.

As mentioned before, certain tribute items from Japan were not accepted by the Ming court. Using this as a reason, the court reduced the number of Chinese commodities as gifts. Interestingly, there were cases when Chinese officials tried to convince the court to refuse Japanese tribute. This was the situation when Yang Shouchen 楊守陳 (1425–1489), a native of Ningbo, submitted a letter in 1477 to the Chief Official of the Bureau of Receptions (*zhuke langzhong* 主客郎中), an office under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Rites that was responsible for foreign tributary embassies, and proposed that Japanese tributary ships should be refused in the future.⁵³ Yang Shouchen had just been selected as an apprentice at the Hanlin Academy after passing the *jinshi* 進士 grade in the state examination, and he was working on an edition of official historical works.

He claimed that swords and fans as tribute products from Japan were not necessary items for Ming China. In his reasons for refusing Japanese tribute, he mentioned that the products were expensive and the court had to invest a huge amount of money for the preparation of return gifts, which in this situation was a waste of money. A further reason for the refusal was that for transporting Japanese commodities of tribute-bearing embassies from Ningbo to Beijing, local

⁵² Olah 2014: 23–39, Olah 2015: 39–48.

⁵³ *Shuyu zhousilu*: 62–64.

officials in Ningbo had to borrow people from Zhejiang to work as labourers, which became a huge burden for the people.

He also emphasised quite harshly that accepting Japanese tribute would encourage the arrogance of Japanese people and damage the Ming state financially. It is not clear why Yang Shouchen was so opposed to Japanese tribute. One possible reason could relate to a previous Japanese embassy from 1453 when the Japanese had brought a huge number of commodities to sell during official trade and had started negotiations with the Ministry of Rites on the prices, because the ministry had not been ready to purchase those commodities for the same price as before. Yang Shouchen was concerned that Japan would increase the number of commercial products and continue to request high prices for them during negotiations with the Ministry of Rites. In his opinion, refusing Japanese tribute would have no effect in China, since Japanese commodities were useless for the Chinese state, and the refusal would eliminate the chance of possible conflicts. In the end the Ministry of Rites rejected his request.

The recognition that Japanese tribute commodities contained nothing necessary for China is mentioned in later Ming sources. For example, when the author of *Ribenguo kaolüe* 日本国考略 referred to Japanese tribute products, such as folding fans decorated with gold leaf or gold lacquerware, he belittled the value of those commodities saying that ‘even if it is cold we cannot wear them, even we are hungry we cannot eat them’. He further emphasised that China had plenty of goods that were sufficient to meet the needs of people; thus, it was unnecessary to bring commodities from Japan that were not even necessary.⁵⁴

In contrast, however, other Chinese sources mention that Japanese fans were popular in China, especially precious and high-quality fans whose sticks were made of ebony wood, an import from Southeast Asia, and whose leaf was gold painted. Korean fans were also imported to China, but their quality was far inferior to that of Japanese fans, and their price was also only a tenth of that of Japanese fans. Japanese fans were not cheap, but they still became popular among Chinese people.⁵⁵

Japanese tribute items were sometimes rejected, or lower prices were offered for them because of their low quality. In fact, the quality of Chinese return gifts that the shogun received from the Emperor also decreased over the years. According to a diary account from 1492, when Kisen Shūshō 龜泉集証 (1424–1493), head monk of Inryōken, and the shogun talked about gifts from China, Kisen explained to the shogun that he inspected the return gifts from China and he discovered that the quality of gifts had decreased. The following is part of the recorded conversation:

⁵⁴ *Ribenguo kaolüe*: f. 21-v.

⁵⁵ *Wanli yehuobian*: 663.

Then I [the head monk of Inryōken, Kisen Shūshō] said [to the shogun]: ‘I was there before when the imperial gifts from China were inspected in the house of Ise [Sadamune, *bugyōnin* of the shogunal government]. I saw that, compared to the past, the number of Chinese gifts decreased and [their quality] also became inferior. After that I asked Shukugen [Jugen], the abbot of the sub-temple Tengen’in [about this]: “This time the Chinese imperial gifts are different from those in the past. Their number decreased and [the quality of] many of them became inferior. What is the reason for that?” [Shukugen of] Tengen[‘in] said: “You are absolutely right. It is strange, as you say, but China is not wrong. The gifts sent by our court [i.e., the *bakufu*] as tribute are of extremely low quality. Therefore, the Chinese court also reduced the quality of its gifts in retaliation.” [He mentioned as examples that] the shafts of *yari*-spears were made from the waste material of wood and scrap paper that was used for the lining of the golden folding screens. [The Japanese tribute gifts were] such low-quality!’⁵⁶

According to this, Kisen discussed the problem of tributes with Shukugen Jugen 肅元寿嚴, who served as monk administrator on a tribute ship during the Hōtoku period, but Shukugen said that the decreasing quality of Chinese gifts can be explained by the fact that Japanese tribute items were low in quality. As Shukugen said, the Chinese court just wanted to take revenge, and that is why the court sent low-quality items. When the shogun heard this explanation, he said that ‘it is shameful for Japan’ that Japanese commodities of such bad quality were sent to China.⁵⁷ It is obvious that there was a tendency of decreasing quantity and quality during these years. The reason for this change can be explained by the shift in ship organisation from the shogun to merchants, warriors, and religious institutions. Ship managers tried to keep down the costs, but it led then to a decrease in quality.

Profit and investment

Those who decided to take on the organisation of ships to China as part of the tribute mission and who were engaged in preparation and supervision of the process were the ship managers. Originally, as mentioned above, the shogun was also a ship manager who provided capital—with the help of storehouse-keepers who acted as shogunal treasurers—for sending tribute ships. Then, when the shogun was not in strong enough of a financial situation to send tribute ships and the treasurers could not provide the necessary capital for preparing the tribute

⁵⁶ *Inryōken nichiroku*, 1492 (Entoku 4), 6/6.

⁵⁷ *Inryōken nichiroku*, 1492 (Entoku 4), 7/6.

commodities, private merchants offered their services and became managers of the shogunal ship, and they, instead of the shogunate, procured the tribute products. Since those managers provided capital for the ships, the profit from trade done by merchants and others on their ships belonged to them as well.

Ship managers were responsible for providing the tribute ships with a crew and the necessary equipment. Ships sent to China were generally rented in ports along the Seto Inland Sea or ports in Kyushu, mainly in Hakata. The costs for the rent and the equipment, including the costs of repairs for damages and the repair or replacement of damaged equipment before returning the ship to its owner, were—under certain conditions—to be paid by the manager who borrowed the ship.⁵⁸ It seems from the sources that the average rental fee for one ship that was used as a tribute ship was 300 *kanmon* copper cash, and to pay for the ship's repair costs and equipment, the managers appropriated another 300 *kanmon* in cash.⁵⁹

Those who travelled to China to engage in private trade, often representatives of religious institutions, wealthy merchants, or members of the warrior clans, had to pay for the travel and for the space they used for their products. This was an important source of income for the ship managers who provided capital for tribute ships.

In a conversation with Jinson 尋尊 (1430–1508), chief monk of Daijōin 大乘院 (Kōfukuji 興福寺) in Nara, Kusuba Sainin 楠葉西忍 (1395–1486) emphasised the importance of the deputy officials (*gekan* 外官) and their attendants (*jū* 従) on tribute ships to China who were selected and sent by the ship manager.

The secret [of a successful mission] is to fill the positions of the deputy and the attendants with wealthy merchants [*utoku no shōnin* 有徳之商人]. [...] [The positions] are not for people who are financially in a difficult situation [*keikai no jin* 計会之仁].⁶⁰

Even in this case, Sainin talks about a special situation when a tribute ship was sent by 13 individuals and religious institutions (i.e., the ship had 13 ship managers and each of them had the right to send one deputy official). In this way, the managers shared the costs necessary for the preparation and divided the profit according to the amount of their invested capital. We cannot overlook how much Sainin emphasises the importance of the financial strength of those who represented the ship managers during the preparations and then in China. Only wealthy merchants could provide sufficient capital to prepare tribute ships and procure Japanese commodities that they could sell in China.

⁵⁸ On the rules for shipping in medieval times, see Sumita 1942: 62–66.

⁵⁹ *Boshi nyūminki*: 353, *Daijōin jisha zōjiki*, 1483 (Bunmei 15), 1/24.

⁶⁰ *Daijōin jisha zōjiki*, 1483 (Bunmei 15), 1/24.

According to the practice at the time, ship managers had the right to take a 10% levy (*chūbunsen* 抽分錢) from the merchants after they came back to Japan. After the arrival, managers inspected and evaluated the imported commodities that merchants brought back from China on the tribute ships, put a price on each of them, and took 10% of the entire value as levy. This 10% of levy represented the actual profit of a ship manager.⁶¹

This is why Kusuba Sainin also emphasises that taking wealthy merchants and their attendants was also essential for doing profitable business in China, because their individual profit determined the profit of the entire ship and, in the end, the profit of the ship managers.

A new financial model—Sakai merchants and the ‘guest merchants’

From the Bunmei period (1469–1487) onwards, the collecting of a 10% levy based on the calculation of the value of imported goods was substituted by another system. In this new model merchants from Sakai offered to ship managers that they undertake the organisation of the tribute ships and provide the capital necessary for the preparations for dispatching the ships. Merchants made a contract with the managers in advance based on the amount that they would pay after returning from China, and thus they also received the right to collect fees for the travel and the cargo from the merchants before departure and to collect a levy from merchants after they returned to Japan. The significant change from the previous system was that they promised in advance that they would pay a certain amount of money irrespective of the actual profit of the ships. This was risky for the merchants, but it seems that they were confident that they could collect enough money to exceed the original expenses and thus make a profit. Still, they took a risk that could have led to their earning not so much money or even not attaining a balance between the amounts of investment and profit.

Sakai merchants, who represented a powerful commercial group in late medieval Japan, started to participate in the organisation and management of tribute ships and commercial activities in China based on this new model, from the Bunmei period onwards. They were closely connected to the self-governing body of the free-city Sakai that was under the direction of the association of Sakai merchants (*egōshū/kaigōshū* 会合衆).⁶²

It was in 1476 that the first tribute mission departed from Sakai with the proactive participation of Sakai merchants in the preparation of the tribute ships. This was also the first time that Sakai merchants made a contract on the amount

⁶¹ Suda 2004: 91.

⁶² Fujimoto 2017: 14–16.

of the levy that they would pay after their return to Japan. Details of this contract, however, are not known.⁶³

Compared to the early stage of the tributary trade, when the shogun and later the ship managers of religious institutions and warriors organised the tribute ships to China, sending their own representatives—often warriors or Buddhist priests, sometimes moneylenders or merchants—to oversee the organising process, by the Bunmei period we see the development of the half-professional group of investors—coming from the Sakai merchants—who were ready to take over the organisation of the tributary ships and to provide capital for outfitting the ships and participating in trade in China with their own merchandise. Parallel to this new development, we see that a certain group of merchants appear in the sources from around the Ōnin period, the so-called ‘guest merchants’ (*kyakushu* 客衆, *kyakunin shu* 客人衆).

To better understand who they were, it is useful to look at the only existing list with names of guest merchants who travelled on the shogunal ship *Izumi maru* 泉丸 during the Ōnin period.⁶⁴ Among those guest merchants we can find representatives of religious institutions, merchants, and moneylenders being divided into two groups. The first was the group of ‘guest merchants of the ship *Izumi maru* with a portion of 1000 *kan*’, and the second was the ‘group [of guest merchants] with 500 *kanmon* on the same [*Izumi maru*]’. The amount of copper cash refers to the total sum that these guest merchants had invested for preparing their own trade commodities that they intended to sell in China.⁶⁵ This means that the 36 members of the two groups invested 1,500 *kanmon* copper cash in total for their commodities, including the costs for the shipment of the cargo to China. Among the 36 members, we can find, among others, Zen monks representing the Shōkokuji or other Zen temples, representatives of several Hakata merchant clans, Kyoto moneylender-traders, and wholesale merchants from Hyōgo. It is interesting to note that beyond the merchants and moneylenders, there was a quite high number of Zen monks on the list. They were probably selected as representatives of Zen temples for the mission to China, because they were experienced in finances and commercial activities of their own temples.⁶⁶

It is fairly true to say that without the participation of these guest merchants, who represented religious institutions, merchant groups, or moneylenders with great financial power, influence, and commercial networks, it would not have been possible to prepare the tribute ships.

⁶³ Izumi 1981: 94–95, 114–116.

⁶⁴ *Boshi nyūminki*: 354.

⁶⁵ Kobata 1969: 246–47.

⁶⁶ Takeda 2007: 150, Olah 2016: 86–102. On Zen monastic economy in general, see Collcutt 1996: 253–289.

A diary from the 16th century, *Tenbun nikki* 天文日記, provides a short explanation of these guest merchants in one of its entries. The diary refers to guest merchants from the estates Minami no shō 堺南荘 and Kita no shō 堺北荘 in Sakai who participated in the last two tribute missions organised by the Ōuchi clan, and it describes them as ‘a group [of merchants] that contributes to the preparations of the travel to China’ (*totō no gi aimoyōsu shū nari* 渡唐之儀相催衆也).⁶⁷ We can interpret this short and general explanation as a statement emphasising that these merchants were indispensable for dispatching the tribute ships. In fact, they participated in the preparation of dispatching the tribute ships in different ways, helping to outfit the tribute ships, prepare the necessary equipment, and also participate in the operation of the ships.⁶⁸ The backup role played by Sakai merchants shows that the role and existence of Sakai merchants had become increasingly important.

In 1486, Sakai merchants were selected for organising and managing two shogunal ships. This was the second time that Sakai merchants were involved in the organisation of tribute ships. The shogun, Ashikaga Yoshimasa, asked a monk named Shuryū 取龍 from Sakai to act as ship manager for both of the shogunal tribute ships.⁶⁹ He decided to entrust the formal ship management to Shuryū, probably because he had high expectations that Shuryū would use his personal connections to Sakai merchants, who had proven to be skilful traders in the previous mission. The de facto organisation and management of the shogunal ships was finally entrusted to the Sakai merchants. We may suppose that Shuryū believed that the Sakai merchants could keep their promises and would pay the amount of money they had agreed upon in advance; that is why he entrusted to them the management of the two shogunal ships.⁷⁰

This was the second time that Sakai merchants made a contract in advance on a fixed amount of levy. They promised to pay 4,000 *kan* copper cash as a levy after each ship returned to Japan, but after their return it turned out that they were not able to keep their promises. The merchants claimed that they were not able to pay 4,000 *kan* but were ready to pay 3,000 *kan*, which was significantly less.⁷¹

The details are not elaborated in the diary *Rokuon nichiroku* 鹿苑日録, but the most plausible explanation seems to be that Sakai merchants could not make as much profit with the tribute ships as they had originally expected. One possible cause of the low profit could be that not as many merchants had travelled

⁶⁷ *Tenbun nikki*, 1538 (Tenbun 7), 1/17.

⁶⁸ Okamoto 2022: 55–61.

⁶⁹ Itō 2002: 36–50.

⁷⁰ Murai 2015:10–11.

⁷¹ *Rokuon nichiroku*, 1499 (Meiō 8), 8/6.

on the ships to China or that the merchants had brought fewer commodities to sell in China. A more convincing explanation would be that trade opportunities in China had changed. Official trade, when the Ming state purchased the foreign commodities, was not as profitable as before, and the prices went through drastic changes. If we compare the prices paid by the court for Japanese commodities during official trade in 1433 and in 1453, we find a decrease in the prices of between 40% and 80%. The chief ambassador, Tōyō Inpō 東洋允澎 (?–1454), complained to the court in 1453 that the amount of copper cash that they received for their commodities was only one-tenth of the amount that they had received in 1433.⁷²

It turned out quite clearly that this kind of ship management of Sakai merchants was too risky and hazardous. Another possible problem, which may explain why they could not fulfil their promises, might have been that they were not aware of the situation of the trade environment in China. The fact that Chinese official trade was shrinking because the court was not ready to purchase foreign commodities during official trade showed its clear signs already in the 1450s. Japanese tribute missions also experienced the changes and the drastic decrease of profit. Southeast Asian rulers, for example, stopped sending tributary missions because of the decreasing profit from official trade. Indeed, the port of Canton saw a decrease of tribute missions from the mid-15th century onwards from Southeast Asia.

The fact that the Sakai merchants refused to pay the amount agreed on before is an obvious sign that their profits had been much lower than expected. It seems that Sakai traders did not understand the situation in China and did not consider the changes in the tributary trade system. No concrete data exists about this mission, but from the situation it seems to be highly possible that the Sakai merchants had miscalculated their mission and had made decisions based on old data about official Chinese prices. They made the mistake of believing that profitable trade would continue as it had before. Japanese merchants were, we have to assume, ignorant about the changing situation in China.

This ignorance led to a conflict with ship manager Shuryū, who did not want to accept such a change of the amount the merchants had agreed to. He discussed this problem with the Sakai merchants, who finally agreed to pay the original amount of 4,000 *kan*. This incident clearly showed the problems and risks of the management of the tribute ships based on this method of agreeing on a levy in advance.

⁷² Olah 2022: 301–302.

Conclusion

After providing a short description about the financial situation of the shogunate, this article has tried to provide an inventory of case studies that help us imagine and understand what kind of connections existed between domestic networks and foreign trade in medieval Japan that made the procuring of tribute items and commercial products for official trade in China possible. The fragile financial situation of the shogun was an important reason for why the organisation and management of tribute ships after the Ōnin period were transformed into a different structure.

It should be also emphasised that the word ‘network’ in this context is not limited to commercial networks. It may include political, social, and religious networks that helped individuals prepare for tribute missions to China. Including a few details from primary sources, the article has tried to give examples—some of which have already been discussed separately in previous research—of how sources can be re-evaluated by looking at simple records from more complex perspectives. Being aware of networks in Medieval society, such as the religious network (and also closely connected to that the commercial network) of Honganji or Tenryūji, that were discussed in this article can help us connect the scattered and loose information in the sources, in order to explain what contributed to the development of foreign trade. The giving and receiving of gifts, very trivial actions that we often see in the sources, can help us understand how commodities circulated in society.

Despite the weakening of shogunal power, tributary trade continued because the structure of ship management transformed. Ship managers and merchants became important investors who provided capital. Tribute ships became part of commercial ventures backed by the flourishing late medieval Japanese economy, and the increase of capital led to an increase in investors who were ready to participate in trade with China.

The way that products were procured shows different patterns that provide good examples that help us understand how local commercial, social, and religious networks were utilised for procuring Japanese commodities. We may suppose that, in the case of preparing commercial products, participants on the ships also used connections to their own networks to procure items for tribute or finally purchase the necessary items.

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