CONFUCIAN BANKING: THE COMMUNITY GRANARY (SHASŌ) IN RHETORIC AND PRACTICE

Mark J. Ravina*

A. Introduction

Few pairings of ideology and institution would seem as unlikely as the writings of Zhu Xi 朱子 (1130–1200) and early modern Japanese finance. Beginning in the 1650s, however, the writings of Zhu provided the justification for a common form of Tokugawa financial institution, the “community granary” (社倉 Jp. shasō, Ch. shecang), a reserve storehouse that provided famine relief to farmers, but that, in many instances, also offered commercial loans and underwrote both public and private development projects. Proponents of the shasō in Japan often cited Zhu Xi and Chinese precedent in their writings, but they paid little heed to the broader political economy debate about the shasō in Song China, where Zhu conceived of the granary program as a voluntary, private alternative to the state-directed economic institutions of Wang Anshi 王安石 (1021–1086). Divorced from this broader context, several Japanese shasō came to resemble exactly what Zhu Xi had opposed: semi-governmental, rural development banks. By the late Tokugawa era, Japanese proponents of the shasō were advocating, in the name of Zhu Xi, state activist policies that he had explicitly rejected. Despite their departure from Zhu’s vision, Tokugawa shasō were often successful institutions, providing credit to rural communities and supporting public works. Indeed, in the late Tokugawa era, advocates of the shasō stressed their value as financial institutions rather than as simple relief granaries. Under the veneer of Song-era, neo-Confucian precedent, Tokugawa economists and administrators

* I wish to thank Ari Levine for his thoughtful reading of this manuscript and for his careful explications of twelfth-century Chinese thought over many hours at the Brick Store. Both Ari Levine and Ho Wan-li helped me with reading classical Chinese. Mark Metzler and Gregory Smits made valuable comments at the New York meeting, as did the other panelists. Bettina Gramlich-Oka was a dogged and astute editor throughout.
engaged in a vigorous debate over the role of loans and financing in a prosperous society.

Tokugawa *shasō* encompassed a striking range of institutions. Some were little more than village-level disaster-relief storehouses, whereas others were primarily lending institutions. To complicate matters further, Tokugawa terminology was remarkably inconsistent. In theory, the terms Ever-Normal Granary (*changping cang* 常平倉), Charity Granary (*yicang* 義倉 or *guanghui cang* 廣恵倉), and Community Granary referred to three distinct Chinese institutions, but in practice the terms were used with only loose connection to Chinese precedent. Thus, as Kokushō Iwao observed, Tokugawa-era relief granaries with the same name often had different functions, and institutions with different functions often had the same name.\(^1\) For this reason, attempts to provide a comprehensive survey of Tokugawa *shasō* have often produced results that are encyclopedic rather than illuminating. A 1915–1916 survey of *shasō* by the Japanese Ministry of Agriculture, for example, came to the following comprehensive but unhelpful conclusions. *Shasō* were designed for at least twelve different functions, including providing relief from harvest failures, providing relief from natural disasters, providing seed rice and grain, stabilizing commodity prices, providing credit to merchants, providing credit to farmers, providing fertilizer to farmers, and providing funds to allow branch families to establish independent households. *Shasō* were run either by government officials, independent commoner authorities, or by some combination of the two. *Shasō* held their assets in either rice, barley, foxtail millet (*Setaria italica*, 稟), sanwa millet (*Echinochloa frumentacea*, 稟), precious metals, eggs, or seaweed.\(^2\) Some economic historians, such as Honjō Eijirō and Miki Masatarō, have focused on institutions close to the formal definition of *shasō* as non-governmental relief storehouses supported by voluntary contributions.\(^3\) Within this framework, however, innovative *shasō* appear as transgressive failures. Miki, for example, interpreted the gradual transition of *shasō* from holding reserves in grain to holding them in cash as a loss of

---

\(^1\) Kokushō 1923a, pp. 134–35.  
\(^2\) Nōshōmushō Nōmukyoku 1915, esp. pp. 15–16, 18.  
\(^3\) Honjō 1925, pp. 3–4, 8–10, 15–17, 99–101. Honjō’s focus was primarily on the Ever-Normal Granary system of Mito, and he treated the *shasō* only as a related institution.