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Overcoming space and social distance: institutionalization of the mass travel market in Japan

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Introduction

The study of the historical development of economic markets is of crucial importance for economic sociology. Only through analyzing long-term developments we are able to gain insights into the functioning and the dynamics of economic institutions that are not only socially embedded, but also have historical depth. Analyzing economic history with the theoretical tools of economic sociology will not only lead to a better understanding of historical processes, but will also result in a sharpening of the theoretical understanding of economic sociology. Furthermore, a fruitful cooperation and dialogue between specialists in economic history and historically oriented sociologists will hopefully develop.

The institutionalization of the mass travel market in Japan is in this context for several reasons a very interesting case study. First, due to its special characteristic and inner structure, early modern mass tourism is in general an especially worthwhile object to study. In comparison to the ideal types of historical markets constructed by Swedberg (1994: 273), a mass travel market is a mixture between the ideal type "local city market" and the ideal type "long distance trade market". On the one hand, a mass travel market is a mass consumer market and consists like the "local city market" of a large number of buyers and a smaller number of sellers. On the other hand, a mass travel market is like the "long distance trade market" also characterized by geographical and social distance between sellers and buyers. Furthermore, the main products in the travel market are not tangible goods, but services. These characteristics of the mass travel market result in number of barriers to their institutionalization. The geographical and social distance between customer and seller has to be overcome and trust relationships as a basis for economic exchange have to be established. In other words, the market as a network of stable trust relations between sellers and buyers has to be socially constructed (Berger and Luckmann 1966; Granovetter 1992).

Second, the mass travel market in Japan is of special interest because of its very early institutionalization during the 17th century. Although the exact number of travelers in Early Modern Japan is unknown, it is possible to estimate the volume of travel activity on available records. Based on the number of ferryboats that crossed lake Hamana in 1702, it can be assumed that at least one million people or about one-thirtieth of the total population traveled that year alone on the Tôkaidô, the main highway of Early Modern Japan (Ishimori 1989: 179-180). Compared to other countries, Japan had in a very early stage of its history a full-developed travel market and a form of mass tourism.1 This raises the question which factors and mechanisms contributed to this very early institutionalization besides some obvious factors like a relative high degree of social stability and of general economic prosperity as well as a good travel infrastructure?

Third, detailed historical studies of tourism and traveling in Japan are available (e.g. Kanzaki 2004; Shinjô 1982; Vaporis 1994). These extensive studies cover the whole development of the mass travel market in Japan over a period of over 250 years, respectively 500 years if its precursor is also counted. Therefore, an analysis of the institutionalization of mass tourism in Japan can be based on a strong empirical base and the full institutionalization process from its precursor to its fully developed, mature form can be studied.

The following analysis of the institutionalization of mass tourism in Japan will concentrate on the relation between suppliers and consumers as a core element of the travel market. Due to space limitations, the political regulation of the mass travel market has to be left aside. Also the historical context of the institutionalization process and the infrastructural changes will only be discussed briefly.

The analysis follows the historical development of the mass travel market in Japan that can be divided into three periods:

- 1 prototype and precursor of the mass travel market (mid 14th century to late 16th century);
- 2 social construction of the mass travel market (late 16th century to mid 18th century);
- 3 fully institutionalized mass travel market (mid 18th century to mid 19th century).

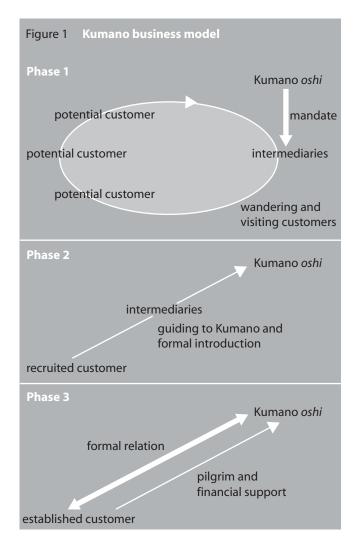
Prototype and precursor of the mass travel market: (Kumano) pilgrimages

The historical forerunners of the mass travel market in Japan were pilgrimages to religious centers. In the early Muromachi period (1333–1573), the imperial court lost its hegemonic position and competing warrior clans started to gain more and more power. One outcome of this disintegration of political order and the resulting power struggle was that religious institutions lost control over their manors and were forced to look for new sources of income for economical survival.

Priests of lower rank, called *oshi*, started to establish networks with new patrons, which conducted pilgrimages to the shrine or temple and supported the religious institution financially. A large number of religious centers like Ôyama, Koya or Ise started to look for new patrons and to attract pilgrims. However, by far the most important pilgrimage center of this period was Kumano (Miyake 1996: 128–132).

Religious specialists like mountain ascetics that were wandering through the country played a crucial role as intermediaries in the acquirement of new patrons for Kumano. During their journeys these intermediaries recruited new potential customers as agents of Kumano *oshi*, which were stationary waiting in Kumano for new customers that were guided to them (Shinjô 1966: 68–70). Once a new potential customer would have traveled to Kumano and met personally with an *oshi*, both parties would sign a document and establish a formal relation.

The pre-modern travel market in Japan was dominated by what might be called the Kumano business model (see figure 1). Intermediaries recruiting new costumers on the mandate of Kumano *oshi* were the core element in this business model. Through the activities and the introduction of these religious vagrants the geographical distance between potential customer and Kumano could be overcome. The Kumano business model relying on intermediaries functioned very well because Kumano had only a small number of wealthy costumers. At this time traveling and pilgrimage were confined to the members of the very small and powerful upper class. The common people could at most travel to a pilgrimage center far away as servants of their masters. Therefore, it would be inappropriate to speak of a mass travel market during this period.



Social construction of the mass travel market: religious tourism (to Ise)

In the second half of the Muromachi period, the popularization of traveling began in Japan. Customers in Kumano and other religious centers started to include wealthy farmers from the Kinki region, the agro-economically most advanced region. However, the real popularization of long distance traveling as a normal leisure activity of the common people developed during the late 16th and 17th century in Japan. A veritable travel boom took place during this era while the mass travel market was institutionalized. During the 17th century the shift from the upper class to the common people was completed; the overwhelming majority of the travelers were from the common people.

This change was possible thanks to a new political order and significant improvements in the travel infrastructure. During the second half of the 16th century, after 400 years of power struggle, powerful warlords started to rebuild a national political order. The conclusion of this process was the establishment of the Tokugawa shogunate in 1603 that lasted for over 260 years until 1868. This period was marked by a new political and social stability, economic growth, and a reinforcement of public security through the containment of bandits and pirates. These developments were crucial pre-conditions for the increasing travel activities of the common people. The political unification went also hand in hand with an upgrading of the existing road infrastructure, the construction of new roads, and a simplification and harmonization of the road control system.2

A replacement of Kumano by Ise as the most important traveling destination accompanied the popularization of traveling. While Kumano stagnated in its importance, Ise became *the* travel destination in Japan during the 17th century. This switch from Kumano to Ise was on the one hand due to an alteration in the character of traveling, and on the other hand to differences in the organizational pattern of the networks between vendors and customers (Shinjô 1966: 68–72).

Hand in hand with its popularization, traveling in Early Modern Japan changed from pilgrimage to a form of religious tourism. Although the travel activities of the population were not totally detached from religious motives, traveling was more and more characterized by sight-seeing and other leisure activities. Often travelers conducted long side-trips to famous places, hot springs and

cities during their journeys to religious institutions (Hashimoto 1995). Traveling was a possibility for the people to escape from the hardship of everyday life; the term *yusan tabi* (pleasure travel) became a word of everyday language in Early Modern Japan (Shinjô 1982: 724).

In the view of the common people of Early Modern Japan, the combination of tourism and pilgrimage was not a contradiction.³ Amusements as well as religious practices were part of the relaxed part of life (*hare*), in which body and soul were regenerated. They were in contrast to the seriousness of everyday life (*ke*) with its hard physical work (Varner 1977: 473). Furthermore, religious practices in Japan, especially in the little tradition of the population, are not characterized by an ascetic avoidance of the material world, but is oriented to concrete success and profit in this world (*genze riyaku*) (Reader and Tanabe 1998).

The switch from Kumano to Ise as the most important travel goal reflects these changes in travel activities. Ise, apart from its religious significance, had several tourist highlights with a number of theatres, its famous Kasuga dances, and not to forget one of the largest pleasure districts of the country with over 70 brothels (Nishigaki 1983: 178–179). Its seafood that was known and praised in all Japan made Ise a complete tourist attraction. Kumano had no such tourist highlights and was simply not a very attractive travel destination for the pleasure-seeking crowd traveling in Early Modern Japan.

However, even more important for the rise of Ise and the decline of Kumano were the differences in the business model of the two travel destinations. From the later Muromachi period onwards mountain ascetics and other religious travelers stopped their vagrant life. They settled down in villages and towns and started to act as religious specialist for local communities. Without their crucial agents the Kumano *oshi* were no longer able to attract a large number of new customers. Their business model was not suited for the new era of mass traveling of the early modern period, which was characterized by a larger number of customers and a much harder competition.

In contrast to Kumano, the *oshi* of the lse shrine had a stronger and direct relationship with their customers. They traveled by themselves through the country, looking for new customers. During their travels they visited also their established clients in order to strengthen their relationship with them and to gain supplementary income. Ise *oshi* distributed calendars, tea and other items to their clients

and received a "contribution" in return (Nishigaki 1983: 109–110). These yearly customer visits were of crucial importance as lucrative side business. The common people could not be expected to make large donations like the patrons in the early Muromachi period that had been part of the small, but wealthy upper class. But through their trade with their clients, Ise *oshi* could gain a reasonable profit from their regular customers. Agents of the *oshi* played only a secondary role in the Ise business model. They acted as guide for the customers on their travel to Ise and as local representatives of an *oshi*. These functions could also or even better be fulfilled by religious specialists after they had quitted their vagrant life and settled down in local communities.

Economic growth and increasing wealth of the common people was a crucial pre-condition for the development of a mass travel market in Early Modern Japan. Especially in the first half of the Edo period, the economy flourished while the living standard of the population increased significantly (Totman 1993). Still, despite the economic growth and increasing living standard a farmer or craftsman could not have financed a long distance trip individually. The organization of local communities into groups or fraternities of mutual assistance for long distance trips to Ise allowed the cooperative financing of these trips and was of crucial importance for the travel boom in Early Modern Japan. These corporate bodies on the local level might be called people travel clubs. Every member of such a body paid an annually amount to its fund. In some villages the crop of certain fields or areas of forest was also added to the fund (Ono 1976: 172). Financed by this fund a number of members per year could travel as representatives to Ise. Often representatives were chosen among the members by drawing lots (Sakurai 1988: 248).

Organizing themselves into fraternities allowed their members to pay for their own travel costs in small installments over several years. In comparison to current consumer credits this system had the advantage that no interests had to be paid. As these travel groups were organized on the level of a village or town neighborhood, social control mechanisms could ensure that nobody would maximize his own profit at the expense of the group. Social pressure inside the community detained members from leaving a fraternity soon after their travel had been financed by the fund of the corporate body. The magnitude of the social pressure manifests itself in the fact that often all families of a community became member in the

local lse group, although membership was voluntary (Sakurai 1988: 257; Shinjô 1982: 781–782).

Through these corporate bodies customers also gained more weight in their business relationship with an Ise *oshi*. In the terminology of James Coleman (1988: 105–108), the social networks were closed on the side of the customers. Therefore, they were not single, relatively unimportant customers, but acted always as representatives for a group of customers. A supplier had to be careful to satisfy every customer with his services. Otherwise he risked losing the entire group. Every Ise group was a kind of small consumer organization of travelers that gave them more weight in the eyes of the sellers.

The activities of the Ise *oshi* as entrepreneur encompassed more than simply recruiting new customers during their travel through the country. They were the driving forces behind the establishment and incorporation of local Ise fraternities (Sakurai 1988: 249). The continued existence of travel groups was also of crucial importance for them, because without Ise fraternities most customers of the population would not have been able to travel to Ise. In order not to loose their customers, Ise *oshi* were not only the initiators of Ise fraternities, but often fulfilled a leading role in their management and in the administration of their funds as well (Kanzaki 1995: 48). Again, through his central role in the travel groups, the Ise *oshi* could also strengthen its relationship with his customers.

Still, in the center of Ise oshi's business activities stood organizing the trips of their customers and taking care of them during their stay in Ise. They organized travel guides for their customers that accompanied them to Ise. And they would accommodate their customers in their house during the stay in Ise. During these sojourns, which lasted several days in Ise, they would organize a whole program of activities for their customer. A part of these activities clearly had a religious character like prayers, rituals and, of course, a visit at the Ise Shrine. Other activities organized by the Ise oshi could hardly be described as religious. Amusement and pleasure were the central element in these activities in Ise. The Ise oshi gave extravagant banquettes, organized Kasuga dance performances for their guests or recommended appropriate souvenirs to them. Even a personnel introduction into the local nightlife and the famous red-light district in Ise was often part of the services (Kanzaki 1995: 48).

These activities in Ise and the luxurious hospitality in the house of the Ise *oshi* stood in diametrical contrast to the simple everyday life of most travelers. It was also a form of marketing for Ise, as the visitors would go into ruptures about their travel to Ise and especially about their stay in Ise after their return to their villages and communities. How deeply travelers were especially impressed by the luxurious food that was served to them in the Ise *oshi's* houses is visible in their travel diaries. The sober and very short listing of the places passed on the way would be suddenly interrupted by an euphoric and detailed description of the menus of several courses that were served (Fukai 2000: 136–138).

In comparison to contemporary travel agents, the business activity of the providers in the lse business model was much broader. The lse *oshi* were traders as well as initiators and managers of travel groups during their business trips; at the same time, they were travel agents, tour guides and innkeepers for their customers in lse. Also, they build and maintained the social networks through which their services could be delivered (see figure 2).

The stable networks between travelers respectively travel groups on the one side and Ise *oshi* on the other side was the basis for a mutual trust relationship between sellers and customers in the mass travel market in Early Modern Japan. These social structures of the mass travel market also resulted in incentives for both sides not to deceive the business partner despite geographical and social distance. However, one question has still to be answered (in detail): How was it possible in the beginning to establish trust relations between an Ise *oshi* and a local community? After all, in the beginning an Ise *oshi* would be a complete stranger. How could he gain the appreciation and trust of the local community that he visited for the first time?

The main factor allowing Ise *oshi* to gain the trust of a local community and to establish travel groups was their religious status. They could follow up in and rely on the long tradition of religious specialists wandering through the country and fulfilling services to local communities as healers and priests. Because of the established pattern of wandering religious specialists, it was easier for an Ise *oshi* to win the trust of their potential customers and whole communities. The high esteem that they had in the population is visible in the large number of stories that circulated about them, in which their good acts and help for people in need are described (Fujitani and Naoki 1991: 101). With the increasing prestige of the Ise Shrine as the



most important religious center and pilgrimage destination among the common people in Early Modern Japan, the social status of the Ise *oshi* increased even further among the population. Although only a small minority of Ise *oshi* was still directly affiliated as priests with the Ise Shrine (Fujitani and Naoki 1991: 132–133), they deliberately did not point out this fact to their customers:

An *oshi* was called "Mr. Ise", but their activity no longer had anything to do with Ise Shrine itself. In their cleverly delivered oral messages, they might have said, "I came from Ise," or "I am tayô from Ise," but they would have never say "I came from Ise Shrine." Nevertheless, in communities in the countryside, people doubtless believed that they could obtain the deity's grace from the *oshi* (Kanzaki 1995: 46).

From the 18th century onwards, the Ise *oshi* lost their religious status, especially among the urban population. A large part of travelers regarded their relation to an *oshi* strictly as business (Shinjô 1982: 769–770). However, how

high and even magical the status of *oshi* must have been – especially among the rural population – is visible in remote and isolated farming villages. In these villages even in the early 20th century, the water in which *oshi* or their agents had bathed or washed their feet, would be kept and drunk as medicine in the case of sickness (Sakurai 1988: 259).

Fully institutionalized mass travel market: diversification and individualization

From the second half of the 18th century onwards, a maturation of the travel market in Japan can be noted that resulted in a further commercialization and a diversification of the market. The institutionalization of the mass travel market resulted over the years in an enlargement and expansion of the services and goods available. A large number of shops, where one could pay everything utile and necessary while traveling, had been established along the important routes. And a large quantity of publications for traveling and guidebooks were available. Private lodging had developed along the roads, taking over the business from the old temples that had given shelter to the travelers in earlier periods. The competition among these hostels and hotels increased. Some inns offered new services like portable meals for on the way (bentô) or organized guided sightseeing tours in order to distinguish themselves from the mass of lodgings (Fukai 2000: 193–194). Other private lodgings organized themselves into lodging groups guaranteeing the same services, like for example the Azumakô, which was established in 1804 (Toyoda and Kodama 1970: 177).

This expansion of the infrastructure and further commercialization of traveling was accompanied by a diversification of the travel destinations. New forms of traveling developed like e.g. the day trips from Edo or Kyoto that came en vogue in the late 18th century (Fukai 2000: 141). Ise's importance as travel destination decreased. Already in the 1730s Ise had reached its zenith. Although Ise was still the most important travel destination during the 19th century, the number of visitors declined (Shinjô 1982: 1156–1157).

An example for this tendency is the city of Ueda in Nagano, for which data are available. The average number of travelers to Ise per year declined from averagely 13.1 travelers per year from 1707 to 1803 to only 3.6 travelers for

the period from 1804 to 1867 (Fukai 1977: 141). Another indicator for the decreasing importance of Ise as travel destination is the falling number of *oshi* houses (or companies) in Ise. In the case of the Outer Shrine in Ise, their number had strongly increased from 391 houses in 1671 to 615 houses in 1724. However, it decreased again until 1792 to 357 houses and stood below 400 houses until the end of the early modern period in Japan (Shinjô 1982: 758–759).

The successful business model of the Ise *oshi* had been copied by *oshi* from other shrines and temples, which had established customer networks themselves. All over the country pleasure quarters developed in front of the entrances of temples and shrines and new places actively started to attract tourists and travelers (Ishimori 1989: 185; Nenzi 2004). The Ise *oshi* were confronted with a large number of new travel destinations that had effectively copied their business model (Sawaki 1999: 14).

Another tendency was the individualization of traveling. If people had the money they could travel on their own (Formanek 1998). People were used to long distance travel. Everyone knew relatives and friends who had already traveled and could give advice. A large number of detailed travel guides were available while all necessary goods were sold along the way. The specialist services of the *oshi* and their agents were simply no longer needed (Shinjô 1982: 707).

Concluding remarks

In the center of the full institutionalization of the travel market in Early Modern Japan were the social networks between *oshi* as vendors and entrepreneurs and their customers organized in corporate bodies. Through these social networks the spatial and social distance of the market was overcome. Ise *oshi* were the central figures and initiators of these social networks. They were not simple travel agents that organized journeys and sojourns in Ise for their customers, but socially constructed corporate bodies that allowed for the travel activities of the common people. In order to be an economic entrepreneur the Ise *oshi* had to be a social entrepreneur.

This social entrepreneurship is also the main difference between the Kumano business model and the Ise business model and explains the switch from Kumano to Ise as the main travel destination. Of course the rise of Ise is also due to a change on the demand side. The common people as customers demanded more and more amusement and leisure activities during their travels. Traveling changed with its popularization from "pure" pilgrimage to a form of religious tourism. Because of the attractiveness of Ise as a leisure travel destination, Ise *oshi* were much better able to meet these new demands in the evolving travel market than Kumano *oshi*. But it was their independence from intermediaries, their direct ties to their customers and their social entrepreneurship that allowed them to use this market opportunity.

From the second half of the 18th century onwards, once the mass travel market was fully institutionalized, a diversification and individualization of traveling developed. Ise lost importance as oshi of other travel destinations had successfully copied its business model. Information about traveling and trust relations between seller and supplier in the mass travel market were no longer limited to social networks. The services and products in the market were more and more standardized while information became available through for instance travel guides, friends and relatives. Everyone who had the money could travel on his own and did not have to rely on travel specialists. Although social ties are of crucial importance even in contemporary consumer markets (see e.g. DiMaggio and Louch 1998), the example of the mass travel market in Early Modern Japan suggests that they decline in importance once the market is fully institutionalized and standardized.

Endnotes

1 To illustrate the level of travel activity in Early Modern Japan in international comparison, one may quote Engelbert Kaempfer, a German doctor, who was one of the few Westerners that had the opportunity to travel through Japan during the early modern period despite Japan's national seclusion policy. When he visited Japan at the end of the 17th century, he was surprised by the number of people who traveled on the Tôkaidô: "It is scarce credible, what numbers of people daily travel on the roads in this country, and I can assure the reader from my own experience, having pass'd it four times, that [the] Tokaido ... is upon some days more crowded, than the publick streets in any [of] the most populous town[s] in Europe" (quoted after Vaporis 1994: 15).

2 Before this simplification and abolishment of obsolete checkpoints, a traveler had to pass 60 of them on the short distance of only 15 kilometers between Kuwana and Hinaga (Ishimori 1989: 182).

3 A clear differentiation between tourism and pilgrimage is in every culture very difficult to make. Journeys are often a mixture between the two and a clear differentiation could only be possible on the basis of the internal motive of a traveler. One should be very careful not to differentiate between tourism and pilgrimage because of the external actions of travelers (see also Pfaffenberger 1983).

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