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Replacing Tributary Relations

The Reciprocal Collaboration between Monks and Merchants, 839–900

After the Japanese delegation departed from China in 839, leaving Ennin behind, the tribute trade between China and Japan lapsed into a long period of dormancy. Traveling monks and sea merchants, however, were together building a new network, which sustained the circulation of objects and knowledge. Ennin and his Buddhist pilgrim successors left records showing how they waited for merchant ships to cross the sea, and how the merchants helped them transport or procure precious ritual objects. Japanese pilgrim monks and Chinese merchants formed close relationships during those long voyages. Many of the Chinese merchants in the circle were Buddhist believers, who willingly exchanged poems and gifts with the monks. The poems and letters written by the merchants, intriguingly, indicate that the merchants themselves also took advantage of their network with the monks: they hoped to use the monks' connections to gain access to the authorities in both countries and to circumvent regulations imposed on foreign trade.

This chapter covers the time from the last Japanese embassy's departure from China in 839 to the end of the ninth century, when the Tang empire was collapsing, and the Japanese government stipulated new regulations to manage the foreign merchants coming to their land. This period from 839 to 900 represents a transition era in which a new pattern to sustain Sino-Japanese exchanges took shape in the absence of formal diplomatic relations. Japan scheduled an embassy in 894 but eventually canceled it: the weakening of the Tang dynasty was one reason, but the more important reason was probably the increasing alternative opportunities for obtaining continental products.

An Unofficial Network for Obtaining Buddhist Sacred Objects: Ennin's Sojourn in the Tang Empire

After a nine-year sojourn in China, where he survived a four-year long persecution of Buddhism, Ennin returned to Japan with more than

800 fascicles of Buddhist texts and fifty ritual objects. As mentioned in Chapter 1, those scriptures and objects had been procured and protected via a private network made up of monks and merchants, and in Japan, they earned Ennin both reputation and patronage from the Japanese royal family.

Among all the scriptures and sacred objects that Ennin industriously collected, mandalas – cosmic paintings for esoteric Buddhist ceremonies – stood out. Ennin gave them much space in his diary: he recorded thoroughly how much he paid for each mandala and how they survived the persecution of Buddhism only via the protection provided by the monk-merchant network. More interestingly, the records in Ennin's diary regarding obtaining mandalas were probably often altered, sometimes by Ennin himself, sometimes by a later cleric, to enhance Ennin's fame and bring distinction to his monastery, Enryakuji. These doctored records again demonstrate the significance of certain Chinese objects to Japan at the time and therefore the value of a network that could help to secure them.

Ennin managed to obtain these important and very desirable mandalas in 840, after his pilgrimage to sacred Mount Wutai. By then, Ennin, along with three companions, had already been separated from his Japanese diplomatic mission for more than a year and very much depended on the Buddhist communities in China, who provided him accommodation and access to Buddhist scriptures, to continue his trip. For example, the Dahuayan monastery on Mount Wutai hosted Ennin for two months and allowed him to systematically make copies of the Tendai Buddhist sutras that Japan lacked.¹ In his diary, Ennin also meticulously described the Buddhist statues he saw at various monasteries in the Mount Wutai area.² It is likely that he intended to use this account as a reference for instruction on how to make Buddhist statues, which he valued as important ritual objects, after his return to Japan.³

Ennin, however, was not yet satisfied with his collection – he was apparently very eager to obtain more mandalas. Thus, when he arrived in the capital of Chang'an, he went to the Yongchang

¹ Ennin, *Ennin's Diary*, 249; Ennin, *Rutang qiufa xunli xingji jiaozhu*, 294.

² Ennin, *Ennin's Diary*, 241–42; Ennin, *Rutang qiufa xunli xingji jiaozhu*, 288.

For the Buddhist arts at Mount Wutai and their significance, see Wei-Cheng Lin, *Building a Sacred Mountain: The Buddhist Architecture of China's Mount Wutai* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2014).

³ Hansen, "Devotional Use of Buddhist Art in Ennin's Diary," 77.

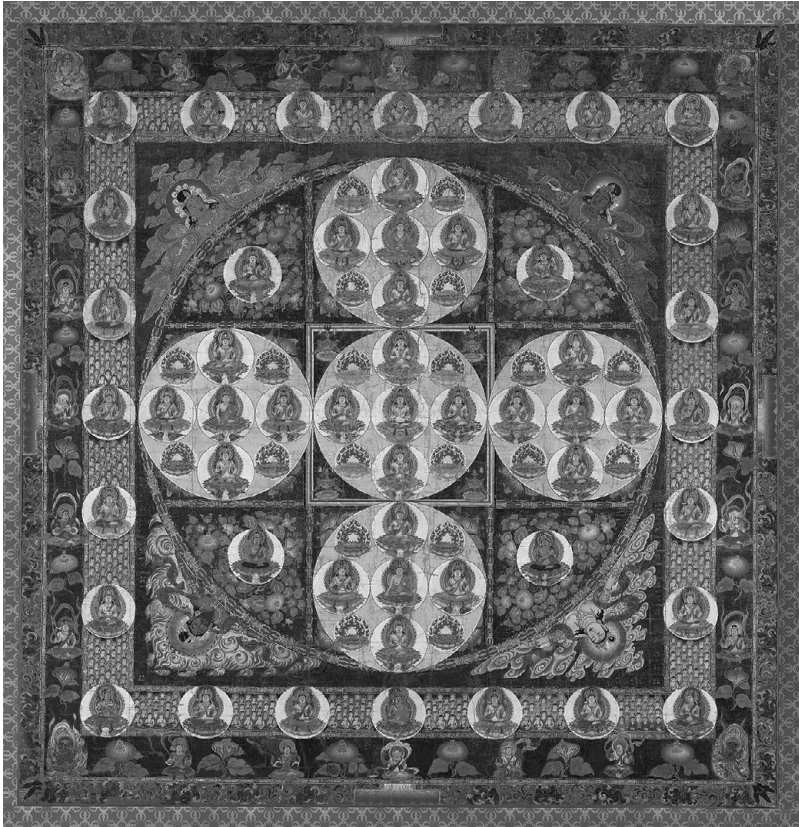


Figure 1 A Diamond Realm mandala directly copied from the mandalas Ennin brought from China to Japan. Thirteenth century, Japan. Hanging scroll; ink and color on silk. h: 216 cm; w: 209.8cm. Courtesy of Nezu Museum, Tokyo.

(Ever-Prospering) ward in the city and hired a craftsman, Wang Hui 王惠, to make four big Diamond Realm mandalas (Figure 1).⁴ About fifty days later, the mandalas were finished.⁵ Curiously, a diary entry nearly two months before Ennin's order of the mandalas mentions one of his dreams from ten months earlier. Ennin reportedly dreamed that when he brought Diamond Realm mandalas back to Japan, his mentor Saichō was thrilled. When Ennin was about to prostrate himself to Saichō, Saichō stopped

⁴ Ennin, *Ennin's Diary*, 296; Ennin, *Rutang qiufa xunli xingji jiaozhu*, 363.

⁵ Ennin, *Ennin's Diary*, 300; Ennin, *Rutang qiufa xunli xingji jiaozhu*, 373.

him, saying, “I don’t dare to accept your obeisance now. I should pay obeisance to you.”⁶ It seems that Ennin’s account of this dream was meant to justify his motivations in ordering mandalas, but Ono Katsutoshi, the top researcher on Ennin, believes that the dream was added later by someone else because Saichō was referred to as “Master” (*daishi* 大師) in this account, which is a title Saichō had not received until two years after the alleged date of the dream.⁷

The legends around mandalas illustrate their deep, spiritual significance to the Japanese. Tendai Buddhism, a branch of esoteric Buddhism ascending in Japan, emphasizes the secret transmission of its teachings by way of a teacher “pouring” knowledge into a disciple like pouring water into a vase. This required a “ritual technology,” of which mandalas, along with other ritual implements and altars, were vital components.⁸ Such was the popularity of esoteric Buddhism in Heian Japan, that the pair of mandalas brought back from China in 804 by the great master Kūkai – Saichō’s rival and the founder of the Shingon Buddhist sect – already needed to be replaced with copies in 821 due to extensive wear from frequent ritual use. Hence the Buddhist community surrounding Ennin considered his success in bringing back mandalas a highly laudable achievement; in this context, it is plausible that subsequent monastery archivists added the dream to Ennin’s diary to emphasize the significance of this achievement.

Two months after getting the completed Diamond Realm mandalas, Ennin claimed to have ordered another five Womb Realm mandalas and five Diamond Nine-World mandalas from the same craftsman, Wang Hui.⁹ However, not long after that, driven by the desire to dwindle the power of Buddhist communities and to enlarge the tax rolls, the emperor Wuzong 武宗 (814–46, r. 840–46) initiated a large-scale and years-long persecution of Buddhism, and the capital suffered most. Ennin wrote diary entries less frequently, but he mentioned that the emperor ordered sutras and Buddhist sculptures burned and forced Buddhists to forsake their beliefs.¹⁰ As noted in Chapter 1, Ennin could no longer collect

⁶ Ennin, *Ennin’s Diary*, 294; Ennin, *Rutang qiufa xunli xingji jiaozhu*, 358.

⁷ Ennin, *Rutang qiufa xunli xingji jiaozhu*, 360, notes.

⁸ Bogel, “Situating Moving Objects,” 149.

⁹ Ennin, *Ennin’s Diary*, 304, 306, 307; Ennin, *Rutang qiufa xunli xingji jiaozhu*, 385, 388, 389.

¹⁰ Ennin, *Ennin’s Diary*, 321, 333, 340, 361; Ennin, *Rutang qiufa xunli xingji jiaozhu*, 408, 426, 440, 463.

Buddhist items and barely managed to keep the important ones he had already obtained. He tried every possible means to leave China and return to Japan: at one point he sought help from a Korean living in Chang'an, and even went so far as to file a petition claiming that he was willing to forsake his Buddhist beliefs and return to Japan.¹¹ When it was decreed that all foreign monks who did not hold a certificate issued from the Department of Sacrifice must return to lay life, Ennin hurried to put away all the Buddhist texts and items he had collected which, along with his clothes, took up four hampers. The next day, he took off his clerical robe, donned lay clothes, and began to let his hair grow.¹²

In 845, Ennin and his companions finally received permission to leave Chang'an and return to Japan. Upon their departure, a crowd of their Chinese acquaintances came to see them off, including monks from Chang'an monasteries, Chinese officials, and Ennin's local patrons. These were likely the very people who had supported Ennin during the years of persecution. Ennin received many farewell gifts from them, the most common of which were daily necessities such as textiles, cash, and tea.¹³ An official in the censorate even gave Ennin a scroll in silver characters of the *Diamond Sutra* – one of the most influential Mahayana Buddhist sutras in East Asia – which Ennin specifically noted as a Tang palace possession.¹⁴ It is likely that the sutra had been in the palace and was removed during the persecution.¹⁵ One interesting effect of the persecution of Buddhism was that it made Buddhist objects, even those that had previously been most treasured, accessible to foreigners. As the following chapter demonstrates, thanks to dedicated collectors like Ennin, Japanese monasteries acquired some Buddhist texts that had been lost in China during the persecution.

After leaving Chang'an, Ennin and his companions were hard-pressed to find a ship to sail back to Japan. They were originally planning to depart from the Shandong peninsula, where they had left the

¹¹ Ennin, *Ennin's Diary*, 335, 359; Ennin, *Rutang qiufa xunli xingji jiaozhu*, 433, 459.

For details of the Koreans that Ennin encountered in China, see Edwin O. Reischauer, *Ennin's Travels in T'ang China* (New York: Ronald Company Press, 1955), 272–94.

¹² Ennin, *Ennin's Diary*, 363; Ennin, *Rutang qiufa xunli xingji jiaozhu*, 463.

¹³ Ennin, *Ennin's Diary*, 365–68; Ennin, *Rutang qiufa xunli xingji jiaozhu*, 465–66.

¹⁴ Ennin, *Ennin's Diary*, 367; Ennin, *Rutang qiufa xunli xingji jiaozhu*, 466.

¹⁵ Ennin, *Rutang qiufa xunli xingji jiaozhu*, 469, notes.

embassy, but by then, most of the ships bound for Japan were sailing from the lower Yangzi delta. This shift in ports is a strong indication of the major change underway at that time in Sino-Japanese trade: the rise of the ports in the lower Yangzi delta. As this chapter further shows, the delta region, which was rich in commercial and religious resources, was rapidly growing to become the critical hub of the unofficial network connecting China and Japan.

In their pursuit of a ship, Ennin and his companions had to travel up and down along the eastern coast of China multiple times. Since it would have been impossible for them to carry all their luggage with them on the long trip, they entrusted the four hampers of holy teachings, pious pictures, and clerical clothing to the Silla translator Yu Sineon, to whom Ennin had given a generous set of gifts six years earlier.¹⁶ When they finally were about to board a merchant ship and went to retrieve the four hampers from Yu, however, according to Ennin's record, they discovered that Yu had burned the highest-value item, the Double Great Womb and Diamond mandala, due to the severity of imperial orders on persecuting Buddhism in Yangzhou, but he managed to preserve the rest of the items.¹⁷

This is an interesting point that allows us to examine Ennin's records critically. It seems unlikely that among four full hampers of illicit Buddhist objects Yu specifically picked out the most valuable one and burned it, especially since by that time the persecution of Buddhism had already relaxed. It is possible that Ennin had never possessed such a precious mandala but simply added it to the list of his achievements and had it conveniently burned, because even having once obtained a great mandala would give him some leverage in the competition among Buddhist sects in Japan and earn more patronage for himself and his monastery.¹⁸

In the ninth month of 847, Ennin and his companions, after a voyage passing along the Korean peninsula – and carrying all the texts and

¹⁶ Ennin, *Ennin's Diary*, 372, 376; Ennin, *Rutang qiufa xunli xingji jiaozhu*, 476, 482.

¹⁷ Ennin, *Ennin's Diary*, 389–90, 392; Ennin, *Rutang qiufa xunli xingji jiaozhu*, 498, 502.

¹⁸ I thank Eric Greene for his help on this point.

An anonymous reviewer of this book manuscript proposes another possibility: Yu Sineon may have sold that one item, because it would have fetched the largest price.

items collected during their long, adventurous journey on the continent – finally landed in their homeland.¹⁹ It had taken Ennin two years to eventually board a ship. Waiting for a ship for two years might seem a tough experience to modern readers, but the typical interval between tribute missions had been fifteen years, and some Japanese sojourners had ended up dying of old age in China for lack of a ship to transport them home. The two-year wait suggests that ships traveled more frequently in the period after the tribute era than during it – Ennin's successors were taking advantage of this new change.

The Continued Search for Buddhist Teachings: Enchin's Trip to Tang China

Only six years after Ennin's return, Enchin 円珍 (814–91, in China 853–58), another monk from the same monastery, Enryakuji, outside of Kyoto, embarked on a voyage to China. Relying entirely on help from merchants and fellow monks in China, Enchin spent five years there and, following upon Ennin's productive sojourn, brought back as many valuable objects. Both Ennin's and Enchin's successful pilgrimages elevated Enryakuji's reputation, and more importantly, contributed to building the unofficial network of Japanese monks and Chinese merchants that would grow over the coming centuries. There were other Buddhist actors involved in creating the network around the same time, but this book chooses to focus on Ennin and Enchin for this foundational period because their journeys have the best surviving records for that era.

Enchin himself was closely related to other important Buddhist travelers to China: he was Kūkai's nephew; and his own teacher, Gishin 義真 (781–833), had not only accompanied Ennin's mentor Saichō to China in 804 as a translator but had also helped him establish the Enryakuji monastery on Mount Hiei after their return.²⁰ Unlike his predecessors, Enchin traveled as an individual, not as a member of an official Japanese embassy. He began his journey by waiting for incoming Chinese merchant ships in Dazaifu, where

¹⁹ Ennin, *Ennin's Diary*, 404; Ennin, *Rutang qiufa xunli xingji jiaozhu*, 520.

²⁰ Ono Katsutoshi 小野勝年, *Nittō gubō gyōreki no kenkyū: Chishō Daishi Enchin hen* 入唐求法行歴の研究：智證大師圓珍篇 (Kyoto: Hōzōkan, 1982), 19–20.

Ennin had landed on his return four years earlier.²¹ Dazaifu, as noted in Chapter 1, was the imperial headquarters for western Japan and home to several thousand bureaucrats, soldiers, and their families. Although not located directly on the seashore – it was approximately thirteen kilometers from the nearest port – Dazaifu directly supervised the foreign contacts in Kyushu.²² (Map 2.) Enchin seemed quite confident that he would get on a ship there, and he was right. When he arrived at Dazaifu in the fifth month of 851, there were no ships that he could board, so he took temporary residence at a monastery nearby. A merchant ship arrived as soon as the following year, which suggests that Chinese merchant ships came on a fairly regular basis at the time, and Enchin was on board for its return journey to China in the seventh month of 853.²³

Like Ennin, Enchin kept a diary while he was in China, but unfortunately, the complete version of the diary has been lost. Parts of the diary were collected from various sources and formed a one-volume record titled *Gyōrekishō* 行歷抄. Eleven years after Enchin died, his friend Miyoshi no Kiyoyuki 三善清行 wrote his biography using many records from the original diary. Although the extant version of Enchin's diary is not comparable to Ennin's in terms of length, we still know much more about Enchin's sojourn in China than about those of his contemporaries. More importantly, several other crucial sources regarding Enchin's journey in China have survived, among which the most remarkable is a collection of poems and letters Enchin received from his Chinese friends.²⁴ These poems and letters are particularly

²¹ Enchin, *Gyōrekishō* 行歷抄, in *Xinglichao jiaozhu* 行歷抄校注, ed. Bai Huawen 白化文 and Li Dingxia 李鼎霞 (Shijiazhuang: Huashan wenyi chubanshe, 2004), 1; Miyoshi no Kiyoyuki 三善清行, *Tendaishū Enryakuji zasu Enchin den* 天台宗延曆寺座主円珍傳, in *Chishō daishi zenshū* 智證大師全集, ed. Onjōji 園城寺 (Ōtsu: Onjōji jimusho, 1918), 1366.

²² Bruce L. Batten, *Gateway to Japan: Hakata in War and Peace, 500–1300* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2006), 5, 36.

²³ Miyoshi, *Tendaishū Enryakuji zasu Enchin den*, 1366.

²⁴ Other important sources include a catalog of all the items Enchin brought back from the Tang to Japan and a set of official certificates and passports that Enchin received from Chinese local governments. These have been included in the collection of Enchin's complete works.

In 1767, the monk Keikō 敬光 (1741–95) from the Onjōji 園城寺 monastery collected those then extant poems and letters addressed to Enchin into a one-volume collection titled *Fūsō sengen shū* 風藻錢言集. This collection contains sixteen poems and seven letters, and the majority were written by Chinese merchants. *Fūsō sengen shū* has been included in *Chishō daishi zenshū*. Onjōji

helpful in reconstructing the network connecting Enchin and the Chinese sea merchants and shed light on the type of enduring cooperation in which Ennin likely also engaged.

Although not traveling as an embassy member, Enchin still received an allowance from the Japanese court during his journey, suggesting that pilgrimage trips to China during this time were encouraged by the court. Even while waiting at the monastery near Dazaifu, Enchin was receiving a monthly allowance.²⁵ With the support from the court and apparently his own strong will, Enchin followed Ennin's practice of collecting Buddhist texts and ritual objects. During his five-year stay in China, he spent almost three years at the Guoqing monastery on Mount Tiantai, where Ennin had always wished to but failed to go. Enchin also visited the capital Chang'an and the famous Buddhist grottos at Longmen in central China.²⁶ Among the surviving entries from Enchin's diary, we can see that he copied esoteric Buddhist ritual manuals at a monastery in Chang'an and received the copies of three texts related to the *Lotus Sutra* at the Kaiyuan monastery in Taizhou 台州.²⁷ But these were just a tiny fraction of what Enchin brought back to Japan. According to Enchin's catalog of the texts and objects he acquired in Tang China, in the sixth month of 858, he returned to Japan with a total of 1,000 fascicles of texts and sixteen ritual objects.²⁸

Inspired by Ennin's success, Enchin also considered mandalas the most crucial sacred items to pursue. There are four mandalas in Enchin's catalog, two of which – one Womb Realm mandala and one Diamond Realm mandala – were labeled as “having been presented to

monjo 園城寺文書 published both the image of the original manuscripts and the standard texts, and also added two more poems from a merchant in this group. Japanese scholar Ono Katsutoshi and Chinese scholars Bai Huawen and Shi Xiaojun have worked on identifying obscured characters and the exact date (or year) each poem or letter was written. Shi Xiaojun has collected both Ono's and Bai's works in his article, see Shi Xiaojun 石曉軍, “Ribei Yuanchengsi (Sanjingsi) cang Tang ren shiwen chidu jiaozheng” 日本園城寺（三井寺）藏唐人詩文尺牘校證, *Tang yanjiu* 唐研究 8 (2002).

²⁵ Miyoshi, *Tendaishū Enryakuji zasu Enchin den*, 1366. Enchin's diary also shows that he received gold dust from the court for the pilgrimage, see Enchin, *Gyōrekishō*, 20.

²⁶ Saeki Arikiyo 佐伯有清, *Enchin* 円珍 (Tokyo: Yoshikawa kōbunkan, 1990), 43–72.

²⁷ Enchin, *Gyōrekishō*, 42, 52.

²⁸ Enchin, *Chishō daishi shōrai mokuroku* 智證大師請來目錄, in *Chishō daishi zenshū* 智證大師全集, ed. Onjōji 園城寺 (Ōtsu: Onjōji jimusho, 1918), 1266.

the [Japanese] court” 此進奉内裏了.²⁹ One entry in Enchin’s diary happens to provide more information regarding these mandalas. On 859/1/16, only several months after he returned to Japan, Enchin received an audience with the Japanese emperor who, along with several other high-ranking officials, examined and appreciated two mandalas Enchin had brought back from the Tang.³⁰ Those two mandalas were deemed valuable and therefore kept by the court.³¹ More interestingly, in the same entry, Enchin mentions that Ennin had examined those two mandalas before they were presented to the emperor. Obviously Ennin was by then already recognized as the expert on Chinese mandalas, so perhaps the court had him check the authenticity of the mandalas prior to their presentation to the emperor.

Enchin’s successful trip to the continent earned rewards for both himself and the Enryakuji monastery. The monastery received yet more Buddhist scriptures and crucial sacred objects for ritual performance, which brought more royal patronage; and in 868, ten years after his return and four years after Ennin’s death, Enchin himself became the fifth head abbot of Enryakuji.

Enchin and His Merchant Network

Besides obtaining Buddhist texts and ritual objects from China, Enchin’s trip had a further and important impact: Enchin established solid connections with a group of sea merchants during his trip, and for decades, when Enchin remained in Japan, his merchant network helped him maintain his religious connections to China. The key figures in Enchin’s merchant network included a shipmaster, Li Yanxiao 李延孝, from Bohai/Balhae 渤海, and two sea merchants, Zhan Jingquan 詹景全 and Li Da 李達, from the lower Yangzi delta, where maritime exchanges were burgeoning.³²

²⁹ Enchin, *Chishō daishi shōrai mokuroku*, in *Chishō daishi zenshū*, 1271.

³⁰ This book uses the date system of year/month/date, and all the dates are in the lunar calendar.

³¹ Enchin, *Gyōrekishō*, 56.

³² Bohai/Balhae (698–926) was a state that received investiture from the Tang. It once covered northeastern China, the northeastern Korean peninsula, and the far eastern area of modern Russia. It was defeated by the Kitan in 926.

In 853, it was Li Yanxiao's ship that Enchin boarded en route to China, and that was probably how they first met.³³ Zhan Jingquan and Li Da were Li Yanxiao's regular trade partners and always traveled together with Li Yanxiao. It is likely that Enchin and Li Yanxiao reached an agreement that Enchin would take Li's ship back to Japan after his pilgrimage. So, in 856, when Enchin completed his trip to Chang'an and Luoyang, he went back to the Guoqing monastery at Mount Tiantai and waited there. The next year, Li Yanxiao and Zhan Jingquan also arrived at the monastery, and before they set off to Japan, the merchants made a donation of 40,000 coins to the Guoqing monastery to support the construction of three residential halls for the monks who would come to study in the future.³⁴ The merchants' donation would have left a very good impression on Enchin, who three months earlier had himself donated 30 ounces of gold to the Guoqing monastery for building a lecture hall.³⁵

Enchin and this group of merchants arrived in Japan in the sixth month of 858. At this time, as noted in Chapter 1, a regulation required all Chinese merchants to reside at the official guesthouse, Kōrokan 鴻臚館, near Hakata Bay and under direct supervision of Dazaifu.³⁶ The merchants usually had to stay for months while the officials from the Dazaifu headquarters were inspecting their cargo.³⁷ Meanwhile, Enchin was staying at a nearby monastery waiting for permission to go to the capital, Kyoto. A letter soon arrived granting Enchin an audience with the emperor Montoku 文德 (827–58).³⁸ Unfortunately, Emperor Montoku died within two weeks of giving the order, so Enchin had to

³³ Some records misreported that Enchin took another merchant's ship to China. For a detailed discussion and clarification, see Huang Yuese 黃約瑟, "Da Tang shangren' Li Yanxiao yu jiu shiji Zhong-Ri guanxi" "大唐商人"李延孝與九世紀中日關係, *Lishi yanjiu* 歷史研究 (1993): 51.

³⁴ Enchin, "Qi Taizhou gongyan zhuang" 乞台州公驗狀, in *Gyōrekishō* 行歷抄, in *Xinglichao jiaozhu* 行歷抄校注, ed. Bai Huawen 白化文 and Li Dingxia 李鼎霞 (Shijiazhuang: Huashan wenyi chubanshe, 2004), 107.

³⁵ Miyoshi, *Tendaishū Enryakuji zasu Enchin den*, 1370.

³⁶ Ennin, *Ennin's Diary*, 405; Batten, *Gateway to Japan*, 3. Kōrokan was firstly named the "Tsukushi Lodge" and built by the Japanese court as a hostel for foreign visitors in the seventh century. It adopted the Chinese-style name Kōrokan in the ninth century and was abandoned around 1100.

³⁷ Von Verschuer, *Across the Perilous Sea*, 34; Watanabe, *Heian jidai bōeki kanri seido shi no kenkyū*, 113.

³⁸ Miyoshi, *Tendaishū Enryakuji zasu Enchin den*, 1370.

wait for another three months for a new letter, during which period he and the sojourning Chinese merchant group had frequent contact.

According to surviving poems written by those merchants, Enchin sometimes came to the guesthouse and spent leisure time with them. A merchant named Gao Feng 高奉 wrote a poem to Enchin entitled “Yesterday Strolling at the Gate Tower of the Northern Building of Kōrokan” and recalled their gathering: “The gate tower of [the guesthouse] Kōrokan stands by the sea, and when we look around, we feel we are living a reclusive life. [Fortunately] sometimes the Buddhist master comes to join our convivial gathering, and together we drink a cup of Blue Cloud tea, as if it were elixir.”³⁹ Exchanging poems in Sino-centric culture sphere could serve as expressions of camaraderie, and it was customary to solidify relationships – be it business or friendship – with poetry. Apparently, Enchin and the literate ones among the Chinese merchants also adopted this practice.

Poems also show that Enchin sometimes shared the memories of his time at Mount Tiantai with the merchants, and Zhan Jingquan, Li Da, and other merchants at the guesthouse all wrote and warmly responded to Enchin.⁴⁰ Zhan Jingquan also left a letter inviting Enchin and his disciples for a meal at the guesthouse, which again testifies to Enchin’s frequent gatherings with the merchants.⁴¹

After safely returning Enchin to Japan, this merchant group continued to trade between China and Japan and helped Enchin with many future issues, such as purchasing Buddhist sutras and ritual objects, and sending letters and gifts to monks in China. In 867, at the Chinese monk Deyuan’s 德圓 request, Zhan Jingquan brought two very large Pure Land Buddhist embroidery arts to Enchin (one was about 7.2 m by 4.5 m, while the other was 4.5 m by 3 m). During his visit to Wenzhou, Enchin had mentioned to Deyuan that he wished to obtain embroidery Buddhist images, but he was also worried that he might not be able to carry so many heavy things back to Japan all at once. Deyuan then agreed to send the embroidery arts to Enchin later, and Zhan Jingquan assumed the duty of transporting the sacred

³⁹ Keikō, *Fūsō sengen shū*, 1353. The excavated archaeological site of Kōrokan is not near the sea shore today due to sediment and areas of land reclamation, but the poem proves that back in the days when Kōrokan was in use, it was standing by the sea.

⁴⁰ Keikō, *Fūsō sengen shū*, 1354. ⁴¹ Keikō, *Fūsō sengen shū*, 1355.

images.⁴² Zhan also commissioned two large Buddhist portraits and brought them to Japan as his own gifts to Enchin.⁴³ Fourteen years later, in 881, the other merchant, Li Da, at Enchin's request, arranged to transport more than 120 fascicles of sutras sought after by Japan.⁴⁴ The transported objects reveal information about the ships in use by Enchin's merchant associates. The large embroidery Buddhist images gifted by Deyuan, for example, measured at least 4.5 meters long even when wrapped up. The merchant ship had to have been large enough to store such a big item among its cargo. Records indicate that the Tang merchant ships to Japan in the late ninth century usually carried crews of thirty to sixty; after the fall of the Tang dynasty in the tenth century, giant trading junks sailed with crews of 100 and capacities of several hundred tons.⁴⁵ Apparently, the sea merchants were willing to spare a significant portion of the space for the monks.

The merchants also helped Enchin to send presents back to monks in China, which was important to maintaining religious ties with his Chinese colleagues. A Chinese monk, Changya 常雅, at the Kaiyuan monastery in Taizhou wrote a letter to Enchin, thanking him for sending four *jin* of mercury, a chemical used in gilding gold statues, via a "Zhan Silang" 詹四郎 (the fourth son of the Zhan family), who was very likely Zhan Jingquan.⁴⁶ Enchin's letter to Changya did not survive, but based on Changya's reply, Enchin did not seem to request anything from Changya. Enchin received three texts related to the *Lotus Sutra* from this Kaiyuan monastery during his pilgrimage, so the mercury was probably a reciprocal gift. Changya replied with a detailed receipt, explaining how the mercury was distributed among the monks that Enchin knew. Mercury was always on the list of popular commodities that China imported from Japan, and this letter indicates that monasteries were consuming a fair amount of it.

⁴² Miyoshi, *Tendaishū Enryakuji zasu Enchin den*, 1373.

⁴³ Miyoshi, *Tendaishū Enryakuji zasu Enchin den*, 1376.

⁴⁴ Miyoshi, *Tendaishū Enryakuji zasu Enchin den*, 1375–76

⁴⁵ William Wayne Farris, "Shipbuilding and Nautical Technology in Japanese Maritime History: Origins to 1600," *Mariner's Mirror* 95.3 (2009): 267.

⁴⁶ Keikō, *Fāsō sengen shū*, 1356–57. The letter does not contain a year but only the month and day: "the nineteenth day of the fifth month." Changya was asking about Enchin's situation after his return to Japan and was recalling the moment of their parting, so perhaps the letter was written not too long after Enchin left China. Ono Katsutoshi thinks it probably was written from 863 to 867 when Zhan Jingquan was most active. I think his speculation is plausible.

Procuring mercury to send to a Chinese monastery was probably an easy task for the sea merchants, since they always carried much mercury from Japan to China.⁴⁷ Along with his letter, Changya also sent Enchin some tea harvested from Mount Tiantai as a return gift.

A letter written by Enchin to Zhihuilun 智慧輪 (?–876), a famous esoteric Buddhist master who Enchin had met in the capital of Chang’an in 855, tells more about how the merchant group served as intermediaries between Enchin and monks in China.⁴⁸ According to this letter written in 882, Zhihuilun had sent eight fascicles of Buddhist scriptures to Enchin in 861, likely via Zhan Jingquan.⁴⁹ After receiving the scriptures, in 863 Enchin entrusted Zhan Jingquan with a reply, but Zhan returned the following year with the news that he had failed to deliver the letter because of “transportation difficulties in northern China.” Enchin recorded that in 865 when Zhan Jingquan left for China earlier than usual, Enchin did not get a chance to make a new request. And very unfortunately, Zhan Jingquan, along with the shipmaster Li Yanxiao and Ensai, a Japanese monk who had sojourned in China for nearly four decades, died in a shipwreck on the return trip to Japan in 877.

Li Da was actually also on that doomed ship in 877, but he was lucky enough to drift ashore and survived the shipwreck. Five years later, he assumed the role of Enchin’s envoy, and took up Zhan Jingquan’s unfinished task of passing a letter to Zhihuilun. In the new letter, besides recalling the past incidents, Enchin also asked for a copy of a Buddhist text that Zhihuilun once showed to him when they met. Enchin attached fifty ounces of gold to his letter to cover the expenses of copying the scripture.⁵⁰ The letter, however, could never have been read by Zhihuilun himself since he passed away six years before it was written.

The scattered extant records suggest that Zhan Jingquan, Li Da, and the shipmaster Li Yanxiao, as noted earlier, were likely to have been long-term trade partners, since they always traveled together between

⁴⁷ Von Verschuer, *Across the Perilous Sea*, 20, and app. 7.

⁴⁸ Zhihuilun was also known as Borezhuoja 般若斫迦 [Skt. Prajñācakra]. For more about Zhihuilun, see Chen Jinhua, “A Chinese Monk under a ‘Barbarian’ Mask? Zhihuilun (?–876) and Late Tang Esoteric Buddhism,” *T’oung Pao* 99-1-3 (2013).

⁴⁹ Enchin, “Jō Chierin sanzō sho” 上智慧輪三藏書, in *Gyōrekishō* 行歷抄, in *Xinglichao jiaozhu* 行歷抄校注, ed. Bai Huawen 白化文 and Li Dingxia 李鼎霞 (Shijiazhuang: Huashan wenyi chubanshe, 2004), 88–94.

⁵⁰ Enchin, “Jō Chierin sanzō sho,” in *Gyōrekishō*, 89.

China and Japan. Li Da and Zhan Jingquan were from the same area, Wuzhou 婺州 (modern Jinhua 金華), close to Mount Tiantai and many coastal ports.⁵¹ Also, it is worth noting that they conducted these trade voyages rather frequently. Remember that Zhan Jingquan sailed from China to Japan in 861, 864, and 867. The stable composition of this merchant group and their predictable schedule allowed Enchin to form a long-term cooperative relationship with them and to depend on them as part of a network through which to connect with China.

The merchants' inclination toward Buddhism also strengthened Enchin's collaboration with them. In his letter to Zhihuilun, Enchin referred to Li Da as "disciple Li Da from the Yongkang County of Wuzhou" 務州永康門徒李達 and also praised Li Da for his "solid mind in pursuit of teachings" 道心堅固 which, as Enchin believed, helped Li Da survive the disastrous shipwreck.⁵² And according to Enchin's biography, Zhan Jingquan took Buddhist vows no later than 867.⁵³ Thus, this group of merchants were both active traders and dedicated Buddhist believers. After meeting Enchin, this group of merchants were much involved in his Buddhist networks, and becoming Buddhist messengers also helped the merchants expand their ties to the monks in both lands, as this book further shows. Given the suspension of embassy missions at this time, merchant-monk networks like this became indispensable to sustaining the exchanges between China and Japan.

Buddhist Connections Serving Economic Interest: Cai Fu's Poems

The collaboration between Enchin and the merchant group of Zhan Jingquan and Li Da seems, at least from the surviving records, to have served mostly Enchin's interests. But in fact, merchants also tried to take advantage of their connections with the monks to generate economic profits.

⁵¹ In the "Letter to Request the Official Certificate from Taizhou" ("Qi Taizhou Gongyan Zhuang," see fn 34), Enchin referred to Zhan Jingquan as a "Yuezhou merchant," but in two places in Enchin's biography, Zhan was recorded as being from Wuzhou. Also, Yuezhou and Wuzhou were geographically adjacent to each other, so perhaps Zhan was trading in Yuezhou – a place famous for ceramic production – and when he first met Enchin, he mentioned only that to him.

⁵² Enchin, "Jō Chierin sanzō sho," in *Gyōrekishō*, 89.

⁵³ Miyoshi, *Tendaishū Enryakuji zasu Enchin den*, 1376.

Among the merchants who Enchin encountered, one named Cai Fu 蔡輔 was clearly trying to use his acquaintance with Enchin to serve his own economic interests. Cai Fu arrived in Japan on the same ship with Enchin in 858 and also stayed at the same guesthouse. He likely attended all of Enchin's and the merchants' gatherings during their stay in Kyushu. Unlike Zhan Jingquan and Li Da, however, Cai Fu did not appear in any surviving records after 858, so he probably was not part of Zhan and Li's circle.

Cai Fu wrote at least nine poems to Enchin during that three-month sojourn.⁵⁴ He actively responded in poems to Enchin's memory of the years at Mount Tiantai. And when Enchin was finally about to leave for the capital of Kyoto, Cai Fu wrote a series of four farewell poems. Those poems were mostly generic and formulaic and did not contain many insightful lines, but Cai Fu did not spare any effort to display a seemingly profound relationship between himself and Enchin. The first poem in that series, for example, reads, "The [guesthouse] Kōrokan is three thousand *li* away from the capital [of Kyoto], / and the horse you are riding runs so fast that it is almost flying. / We hold hands, repeat and repeat the words to each other, so reluctant to separate. / I hope you arrive soon at the Dragon's Gate, but also long for your return."⁵⁵ The last sentence of the poem is clear evidence of its clichéd writing, because both the merchants and Enchin knew that it was highly unlikely that Enchin would return to Dazaifu again, given that he had already accomplished his pilgrimage.

There is no certain way to verify whether the friendship between Enchin and Cai Fu was as deep as depicted in the poems, but another poem written by Cai Fu is worth particular attention. The full title of the poem literally means "The Country of the Tang Presents the Belt of Immortals Assisting the Governance Along with Other Products" 唐國進仙人益國帶腰及貨物詩一首, and it reads, "The products of immortals from the great Tang are presented to the new Heaven. / The spring grass is newly grown while the leaves of the flowers are so fresh. / I expect that the present reign will last as long as the sun. / The house of the Tang wishes you longevity of 1,000 years."⁵⁶

This poem does not explicitly indicate to whom it was addressed, but I believe it was intended for the new Japanese emperor who had just

⁵⁴ Keikō, *Fūsō sengen shū*, 1353–55. ⁵⁵ Keikō, *Fūsō sengen shū*, 1353.

⁵⁶ Ono Katsutoshi, *Nittō gubō gyōreki no kenkyū*, 387; Bai and Li, *Xinglichao jiaozhu*, 270.

ascended the throne.⁵⁷ The content shows a strong sense of speaking directly to the emperor, and Cai Fu also signed this poem in a very formal way: “The trivial official in front of the government gate of the Rong–Guan Circuit of the Tang, Cai Fu, written at Kōrokan, humbly presents” 大唐容管道衙前散將蔡輔鴻臚館書進獻謹上. Although Cai Fu signed the poem with an ostensible official title, it is actually a title with no rank and no actual duty, most likely just indicating that Cai had served at a military official’s house.⁵⁸ Cai Fu at that point was just a merchant like Zhan Jingquan or Li Da, but he used this title often, probably because this is the highest title he had ever achieved.

This poem was written on 858/10/21, when Enchin was preparing to leave for the audience with the new emperor, at which he would present the mandalas he had brought back from China. Cai Fu was most likely taking the opportunity to present some gifts to the new emperor via Enchin. The “spring grass” and “flower leaves” probably refer to herbal medicines, which were popular continental goods that previous Japanese embassy members sought to purchase in the Tang markets. Although the letter was written in late autumn, when the merchants and Enchin left China it was still summer, so the herbal medicines that Cai Fu collected in China were indeed “spring grass.”

Sea merchants and emperors, in a normal sense, were almost at opposite ends of a hierarchical spectrum. But Cai Fu’s case shows that, with monks as intermediaries, it was very possible for a Chinese sea merchant to make contact with the Japanese emperor, which happened again from time to time in the ensuing centuries. The network established by Enchin and his merchant acquaintances not only sustained the commercial and religious exchanges between China and Japan with more flexibility, but also allowed new forms of interactions.

Cultivating Buddhist Connections for Trade: The Xu Brothers' Letters

While Cai Fu was trying to gain access to high authorities in Japan via his connections to Enchin, other merchants made even greater efforts in their own interest: some intentionally cultivated their Buddhist connections and used them to maximize their trade profit. A set of

⁵⁷ This poem was categorized by Ono Katsutoshi as a “farewell poem” 送別詩, but I see it differently.

⁵⁸ For more information on this title, see Shi, “Ribei Yuanchengsi (Sanjingsi) cang Tang ren shiwen chidu jiaozheng,” 117–18.

eighteen letters to a Chinese monk, Yikong 義空, who stayed in Kyoto from 847 to at least 852 (possibly until 856), provide valuable information about the direct interaction between Yikong and a merchant family.⁵⁹ A Chan monk from Hangzhou in the lower Yangzi delta, Yikong came to Japan at the invitation of the Japanese royal family. He received a warm welcome upon his arrival – the royal family first hosted him in the prestigious Tōji 東寺 monastery in the capital, and later the Empress Dowager established the Danrinji monastery 檀林寺 in the Sagano area of Kyoto for him.⁶⁰

Similar to Enchin, Yikong also frequently communicated with some Chinese merchants – among the eighteen surviving letters that Yikong received during his sojourn in Japan, nine were from two Xu brothers (Table 1). These Xu brothers – Xu Gongzhi 徐公直 and Xu Gongyou 徐公祐 – were also based in the prospering lower Yangzi delta and engaged in overseas trade. Xu Gongyou, the younger of the brothers, seemed to travel between China and Japan often.

According to the letters, Xu Gongyou arrived in Japan in both 849 and 852 and stayed at the guesthouse Kōrokan for several months. Each time, he wrote to Yikong soon after his arrival, attaching a large

⁵⁹ The set of letters were originally preserved in *Kōya zappitsushū* 高野雜筆集, which is a collection containing mostly essays by and letters to Kūkai. Kūkai, as mentioned earlier, was Enchin's uncle and went to Tang China with the 804 embassy. This set of letters, however, was later taken out of this collection when *Kōya zappitsushū* was republished, since people believed they were not related to Kūkai. See Kūkai 空海, *Kōhō dashi zenshū* 弘法大師全集 (Tokyo: Yoshikawa kōbunkan, 1910), 609–10. Thus various published versions of *Kōya zappitsushū* do not include these letters. Otani University in Kyoto preserves one of the earliest manuscripts of *Kōya zappitsushū* and has published the digital version on its website, which contains all the letters.

For the digital version, see https://web.otani.ac.jp/museum/kurashina/01_koya/all_b25.html

Japanese scholars Takagi Shingen 高木紳元 and Tanaka Fumio 田中史生 have compared the Otani manuscript with other extant versions, identified the obscure characters, and discussed the time when each letter was written in their works. See Takagi Shingen, “Tōsō Gikū no raichō o meguru shomondai” 唐僧義空の来朝をめぐる諸問題, in *Kūkai shisō no shoshi teki kenkyū: Takagi Shingen chosakushū 4* 空海思想の書誌的研究：高木紳元著作集 4 (Kyoto: Hōzōkan, 1990), 357–409; Tanaka Fumio, *Kokusai kōeki to kodai Nihon* 国際交易と古代日本 (Tokyo: Yoshikawa kōbunkan, 2012), 153–88. All the scholarship on these letters uses the same numbering, which is consistent with the Otani manuscript. This book also adopts that numbering of the letters.

⁶⁰ Kokan Shiren 虎關師煉, *Genkō shakusho* 元亨釈書 (Tokyo: Keizai zasshisha, 1901), 6:729–30.

Table 1 Basic information on the letters to the monk Yikong⁶¹

Letter No.	Year/M/D	Sender	Recipient	Location Where Written	Remarks
1	849/5/27	Xu Gongzhi	Yikong	China	Set with Letter no. 2
2	849/5/27	Xu Gongzhi	Yikong and monk Daofang	China	Set with Letter no. 1
4	849/6/7	Tang monk Yunxu	Yikong	China	
10	849	Tang monk Faman	Yikong	China	
3	849/9/11	Xu Gongyou	Yikong	Japan	
5	849/9/13	Japanese monk Shinjaku	Yikong	Japan	
11	849/10/14	Tang monk Wuwu	Yikong	Japan	
15	849/10/15	Xu Gongyou	Yikong	Japan	
14	849/c.11/24	Xu Gongyou	Yikong	Japan	
13	852/5/22	Xu Gongzhi	Yikong	China	
16	852/6/30	Xu Gongyou	Yikong	Japan	Set with Letter no. 17
17	852/6/30	Xu Gongyou	Hupo	Japan	Set with Letter no. 16
18	852/10/21	Xu Gongyou	Yikong	Japan	

set of gifts. The gifts in 849, for example, included ten *jin* of sugar, five liters of honey, and two pairs of shoes from Xu Gongzhi, all of which Gongzhi referred to as “local products of the prefecture” 當境所出土物; and Gongyou added one *jin* of tea and ten white porcelain tea bowls as his own gifts.⁶² The term “local products of the prefecture” forcefully

⁶¹ The table is based on Tanaka Fumio, *Kokusai kōeki to kodai Nihon*, 169.

⁶² Letter no. 2, “From Xu Gongzhi to Yikong”; Letter no. 3, “From Xu Gongyou to Yikong.”

points out the significance of the lower Yangzi delta in Sino-Japanese trade: it was an important supply source of the goods, which gave the local residents – such as the Xu brothers and Enchin's associates – an advantage for participating in the overseas trade.

The gifts indicate that many sorts of goods traded by the private merchants were tightly related to monks' lives. By the Tang dynasty, tea drinking had been a common practice in Chinese monasteries. The drink was used by the Buddhist monks to support them while they meditated and to ward off sleep. Japanese embassies to the Tang also facilitated the spread of tea to Japanese monasteries – the famous Saichō and Kūkai were recorded to have played a part in the process.⁶³ As we saw earlier, Ennin purchased tea while in China, and Enchin drank tea with the Chinese sea merchants during their stay at the guesthouse of Kōrokan, confirming that tea drinking was popular among Japanese monks, too. But because tea was not planted widely in Japan until the thirteenth century, imports from China were crucial to meet the demand. Sugar, too, was an indispensable staple of monastic life. The five medicines permitted to sick monks in traditional Buddhism included sugarcane, syrup, and sugar.⁶⁴ Important methods for making sugar were introduced into China from India in the mid-seventh century, and Chinese monks also made efforts to transmit the technologies to Japan. Compared with tea, it took even longer for Japan to become a self-sufficient producer of sugar – Japan relied on imported sugar from China until the seventeenth century.⁶⁵

In addition to gifts, Gongyou also sometimes took letters from other Chinese monks to Yikong. We can see from the extant letters that in 849 Gongyou must have brought Yunxu's and Faman's letters (see Table 1) from China to Yikong. During his sojourn at the guesthouse, Gongyou would usually receive replies from Yikong, to which Gongyou would respond, attaching another set of gifts.⁶⁶

The relationship between Yikong and the Xu brothers involved more than exchanging letters and gifts, and the Xu brothers intentionally

⁶³ Victor H. Mair and Erling Hoh, *The True History of Tea* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2009), 41–44.

⁶⁴ Christian Daniels and Nicolas K. Menzies, *Science and Civilisation in China*, Vol. 6: *Biology and Biological Technology*, Pt. 3: *Agro-Industries and Forestry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 61–62.

⁶⁵ Daniels and Menzies, *Science and Civilisation in China*, 58, 62, 456.

⁶⁶ For example, Letters no. 14 and no. 15 are both Gongyou's replies to Yikong.

cultivated close ties with Yikong. In 849, in addition to the presents, Xu Gongyou actually brought his nephew, Gongzhi's son Hupo 胡婆, to Japan, hoping Yikong could take Hupo as his attendant. In his letter to Yikong dated 849/10/15, Xu Gongyou wrote, "I humbly rely on you master to teach him [Hupo] with mercy. This child is dumb about everything and understands nothing, so I humbly hope that you could instruct him day and night. I will thank you altogether one day."⁶⁷

Xu Gongzhi explained the decision to send his own son to Japan in his later letter: "My son Hupo has admired the [Buddhist] way since he was little, but he encountered obstacles in the Tang and thus wishes to pursue the way in a country where Buddhism is flourishing. I only wish you do not mind his dumbness and would take him at your disposal. I do not know how to describe the salvation he would receive from you."⁶⁸

The "obstacles" the letter refers to must have been the persecution of Buddhism in the Tang between 842 and 846, which Ennin and his companions experienced. By the time that the Xu brothers sent Hupo to Japan, however, it had been more than three years since the persecution had ended. Moreover, according to the Chinese monk Faman's letter, which Xu Gongyou brought to Japan in 849, Buddhism was already resurgent in China: "The Buddhist teachings in our country have already been revived by His Majesty. The projects of constructing Buddhist monasteries and increasing the number of monks are deemed of great importance."⁶⁹ Therefore, learning Buddhist teachings in China appeared to be entirely possible then, so the Xu brothers likely sent Hupo to Japan for reasons other than simply supporting his pursuit of the dharma.

Xu Gongyou's following visit to Japan in 852 revealed the brothers' real intention behind sending Hupo to Yikong. On 852/6/30, soon after his arrival at Dazaifu, Xu Gongyou made a direct request to Yikong, hoping that he could dispatch Hupo to Kyushu. Gongyou wrote, "My nephew Hupo must have been a great bother to you in the capital. I brought some clothes and gifts from home, but there are no good candidates that I could entrust these things with [to bring to you], so I humbly hope that you could send Hupo to me. He will continue, as usual, to be at your disposal later."⁷⁰

⁶⁷ Letter no. 15, "From Xu Gongyou to Yikong."

⁶⁸ Letter no. 13, "From Xu Gongzhi to Yikong."

⁶⁹ Letter no. 10, "From Chinese monk Faman to Yikong."

⁷⁰ Letter no. 16, "From Xu Gongyou to Yikong."

Bringing back gifts to Yikong, however, was not the main reason to ask Hupo to Kyushu. Gongyou continued to explain in the same letter that his rice fields in Suzhou had yielded no harvests for more than two years, and since he had invested much, he was in a financially difficult position. And he confessed his true reason for asking for Hupo: “This time I also carried a small amount of cargo, and I wonder if Hupo has acquaintances in the capital who could take care of the cargo. I hope you could please dispatch Hupo to Kyushu to fetch the cargo. Five *jin* of fragrances [are attached] for your disposal. I beg that you will not blame me for my request. Given the long journey [from Kōrokan to Kyoto], please forgive me for having not paid a visit.”⁷¹

The letter clearly shows that Gongyou was asking Yikong to assist in transporting and selling some cargo in the capital of Kyoto. Although Gongyou mentions wondering whether Hupo might have any connections to help with distributing the cargo in the capital, the chances that Yikong knew such people were much greater. More remarkably, what Gongyou requested from Yikong was against the regulations of the Japanese court, which prohibited unauthorized foreign imports, and essentially constituted smuggling.

The Kyoto court had been closely monitoring and controlling overseas trade in Japan since the tribute-trade era. When Japanese embassies – like that of Ennin and his colleagues – and foreign envoys were the reliable sources for foreign luxuries for the court and aristocrats, as noted in Chapter 1, everything brought back had to be sent to the court first, and only aristocrats and officials could receive the exotic luxuries from the court or apply to purchase them.⁷² A document issued by the Department of State (*Dajōkan* 太政官) in 828 reads, “It has always been against the law for foreign visitors to import objects for private trade. Since our people are obsessed with the objects coming from faraway lands and they fight to trade for them, we must strictly prohibit [the illicit private trade with foreigners] and not allow the trade to develop further.”⁷³

In the mid-ninth century, although sea merchants started to assume an increasingly important role in importing foreign commodities to Japan, the court in Kyoto continued to control the sale of imported

⁷¹ Letter no. 16.

⁷² Watanabe, *Heian jidai bōeki kanri seido shi no kenkyū*, 110.

⁷³ *Ruijū sandaikyaku* 類聚三代格, in *Shintei zōho kokushi taikai* 新訂増補国史大系, Vol. 25 (Tokyo: Yoshikawa kōbunsha, 1998), 18:571–72.

goods. In addition to the requirement to stay at Kōrokan, arriving foreign sea merchants like Gongyou were still subject to cargo inspection, just as Zhan Jingquan and Li Da had been.⁷⁴ And the court still held the right to the preemptive purchase of any imports.⁷⁵

Gongyou's letter demonstrates that those regulations were indeed enforced. He mentions that while his brother Gongzhi had prepared gifts for Yikong, he was waiting for government officials to finish the inspection before he could retrieve the gifts and send them to Yikong.⁷⁶ The gifts that Gongzhi sent to Yikong included one bolt of damask silk made in Yue, a pair of shoes, and ten *jin* of sugar.⁷⁷ Very interestingly, the bolt of damask silk was in the end purchased by the officials during the inspection, another confirmation that the court continued to exercise the right of preemptive purchase at that time.⁷⁸

For a sea merchant who could carry only a certain amount of cargo for every trip, Gongyou's goal was simple – to make as much profit as possible from his cargo. Japanese edicts specifically forbade aristocratic and bureaucratic families from competing with the court in purchasing foreign goods privately by offering high prices.⁷⁹ This suggests that if Gongyou were able to find a way to sell part of his cargo directly to aristocrats, he likely would get a much better offer than the court's preemptive purchase price. Therefore, Gongyou was hoping Yikong would help him with selling the cargo in the capital. As already suggested, the likely real reason the Xu brothers had sent Hupo to Japan in 849 was to strengthen their connections to Yikong and take

⁷⁴ A document issued by the Department of State in 831 stipulated that “after the merchants arrived, all the cargo and miscellaneous objects on board should be submitted.” *Ruijū sandaikyaku*, 18:570. Also see Batten, *Gateway to Japan*, 108–9.

⁷⁵ For example, in 903 the court repeated its previous regulation again and particularly pointed out that no one was allowed to make purchases before the court did so. *Ruijū sandaikyaku*, 19:612.

⁷⁶ Letter no. 16, “From Xu Gongyou to Yikong.”

⁷⁷ Letter no. 13, “From Xu Gongzhi to Yikong.”

⁷⁸ Letter no. 18, “From Xu Gongyou to Yikong.”

⁷⁹ An edict in 885 reads: “Tang merchants arrived in Dazaifu. This day, an edict was passed down to the governors and offices, forbidding the messengers from aristocratic and bureaucratic families as well as the clerks and commoners under their surveillance to compete in purchasing foreign goods privately by offering high prices.” Fujiwara no Tokihira 藤原時平 (871–909) et al., *Nibon sandai jitsuroku* 日本三代実録, in *Shintei zōho kokushi taikei* 新訂増補国史大系, Vol. 4 (Tokyo: Yoshikawa kōbunkan, 1998), 48:Ninwa 1 (885)/10/20, 593.

advantage of his position and resources to extend their trade network to the capital.

We do not know whether or not Yikong dispatched Hupo in the end, but it is very likely that Yikong remained in the network of pilgrim monks and sea merchants and even introduced the Xu brothers to Enchin. In 855, when Enchin was on his way from Taizhou to Chang'an, he spent two months at Xu Gongzhi's house in Suzhou to recover from illness; and when he returned from the capital the next year, he stopped by Xu Gongzhi's place again.⁸⁰ A short letter from Xu Gongzhi to Enchin survived and looks like a note attached to a set of gifts that Xu Gongzhi sent to Enchin. The gifts included two bolts of damask silk and twenty small plates.⁸¹ The letter was so brief that it even omitted regular greetings – Xu Gongzhi simply listed the gifts and mentioned that he only had one day's notice and so did not have time to prepare other gifts. This brief message indicates that Xu Gongzhi and Enchin were quite close and the absence of greetings in the letter would not have caused any offense.

Enchin left Kyoto for Dazaifu in 851, while Yikong arrived in 847, so their time in the capital had overlapped. Enchin had written about Yikong, too, mentioning that the Chinese monk was disappointed with Japanese monks' indifference to Zen Buddhism and had criticized them for often violating monastic regulations.⁸² Thus, Yikong and Enchin probably knew one another, and when Enchin was going to south-eastern China for his pilgrimage, it would have been natural for Yikong to introduce the Xu brothers, who were based in that area, to Enchin for assistance. The network of monks and merchants also expanded in this way.

Conclusion

After the last Japanese embassy to Tang China returned to Dazaifu in 839, the lack of tribute vessels meant the de facto suspension of the official diplomatic relationship between the continent and the archipelago, which prompted cooperation between the persistent travelers – monks and merchants. In the period of the tribute trade, the Japanese court had paid for the ships – a delegation usually contained four ships, and they had sent

⁸⁰ Miyoshi, *Tendaishū Enryakuji zasu Enchin den*, 1368.

⁸¹ Keikō, *Fūsō sengen shū*, 1357. ⁸² Saeki Arikiyo, *Enchin*, 257.

ambassadors along with as many as 600 crew to obtain goods. Although no concrete textual or archaeological evidence of the Japanese tributary ships have emerged, to accommodate 150 passengers with their provisions, the ships would have measured 24 meters long and 8.5 meters wide with a displacement of 300 tons. The ships were likely similar to the Chinese junks of that era – flat-bottomed with bulkheads that partitioned the ship into holds – and the designers and carpenters were probably immigrant Koreans, who were master craftsmen in shipbuilding.⁸³ The navigational skills and knowledge of winds and currents were still rudimentary in the ninth century, so the seven- to ten-day journey traversing the East China Sea could be perilous. In fact, out of a total of eight tribute delegations that crossed the East China Sea over 150 years, only one managed to complete a round trip safely.⁸⁴

When the official missions were not frequent enough – the 838 delegation coming after a thirty-year interval – to satisfy the increasing demand for Chinese goods and knowledge, the monks and private merchants stepped in to fill the void.⁸⁵ Ennin pursued Buddhist scriptures and ritual objects in China determinedly, and the rewards after his successful return inspired more Japanese monks to follow his steps on pilgrimage to the continent. For those pilgrims in future

⁸³ Farris, “Shipbuilding and Nautical Technology in Japanese Maritime History,” 265–66.

⁸⁴ Masashi Haneda and Mihoko Oka, eds., *A Maritime History of East Asia* (Kyoto: Kyoto University Press, 2019), 40–41; Farris, “Shipbuilding and Nautical Technology in Japanese Maritime History,” 263–66.

Prior to 700, tribute missions from Japan to China took a northern route, after setting off from northern Kyushu, the fleet “island-hopped” across the Korea Strait, then sailed along the coastal line of the Korean peninsula, north to the Liaodong peninsula, and only needed to make a short trip across the Bohai to land in ports on the Shandong peninsula. The northern route was much easier to navigate since ships remained in sight of land for almost the entire journey, but as the relationship between Japanese and Korean courts worsened, the northern route was replaced by the southern route from the sixth Japanese embassy to the Tang in 701. Seasonal winds blow in a westerly direction from northern Kyushu during April to May and again in September to December, and the winds blow from the Yangzi delta eastward toward Kyushu in July. The historical records show, however, that the Japanese embassies many times failed to take advantage of the prevailing winds. (Farris, 263–66.)

⁸⁵ Feng Lijun also points out that “the ninth century can be seen as a turning point or transition period in the history of trade in East Asia.” See Feng Lijun 馮立君, *Tangchao yu Dongya* 唐朝與東亞 (Beijing: Shehui kexue wenxian chubanshe, 2019), 55.

decades, one key takeaway from Ennin's experience was the importance of the assistance provided by Chinese merchants.

Absorbing this lesson, Enchin made full use of the merchants' help. Enchin's trip was clearly encouraged by the Japanese court, which supported him with an allowance, but Enchin's five-year sojourn in China otherwise relied entirely on the Buddhist community and merchants there. The surviving materials not only allow us to reconstruct a substantial part of the unofficial network, but perhaps more remarkably also show us the mechanism of the network from the viewpoint of the merchants.

Enchin's case reveals that Chinese merchants in the mid-ninth century traveled on a regular and frequent basis. Between 853 and 865, based on surviving records, the shipmaster Li Yanxiao arrived in Japan from China seven times. There was a gap in record between 866 and the shipwreck in which he died in 877, but it is very possible that Li Yanxiao did not stop traveling during that decade and those simple trade routines did not leave a trace in the texts.⁸⁶ Kimiya Yasuhiko and Bruce Batten have both counted more than thirty merchant voyages to Japan from China during the mid-to-late ninth century, based on the records in Japanese sources.⁸⁷ Batten believes that the volume of foreign trade "was in fact extremely low."⁸⁸ While the statement may be true by modern standards, if we compare it with the previous tribute era, one merchant ship – roughly half the size of a tributary ship – every year on average was still a considerable improvement over four tributary ships every fifteen years. Furthermore, while the number of tributary ship voyages was well documented, the merchant voyages evolved opportunistically and the number of Chinese merchant ships to Japan is likely underestimated somewhat.⁸⁹

⁸⁶ Huang Yue-se, "Da Tang shangren' Li Yanxiao yu jiu shiji Zhong-Ri guanxi," 50–55.

⁸⁷ Kimiya Yasuhiko 木宮泰彦, *Ri-Zhong wenhua jiaoliu shi* 日中文化交流史, trans. Hu Xinian 胡锡年 (Beijing: Shangwu yinshuguan, 1980), 255–58; Bruce Batten, "An Open and Shut Case? Thoughts on Late Heian Foreign Trade," in *Currents in Medieval Japanese History: Essays in Honor of Jeffrey P. Mass*, ed. Gordon M. Berger et al. (Los Angeles: Figueroa Press, 2009), 307.

⁸⁸ Batten, "Open and Shut Case?," 305.

⁸⁹ Charles Holcombe also points out that there was "indirect but conclusive evidence of a fairly substantial private maritime trade" during the ninth century. Charles Holcombe, "Trade-Buddhism: Maritime Trade, Immigration, and the Buddhist Landfall in Early Japan," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 119.2 (1999): 285.

It was the sea merchants' dependable long-term partnerships with one another that allowed monks to form decades-long, cooperative relationships with them. This was key to the success and growth of the monk-merchant trading network. The monks were reassured by the regular, predictable shipping schedules, that their messages would be delivered and their orders of goods would be completed in a timely manner.

The network of monks and merchants continued to expand as more of them became connected when their paths crossed during these trips, as evidenced by Yikong's introduction of the Xu brothers to Enchin. Those two groups – Yikong and the Xu brothers, Enchin and his merchant friends – thus became connected. Furthermore, the mobility of the merchants also helped with maintaining and expanding the transregional network, demonstrated in the way that Zhan Jingquan and Li Da served as Enchin's envoys, passing gifts and messages to monks in China.

The dual religious and commercial feature of the network of monks and merchants was already evident in the ninth century. Many merchants in this network claimed faith in Buddhism. They seemed to visit and donate to monasteries often, and in their correspondence with monks, they frequently addressed themselves as “disciple” (*dizi* 弟子) or “lay disciple” (*sudizi* 俗弟子). The monks, correspondingly, usually referred to the merchants as disciples and praised them for their determination in pursuing the Buddhist way. The merchants, on the other hand, did not hesitate to use the network to make more economic profit. For these Buddhist traders, their belief in Buddhism and their pragmatic use of religious ties to conduct trade did not conflict and may have even enhanced each other: after all, the merit they accumulated by believing in Buddhism was said to generate material fortune.

This transition period from 839 to 900 saw another important change in Sino-Japanese trade: the rise of the ports in the lower Yangzi delta, especially the port of Mingzhou (modern Ningbo). As Xu Gongyou specifically mentioned in one of his letters, he set off from Ningbo and it took him fifteen days to arrive at the guesthouse Kōrokan.⁹⁰ This shift in ports, as Ennin first encountered during his search for a departing ship in 847, probably corresponded with the fall of Silla merchants and the rise of Chinese merchants. The presence of Silla merchants had been relatively strong during Ennin's sojourn in

⁹⁰ Letter no. 16, “From Xu Gongyou to Yikong.”

the early ninth century but decreased significantly afterward due to the Japanese ban on their arrival; the Chinese merchants became the dominating group trading in East Asian waters.⁹¹ The impact of this shift on Sino-Japanese unofficial trade can be seen in the fact that the majority of merchants discussed in this chapter were based in the lower Yangzi delta. As detailed earlier, a substantial portion of the cargo that these Chinese sea merchants transported to Japan – including local products such as tea, celadons, and textiles, and Southeast Asian imports like herbal medicine and aromatics – was from the lower Yangzi region, too.

Thus, at that time, the lower Yangzi delta, in addition to possessing many convenient ports from which to sail to Japan, was a region where many sea merchants were based and desirable goods congregated. More remarkably, monasteries were developing there, too, in addition to the famous Mount Tiantai. The religious and commercial ties and resources that coalesced in this region formed the foundation of a rich and diverse culture for Sino-Japanese trade that would become more prominent in the ensuing centuries.

Between 839 and 900, the merchants and monks were actively establishing a new network in the absence of official diplomatic ties, but the continuous presence of authorities meant that merchants felt compelled nonetheless to cultivate good relationships with powerful people. The government stipulations were strongly affecting Sino-Japanese exchanges; restrictions were necessitating ever-more creative partnerships. In the next century, the collapse of the Tang empire left an array of possibilities for redefining the relationship between the continent and the Japanese archipelago. The next chapter traces how this religio-commercial network continued to develop into the primary axis of Sino-Japanese maritime exchanges in the new era.

⁹¹ Huang Yue-se, “‘Da Tang shangren’ Li Yanxiao yu jiu shiji Zhong-Ri guanxi,” 57–59.