

COMMERCE, FINANCE AND CURRENCY

The Flow of Coins from Song China

In the previous chapter, I noted how the social function of writing changed considerably around the fourteenth century. I believe this change is closely related to the fact that coins also first began to circulate with regularity in the islands from the late thirteenth century. Of course, coins had been used in Japan prior to the thirteenth century, with minting beginning in the eighth century. These early coins were made of silver and copper and were known as “wadô kaichin.”¹ The imperial court later minted “imperial twelve-sen” coins up until the middle of the tenth century.

The character of these early coins raise a number of issues for our consideration. To begin with, it is no accident that they were first minted at the same time as the Yamato state was adopting the Chinese governmental system. They were often used to pay *chô* (taxes in kind) and *yô* (corvéé labor tax) levies. But in fact, the only area in which these coins actually circulated was the Kinai region, the five provinces that surrounded the capital. We have no evidence that they were in use throughout the islands. Furthermore, *wadô kaichin* were not simply used as a method of payment and circulation. They also had more magical uses. For example, *wadô kaichin* were always placed on the foundation whenever a new temple was constructed. Several coins were also usually placed in a corner of a building, as we know from the excavation of the Fuwa barrier in Mino. This kind of placement appears to have had a magical significance. Since society in the islands did not yet

¹The name comes from the characters inscribed on the coin, clockwise around the center hole.

possess the conditions that made currency necessary, the minting of coins came to an end in Japan after the tenth century, just as the power of the central government went into significant decline. Nevertheless, the fact that this primitive society had known of coins had critical consequences for the subsequent relationship between coins and society.

There were, however, other items that circulated as currency (in other words, as a medium of exchange). Foremost were silk and rice. For example, records show that rice and silk continued to be used as the measure of the price of land until the middle of the twelfth century. But from that point in time through the thirteenth century, coins from Song China began to flow into Japan in great quantities. Taira no Kiyomori,² in particular, put tremendous energy into developing trade with the Song.

However, just as this process was getting underway the Japanese islands were hit by a series of epidemics. These epidemics were popularly called “the coin pestilence” because of rumors that it was the use of coins that caused their outbreaks. These rumors provide us with evidence that coins were beginning to circulate with greater frequency. But they also show that the tendency to view coins as magical items was still quite strong. In other words, the idea of coins as a mere medium of circulation had still not sufficiently permeated society.

Nevertheless, according to Matsunobu Yasutaka, payments that used to be made in silk were almost all made with coins by the first half of the thirteenth century.³ This trend continued from the latter half of the thirteenth century as land

²Taira no Kiyomori (1181-1181) was the head of the Taira clan at their zenith of power at the end of the Heian era. It was his rise to power that exacerbated growing tensions between regional warrior groups and warriors associated with the aristocracy in the capital, and it was his death that precipitated the events leading to five years of civil war, known as the Gempei wars. Taira no Kiyomori was portrayed as the great villain in the romance of that war, the Tale of the Heike.

³ Matsunobu Yasutaka, “Seni to kahei no kannen”, in Rettô no Bunkashi, no. 6, Tokyo:

sales were no longer conducted in rice but in coins. As a result, the importation of Song coins reached an enormous volume by the thirteenth century. While there are very few examples to give us a concrete sense of the volume of coins that entered Japan, we do have records of a ship sent to Song China by the Saionji family in the early thirteenth century that brought back 100,000 *kan* of coins. A *kan* was a string of coins with one thousand coins on it, so 100,000 *kan* would amount to 100 million copper coins. This enormous volume of coins was most likely placed in the bottom of the ship as ballast.

Not long ago a sunken ship from the same era was raised from the ocean floor off the southwest coast of the Korean peninsula. The ship, known as the “Shin’an wreck,”⁴ was a rare find for its cargo was raised almost entirely intact. The ship also contained a huge number of wooden tablets by which we know that there were many people with Japanese names on board, including a mendicant priest (*kanjin hijiri*) who was gathering funds for construction work at Tōfukuji temple.⁵ The ship contained vast stocks of celadons and porcelains, and about twenty-eight tons of Song coins were placed in its keel for ballast, an amount far exceeding the 100,000 *kan* of the Saionji family import. We do not know if all of this was intended for import to the Japanese islands, but a significant proportion, at least, was surely destined for the archipelago. According to the wooden tablets found on board, the ship sank in 1323.

Documents of the time reveal that there were a great many ships traveling between the archipelago and the mainland up through the fourteenth century. From *Nihon editaasu sukuuru shuppanbu*, 1989.

⁴The area in which it sunk is called the Shin’an Sea.

⁵*Kanjin hijiri*, as the reader will see below, were wandering priests who traveled the country collecting donations for large-scale temple construction projects. Tōfukuji was a Rinzai Zen sect temple founded in 1236 in eastern Kyōto by the Kujō family, a member of the aristocracy.

the latter part of the eleventh century, ships like these, loaded with copper coins, sailed continuously from the Asian mainland to every part of the Japanese archipelago. Many ships were also sent to the mainland from the islands. The level of intercourse was so high that Chinese merchants and sailors formed Chinatowns in Kyûshû ports like Hakata, Imatsu and Bônotsu or Japan Sea ports like Tsuruga. The majority of the goods imported from China on these ships were copper and pottery (porcelain and stoneware). Again, the Shin'an wreck provides evidence of this, for several tens of thousands of unbroken blue and white porcelains were also recovered from the wreck.

This volume of imports testifies to the fact that there was a tremendous demand for Song coins precisely at the time that Japanese society itself was undergoing a major transformation. We have very few extant records of transactions in commodities, but the documents concerning sales of land from this period suggest that value was coming to be measured more frequently in coins in a wide variety of transactions. Coins became the primary object of finance, but as I shall discuss in further detail below, we should also remember that rice did not lose its function as a measure of value or as a means of exchange and payment.

The coins brought back by these ships began to disseminate and circulate in Japanese society from the thirteenth century—the early part of the century in eastern Japan and the latter half in western Japan. The dissemination of coins, however, was not uniform, for eastern Japan—where until the twelfth and thirteenth centuries silk and cloth had circulated as currency—took to coins earlier than western Japan. Since “a bolt” is a unit of measure for silk or cloth, the saying from the time that “ten copper coins will get you a bolt,” suggests that silk and cloth were traded directly for coins.

In contrast, rice had been used as currency in the Kinai region and the

rest of western Japan from early on as the primary means of exchange and measure of value. At the end of the Heian period, there even appeared rice promissory notes known as “*kaemai*” (exchange rice). With the appearance of these notes, rice itself did not have to be transported, to make “rice” payments. In other words, these notes quite effectively fulfilled the function of currency, thereby delaying the adoption of coins in the area.

In the east, however, the Kamakura shogunate authorized the circulation of coins in lieu of silk and cloth from the early thirteenth century. Thus from the thirteenth to the fourteenth century the shogunate began to express the value of annual tribute from steward and vassals’ fiefs in terms of cash, for example, as a “one hundred *kan*” holding or a “five hundred *kan* land tribute.” Likewise, the “Kantô *kuji*,” a tax levied on vassals themselves, was also collected in coins.

In this way, we can see the end of the thirteenth century as a period in which a cash economy developed, as coins permeated the Japanese archipelago. In addition, it marked the beginning of a credit economy, with bills of exchange circulated instead of coins. The reason is simple: the large volume of coins used in many transactions were too unwieldy to be practical. Ten *kanmon* of coins—bills of exchange were customarily issued in that amount—was equal to 10,000 coins, quite a healthy sum. One string held one hundred *mon*—usually about 96 coins—which by itself would be quite heavy. Ten of these made one *kan*, so ten *kanmon* would be one hundred strings, which would be extremely heavy. Transporting actual coins could be dangerous, so safe and portable notes of credit came to be the preferred means of sending payment. We should also remember, however, that these bills of exchange could only work if there was a wide-spread network of

merchants who recognized and honored them.

Symbols of Wealth

The normal result of a massive influx of coins is inflation. We expect prices to rise, and indeed for a time in the late thirteenth century the price of rice, silk and other commodities did rise. But, as Matsunobu Yasutaka has shown, prices in general, including those of land, showed a tendency to fall from the fourteenth century. Not many historical materials have survived from that period, so there is little that we can say for absolutely certain. But Matsunobu believes that the reason prices did not rise was because it was the value of the coins that rose—that is, the demand for coins rose—which would make the relative value of other commodities decline. The late thirteenth through fourteenth centuries represented one peak of this demand, as we can see in the frequent discovery of what are called “buried offering coins” (*mainôsen*) or “set aside coins” (*bichikusen*) from that era. The next peak came during the Warring States period and into the first years of the Edo period.

The standard view of buried coins is that they were buried because of some form of social chaos, such as war. That is conceivable for the period of the second peak in demand, which was a period of extended civil war. But Matsunobu believes that the peak in coin burials in the late thirteenth through fourteenth centuries represents attempts to accumulate, rather than simply safeguard, wealth. This is a sign that Song copper coins had come to possess a great significance.

I am basically in agreement with this. However, I should point out

that people at the time considered buried things to be owner-less. Our investigation of the significance of buried coins must take this belief into account. The fact that coins were buried suggests that they still retained a certain magical significance (to which I shall return in the next section). This is a somewhat different meaning from that attributed to the accumulation of coins after the Warring States period, when burial had ceased to signify the same kind of alienation. In any case, we can say that coins had definitely become a means of accumulating wealth. The fact that coins—which, unlike rice and silk, have no use value—became a symbol of wealth demonstrates that there was a major transformation in the image of wealth. This constituted a momentous shift in the way society understood coins.

In Yoshida Kenkô's Essays in Idleness, there is mention of “an exceedingly rich man” who said of coins: “Money should be feared and dreaded like a master or god, not used as one pleases.”⁶ That is, one should seek to suppress one's desires and single-mindedly save up one's coins. For this rich man, the accumulation of coins was itself a “virtue.” In fact, wealthy people in that period were also called “virtuous people” (*yûtokujin*). This gives us a good indication of the way society's understanding of coins was changing. Nakamura Naokatsu has called this late thirteenth century approach to coins “money worship.”⁷ By the fifteenth century, coins had become more than just a measure of wealth. They began to function as a means of payment and exchange.

There are a number of things that we can say about the fact that coins

⁶Essays in Idleness: The Tsurezuregusa of Kenkô, trans. by Donald Keene, New York: Columbia University Press, 1967. The essays were originally written between 1330 and 1332. The quote is on page 179, the translation is Keene's.

⁷ Nakamura Naokatsu, Muromachi jidai no shômin seikatsu, Iwanami shoten, 1935.

made the transition to function as currency in this manner. In the previous chapter, I wrote that the dissemination of writing propelled the homogenization of society. Here, I believe we can say that the circulation of these round coins with their square holes throughout the archipelago (excepting Hokkaidô and Okinawa) also contributed to this trend toward homogenization. This transformation was an epochal event in the formation of an “ethnos” (*minzoku*) in the Japanese archipelago.

Nevertheless, I must admit that there are many things about premodern copper coins that we do not understand. The biggest question relates to the fact that these coins were all coins of the Chinese mainland—Song coins, Yuan coins and Ming dynasty coins. Yet, there was a great amount of copper being mined and processed in Japanese society at that time. So much copper was produced that copper counted among the archipelago’s top export items. Casting technology had long been available, and casters had long been active in Japanese society. So there is no doubt that the ability to mint coins existed in the islands. Nevertheless, the ruling class in Japan showed no desire to mint coins after the late Heian period. Apart from Emperor Go-Daigo—a rare exception among emperors in that he planned, but was unable to bring about, the minting of coins and the printing of paper currency—neither the imperial government nor the shogunates (Kamakura and Muromachi) seems to have conceived of the possibility.⁸

Why was that? This should be a major topic for investigation in the history of the relations between China and Japan. What might this have to do with the fact that Japanese society had already possessed a government that had once

⁸This statement only applies to the Kamakura and Muromachi shogunates. The Tokugawa shogunate did mint coins and, in fact, made recurrent debasements of its coinage a central feature of its financial policy.

produced currency (the *wadô kaichin*)? Historians have not yet answered these questions.

Matsunobu calls the society of the fourteenth century “a society that had converted to currency too early.”⁹ Whether or not that was true, the practical circulation of coins as currency had a decisive and transformative effect on the meanings of trade and finance as well as on the social status of those members of society who were involved in such activities.

How did “things” become commodities?

The act of exchanging one thing for another—treating each thing as a commodity—took time to develop to the form that we know it today. In earlier societies, the exchange of goods was conducted within a so-called gift economy. In this kind of economy, relations between people were cemented through the acts of giving a gift and receiving something in return. This was not an exchange of commodities. How, then, did things become commodities?

Katsumata Shizuo suggests that the exchange of one thing for another requires a particular kind of place to facilitate the exchange. This place is the marketplace. It is only when the particular space of a marketplace comes into existence that things can be separated from a gift economy and circulate in trade. In this sense, a marketplace is a site that must be cut off from the everyday relations that bind people together. If I were to put it in my own way, I would say it is a site of “disengagement” (*muen no ba*).¹⁰ Katsumata

⁹Matsunobu, p. 208.

¹⁰“Muen no ba” is a phrase that comes from Amino’s groundbreaking book, *Muen, kugai, raku: nihon chûsei no jiyû to heiwa*, Heibonsha, 1978. The fundamental issue of that

proposes that these sites have existed since the ancient past. For example, there was an ancient custom that a market be set up where ever a rainbow appeared. This custom appears in the writings of Heian period aristocrats and there were still traces of this custom as late as the Muromachi period. In one case, a rainbow appeared in the compound of Fujiwara no Michinaga, grandfather of three Heian period emperors.¹¹ So, following custom, Michinaga set up a market in his compound and allowed merchants to come in and ply their trade. Of course, one never knows exactly where a rainbow touches ground, but this did not prevent the custom from being followed.

According to Katsumata, Japan is not the only place that had a custom of holding a market where a rainbow appeared. Katsumata conjectures that this custom arose in the Japanese islands because rainbows were seen as a bridge from the next world to this one—between the sacred and the profane.¹² Conducting trade at this kind of site was believed to please the deities, who resided in the other world. Katsumata’s point, then, is that markets in general were established at the border between the world of the deities and the world of human beings, at the boundary of the sacred and the profane.

I agree with Katsumata completely. In fact, markets in Japanese society were usually established in places that marked boundaries, such as

book was the function of sites outside the control of the state where goods and people circulated in an alternative economy.

¹¹Fujiwara no Michinaga (966-1027) who led the Fujiwara clan at its zenith of power and was the ultimate master at marriage politics, succeeding in establishing five daughters as imperial concubines and becoming grandfather to three successive emperors.

¹²There is a more detailed discussion of this notion in the chapter “Fear and Loathing” (as well as in the introduction), but those readers who have not yet read those two sections should know that a basic tenet of the ancient Japanese world view is that there were two planes of existence: the present world of everyday life and an invisible “other world,” close to this world—even potentially overlapping—but nevertheless distinct. The borders and liminal spaces Amino writes of in this chapters were understood to be borders between this world of humans and the “other world” of spirits or deities.

riverbanks or the islands in the middle of a river, or on the beach (the boundary between the ocean and the land), or in foothills between mountains and plains. A functioning market was seen as a place separate from the everyday world, in large part by virtue of the significance of its physical location. It was seen, in other words, as a place linked to the sacred world, the world of the deities. Upon entering such a place, both people and things were severed from their mundane relations. It was only in an “unencumbered” condition that objects could be exchanged as simply things-in-themselves. To put it another way, both people and things became the possession of the deities once they entered the space of the marketplace. Or, we could say that in a marketplace, objects became ownerless. At the least, they were no longer seen as emblematic of the person who possessed them. That seems to me to have been the condition that enabled the exchange of objects for other objects.

Since markets in Japan were places where the worldly relations between people were severed, they also became a place for activities like the bacchanalian revelries known as “*utagaki*.”¹³ During festivals, the everyday relationship of marriage was considered severed and men and women could freely come into contact with each other, at the festival site, as unattached individuals. What is less well known is that the same principle held true in the marketplace. Thus, the exchange of objects as commodities became possible only under conditions in which both people *and* things were cut off from their relations in the everyday world.

This severance of objects from human ownership as a precondition for exchange is, I believe, a key to understanding the significance of the buried

¹³Amino returns to *utagaki* in the context of his discussion of medieval sexual practices in the chapter, “On Women.”

coins I discussed above. Since the area beneath the ground was seen as the “other world,” burying things in the ground would mean removing them from the hands of humans and consigning them to the world of the deities. It appears that by burying things in the ground, and thereby making an offering to the deities, people may have been seeking divine permission to use the land or the coins. Or perhaps making something ownerless transformed it into an offering, a sacred possession, and thereby made it possible to re-use it as a form of financial capital.

Important questions are raised if we say that the principle of the market and the modern exchange of commodities was based on the state of disengagement from mundane relations that appeared in the marketplace. What could account for the change from this market conception, which lasted until the medieval era, to the one we are more familiar with today? We will come to that.

How interest was taken

The practice of finance raises the same issues. Just how did it come about that things were loaned and interest charged on that loan? There is nothing natural about it. I do not know how things would look if we approached this on a world historical scale. But if we trace back the origins of finance in the case of Japanese society, we eventually arrive at the concept of “*suiko*.” *Suiko* was a practice that was intimately tied to rice agriculture. In ancient society, the first rice of the season to be harvested (known as *hatsuho*) was offered to the gods and stored in a sacred storehouse which was probably managed by the leader of the community. The next year, the rice

that had been offered to the gods and placed in the storehouse was loaned out to farmers as sacred rice seed. At harvest time, the farmers would return the amount of rice they had been loaned for seed and add to that a small amount of “interest rice” (*ritô*) as thanks to the deities. This cycle constituted the basic principle of “*suiko*.”

Just how this fit into the system adopted from China by the Ritsuryô State is a point of some debate. But, however they meshed, the Ritsuryô State cemented this practice within its government system in a practice known as “*kusuiko*” (public *suiko*). Tax rice stored in provincial government storehouses was originally used as principal. Loaned to farmers in the spring, the loan was to be repaid by the farmers in the fall with “interest rice.” This interest was called “*shôzei*” (proper tax), and was used to pay for regional administrative expenses.

However, the custom of *suiko* was not restricted to the government. It was also practiced in society at large where it was called “private *suiko*” (*shisuiko*). Whether public or private, it is important for us to remember that this loan relation was expressed as “*suiko*.” Interest rice was usually collected at a rate of fifty percent. Both state and private *suiko* strictly abided by the restriction that interest not amount to more than double the principal. Interest rates of fifty and one hundred percent may appear to be extraordinarily high. But if the interest is collected on agricultural production, in kind, then it is not that high.

Financial activities were conducted as the lending of something owned by the deities and, through the process of agricultural production, that loan was returned with an extra amount as an expression of gratitude. The initial offering of the first harvest to the deities was still sometimes called “*hatsuho*”

in the medieval period. But more often it was called “*jôbun*” (offering). For example, the first products of harvest offered to Hie Shrine were called “Hie *jôbun butsu*” (goods offered to Hie), “Hie *jôbun mai*” (rice offered to Hie), or “Hie *jôbun seni*” (copper coins offered to Hie). The offerings to Kumano Shrine were called either “Kumano *go-hatsuho butsu*” (Kumano’s first grains) or “Kumano *jôbun butsu*” (goods offered to Kumano).

These rice and coin offerings—which, as offerings, had become the possessions of the deities—were then used as capital for loans. We can confirm that loans were widely carried out in this form in the twelfth century, and that in such cases the act of making a loan was still called “*suiko*.” This lending of sacred possessions continued after the Muromachi period as well, under the name “*shidôsen*” (literally, temple coins). By this time, the loans, offered at low rates of interest, were generally made with the coins that had been offered to the Buddhas at the temples.

Whatever they were called, whenever human beings made use of something that had been offered to the deities, the return of those sacred possessions was accompanied by interest as a gesture of gratitude to the deities whose objects had been used. Financial activities, therefore, were carried out in a close relation to the realm of the sacred. Earlier, I mentioned that coins that were buried in the ground became “ownerless.” We might also see burial as a way of giving the coins to the deities, in which case, whoever buried the coins may have meant to consign them for a time to the deities so that they could later be used as financial capital.

Thus, whether we are discussing trade or finance, both were only possible through the construction of a relation to the sacred world, a world that transcended the mundane. Merchants and financiers were thus set apart

from ordinary people, for they had to continually come into the presence of that sacred world. That is why merchants and financiers in the medieval period took on the physical appearance of people in the service of the deities and Buddhas (i.e. religious workers). In the terminology of the time, people who served the native deities were called “*jinin*” (or *jinnin*) and people who served the Buddhas were called “*yoriodo*.” The emperor, who was likened at the time to a deity, was served by people called “*kugonin*.”¹⁴ The “*kugo*” of “*kugonin*” originally meant the food eaten by the emperor and the nobility, but it eventually expanded to include anything used by the emperor. Those people who provided the emperor with the various things he needed everyday were called “*kugonin*,” or imperial purveyors. All of these purveyors—to shrines, temples and the emperor—were considered servants of sacred beings. They even called themselves “slaves of the gods” (*shinbutsu no nuhi*).

In concrete terms, then, the people who conducted financial activities by loaning offerings, from Hie Shrine for example, were known as the Hie shrine purveyors. Lower level monks and mountain ascetics put the offerings to Enryakuji Temple into circulation as loans and the Kumano shrine purveyors and mountain ascetics ran lending enterprises with Kumano’s offered goods. At Ise shrine it was a group called the “*oshi*” who used Ise’s offerings. It is important to note, then, that financial operations were begun by people who were recognized as serving the deities in their various forms.

¹⁴Following Andrew Goble’s usage, I would translate these groups as “purveyors”—shrine purveyors, temple purveyors and imperial purveyors. The reason for choosing the term purveyor despite the more literal translations of “shrine people,” “people who approach,” and “people who make offerings” will be clear in Amino’s discussion of their functions in “Fear and Loathing”. See Andrew Edmund Goble, *Kemmu: Go-Daigo’s Revolution*, Harvard University Press, 1996.

People who served the gods and the emperor

The same was true for those engaged in trade. For example, the casters who made the metal lamps used in the imperial palaces were granted in return the right to travel freely throughout the country buying and selling iron and iron goods. Given the weighty title of “Lamp Purveyors of the Emperor’s Private Office” (*kurôdo-dokoro tôro kugonin*), metal casters thus engaged in public trade through their status as imperial purveyors.

Manufacturing and trade were not yet specialized fields at the time, so craftsmen, such as the lamp casters, were also merchants. The cypress craftsmen (*himonoshi*) who made round wooden boxes (*magemono*) both made the boxes and sold them at market. They were also given imperial purveyor status, or else were attached to shrines throughout the islands as shrine purveyors. In short, all merchants from the ancient and medieval eras made their livings as servants to one of the divine entities, and performers, in the narrow sense of those who engaged in performing arts, were in the same situation. Merchant/manufacturers, financiers and performers possessed the status of servants to the deities and emperor because the activities of trade and finance themselves, as well as the performing arts, were seen as having a deep connection to the divine world.

To return to an earlier topic, their status also derived from the character of the spaces in which they made their living. In those days, purveyors of all kinds moved about from market to market, within a particular area or even across the whole archipelago. They naturally had a base somewhere, but many of them were on the road for long periods of time. In the end, the places through which they passed—the roads, harbors and

anchorages—and their destinations—the markets on riverbanks, beaches and foothills—were all liminal places. The liminality of these spaces can be seen in customs other than those related to market activity. For example, it was the custom in those days that any incident that occurred within a marketplace had to be resolved within that space. Grievances could not be carried to outside authorities for redress. The same turns out to have been true for roads. Even in the case of murder, the parties involved had to resolve the situation at the site itself and relatives of the victim could not carry out a vendetta on the murderer once all had left the scene of the crime. Traveling in such places, itinerant purveyors adopted attire that distinguished them from ordinary people. Mountain ascetics, as Buddhist monks, were naturally very easily distinguishable. But shrine purveyors also wore yellow robes to signify that they traveled as servants of the deities.

As I mentioned above, shrine purveyors, temple purveyors and imperial purveyors occasionally called themselves “slaves of the deities,” “slaves of the bodhisattvas” or “temple slaves.” As a result, historians have treated them as people of an extremely low status; as being, in fact, slaves. But a closer investigation reveals that during the medieval era these so-called slaves were occasionally of the same high class as vassals (*gokenin*) of the shōgun. From the perspective of their own society, therefore, these people were in a position that was comparable to that of the warrior class.

These groups have not yet been precisely situated within a world historical framework. Doing so will help us understand them better, for Japan was not the only society that had servants of the deities, or slaves of the sacred. They could also be found in societies with divine kingship. For example, the Incan empire had slaves of the deities—slaves of the sun god

and slaves in the service of the Incan emperor.¹⁵ In Japan's case, there were women known as "*uneme*" (court servants), well back into archaic times. Shamans (*miko*) in Japan were of a similar status. We also know of a similar group of workers at Kashima Shrine who were known as "*shinsen*" (divine menials). The problem for us today is the use of the character "*sen*" in reference to these people. Our modern sense of the character is that it means "base" or "despised." But it would be a mistake for us to employ our modern sensibility and conclude that ancient menials were socially despised.

The class system of the Ritsuryō State designated five kinds of menials, known literally as "the five colors of baseness" (*goshiki no sen*). Four of these groups—public slaves (*kunuhî*), government slaves (*kanko*), private slaves (*shinuhi*) and domestics (*kenin*)—may justifiably be called slaves, either state or privately owned. But the fifth class of menials were the "*ryōko*" (tomb guards) who stood guard over the imperial tombs. These people were classified as menials, but they could not be called slaves in the same sense. Later, in the medieval era, we find that tomb guards had the same status as shrine purveyors and were considered "slaves of the gods." Notably, it was *because* of this status that they were granted special rights and engaged in commerce. We must thus think of menials in direct attendance on the deities, like those people whose function was to guard such sacred spaces as the graves of the aristocracy, as having possessed a character that was radically different from the way a modern sensibility understands "baseness." Even though they may have been called "slaves of the gods," they were in fact people with a status comparable to warriors. Some of them even received court rank.

¹⁵In Incan divine slavery, female slaves were called "akurya" and male slaves were called "yanakona".

As a consequence, the status of purveyor groups was explicitly distinguished in a variety of ways from that of the common people, who were known as “*hyakushō*” (villagers).¹⁶ The homes of shrine workers (that is, the houses that formed their base of operations) were exempted from the duties levied on the homes of commoners. There were even cases where purveyors were granted tax-exempt paddy land from which they could draw an income. In addition, their privilege of free travel granted them exemption from the transportation taxes collected at barrier gates, river crossings, ports and harbors, thus making it possible for them to walk freely throughout the country. That is one more reason why these people wore the yellow or persimmon robes characteristic of monks when they traveled: to distinguish themselves from ordinary people.

They also distinguished themselves by the unusual things they carried: remarkable staffs, sticks and so forth. Shrine purveyors who sold fish carried sacred buckets on their heads into which offerings to the gods were usually placed. It was believed that if an ordinary person laid a hand on a purveyor—on his possessions, or on his person so as to cause injury or death—the offender would be subject to a terrifying divine retribution. In addition, sites where the corpse of a shrine or imperial purveyor was found were itself considered sacred places, now possessed by the deities. Therefore, whenever the villagers of a *shōen* estate that was owned by a temple or shrine failed to submit their yearly tribute, the purveyors (not warriors) would be mobilized to act as bailiffs and collect the tribute from the villagers. We even find cases where the purveyors put on demons’ masks or carried statues of the buddhas with them to intimidate the villagers into turning over the

¹⁶See “Was Japanese Society an Agricultural Society?” for a more detailed discussion of the “*hyakushō*” status.

tribute.

Whatever the activity, the shrine and imperial purveyors lived a separate existence from that of the commoners, their status provided for in the state system itself. I believe we should call this the “purveyor system,” although this term has not yet achieved currency in the academic world in general.

From the sacred to the profane

In sum, up until the early part of the medieval era—the twelfth and thirteenth centuries—commerce and finance were conducted by these purveyor groups because commercial activities could only be carried out in a relationship to the deities. Their involvement was based on the magical character of commerce. The contemporary problem of the group known as “discriminated people” (*hisabetsumin*, or *burakumin*) is related to this condition because there was another group of people in ancient Japan who also had shrine purveyor status who were known as “non-humans” (*hinin*), or “dog-shrine purveyors” (*inuujinin*). Female entertainers, such as courtesans (*yûjo*) and dancers (*shirabyôshi*), also had a social status comparable to that of the divine servant groups up until at least the early part of the medieval era, but I will discuss these groups further in the next chapter.

However, the special character of commercial activities and those who participated in them underwent a major transformation from the latter half of the thirteenth century as the increased circulation of copper coins created new conditions for commerce. In contrast to the earlier financial practice of *suiko*—in which the possessions of the deities were loaned out—loans of coins

simply for the sake of earning more coins in interest became more common in the late thirteenth century. One could call this a more worldly use of coins, signifying that financial activities were becoming more secular.

Of course, not all financial activities were immediately secularized. It is well known that the most important financiers of the Muromachi period were the *dosô* moneylenders.¹⁷ Originally, many of these moneylending institutions were managed by monks from Enryakuji temple or purveyors from Hie Shrine. These institutions began to appear in the Kamakura period, and the principal they originally used in their loans were offerings to the deities. In particular, the *dosô* moneylenders were characterized at first as divine storehouses, and were even considered a kind of “disengaged” space. For example, in time of war, anything placed within a *dosô* storehouse was considered safe. *Dosô* storehouses never entirely lost this character, but in the Muromachi period, the managers of these storehouses began increasingly to make private loans of coins. The debt cancellation edicts (*tokuseirei*) of the Muromachi period were aimed at bringing an end to this form of private lending.¹⁸ The period also saw the continuation of previous kinds of financial activities, such as the loaning of the deities’ offering rice and the buddhas’ copper coins (*shidôsen*), but the debt cancellation edicts of the Muromachi period did not apply to these kinds of loans.

In this way, financial practices gradually took on more of the secular

¹⁷*Dosô* literally means “earthen storehouse” and referred to the thick-walled, white-plastered storehouses in which these institutions kept their cache of coins and objects handed over as security for loans. Since many of their loans were made on movable collateral, these institutions are sometimes called pawnshops. But their activities were more varied than a modern pawnshop, and the scale of their loans may often have been much greater, making them more like banks. In general we shall refer to them in this book as moneylenders.

¹⁸The Japanese term, “*tokuseirei*” literally means “decrees of virtuous government” and were essentially general cancellations of most debts. They happened periodically from the late Kamakura period, although most took place in the Muromachi period.

character that a modern sensibility can understand. Nevertheless, the reaction against “*rizeni*” (interest money) loans also grew stronger, often culminating in debt cancellation uprisings (*tokusei ikki*) in which people would demand the cancellation of cash loans and the return of pawned goods. In that sense, the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries were an epoch-making period in which the prior relationship between finance and the sacred realm gradually changed and finance settled into being a secular practice. Merchants and tradesmen were also affected by this secularization. One sign of this was that a distinction between merchants and artisans slowly emerged at this time. In a related development, shrine and imperial purveyors retained their status, but the meaning of that status was undermined as the act of commercial exchange itself gradually became seen as secular.

We can explore this transformation by considering an example involving artisans. From the latter half of the thirteenth century a genre of picture scrolls developed known as “Tradesmen Poetry Contests” (*shokunin utaawase*).¹⁹ These scrolls depicted several kinds of skilled workers arranged in a series of pairs. In the standard format, each member of a pair creates a poem and then the poems from each pair are evaluated by a judge. In effect, these scrolls feature a variety of tradespeople whose crafts are represented in

¹⁹The third volume of *The Cambridge History of Japan* defines “shokunin” as “a general term for those engaged in non-agricultural occupations, that is, artisans. Entertainers were also sometimes included in this category.” While most scholars follow the convention of translating *shokunin* as “artisan” (for lack of a smoother alternative), I am uncomfortable with the way that tends to restrict our notion of this group to those who work in handicrafts. Since one of the major thrusts of Amino’s reinterpretation of Japanese history is to argue that our modern understanding of premodern terminology is trapped in modern-day conceptions, I am tempted to break with convention and use a broader, albeit more clumsy, translation. Thus, I am going with “tradesmen” and “skilled workers” to distinguish *shokunin* from the more restricted group “*kōgyōnin*” which I am translating as craftsmen. With tradesmen and skilled workers, I hope to suggest the concept of a person who possesses a polished skill, but one which need not be restricted to strictly material production. This also has the merit of avoiding the white-collar connotations of today’s use of “professional.”

song and picture. This genre became quite popular and was widely disseminated in the Edo period under the rubric of “An Illustrated Catalog of Tradesmen” (*shokunin tsukushi*).

When these scrolls first appeared in the late thirteenth century they were produced in a way that revealed a relation to the deities. One example of the early form of this genre is the “Tôhoku-in Poetry Contest.” This scroll depicts a poetry contest held among a gathering of tradesmen and women for a memorial service (*hôte*) at Tôhoku-in temple. Another early example is a scroll called “The Tsurugaoka Bird-Release Poetry Contest” (*Tsurugaoka hôseikai utaawase*) which depicts tradesmen reciting poetry while gathered at Tsurugaoka Hachiman Shrine for a bird-releasing ceremony. Both of these scrolls, therefore, take the form of a poetry contest among skilled workers held in conjunction with a sacred event at a sacred site.

In these poetry contest scrolls, the tradesmen and women are placed in pairs, seated left and right, and there appears to be a logic to the way certain occupations are paired together. For example, one often finds blacksmiths paired with carpenters. When we look into why these two were paired, we find that blacksmiths in those days were more closely associated with making nails and clamps than they were with making swords. Since blacksmiths were associated with building construction they were often attached to temples and shrines and given the status of shrine or temple purveyors. Since the blacksmith was a construction worker, he was paired in the picture scrolls with the most important worker on a construction site: the carpenter.

Thus, each pairing of the trades in the scrolls was based upon a logical relation between the two. Now, what is particularly interesting is that in the “Tôhoku-in Poetry Contest” scroll we find a shaman paired with a gambler.

The very fact that a gambler is included in a picture scroll of tradesmen reveals the different mindset of society before the thirteenth century. Most likely, the pairing here has to do with the way that each one communicates the will of the deities; the gambler through the roll of the dice and the shaman through spirit possession. It is in this sense that these two are paired as “skilled workers.” But how are we to understand their place in this gathering of people who might otherwise be simply labelled artisans? On the one hand, gambling was something that was subject to social condemnation. On the other hand, it was placed in the same domain of activities as the drawing of lots that was common to so much communal activity. In either case, gambling was considered a form of artistic practice and gambling had its own form of a “Way” (*dao*): we know from documents of the time that there was something known as a “Way of Gambling.” We know, too, that at the end of the Heian period there were positions in the headquarters of the provincial government of Kaga for “the director of the dice” and “the director of the shamans.” We can also confirm that there was an office that oversaw dice players, gamblers and shamans in the imperial government in Kyôto. In fact, the famous picture scroll, *Gaki sôshi* (Picture Scroll of Hungry Ghosts), depicts a scene in which shamans were present when the wife of a retired emperor gave birth. The shamans—whose job was to become possessed by any evil spirits that might otherwise possess the mother—were seated behind a buddhist ascetic who was brought in to pray for a safe birth. A *sugoroku* board (a kind of backgammon) was placed next to the shamans. The shamans then “gambled” by playing the game and rolling the dice. This was also practiced by commoners, but such gamblers and shamans had a particularly close relationship to the imperial palace. Gamblers and shamans

can thus be seen as types of skilled worker, forming a natural pair in the tradesmens' poetry contest scrolls. We can also see that the other "tradesmen"—hand craftsmen, merchants, or performers—were understood via their relationships to the deities in the scrolls produced in the thirteenth century.

However, scrolls produced from the fifteenth century, such as the Songs of Thirty-Two Pairs or the Songs of Seventy-One Tradesmen, still portray a great number of tradesmen—hand craftsmen, merchants and performers—but the opportunity for their gathering no longer had anything to do with the deities. In particular, in the Songs of Thirty-Two Pairs the tradesmen call themselves "base" (*iyashiki mono*) and the contest is presented as a gathering of occupations that have become socially stigmatized. This is inextricably bound up with the issue of discrimination, discussed in greater detail in the next chapter, and this scroll indicates to us that a portion of the professional class had already become denigrated by the fifteenth century.

In the scroll of the Songs of Seventy-One Tradesmen, the now stigmatized commercial and performing tradesmen are clearly divided according to their *appearance*, rather than function. For example, they are divided according to whether they wrap their faces in cloth, or whether they wear an *eboshi* cap (see figure). Female professionals are also distinguished according to the styles of headgear, coiffure and makeup that marked their occupations. In this manner of dividing the tradesmen, these fifteenth century scrolls are quite different from their thirteenth century predecessors. The fifteenth century poetry contest picture scrolls clearly attempt to realistically depict the tradesmens' work itself. For hand craftsmen, the scrolls show their tools and working styles, while for merchants the scrolls

show their wares and their selling styles. On that point alone, we can see that commerce, handicraft production and performances were becoming separated from their sacred functions and were becoming more secular activities.

All of this points to the fact that during the disturbances of the Northern and Southern Courts period Japanese society underwent a major change in the structure of authority. Along with that social transformation, those tradesmen who had based their distinction from ordinary people on their direct relation to the gods (thereby becoming sanctified themselves) were no longer able to maintain their special privileges. That is why in the fifteenth century these merchants and craftsmen frequently appealed to such temporal powers as the military governors (*shugo daimyô*) to maintain their privileges. Thus, the fourteenth century constitutes an epochal period in the transformation of the conditions of commerce, trading and finance, as well as of the existence of the people who were involved in those activities. And there is no doubt that the increased flow of metallic currency, discussed later in “The World of the Shôen Estate and Government Lands,” had a deep connection to this transformation.

The role of New Buddhist Sects in Kamakura

Our attempt to understand this transition raises an important problem at this point. That is, it is precisely during this period of change that the Buddhist sects known as the “Kamakura New Buddhist Sects” came to play a major role in society. For example, during the Kamakura period the Saidaiji branch of the Ritsu sect achieved great popularity due to two of its

evangelists, Eison (1201-1290) and Ninshô (1217-1303).²⁰ We find Ritsu monks of this branch extremely active by the middle of the Kamakura period. One of their most notable activities was the attempt to bring salvation to the “non-humans,” as I shall discuss in the next chapter. But one other important role they played was in the collection of contributions—what we today would call donations for temple refurbishment. In those days, coins and rice were collected for the native deities and the buddhas and used to pay the costs of temple or shrine construction and repair. The monks who went out and collected contributions from donors throughout the country were known as “*kanjin jônin*” (donation-gathering holy men, or religious solicitors). We find evidence of their activities in the twelfth century, but the monks of the Ritsu sect played a significant role in this endeavor from the middle of the Kamakura period, collecting contributions on a far larger scale. Furthermore, the Ritsu monks did not merely gather donations. They also organized groups of craftsmen and tradesmen.

For example, Eison employed stone cutters who came over from Song China to construct the stone pagoda at Hannyaji temple.²¹ Ninshô had a close relationship with stone cutters as well. Ritsu monks also had connections with metal casters and by mobilizing all these artisanal groups, the Ritsu monks built and repaired temples and shrines. In other words, the Ritsu monks acted as construction contractors.

At the time there were also a number of tribute ships plying the seas between the archipelago and the Asian mainland. It was likely that some of

²⁰Transmitted to Japan in 754, the Ritsu sect’s Japanese headquarters are at Tôshôdaiji temple in Nara. The sect is known as one of the six “Nara sects” and focused its activities on establishing the rules of Buddhist discipline and ordination.

²¹A Shingon-Ritsu temple in the city of Nara, established by the Soga clan in 654. The stone pagoda Amino refers to here is currently designated a National Treasure.

these Chinese-style boats (called “*karabune*”) were also built in Japan for the China trade.²² For example, I believe there is a very good chance that the Shin’an wreck, discussed above, was made in Japan. In any case, many of the men sailing these ships and conducting trade were, in fact, Ritsu monks. From the late thirteenth century through the fourteenth century, a religious solicitor was always on board whenever one of these trading ships left for the Asian mainland. The profits earned by these monks paid for the construction work on a number of temples. Therefore, the Ritsu monks were also entrepreneurs and traders who took the donations they collected and used them as capital.

The same was true for Zen monks. Until now, scholarship on the Zen sects has focused almost entirely on the intellectual history of their founders. But in fact, Zen monks played a variety of roles in the temporal world. We know that, like the Ritsu monks, Zen monks also rode as religious solicitors on China-bound ships to engage in trade. We also know that it was Zen monks who brought back from China a number of new art forms—such as ink painting, tea ceremony and garden design—as well as performance arts such as Noh. At a more mundane level, many of the street performers known as “*hōka*” were, in fact, Zen monks.²³ In the Muromachi period, Zen monks were also commonly acting as “*shōsu*,” or contractors for the management of *shōen* estates. This is most likely due to the fact that Zen monks had superior accounting skills which were needed for the administration of *shōen* estates.

²²The issue of whether these boats were built in China or the Japanese islands becomes an important point in “Bandits, Pirates, Merchants and Financiers”. Amino points out there that the consensus is that the boats were all built in China, and he argues against that.

²³“*Hōka*” was a style of street theater in which the performer would dance and sing while performing certain acrobatic feats.

Again, by the Muromachi period, temples of the new Kamakura Buddhist sects were replacing the shrine purveyors and mountain ascetics with these monks in their investment of temple and shrine offerings. With these changes, the temples began to underwrite their operations with a variety of financial activities centering on the lending of “*shidôsen*” temple coins. This period also saw the widespread appearance of temples known as “*muensho*” (places of disengagement, or non-related places). They were called places of disengagement because they were cut off from the kind of worldly relations that supported clan and patronized temples. Again, the majority of “disengaged” temples were of the new Kamakura sects: Zen, Nichiren, Ritsu, as well as Pure Land, True Pure Land and Ji. *Muen* temples were generally temples that did not own land. They were thus different from clan temples or those temples that had received land from powerful patrons. If we view these temples from a real estate-centered perspective, it would appear that they had a very weak financial base. And in fact there are many scholars who see these temples as having been poor. But the distinctive characteristic of “disengaged” temples was that they supported themselves on a “capitalist” basis—through such financial activities as the lending of coin offerings or such commercial activities as donation investment—rather than on the basis of real estate holdings. In particular, temples of the True Pure Land sect frequently anchored the formation of a town as merchants and craftsmen gathered in the “sacred ground” surrounding the temples and their practice halls. True Pure Land sect temples were supported on the same principle as other “disengaged” temples, with contributions known as “kindnesses” (*shi*) and by the commercial activities of their surrounding “temple towns.”

Why it was that so many of the new Kamakura Buddhist sects

operated in this way remains a major question for further investigation. As the character of commerce, trade and finance—which had been supported by the old, magical authority of the deities—changed during the major social transformation of the fourteenth century, the new Kamakura Buddhist sects appear to have begun to confer a new kind of sacred meaning on commerce and finance. It appears that the new Kamakura sects attempted to fulfill the same function in Japan as the European historian, Abe Kin'ya, has suggested Christianity fulfilled in Europe.²⁴ That is, in a society based upon a gift and reward economy, finance and the exchange of commodities came to take place at a site or according to a method that was related to the founder of a monotheistic religious sect, rather than an earlier, more generalized notion of divinity.

In fact, an examination of the overall conditions of faith among tradesmen and merchants reveals that their connection to the new Kamakura Buddhist sects remained extremely strong from the Edo period on. I believe the time has come for a reconsideration and reexamination of the state of religion in Japanese society from this perspective. Even if we do not go in the direction of Max Weber's Protestantism and the Spirit of Capitalism, we can find in the relation between the new Kamakura Buddhist sects and commerce, finance and handicraft production issues that Japanese society shares with Weber's work.

But in Japanese society, the new religious groups—including Christianity which was introduced in the sixteenth century—were all bloodily suppressed in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries by Oda Nobunaga, Toyotomi Hideyoshi and the Edo shogunate. As a result, these

²⁴Abe Kin'ya, Chûsei wo tabisuru hitobito: yoroppa shômin seikatsu tenbyô, Heibonsha, 1978.

religious groups were unable to establish an independent power base. Why did things turn out this way? This may in fact turn out to be the most important issue in considering the overall history of Japanese society.

After the disturbances of the fourteenth century,²⁵ the emperor completely lost his power, while his authority was also greatly diminished. The answer as to why the emperor survived despite all that may be related to the problem of why a monotheistic religion was unable to take root in Japan. In the end, the fact that this kind of religion was suppressed and was unable to sustain itself as an independent religious authority is also closely related to the technological condition of merchants, financiers and artisans in the subsequent course of Japanese history.

In the class system of the Edo period—anchored by the four main classes of warrior, peasant, artisan and merchant—handicraft producers, merchants and financiers were not ascribed high social status. Even though the merchants had a great deal of actual power, they had the lowest status. Money changers were also subject to social stigmatization. It may be worth considering the idea that the decline in social status of commercial activities and the people who participated in them was inseparably related to the suppression of monotheistic religion. But we must also consider what kind of relation this has to the style of capitalism in Japan in the modern period. That is beyond my abilities, but if we are to fully and clearly understand the particularities of Japanese society we will have to make that effort.

²⁵Amino is referring to the Kemmu Restoration of Emperor Go-Daigo which overthrew the Kamakura bakufu in 1336 and the subsequent splitting of the imperial line into the Northern and Southern Courts at the hands of Ashikaga Takauji and the establishment of the Muromachi shogunate.