1 Introduction

Buddhist Trade Networks in East Asia

In 838 CE a fleet of four ships left a port near modern Fukuoka on the island of Kyushu and set sail for China. The vessels carried some 650 people, including members of Japanese diplomatic, scholarly, and religious circles. Their mission, as with fifteen similar missions in the preceding centuries, was to submit tribute to the emperor of the Tang dynasty (618–907). Members of the delegation carried treasure such as silver, various kinds of fabric, jewel beads, and lacquer; the Japanese hoped, for their part, to acquire the latest technologies by observing Chinese practices firsthand and purchasing books.[1] Among this delegation was a forty-five-year-old Japanese monk named Ennin 円仁 (793–864). Intent on learning more about Buddhist teachings, and acquiring sacred objects sought by his monastery, Ennin decided to remain in China after the Japanese delegation left for home in 839 and stayed there until 847.

Ennin's original plan was to return to Japan with the ambassador and the other members of the delegation once they had completed their mission. While Ennin and his companions did not know it at the time, theirs would be the last official tribute mission that the Japanese emperor would send to China; the next one occurred in 1403 after a six-century hiatus in official diplomatic relations between the two countries.

The exchanges between China and Japan during this 600-year period, and how and why they were able to continue, are the subject of this book. The lively set of commercial, cultural, and intellectual exchanges occurring outside the framework of the tribute trade between China and Japan suggest that similar exchanges with China's other trade partners took place alongside the tribute trade but that the primacy of the tribute trade in the sources has overshadowed their importance.[2] Although there are scant traces of the role of Buddhist monks in maritime trade in the official records, other sources shed light on the overlooked but vital contributions of the religio-commercial network. The informal network created by faith-inspired monks and profit-driven merchants first formed in the ninth century and facilitated the robust but unofficial trade between China and the Japanese archipelago until 1403.

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[1] Wang Zhenping, *Ambassadors from the Islands of Immortals* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2005); Tōno Haruyuki 東野治之, *Kentōshi* 遣唐使 (Tokyo: Iwanami shoten, 2007); Ezra F. Vogel, *China and Japan: Facing History* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2019), 1–28.

Ancient Buddhist literature indicates that by the early centuries CE, monks and traders in South Asia had already established a close relationship. Not only did Buddhist texts praise the rich merchants who donated to Buddhist communities, but also in many stories the Buddha was said to provide protection to sea merchants.[3] During the Sino-Japanese tribute hiatus, the continued cooperation between monks and merchants attests to their growing common interests: While monks in both lands sought to spread Buddhist doctrine at home and abroad, merchants from the continent and the archipelago were also concerned with accumulating spiritual merit. While merchants pursued economic profits, monks also aspired to gain wealth for their monasteries. These shared goals served to promote collaboration at least as early as Ennin's time in the early ninth century.

Buddhism was first introduced to Japan in the sixth century via people from the Korean peninsula, who had learned about Buddhism from China. Thereafter, China, where Buddhism thrived, was the source of Buddhist teachings for Japanese monks for centuries. Ennin's network – comprised of connections to Chinese monks, local officials, and Chinese and Korean sea merchants – supported him for a nine-year-long sojourn that took him halfway across the Tang empire.

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[2] For examples of the studies regarding the tribute-system framework, see John King Fairbank, ed., *The Chinese World Order: Traditional China's Foreign Relations* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1968); Hamashita Takeshi 浜下武志, *Chōkō shisutemu to kindai Ajia* 朝貢システムと近代アジア (Tokyo: Iwanami shoten, 1997); Iwai Shigeki 岩井茂樹, *Chōkō, kaikin, goshi: Kinsei Higashi Ajia no bōeki to chitsujo* 朝貢・海禁・互市：近世東アジアの貿易と秩序 (Nagoya: Nagoya daigaku shuppankai, 2020).

The name "tribute system" has inspired many debates, and scholars have been trying to find other frameworks through which to analyze Chinese foreign relations, such as "asymmetric relationships" and "colonial structure." For more details, see John E. Wills, Jr., ed., *Past and Present in China's Foreign Policy: From "Tribute System" to "Peaceful Rise"* (Portland, ME: Merwin Asia, 2010).

[3] Xinru Liu, *Ancient India and Ancient China: Trade and Religious Exchanges AD 1–600* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1988), 90, 115.

This network helped safeguard his valuable possessions during a large-scale persecution of Buddhism in China between 842 and 846, and eventually allowed Ennin and all of his belongings to return home safely to Japan.

During his years in China, Ennin also observed that other, more private forms of shipping and trade managed by monks and merchants had already begun to displace the tribute system. The decline of the Tang empire is believed to have been one of the reasons for this suspension of tributary relations.[4] However, the primary reason was that the rapid development of nontribute trade made tribute missions to China unnecessary.[5]

Over the ensuing centuries, collaboration between monks and merchants grew tighter. Merchants provided more than transportation to monks: they served as monks' messengers and envoys and took commissions to purchase sutras and other valuables; they donated money to monasteries; and some even took Buddhist vows, becoming lay Buddhists and helping to spread the teachings abroad.

Monks in both lands, for their part, provided spiritual guidance as the merchants weathered high-risk voyages, and more importantly, they opened up their networks to the merchants. The monks' networks not only connected monasteries across the sea, which is how Ennin received hospitality and much assistance in China, but also linked them to Buddhist patrons at home and abroad. Ennin and many of his successors received considerable patronage from imperial and aristocratic clans of Japan, while Chinese royal patrons also bestowed economic privileges on prominent Chinese monasteries. Merchants made efforts to embed themselves into this established religious network across the continent and the archipelago and to connect themselves to potential trade partners and patrons, which could earn them an advantageous position in overseas trade.

This religio-commercial network sustained and facilitated the exchanges between the continent and the archipelago during the six-century suspension of the official diplomatic relationship between China and Japan. Desirable commodities, Buddhist scriptures and

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[4] Tōno, *Kentōshi*, 49–50.

[5] Similarly, Hamashita points out that the collapse of the China-centered tribute system in the Qing dynasty (1636–1911) was also to a large extent due to the growth of private trade, which made the tribute trade nonprofitable to both parties. See Hamashita, *Chōkō shisutemu to kindai Ajia*, 9.

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teachings, and a sense of fellowship were all transmitted via the network. This book explores the interaction between monks and merchants who created a vivid and dynamic East Asian maritime world – a world where noninstitutional measures and nontraditional policymakers played a prominent role in overseas exchanges and foreign affairs.

Material Culture and the Buddhist Monastic Economy

When Ennin returned to Japan in 847, his experience in China and the valuable scriptures and sacred objects that he obtained instantly earned him an outstanding position in the Tendai 天台 Buddhist clergy, along with royal patronage. While in China, Ennin kept a detailed diary, which documented the avid desire of the monastic community for certain material objects.[6] Ennin meticulously recorded how he frequented markets to acquire ritual objects, especially those necessary for esoteric Buddhist ceremonies in Japan, such as the Buddhist cosmic painting of mandalas.[7]

Ennin's acquisition of paintings and ritual objects illustrates what tied monks and merchants together for centuries: material culture. Monastic regulations, rather than expressing no interest in material things, gave detailed descriptions of the objects that monks could possess or use. Buddhist images and devotional items were often decorated with precious gems or metals to display grandeur, and artists depicted the paradise of the Buddha Amitābha as filled with rare and expensive treasures.[8] As Xinru Liu has documented, by the early period of South Asian history, Buddhist monasteries had already become important consumers of luxury goods such as silk and precious stones.[9]

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[6] Ennin, *Ennin's Diary: The Record of a Pilgrimage to China in Search of the Law*, trans. Edwin O. Reischauer (New York: Angelico Press reprint edition, 2020); Ennin 円仁, *Rutang qiufa xunli xingji jiaozhu* 入唐求法巡禮行記校注, annot. Bai Huawen, Li Dingxia, and Xu Denan (Shijiazhuang: Huashan wenyi chubanshe, 1992). For research on the Buddhist arts in Ennin's diary, see Valerie Hansen, "The Devotional Use of Buddhist Art in Ennin's Diary," *Orientations* 45.3 (2014).

[7] Ennin, *Ennin's Diary*, 296, 300; Ennin, *Rutang qiufa xunli xingji jiaozhu*, 363, 373.

[8] John Kieschnick, *The Impact of Buddhism on Chinese Material Culture* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003), 7–8. Also see Fabio Rambelli, *Buddhist Materiality: A Cultural History of Objects in Japanese Buddhism* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007), especially ch. 2, "The Buddhist System of Objects."

During Ennin's time, when the court was so eager to adopt Buddhist teachings from the continent, material objects became even more important. Buddhist sutras, most of which were originally written in ancient Indian languages, were accessible to the learners in Japan only in translation, a process that required linguistic expertise and spiritual knowledge and occasionally caused concepts to be distorted. Buddhist ritual objects, on the other hand, could be put directly into use after they were imported to Japan, so they offered devotees direct access to the Buddha's power. Buddhist clerics and lay believers alike believed that they thus had contact with the originals.[10] Ennin's mentor Saichō 最澄 (767–822), the founder of the Tendai Buddhist sect in Japan, had traveled to China with the previous embassy in 804, but he did not bring back as many ritual objects as his rival Kūkai 空海 (774–835), who founded the Shingon 真言 (true words) sect of esoteric Buddhism.[11] Consequently, the Tendai sect was at a disadvantage for a long while in terms of holding ritual ceremonies for the Japanese court.[12] Thus Ennin took every opportunity in China to collect Buddhist scriptures and sacred objects, and his efforts paid off. Ennin performed several court-sponsored Buddhist ceremonies in the capital following his return, including two initiation ceremonies for new emperors over the next ten years.[13]

The Enryakuji 延暦寺 monastery, with which Ennin was affiliated, also benefited enormously from Ennin's trip. Founded by Ennin's mentor Saichō, the Enryakuji monastery, located on Mount Hiei 比叡山, northeast of the capital Kyoto, began as a cluster of several small

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[9] Liu, *Ancient India and Ancient China*, 84; Xinru Liu, *Silk and Religion: An Exploration of Material Life and the Thought of People, AD 600–1200* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996), ch. 2.

[10] Cynthea J. Bogel, "Situating Moving Objects: A Sino-Japanese Catalogue of Imported Items 800 CE to the Present," in *What's the Use of Art?: Asian Visual and Material Culture in Context*, ed. Jan Mrazek and Morgan Pitelka (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2008), 150.

[11] Ryūichi Abé, *The Weaving of Mantra: Kūkai and the Construction of Esoteric Buddhist Discourse* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999); Robert Borgen, "The Japanese Mission to China, 801–806," *Monumenta Nipponica* 37 (1982).

[12] Mikael S. Adolphson, *The Gates of Power: Monks, Courtiers, and Warriors in Premodern Japan* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2000), 31.

[13] Adolphson, *Gates of Power*, 41.

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huts. Ennin's successful return brought in royal patronage and significant economic resources for the monastery's expansion. In the premodern era, constructing and maintaining monastery buildings – which were frequently ruined by accidental fires – and supporting a large Buddhist community were all expensive. To help manage these costs and maintain incoming revenue, monasteries took part in various economic activities such as land cultivation, moneylending, and operating oil mills and hostels.[14]

Most of the economic resources needed to run monastery complexes and their related businesses, however, came from patronage. For example, most of the prominent monasteries in China and Japan relied on land bestowed by the imperial house or donated by courtiers and other wealthy patrons, since this provided stable and sustainable revenue.[15] Enryakuji itself, benefiting from royal patronage, was among the biggest landholders in Japan after the eleventh century. This land endowment, and attendant tax exemption, allowed Enryakuji to build a complex over an impressive area of 150 square kilometers, including about 100 buildings, and to house nearly 3,000 monks.[16]

Monasteries, therefore, strived to foster the patronage on which their financial base heavily relied. Gifts to the monasteries – whether money, land, houses, or hand-copied sutras – were given in exchange for something only Buddhist monasteries could provide: merit.[17] An authentic ceremony in Japan incorporating ritual objects from China would have prompted patrons to make donations in exchange for merit, which they hoped would bring them either earthly happiness or a better afterlife. In the early years of Enryakuji's existence, its monks' pilgrimage trips to China helped it to secure enough funding to construct more monastic buildings and halls and to elevate its religious reputation. In both China and Japan, prestigious monasteries gained the privilege through elite patronage to participate in long-distance trade, which further bolstered their ties to major donors.

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[14] Jacques Gernet, *Buddhism in Chinese Society: An Economic History from the Fifth to the Tenth Centuries*, trans. Franciscus Verellen (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995); Suzanne Gay, *The Moneylenders of Late Medieval Kyoto* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2001); Michael J. Walsh, "The Buddhist Monastic Economy," in *Modern Chinese Religion I: Song–Liao–Jin–Yuan (960–1368 AD)*, ed. John Lagerwey and Pierre Marsone (Leiden: Brill, 2015).

[15] From time to time, authorities also tried to confiscate land from monasteries as a way to reduce their influence, although the attempts often encountered strong resistance. For details, see Adolphson, *Gates of Power*, especially ch. 7.

[16] Mikael S. Adolphson gives a detailed account of Enryakuji's early history in his book. See Adolphson, *Gates of Power*, 25, 34.

[17] Walsh, "Buddhist Monastic Economy," 1292. For a similar point, also see Saskia Abrahms-Kavunenko and Matthew D. Milligan, "The Wheel-Turning King and the Lucky Lottery: Perspectives New and Old on Wealth and Merriment within Buddhism," *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 36.2 (2021): 265–86.

By Ennin's time, merchants were already aiding monks to cross the sea and purchase sutras and ritual objects. Later, as this book shows, monasteries provided protection to the foreign merchants who did business for them, launched trade expeditions in the name of raising funds for reconstruction, and drew up contracts with merchants to divide the profits. Both monasteries and merchants obtained tangible material benefits from their cooperation, and the mechanism of exchange in the monastic economy also allowed merchants assisting the monks to accumulate merit (a less tangible but nonetheless valuable commodity). In order to know why and how these trade networks grew, it is important to understand the role of religion in commercial activities in the premodern era.

Trade via Religious Networks

While Muslim traders from the Arabic world and Jewish traders in the Mediterranean have enjoyed a long-established reputation for business acumen, Buddhist traders maintain a rather obscure position in histories of commerce.[18] This may be because ancient Indian Buddhist scriptures hold that trading constituted misconduct on the part of monks, and trading for profit was an even graver offense.[19] Monastic codes specified that Buddhist monks and nuns should not touch money, gold, or silver. Even if a gilded Buddhist statue were to fall to the floor, the monk was supposed to pick it up with a cloth so as not to touch the gold surface directly.[20] For these tasks, monasteries employed people known as *jingren* 淨人, literally meaning "pure persons." These were acolytes who did all the "unclean" services for monasteries – such as cultivating the land, washing the toilets, and handling silver or gold – to allow monks to remain "pure."[21]

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[18] Compared to the role of Buddhism in Sino-Japanese trade, the role of Buddhism in Sino-Indian exchanges has received more scholarly attention. For the representative work, see Liu, *Ancient India and Ancient China*, and Tansen Sen, *Buddhism, Diplomacy, and Trade: the Realignment of India–China Relations, 600–1400* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2003).

Enomoto Wataru has done important work clarifying several previously misunderstood points in Sino-Japanese trade, and he has emphasized the cooperation between merchants and monks. See Enomoto Wataru 榎本涉, *Sōryo to kaishō tachi no Higashishinakai* 僧侶と海商たちの東シナ海 (Tokyo: Kōdansha, 2010) and Enomoto Wataru, *Higashi Ajia kaiiki to Nicchū kōryū: 9~14 seiki* 東アジア海域と日中交流：九～十四世紀 (Tokyo: Yoshikawa kōbunkan, 2007). Amino Yoshihiko has emphasized the importance of a maritime perspective to Japanese history. See Amino Yoshihiko, *Rethinking Japanese History*, trans. Alan S. Christy (Ann Arbor: Center for Japanese Studies, University of Michigan, 2012). Benefiting from their pioneering work, this book further explores the dynamic of the cooperation and the underlying mechanism of the interplay between religious and trade networks.

But as Gregory Schopen insightfully points out, the monastic rules almost always began with a firm command or rigid prohibition but usually ended with a list of exceptions, and the wording of important codes was often deliberately vague. This ambiguity may have been intentional.[22] Despite formal monastic prohibitions against trading by monks, they actively participated and ran large-scale commercial enterprises. Ennin did not see the need to disguise that he personally touched gold: he recorded in his diary that he carried gold dust (the form of currency of the allowance provided by the Japanese court) to a market in China to exchange it for bronze coins, a more convenient currency for small-amount transactions.[23]

Despite the scriptural prohibition on handling money, commerce – as long as it was ethical – in general was considered acceptable in Buddhism. As this book recounts, prominent Japanese monasteries and eminent monks were directly involved in overseas transactions, and their role in the Sino-Japanese trade grew increasingly important between the ninth and fifteenth centuries. In Ennin's day, the monks joined up with merchant ventures that were already going to China and participated mainly by using their connections to the high authorities to gain special treatment for the merchants. Later, however, the monasteries launched their own trading expeditions. Monasteries offered maritime merchants the benefit of an affiliation – in this sense, the maritime merchants who affiliated with monasteries functioned as "pure persons" in overseas trade.

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[19] Ji Xianlin 季羡林, "Shangren yu fojiao" 商人與佛教, in *Chan yu wenhua* 禪與文化 (Beijing: Zhongguo yanshi chubanshe, 2006), 136–37.

[20] Gernet, *Buddhism in Chinese Society*, 155.

[21] Walsh, "Buddhist Monastic Economy," 1287.

[22] Gregory Schopen, *Buddhist Monks and Business Matters: Still More Papers on Monastic Buddhism in India* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2004), 13–14.

Gregory Schopen and Matthew D. Milligan have both discussed the aforementioned monastic code that forbids monks from handling money. Schopen notes that in the original Sanskrit text, the verb that modern scholars translate as "handle" has a wide range of possible meanings, and so does the object of the action. (Schopen, *Buddhist Monks and Business Matters*, 13–14.) Milligan points out that the commentary in the text identified with the rule uses a word meaning "coined money," and "because of the reference to coins, the rule meant that a monastic could potentially avoid breaking it by accepting non-coined money or credit." (Abrahms-Kavunenko and Milligan, "Wheel-Turning King and the Lucky Lottery," 272.)

[23] Ennin, *Ennin's Diary*, 44; Ennin, *Rutang qiufa xunli xingji jiaozhu*, 53.

The direct participation of clerics in long-distance trade distinguishes the Buddhist trade network in East Asia from other well-studied religious trade networks. The prosperity of trade in East Asian waters during the premodern and early modern periods has inspired scholars in recent years to draw parallels between the seas of East Asia and the Mediterranean during the same period.[24] The religious trade networks that have attracted the most scholarly attention were the trade diasporas located in the Mediterranean, such as the famous Geniza merchants – the Jewish merchants who were based in Cairo and traded in the Islamic Mediterranean – and the Sephardic Jews in Italy.[25] Economic historians who have carefully examined the mechanisms by which those cross-cultural traders formed their business relationships want to know whether shared religious beliefs foster commercial efficiency, a question that this book will address, too.

The trust among business partners, the procedures for accomplishing long-distance transactions, and the external systems for managing trade incidents are all crucial criteria for analyzing the mechanisms cross-cultural traders used to build their business networks. One influential scholar of Mediterranean trade suggests that international traders preferred to do business with people in another land who

[24] Angela Schottenhammer, ed., *Trade and Transfer across the East Asian "Mediterranean"* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2005).

[25] For the Geniza merchants, see Avner Greif, *Institutions and the Path to the Modern Economy: Lessons from Medieval Trade* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), and Jessica L. Goldberg, *Trade and Institutions in the Medieval Mediterranean: The Geniza Merchants and Their Business World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); for the Sephardic Jews, see Francesca Trivellato, *The Familiarity of Strangers: The Sephardic Diaspora, Livorno, and Cross-Cultural Trade in the Early Modern Period* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009).

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shared their religion or ethnicity and were more likely to trust them. The preference and exceptional trust resulted from a "reputation mechanism," which prompted the members inside a community to adhere to their agreements or contracts because the breach of contract would jeopardize their reputation and significantly reduce their future chances to build trade partnerships.[26]

A different point of view maintains that standardized business routines and a widely recognized legal system exerted greater influence than "natural" affiliations. Long-lasting business partnerships existed among traders from different religious and ethnic backgrounds, and networks based on family and ethnicity did not ensure trust. Instead, consistent business routines, as documented by mercantile letters, created more efficient and more reliable trade partnerships.[27]

Premodern China and Japan both had relatively developed government structures, and both established offices and issued regulations to monitor foreign trade. This institutionalized external environment in East Asia, however, did not outweigh the importance of personal connections in building business relationships. As this book will argue, the direct participation of the monks and monasteries in the trade network between China and Japan demonstrates the great importance of religious ties in forming partnerships. When the official diplomatic relationship between the two countries was suspended, the Buddhist network across the sea that had already existed for centuries became the key connection linking the continent and the Japanese archipelago, which facilitated the flow of texts, objects, knowledge, and people.

Not all of the sea merchants from China and Japan started to take advantage of the Buddhist network immediately after the tribute delegations were suspended. The economic benefits offered by the religious

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[26] Greif, *Institutions and the Path to the Modern Economy*, 58–90.

[27] For example, see Trivellato, *Familiarity of Strangers*, and Goldberg, *Trade and Institutions in the Medieval Mediterranean*.

Jessica L. Goldberg proposed a contrasting view – "legal centralism" instead of Greif's "reputation mechanism" – which argues that "the only necessary condition for forming business relationships was shared participation in the Islamic legal system . . . [which] allowed individuals in different Islamic polities, whatever their confession, to enter into business relationships with one another." Goldberg, *Trade and Institutions in the Medieval Mediterranean*, 355. For a more detailed review of the "legal centralism" claim, see Avner Greif's review of *Trade and Institutions in the Medieval Mediterranean: The Geniza Merchants and Their Business World*, by Jessica L. Goldberg, *Journal of Economic History* 74.2 (2014).