
At the Nexus of Colonialism and Capitalism in Hokkaido

In the first decades of Tokugawa rule, when peasants of Ōmi began making seasonal treks to the Kinai and Kanto plains, some journeyed farther north in search of greater fortune. Among the earliest to arrive on the island of Ezo, or Hokkaido,¹ was Okada Yazaemon I (1568–1650). Born into a family that traced its lineage to the warrior Ōmi Genji Sasaki-shi, Okada was one of many peasants who, during the unification wars, relocated to Azuchi and then to Hachiman, where they began peddling after Hachiman Castle fell. What followed in his career would become the typical trajectory of Ōmi merchants who eventually made their way in Hokkaido. Having plied his trade in Mutsu Province, Okada crossed the Tsugaru Strait to pursue new business prospects in Fukuyama, the castle town of the Matsumae domain located on the southern tip of Hokkaido. He gained the patronage of a Matsumae vassal to open a store, selling dry goods and kitchenware to local residents. Soon, he also began extending loans and supplies to Matsumae officials who owned trading posts (*basho*) in the Ezochi—the vast land of Ainu that lay beyond the borders of a coastal Japanese enclave in southern Hokkaido (Wajinchi) (see map 4 later in this chapter). In lieu of loan repayment, the samurai owners over time entrusted Okada with the shipping and sale of marine products traded by Ainu at these *basho*. Year after year he shuttled between Matsumae and Ōmi until his death in 1650. His successors, sometime in the early eighteenth century, began netting even greater profits by taking over the operation of fisheries in the trading posts of Otarunai and Furubira, all of which employed Ainu as a labor force. Adding several more fisheries to its management, the Okada household in ensuing decades joined the ranks of fishing entrepreneurs who would steer Hokkaido's export trade until the end of Tokugawa rule.²

Following the discussion in the previous chapter, I conceptualize Ōmi merchants' activities in Hokkaido, as they themselves did at the time, as a spatial

extension of overland commerce to the sea. This was cross-cultural trade, in the literal sense, insofar as it involved trading with the maritime Ainu. Yet what had commenced as reciprocal trade relations soon morphed into colonial ones. As their activities expanded to the management of fisheries, merchants from the mainland began to ruthlessly exploit Ainu labor as proxies of Matsumae rulers. The career of merchant contractors like Okada, who made a fortune on the backs of Ainu labor, reveals how early modern Hokkaido became a critical interface of colonialism and capitalism, coeval phenomena that are often studied separately and conventionally dated well after the Tokugawa period. Their activities spanned both land and sea spaces, showing how the exploitation of marine resources unfurled in tandem with that of land and its inhabitants. Their increasingly capitalist mode of production, turning trading partners into semi-servile labor, also sheds further light on the “proto-industrialization” of Tokugawa Japan, elucidated by David Howell’s definitive study of the herring fishery. The territorializing impulses of the early modern state combined with the contrasting drive of merchant capital toward “the elimination of spatial barriers to its circulation.”³ This “deterritorializing drive of capital”—which left the Ainu increasingly decoupled from the land, even as they remained conflated as “Ezo” in Japanese parlance—also paved the way for Japan’s “pelagic empire”: exploitation of oceanic environments that stretched across the Pacific from the late nineteenth century.⁴ Considered in this transpacific context, Hokkaido for Ōmi merchants was as much the northernmost end of their early modern trading diaspora as it was the first frontier of their expansion across the sea.

EARLY DOMINANCE OF ŌMI MERCHANTS IN THE MATSUMAE ECONOMY

When merchants from Ōmi began arriving on the southern shores of Hokkaido in the early seventeenth century, the Matsumae clan had been steadily consolidating control over the island through its exclusive right to trade with the Ainu. Granted by the Tokugawa shogunate in 1604, the trade monopoly provided a central source of revenue for the domain, located in a land ill-suited for agriculture. The Matsumae lord apportioned this monopoly right to his ranking vassals by granting trading posts, or *basho*, in the Ezochi. Initially, the samurai proprietors of *basho* dispatched their own trading vessels to the Ezochi every summer to exchange a variety of mainland goods—from rice, sake, and tobacco to clothes, pans, and needles—for marine products, pelts, falcon feathers, and Ainu handicrafts. Fishing also grew as an ancillary part of *basho* activity, eventually forming another pillar of the Matsumae economy.⁵

Merchants from the mainland, who had opened shops in the authorized ports of Fukuyama, Hakodate, and Esashi, made advances of capital and goods to

Matsumae basho owners to facilitate their trade with the Ainu. In chronic debt, the samurai soon handed control of their trading posts over to their creditors. The merchants obtained the privilege of trading at basho in exchange for an annual fee (*unjōkin*), whose amount and terms were stipulated in a contract, ordinarily good for a period of three to seven years.⁶ For both merchant contractors and their samurai patrons, this was a beneficial arrangement. While the merchants obtained trade monopolies and official protection, the Matsumae vassals could outsource the risks of trading and fishing on distant shores to these skilled and capital-rich merchants and simply collect *unjōkin* as their income.⁷ As the system matured, a virtuous cycle developed for those at the apex of this northern economy: one where fisheries drove trade in goods, which in turn shored up the finances of the domain and enriched its commercial agents.

The Matsumae trade with Ainu in its early years took place within the framework of reciprocity between the two parties.⁸ As the volume of trade grew, however, the Matsumae began exercising their territorializing impulse to restrict the Ainu mobility. Ainu desire to reclaim their autonomy was but part of a complex chain of factors leading to Shakushain's War of 1669–72, a large-scale rebellion against the Japanese. Triggered by border disputes between rival chiefs over fishing and hunting grounds, the war had deeper roots in an "ecological conflict" that had been brewing since the Ainu began being woven into market relations with Matsumae's trading posts.⁹ After quashing this Ainu revolt, the Matsumae rulers installed physical barriers to stake out the boundary between the Wajinchi and the Ezochi, to separate the realms of the civilized and the barbarian. The Ainu were now prohibited from leaving the Ezochi, although the border remained porous for the Japanese to cross with passes.¹⁰ Through these filters designed to serve economic interests of the domain, the unbridled forces of merchant capital continued to penetrate the Ainu communities, increasing their dependence on trade goods. Merchants from Ōmi ferried the bulk of these goods from the mainland, used to open the Ainu lands to trade and conquest.

For at least a century, the economic life of Matsumae domain was dominated by Ōmi merchants. The first to arrive in Hokkaido were villagers of Yanagawa, Satsuma, and Hachiman, who began operating actively during the era of Kan'ei (1624–43).¹¹ Their diasporic trajectories into Hokkaido represented a geographical extension across the sea of their wholesale-style peddling on the main islands: *mochikudari akinai* and its more elaborate form, *shokoku sanbutsu mawashi* (chapter 1). As exemplified by the profile of Okada Yazaemon, this two-way commercial journey involved transporting and selling mainland goods in Matsumae and buying and shipping local products of Hokkaido for distribution in the Kyoto-Osaka region. As their business expanded, they built a more permanent base in Matsumae, opening branches and grouping themselves as the Ryōhama-gumi (Shore-to-Shore Association, christened in reference to the origins of its members from the eastern littoral of Ōmi). This was an example of *norai akinai*, business

partnerships formed by Ōmi merchants to undertake long trading voyages. Members of the Ryōhama-gumi typically divided cargo among themselves for transport instead of using their own boats, to apportion the risk and costs of sea damage “in the absence of maritime insurance.”¹² Pooling capital and resources, these partnerships were formed sometimes to fund single projects like shipbuilding.¹³

In the early years when wholesalers (*ton'ya*) had yet to fully emerge, the Ryōhama-gumi merchants quickly extended monopolistic control over distribution networks linking the regional economies of Hokkaido and the main island of Honshū. Residents of Matsumae, samurai and commoner alike, came to depend on their stores for daily necessities, from rice and kimono to kitchenware and medicine.¹⁴ In the early 1710s, according to a family record of Tatsuki Shinsuke, the Matsumae domain “ordered the Ryōhama-gumi under his leadership to handle the entire export of Hokkaido products.”¹⁵ Likewise, they procured trade goods from the mainland for the Ainu trade, almost singlehandedly. A Matsumae official noted retrospectively in 1818, “Ōmi stores imported goods worth as much as five or six thousand ryō, . . . supplying not only local residents of Matsumae but even trading posts in the Ezochi, to the exclusion of merchants from other provinces.”¹⁶

Ōmi merchants dwarfed other tradesmen in part because they were the first to arrive in Hokkaido and in part because they arrived in large numbers.¹⁷ Their business in the far-flung domain was shored up by strong ties with the home province. Stores in Matsumae were run more or less the same as in the rest of Japan: as branches of larger operations “headquartered” in Ōmi, the location of the owner’s stem family. In early years of the Hokkaido trade, Ōmi merchants themselves operated the stores, but as time passed, they were entrusted to managers (who typically adopted the family name of their owner).¹⁸ The Nishikawa Denemon family in Hachiman, for the years documented in its archive, recruited exclusively Ōmi natives as managers of the Matsumae branch. The majority of clerks and apprentices, too, were followers of Shin Buddhism born in Hachiman (or the East Lake district); they were trained and allowed to travel back home, according to the Ōmi custom of *zaisho nobori*.¹⁹ As a founding member of the Ryōhama-gumi, Okada Yazaemon spent heavily on training apprentices back in Ōmi before dispatching them to Hokkaido, enforcing discipline and loyalty through store rules well into the Meiji period.²⁰

As was so often true for merchants in the early modern world, official patronage was indispensable to the success of Ōmi merchants in Hokkaido. Matsumae authorities conferred on the Ryōhama-gumi many privileges, one of which was almost unrestrained mobility in and out of the domain. Merchants from Ōmi were technically classified as transients,²¹ but in practice they were treated like permanent residents; both managers and clerks were permitted five-year residence for business, easily renewable after each term.²² The Ryōhama-gumi also enjoyed tax exemptions and reductions. The Matsumae treasury was founded on the domain’s ability to levy taxes (called *okinokuchi kōsen*) on commodities leaving and entering

the three customs offices in Fukuyama, Esashi, and Hakodate. In 1748, when the domain implemented a 1 percent tax on all sales of imported and exported goods, the Ryōhama-gumi's cargo between Tsuruga and the ports of Matsumae was largely exempted from the import tax.²³ Though they incurred sales tax upon selling imported items as merchandise, members of the Ryōhama-gumi were permitted to pay the tax office directly without having to go through *ton'ya* as other merchants did.²⁴ An official record of tax collection, dated around 1810, shows they were granted preferential treatment in certain categories of goods as well. Cotton goods, accessories, and household items "imported by Ōmi stores" were assessed a fixed tax "regardless of market prices," whereas merchandise sold by others was subject to taxes based on sales value.²⁵

As men of capital, Ōmi merchants were among the first to invest in the nascent fishing industry in Hokkaido. Shortly before the herring were due to make their yearly migration from the Sea of Okhotsk, the merchants would advance cash, fishing gear, rice, salt, miso, and other goods to Japanese fishers in the Wajinchi—loans to be paid off with a share of the catch in the spring.²⁶ Akin to the putting-out system on farms in nineteenth-century Japan, this monopsonistic arrangement created by supply lending (*shikomi*) bestowed on the Ryōhama-gumi almost exclusive rights to market the herring and other fish harvested in the waters surrounding Fukuyama and Esashi.²⁷ Hachiman merchants operated at the center of these credit networks that extended to wholesalers in Osaka and its vicinity. Their dominance was registered in the increasing volume of herring cargo they exported to the mainland: what averaged under 350 tons in the period of 1712–16 surged to over 1,500 tons per year in the early 1730s.²⁸ "Apart from the Ryōhama merchants many others from Ōmi also set up shop to handle supplies for fishing and trade in the Ezochi," observed Hezutsu Tōsaku in his record of travel to Matsumae, *Tōyūki* (1784). They were trailed by migrants from "Noto, Kaga, Echigo, Dewa, and Sado,"²⁹ who could not help but operate in the shadow of merchants from Ōmi.

Hezutsu also credited the Ryōhama-gumi with commodifying Hokkaido's marine life.³⁰ Besides smoothing the herring's pathway to markets in the mainland, Japanese merchants brought many other species, such as salmon and trout, into commercial production. In particular, Ōmi merchants took the initiative in marketing kelp harvested in inshore waters near Hakodate. Through their network, Hokkaido kelp was shipped for the first time as a commodity to central Japan, via the port of Tsuruga and across Lake Biwa, and sold to wholesalers for consumption in the Kinai region. With earnings from this sale, Ōmi merchants purchased cotton and other local goods and sailed back to Matsumae for another round of exchange. "Over the course of this trade repeated year after year, Matsumae's kelp began to spread" across the mainland in the early eighteenth century.³¹

By the mid-1700s, their distribution network had reached the opposite end of the Japanese archipelago, linking Hokkaido to Nagasaki. Okada Kohachirō, born into a branch family of Okada Yasoji (*Yazaemon*), was reportedly among the first

to begin shipping kelp and sea cucumbers. Initially envisioned as substitutes for silver to prevent its outflow, these marine products soon became key exports for the China market, which integrated the Tokugawa regime into the wider world of global exchange.³² From 1741 to 1754—before the Tokugawa regime established its monopoly over the marine product trade in the 1780s—Ōmi merchants held a monopoly on the Matsumae export of dried sea cucumbers (*iriko*) to Nagasaki, among other baled goods (*tawaramono*) bound for export to China.³³ In a kind of “dormant partnership,” Nishikawa Denbē from Hachiman assumed sole responsibility for managing all aspects of the trade, from purchase to export and sale of the product, and twenty other “partners” had ownership stakes but took no active part in business, instead simply sharing in the profits and losses (incurred by shipwreck, for instance).³⁴

As their trading activity and networks continued to thicken, the Ryōhama-gumi merchants developed their own shipping route that stretched all the way back to their home province. For conveying the fish catches in Hokkaido down along the Japan Sea coast, they jointly chartered cargo vessels (known as *nidokobune*), most of which were operated by boatmen in Tsuruga, Kaga, and Echizen. Once unloaded at the port of Tsuruga, these products were transported overland and through a mountain pass to the northern ports of Lake Biwa and then ferried across the lake to a wholesaler in Ōtsu. Through this seasonal trading orchestrated by the Ryōhama-gumi, a Hokkaido-Tsuruga-Ōtsu network developed to link the northern waters to the littoral of Ōmi.³⁵ Before the mid-eighteenth century, these *nidokobune*, which claimed the bulk of Matsumae’s trade with the mainland, exclusively handled Ōmi merchants’ cargo. A contract signed between the two parties prohibited boatmen from handling other merchants’ cargo for the entire duration of their employment. The Ryōhama-gumi issued specific instructions as to the number of vessels, the volume of cargo, shipping destinations, and methods of conveyance. And they met with boatmen, shipping agents, and wholesalers at the port of Tsuruga every year to coordinate cargo shipping to and from Hokkaido. In short, Ōmi merchants maintained strict supervisory control of owners of *nidokobune*, who effectively served as their handmaid in the Hokkaido marine trade.³⁶

Members of the Ryōhama-gumi also pooled money to build and operate a cargo vessel of their own. The earliest documented record of their cooperation shows that in 1733, Nishikawa Denemon, Hirata Yosaemon, and three other Ōmi merchants built and managed such a vessel, *Keiei-maru*, for shipping salmon from the Ezochi to the port of Sakata.³⁷ This was another example of *norai* *akinai*, a strategy to offset heavy overhead costs and high risks involved in constructing and operating a fishing vessel.³⁸ More broadly, it signaled the beginning of their long-term evolution as seafaring merchants.

In their *modus operandi*, merchants in charge of the Matsumae trading posts—who came to be called *basho* contractors (*basho ukeoinin*)—are likened by historians of Tokugawa to the European chartered companies that operated in

Africa, Asia, and the Americas from the sixteenth through the nineteenth centuries. Sponsored by feudal power, both obtained monopoly rights to trade in foreign lands in return for the payment of tribute and other obligations. And both conducted their trade relatively free of interference from the home government.³⁹ Some scholars have pushed the comparison further back in time to the Hanseatic League, an association of northern German towns and merchants which dominated trade in the Baltic and the North Seas from the thirteenth to the fifteenth centuries. The boundaries between land and water blurred in the activities of Ryōhama-gumi, as they did in the maritime operations of the Hansa merchants who controlled regional distribution of stockfish. And as Ōmi merchants evolved into ship-owning contractors, they reshaped the coastal areas of Ezochi into their commercial outposts (fig. 2), not unlike the way their German counterparts had once transformed the Scandinavian and Baltic regions into their “economic colonies.”⁴⁰ Mastery of the sea (and its products) by means of commercial association, a tactic pioneered by the Hanseatic league, found its echoes in the northern waters of Hokkaido, where merchant contractors staked out the foundations of Japan’s pelagic empire.⁴¹

THE GROWTH OF THE BASHO CONTRACTING SYSTEM

By the late eighteenth century, merchants from the mainland had pushed the frontiers of their activity further north, opening new fisheries in areas as far as Kunashiri (the southernmost island of the Kurils) and Karafuto (southern Sakhalin).⁴² In the course of this territorial drive, they moved from the realm of distribution to production and began directly operating fisheries themselves. For Ōmi merchants, their passage to processors of fish paralleled the career arc of their fellow peddlers in the mainland, who advanced into manufacturing such as sake brewing and the production of medicine (chapter 1). As David Howell has shown, the foray of merchant capital into production signaled the beginning of the capitalist transformation of Hokkaido fisheries, one accompanied by a shift in emphasis from trading with the Ainu to employing them as wage labor.

From the time merchant contractors began supervising fishing operations, they relied heavily on Ainu workers. A contemporary observer, Sakakura Genjirō in his *Hokkai Zuihitsu* (1739), offered a sense of how this system of contract fisheries came into being in the early eighteenth century. Merchants from Ōmi and northeastern provinces of Tōhoku, hitherto confined to the Wajinchi for commerce, gradually penetrated the remote interior, where they “entered into contracts with nearby Ainu villages. Having paid taxes to the Matsumae, they controlled and engaged the Ainu in fishing, and shipped their catches” to the mainland.⁴³ In the trading post of Otarunai managed by Okada Yazaemon, all eight fisheries (opened at various points from the early eighteenth to the early nineteenth centuries) employed Ainu, many of whom were settled closely around the *unjōya* (central office of



FIGURE 2. Matsumae *byōbu* (screen), reportedly commissioned by Okada Yazaemon to bear witness to the splendor of his Matsumae store (Ebisuya) for posterity. Spanning the six-panel folding screen is a panorama of the town of Fukuyama, with the Matsumae Castle complex atop a hill, viewed from the southern approach, where the waters bustle with vessels of all sizes and origins. The shoreline bristles with tile-roofed merchant houses, their family crests imprinted on their storefronts and warehouses. Many of these belonged to trailblazing merchants from Ōmi, wealthy by the time of the screen's production in the mid-eighteenth century. The screen served as an emblem of Ōmi merchants' dominance, celebrating the soaring prosperity they brought to the castle town of Matsumae. *Source*: "Matsumae no bunkazai" (<https://www.town.matsumae.hokkaido.jp/bunkazai/detail/00001825.html>). Courtesy of Matsumae Town Folk Museum.

a trading post). Fishery managers taught Ainu new ways to fish, using nets, to increase the catches. Over time they enlarged the scale and scope of operation by hiring Ainu in and out of basho and adding Wajin fishers to the crew.⁴⁴

As the Matsumae fisheries passed into the hands of merchant contractors, Hokkaido was transformed into “a colony of exploitation”—a capital-intensive regime of resource extraction using native labor.⁴⁵ Though local histories of Ōmi shōnin are largely silent on this issue, records abound on the ruthless exploitation of Ainu by fishery contractors and their clerks, who behaved with “an air of condescension as proxies of the Matsumae.”⁴⁶ Managers, overseers, and interpreters—who operated basho at the behest of contractors—were also surrogate rulers; they used any combination of threat, deceit, and brute force to put Ainu to work, mostly to manufacture oil cakes, for little or no compensation in some trading posts. Their abuses festered until another rebellion broke out in 1789. This time the Ainu furor was directed at the contractor Hidayā Kyūbē (whose family was from Hida province) and his employees in the distant fisheries of Kunashiri and Menashi, where the most egregious excesses were reported. Forced to work for the contractor “until the snow began to fall,” the Ainu had no time to produce for themselves or to store supplies for the winter, leaving many on the brink of starvation.⁴⁷ Moreover, Japanese men, from overseers to sailors, routinely violated Ainu women, turning fisheries into what ann-elise lewallen calls “intimate frontiers,” where rape and other atrocities were perpetrated with impunity.⁴⁸ Abusive trading practices by merchants, such as manipulating the exchange rate and degrading the quality of trade goods, had also been known for some time, but none prompted the Matsumae authorities to intercede for Ainu.

Although limited in scale and quickly “subdued,” the 1789 revolt ushered in a key turning point in the Matsumae political economy. As the event coincided with the revelation of Russian southward expansion along the Kuriles, the bakufu moved to bring the eastern Ezochi under its direct control in 1799; in 1807, the western Ezochi was also added to its jurisdiction. For Ōmi merchants, however, it signaled more than a transfer of political authority. The onset of direct bakufu rule served to accelerate some developments already afoot that would spell the end of the Ryōhama-gumi’s near monopoly on Matsumae trade. Signs of decline had begun to appear in its membership, which fell steadily from thirty-one in 1758, to twenty-four in 1762, and to eleven in 1786. It stood at a mere six in 1818.⁴⁹ By then, five Ōmi stores nearly or over two centuries old had shut their retail businesses in Matsumae to work as basho contractors full-time.⁵⁰

So alarmed were Matsumae authorities by the exodus of Ōmi merchants that they launched a probe into its underlying causes in 1817. According to their findings, the declining catch of herring in the coastal waters of Wajinchi from the 1780s was partly to blame; the Ryōhama-gumi merchants mainly bought catches of small fishers in Esashi and its vicinity for export. More detrimental was the arrival of new merchants in the mid-late eighteenth century (Hidayā being one of

the earliest to arrive). These fishery contractors, who possessed large boats of their own, “began importing goods directly from Kyoto, Edo, and Jōshū,” bypassing the Ryōhama-gumi. Meanwhile, “many small retail stores . . . cropped up all over the city” to supply rice, grains, and other necessities to local residents, making Ōmi stores no longer as “indispensable” as before.⁵¹ Their activities steadily undercut the Ōmi shōnin’s grip on the distribution of Hokkaido products, as registered in the decreased herring cargoes handled by Hachiman merchants in the 1750s–60s. The Ryōhama-gumi also felt their status ebb as their tax exemptions were phased out by 1789.⁵²

Most of the big merchants arrived from Edo and Osaka, some in response to Tanuma Okitsugu’s plan to promote the development of Hokkaido in the 1780s. In contrast to the Ryōhama-gumi, who mainly managed the trading posts of Matsumae vassals in the western Ezochi, these new merchants (such as Suhara Kakubē and Date Rinemon) became powerful contractors by taking over large trading posts owned by the Matsumae lord in the remote eastern reaches of Ezochi. Amid these developments, a transfer of the Ezochi to bakufu control in 1799—and the attendant loss of Matsumae patronage that had buoyed Ōmi merchants’ monopoly—was the final straw.⁵³ New competition in Matsumae forced out many small and middling merchants from Ōmi and elsewhere in the mainland.⁵⁴

On the other hand, the relative slide in the Ryōhama-gumi’s status signified further institutional consolidation of basho contracting. When the bakufu extended its control to eastern Ezochi in 1799, two parallel forms of contracting—proxy trade with the Ainu (*akinaiba ukeoi*) and contract fisheries (*gyogyō ukeoi*)—were formally merged into a single system of *basho ukeoi*.⁵⁵ This amalgamation codified what was already in practice at many trading posts, where the same merchant family oversaw the exchange of goods ashore and resource extraction at sea. The survival of merchant contractors from Ōmi hung on maximizing this land-sea linkage in their diasporic business. In subsequent decades, as the management of trading posts was consolidated into fewer hands, bonds of native place that had held the Ryōhama-gumi together gradually dissolved in the face of new divisions between big and small capital. Although small and midsize merchants languished, those who survived the competition continued to wield significant influence in the Matsumae economy, graduating to even more powerful careers as basho contractors in the nineteenth century.⁵⁶

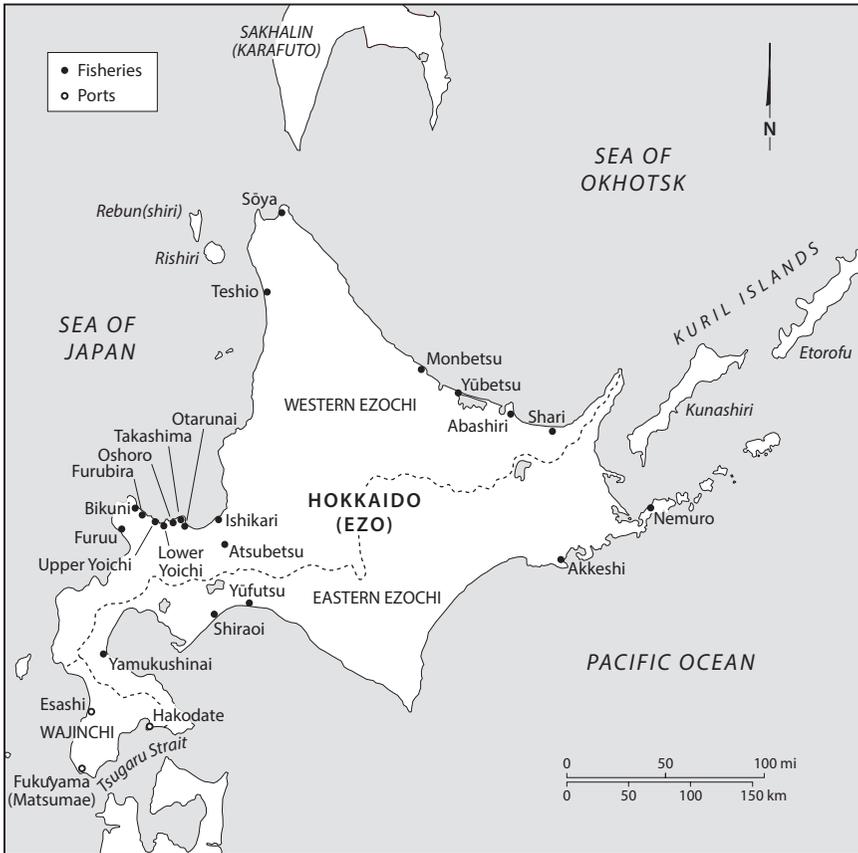
The largest among these Ōmi merchants were the aforementioned Okada Yazaemon I, the founder of Ebisuya, Nishikawa Denemon I (1627–1709) of Sumiyoshiya, and Fujino Kihē I (1770–1828) of Kashiwaya. All three built their careers as powerful merchants in Matsumae within a single generation, serving as official purveyors with the perquisites of samurai status.⁵⁷ By the Tenpō era, their successors were ranked among the wealthiest merchants in the entire domain, with Fujino on top with a capital of “30,000–40,000 ryō,” followed by Nishikawa, and Okada, who shared third place with several other contractors.⁵⁸ Okada and

Nishikawa were also founding members of the Ryōhama-gumi. By the time Fujino arrived more than a century later in 1800, the fourth generations of Okada Yazaemon and Nishikawa Denemon⁵⁹ had taken the helm of their respective family businesses, whose mainstay now was running contract fisheries in the western Ezochi.⁶⁰

Fujino Kihē had a more unusual trajectory. A latecomer from Ōmi who never joined the Ryōhama-gumi, Fujino vaulted into the ranks of basho contractors in 1806, when he took over the supervision of Upper and Lower Yoichi. Whereas the main fisheries managed by Nishikawa and Okada were confined to the seaboard of present-day Otaru, Fujino developed a niche in remote areas along the coast of the Sea of Okhotsk, taking charge of the contract fisheries in Sōya, Monbetsu, Abashiri, and Shari in 1808, as well as Kunashiri in 1817.⁶¹ After the Matsumae resumed control of the Ezochi, Fujino further added to his portfolio Rishiri and Rebun(shiri) in 1823 and Nemuro in 1832, which became his main business base (map 4). The meteoric rise of Fujino as a contractor, in fact, paralleled the spectacular fall of Takadaya Kahē from Awaji. Takadaya left a mark in the annals of Tokugawa diplomacy, having been kidnapped by the Russians during the Golovnin incident of 1813. The Takadaya family was banished from Matsumae in the wake of revelations about Kahē's secret agreement with the Russians: that Russian vessels would not plunder Takadaya's ships and upon encountering each other at sea, they would confirm their identities by a show of flags (*hataawase*). As a result of Takadaya's dismissal, some of the family's prized possessions passed into the hands of Fujino: the trading post of Nemuro, the most lucrative among the confiscated fisheries, and three of the largest vessels Takadaya had owned.⁶²

ŌMI MERCHANTS AS FISHERY CONTRACTORS

How did Ōmi merchants manage the trading posts as basho contractors? Just as they placed managers in charge of their stores in the Wajinchi, Ōmi merchants delegated the daily operation of trading posts to local managers. Stationed at the central office, or *unjōya*, each manager was aided by a team of an interpreter (*tsūji*), a bookkeeper (*chōyaku*), and overseers (*bannin*) who supervised all activities at the fisheries.⁶³ In a typical Ōmi family involved in the Hokkaido trade, a well-defined division of labor existed between the Matsumae branch which, in coordination with the headquarters in Ōmi, handled the shipping and marketing of basho products in the mainland,⁶⁴ and the *unjōya* of a trading post which oversaw the fishing and processing of catches at sea. Most contractors hired Ōmi natives customarily to manage their Matsumae stores, but over time some placed the *unjōya* in the hands of experienced locals in Hokkaido or Tōhoku. Whereas native-place ties dictated the choice of managers to ensure close cooperation between Matsumae and Ōmi, the trading post's office prioritized technical skills and local knowledge of Hokkaido required for operating fisheries on site.⁶⁵



MAP 4. Fisheries managed by Ōmi merchant contractors in early modern Hokkaido. Map by Bill Nelson.

Most fisheries administered by Ōmi merchants, as elsewhere in the Ezoichi, harvested herring, which was processed into food and especially fertilizer for export. The fertilizer increasingly replaced dried sardines on Japanese farms and turned herring into a commodity of high market value that drove the contract fisheries and filled Matsumae coffers.⁶⁶ Along with the fish, herring roe (*kazunoko*) was “loaded onto ships of various provincial origins” in Esashi, reported the *Matsumae Ezoki* (1717), and “transported back to the Chūgoku and Ōmi regions” for wider consumption.⁶⁷ Some fisheries diversified their operations into other species such as salmon, trout, and cod and harvested modest quantities of sea cucumber and kelp as well.⁶⁸ Fujino Kihē, the contractor for Nemuro, was particularly active in expanding the production of kelp. Upon discovering lush kelp forests within the fishery in 1832, Fujino “dispatched some 50 Ainu” to harvest, selling the product

“for 40 ryō per 100 koku in Osaka.” This incidental venture evolved into a significant business, as opportunities to market the product increased over time.⁶⁹

While multiplying fishing operations, big Ōmi merchants began operating boats of their own (*tebune*), which signaled a major development in the pattern of basho contracting in the nineteenth century.⁷⁰ Among the earliest merchant contractors to foray into shipping business was the Nishikawa family. In the 1740s, when Nishikawa’s Matsumae store started running boats commercially, its *Daifuku maru* navigated the following route: after departing Matsumae, the vessel first docked at the port of Sakata, where it sold trout and other products of Hokkaido and loaded soybeans; it then continued on to Shimonoseki, where it off-loaded the soybeans and purchased salt for the return voyage; after reaching Matsumae, the vessel sailed further north to the trading post of Mashike.⁷¹ Nishikawa operated a total of four vessels in 1779.⁷² By 1859, all products of Oshoro and Takashima were transported to Tsuruga by six Japanese-style boats owned by Nishikawa’s store, and their shipping business accounted for a substantial portion of its income.⁷³

Even more impressive in scale of operation was Fujino Kihē. In 1805, just before opening his store in Matsumae, Fujino already had in his possession seven Japanese-style boats. Their number doubled by 1839, and less than twenty years later the Fujino family commanded a fleet of twenty. Like Nishikawa’s, Fujino’s boats most likely carried to Hokkaido salt and other raw materials required for curing the fish and straw mat for packing and transported back to the mainland catches and products from the fisheries.⁷⁴ In other words, ships became an integral part of the production process, beyond a simple means of conveyance.

From the perspective of Ōmi commerce, trading by boat may be construed as a maritime equivalent of *sanbutsu mawashi*—a distinctive wholesale strategy employed by Ōmi merchants in trading across the Japanese mainland. The shipping route charted by Nishikawa’s *Daifuku maru* illustrates this point clearly: it combined the export of Hokkaido products and the import of mainland goods, conducting trade during the voyage to and from ports of call in the archipelago.⁷⁵ A terrestrial business strategy transposed to the ocean, the operation of *tebune* also took advantage of the parcellized space-time of the Tokugawa economy. For Ōmi merchants, as noted in chapter 1, continual extraction of profit hinged on regional differentials in prices generated by a gulf of distance and time that lay between the Hokkaido supply and the Honshū demand sides of the market. Nishikawa leveraged them in the years leading up to the Restoration (1864–68), when the price of fish fertilizer soared on the mainland as the production of cash crops expanded against a backdrop of falling currency value.⁷⁶ This strategy allowed Ōmi merchants in Matsumae to reap large profits in the area of distribution, in the same way that their mainland counterparts procured local goods along the trade route to sell at higher prices at either end of their journey.

But along with profits, the risks of long-distance commerce on land were also mirrored and multiplied in the sea. If the principle of “low-margin, high volume

sales” drove the seasonal treks of Ōmi peddlers, the ethos of big reward at high risk characterized the operation of *tebune*. According to Tabata Hiroshi’s analysis of the Nishikawa family’s account books for the period between 1859 and 1870, the net profit from its shipping business (28,754 ryō) far exceeded the total income from contract fisheries (16,744 ryō).⁷⁷ This may be interpreted as the contractor’s retreat from capitalist production in favor of conservative investment in distribution, yet what appeared to be low-risk behavior masked the continual challenges of operating ships. In the early years, not all vessels survived the journey home. Between 1774 and 1792, Tatsuki Shinsuke, a contractor for Furuu and Bikuni, lost to a storm five boats of his own as well as the Matsumae domain’s official ship, each loss dealing a devastating blow to his business.⁷⁸ Despite technological advances in the nineteenth century, risks of maritime voyage remained high, as demonstrated by the frequency of shipwrecks that dented Nishikawa’s profit; the family lost five out of eight vessels in the year 1866 alone.⁷⁹ While Fujino similarly lost five ships in 1840, on numerous occasions his vessels also rescued crew members of a capsized boat adrift on the sea, during voyages to and from the fisheries in the Ezochi.⁸⁰ Moreover, a range of hazards and uncertainties bedeviled fishermen, including the vagaries of weather and the erratic course of herring shoals. All of these demonstrated nature’s impact on fishing, even as improved vessels and gear amplified the human impact on the marine ecosystems of Hokkaido.

These risks naturally increased as vessels ventured far off shore or closer to the Russian border in pursuit of fish, prompting contractors from Ōmi to join forces. From 1837 to 1841, for example, three Ōmi merchants—Fujino Kihē II, Nishikawa Junbē (of the Nishikawa Denemon family), and Okada Hanbē (manager of Okada Yazaemon’s store)—formed a “dormant partnership” under the fictitious name Ōmiya Sōbē to manage the fifteen fisheries on the island of Etorofu, inherited from Takadaya’s successors. The three merchants divided the profits and losses according to an investment ratio, as a means to consolidate capital and to offset risks of running fisheries at a far-flung location, among them bad catches, maritime accidents, and attacks from Russian vessels.⁸¹ The partnership reflected their continued reliance on native-place ties as the best hedge against potential loss. Nonetheless, it was dissolved after four years, having sustained a considerable deficit due to elevated costs of supplying the fisheries.

The relatively high turnover in the management of Etorofu demonstrated that distance continually stood in the way of operating remote fisheries at a profit. Yet distance, too, was an opportunity to make a fortune that justified the risk, so Ōmi merchants continued to turn it to their advantage. To maximize profits from the northern trade, the operation of *tebune* often led to the opening of a branch in the entrepôt of Osaka. Located at the nexus of marketing and consumption, the Osaka branch in effect supplanted the functions of local wholesalers by directly handling the distribution of fertilizer and other Hokkaido products in the mainland. Consolidating land-sea linkages in the supply chain this way, big

contractors of Ōmi strove to achieve vertical integration in their newly expanded operations, from harvest and production in Hokkaido to shipping and marketing on the Honshū mainland.

In the mid-nineteenth century, the fishing industry in Hokkaido underwent a technological leap with the introduction of pound traps, much larger and more efficient than gill nets used by individual fishers.⁸² Ōmi merchant contractors actively embraced and invested in this technology. In 1852, Nishikawa ordered the overseer of the Takashima basho to manufacture a pound trap for herring, the first of many they would deploy around the fishery.⁸³ Seven years later, Nishikawa owned a dozen pound traps at the Oshoro fishery and six at Takashima; considering that each net required about twenty men on two vessels to operate, he most likely employed several hundred fishers in total.⁸⁴ The conversion of fisheries from seine to pound trap also helped increase production in Nemuro. In 1855 the contractor Fujino “had a pound trap manufactured and experimented with its use for the first time.” Once improvements were rewarded with increased landings in 1860, he equipped boats with pound traps at every fishery, to good effect.⁸⁵ At the Otarunai fishery under Okada, use of pound traps boosted catches to yield an annual average of 40,000–50,000 koku, burnishing its status as the largest fishery in western Ezo.⁸⁶

The spread of pound traps showed how technological innovation unfolded in response to the increased pool of wage labor from midcentury Tōhoku.⁸⁷ Around the same time, individual fishers in the Wajinchi, faced with inshore decline in herring stocks, began “chasing herring” up north, which led to more permanent habitation along the coast of the Ezochi. By 1859, many fishers had settled in Oshoro and Takashima, working on sections of the shore that lay outside the sphere of Nishikawa’s operation. In exchange for permission to fish (and settle) in these basho, as elsewhere in western Ezochi, the fishers paid 16 to 20 percent of their catches or processed products (known as *nihachiyaku*) to the contractor while keeping up to 80 percent as their income.⁸⁸

The growth of catches at the fisheries managed by Okada and Nishikawa owed significantly to the operations of these migrant fishers in the last half of the nineteenth century. *Nihachiyaku* came to account for a particularly large portion of the Nishikawa family’s income. Scholars have cited this dependence on the feudal right to collect access fees—and a declining share of production vis-à-vis other forms of investment such as shipping business—as proof that contract fisheries had not yet crossed the threshold of capitalism. Nor could the labor power of Ainu (and Wajin) in an enclosed system of production be considered “free” in a Marxist sense. The merchants’ operation of fisheries exhibited at best a hybrid character: in the words of Tabata Hiroshi, it was as much “a collateral for the maintenance of feudal privilege” as an investment in production—or as David Howell put it more succinctly, “not quite capitalism.”⁸⁹

Nevertheless, when we shift our concern from the nature of labor to focus squarely on the process of change, it becomes clear that Ainu labor had been

fully integrated into a system undergoing capitalist transformation in the mid-nineteenth century.⁹⁰ We need only look at how organized fishing impinged on coastal and marine ecosystems of Hokkaido. On the one hand, the basho contractors' extractive operations in spawning habitats forced Ainu to subsist on rivers increasingly stripped of salmon and eventually to turn to wage labor at Japanese-run fisheries. On the other hand, increased fishing pressure contributed to depleting the herring stock around the Wajinchi—one of the underlying factors that drove many members of the Ryōhama-gumi out of Hokkaido. Initially localized to the southern coast, resource degradation spread to the Ezochi as Japanese fishers shifted their effort northward and the use of pound traps and larger boats intensified the harvest. No less affected were coastal woodlands. At contract fisheries, fishing and felling trees for fuel went hand in hand to support an ever-expanding scale of production; around large fisheries like Furubira deforestation was serious enough to cause soil erosion well before the onset of industrial forestry.⁹¹ The contractors from Ōmi played no small part in all of these developments—and soon found themselves having to grapple with their consequences. By the time fisheries completed their capitalist transformation in the Meiji period, Japanese fishers big and small were harvesting in an overtaxed ocean at a level that no longer allowed fish populations to regenerate.⁹²

AINU LABOR AT FISHERIES

If the ecological impact of fisheries was one metric of the capitalist-cum-colonial exploitation of native habitats, their changing labor practices was another. The introduction of pound traps especially raised the scale of manpower needed to run fisheries. Although the contractors turned increasingly to migrants from northern Honshū to fill their labor needs, Ōmi merchants continued to depend on Ainu for fishing. By the nineteenth century, trading posts collectively operated like a colonial enclave economy, whose primary function was to produce exports for the mainland, using a mix of free Wajin and semiservile Ainu labor.⁹³

In the western Ezochi, the declining Ainu population and increasing migration of Wajin workers began to transform labor practices at contract fisheries that had already grown in size and complexity. By the 1850s, the trading post of Takashima managed by Nishikawa had become a large manufacturing complex embracing multiple fisheries, where herring and other kinds of fish harvested in nearby waters were dried, salted, and rendered ashore. The trading post had an *unjōya* of 580 square meters in size; its grounds housed nineteen Ainu dwellings and eighty-two sheds of Wajin fishers and moored 206 fishing vessels.⁹⁴ Apart from the overseer and other full-time clerks who worked and slept on the premises, two categories of Wajin labored alongside Ainu at Takashima: skilled Japanese (including carpenters) were supplemented by migrant fishers from the Wajinchi, just as the local Ainu from the basho were joined by those hired or “loaned” from elsewhere to engage in fishing.⁹⁵

Exchanging or “loaning” Ainu labor between basho appears to have been quite common in the western Ezochi, where contractors “sometimes turned to their colleagues in the east” in the context of Ainu population decline.⁹⁶ In November 1833, for instance, the manager of the Usu fishery promised Nishikawa that he would send thirty Ainu men and ten Ainu women to Oshoro for herring fishing the next spring. Another contract, signed in May 1857, arranged to loan twenty Ainu workers from Shiraoi to Takashima for a period of three years for a total wage of sixty ryō—though much of this advanced payment was most likely pocketed by the fishery manager.⁹⁷

During the three months of the herring season, Takashima employed considerably more Ainu labor than other fisheries and mobilized them intensively from the beginning of harvest to the end of production. The rest of the Ainu residing in the basho performed a kind of *corvée* labor throughout the year: processing catches on shore, gathering firewood and timber in the mountains, and transporting earth and rocks. Ainu women were assigned to some of the work in the mountains and miscellaneous jobs around the *unjōya*, as well as delivery of goods to officials. For all the heavy demands on their labor, the Ainu were given very few holidays; apart from New Year, *umsa* (J., *omusha*), and festivals, they were allowed only about a week of break in January and again in December.⁹⁸

From early on, contract fisheries appointed Ainu men to leadership positions, not unlike “chiefs” invented in colonial Africa, to bring more indigenous people into the workforce.⁹⁹ As a form of remuneration, both titleholders and common Ainu were offered various material “gifts”—cotton cloth, rice, sake—at the *umsa* ceremony, held typically at the end of each fishing season.¹⁰⁰ *Umsa* was an integral part of the Japanese policy of accommodation, or “benevolent rule” (*kaihō* or *buiku*).¹⁰¹ From the time merchants took over the management of fisheries, they had pledged to “attend to the responsibilities of benevolent rule” and “avoid unjust conduct toward Ainu,” as phrased in a contract signed between Nishikawa Denemon and the Matsumae owner.¹⁰² After the Ezochi was placed under bakufu rule in 1799, *umsa* was transformed into an annual event to gather all the Ainu at the central office of a trading post, where they were read official rules and instructions¹⁰³ and were appointed to or dismissed from various posts, rewarded for good conduct, and so forth. In short, *umsa* functioned as a political lever for coopting and controlling the Ainu, “a ritual exchange of pledge between the ruler and the ruled” that empowered the Japanese to dispense their duty of benevolence by fiat.¹⁰⁴

Ōmi merchant contractors understood and exploited this mechanism to procure a steady supply of Ainu labor for their fisheries. In the case of the Tatsuki Shinsuke family, who had managed fisheries in the western Ezochi since the eighteenth century, generations of Shinsuke made sure to ship large quantities of rice and miso to each basho and “stock up daily necessities” for the purpose of “caring for Ainu,” to which “the natives [*dojin*] responded by submission,” according

to a family genealogy. Tatsuki was duly acknowledged for his contributions to “benevolent rule” by Matsumae and Hakodate officials.¹⁰⁵ By periodically dispensing “gifts” to Ainu—not only elders but widowers, filial sons and daughters, the sick and the old—the contractors subjected native men and women to continual exploitation in and around the fisheries.

Ainu labor was even more critical to the operation of distant fisheries in northeastern Hokkaido, which were reached by few fishers from the Wajinchi. Around 1810, Shibatani Shirōbē, another contractor from Yanagawa, managed a total of nineteen trading posts from Kunashiri to Yamukushinai in the eastern Ezochi, employing 339 clerks. Each trading post hired a greater number of Ainu men and women from nearby *kotan* (Ainu villages)¹⁰⁶—typically in the hundreds, but at several basho in excess of a thousand. As for the trading posts facing the Sea of Okhotsk, Nemuro employed 1,163 Ainu (582 men and 581 women), and Yūbetsu 1,439 Ainu (715 men, 724 women). Ainu households in each fishery were settled in close proximity and kept under the unjōya’s watch as a reservoir of cheap labor.¹⁰⁷ As fishing became a year-round endeavor, Ainu huts became a permanent fixture; Monbetsu and Yūbetsu each counted some “50 Ainu huts” on the premises, reported Matsuura Takeshirō (1818–1888).¹⁰⁸ Merchant contractors also applied the Matsumae policy to restrict Ainu mobility within the Ezochi to their own trading posts. Fujino forbade Ainu in all his fisheries from “exchanging even a single product with seamen and others” or “visiting other basho” without the unjōya’s permission, declaring each a “punishable offense.”¹⁰⁹

After the Ezochi was “returned” to Matsumae rule in late 1821, the domain increased oversight of these fisheries located near the Russian border by dispatching functionaries from the newly created office of *kinban*.¹¹⁰ Under this system, managers of trading posts were required to obtain approval of kinban for administering all matters pertaining to Ainu—from the appointment of elders¹¹¹ and the “loan” of workers to outside fisheries to the provision of medicine and preventive measures against epidemics.¹¹² The traffic of paper to and from the office of kinban indicated that it had the teeth to enforce the principle of benevolent rule in the Nemuro fishery by the time Fujino Kihē took over its management in 1832.¹¹³ Ainu in these distant trading posts were mobilized extensively for coastal guard and defense, too. These duties at each basho fell to a heterogeneous group of Ainu, Japanese migrant fishers, and clerks of the fishery office, who worked at the behest of kinban officials. A greater number of local Ainu than Wajin, known by name to fishery managers, were appointed to assist kinban as lookouts and even interpreters.¹¹⁴

Fujino worked closely with the Hakodate magistrate and northeastern domains to reinforce security in the trading posts.¹¹⁵ However, the contractor apparently came to view the presence of officials in his fisheries as a nuisance. In 1849, Kihē IV, who had recently succeeded to the post of contractor, and his manager at the Nemuro fishery submitted a petition to the municipal authorities in Fukuyama.¹¹⁶

Not only did they request a reduction in the payment of fees to kinban officials, but they asked the authorities not to “interfere” in their governance of Ainu, suggesting local Ainu had been spoiled by “excessive official care and attention.” A family record elaborated later: “They [Ainu] lie to officials about matters, whether right or wrong, ranging from their contractor to their own well-being, and the officials believe what they say. Every time [that happened] officials would summon the contractor and interrogate him, and if he dared correct them, they would bristle at him for being disrespectful, or revoke his contract.” This was why Fujino and his manager asked the authorities to “leave the duty of caring for Ainu to the contractor entirely.”¹¹⁷

For their part, Matsumae officials were rather inconsistent in enforcing the principle of benevolent rule. Six years earlier, in 1843, when Fujino was entrusted with the management of the Etorofu fishery, the Matsumae lord in his correspondence licensed Fujino to treat the Ainu as he saw fit, “since, as you know, the Ainu are never satisfied no matter how well you treat them.”¹¹⁸ The authorities certainly appear to have adopted a policy of noninterference toward another trading post in Fujino’s hands, Monbetsu, where kinban were never dispatched. Fujino and his manager treated Monbetsu as nothing less than a “supplier” of seasonal Ainu labor. Free of bureaucratic oversight, the Monbetsu fishery was particularly notorious for shipping its Ainu workers to remote islands off the coast of the Ezochi. Since an epidemic in 1804 had wiped out much of the native population in Rishiri and adjacent Rebun(shiri), fishing labor on these islands was provided mostly by the Ainu dispatched from Monbetsu.¹¹⁹

Along with Monbetsu, Shari, another basho that fell under Fujino’s control, performed a similar function. When Fujino took over Kunashiri in 1817, he did not have enough workers to run it, so his manager “dispatched some people to Shari and recruited several dozen Ainu.” These Ainu were promptly relocated to the coasts of Kunashiri to “open several fisheries and engage in fishing” in addition to “tilling the soil.”¹²⁰ This makeshift practice appears to have become a seasonal regime of indentured labor by the time Matsuura Takeshirō visited the Ezochi on a state-sponsored mission in the late 1850s. In his interviews conducted with over one hundred Ainu, one aggrieved Ainu named Ukenashi, who worked in the Shari basho, detailed the horrifying excesses of Japanese fishery operators. Ainu men and women in the area, once they reached the age of sixteen or seventeen, were dispatched to the islands of Kunashiri and Rishiri for an indefinite period of what amounted to *de facto* slavery. Save in cases of illness, they were not permitted to return home or ever see their parents again by the contractor and his manager, who kept the able-bodied working into their thirties and forties. Overseers and Japanese fishermen also appropriated young Ainu women as their “concubines,” forcing them to abort when they became pregnant, while dispatching their husbands to far-off fisheries to exploit as they wished. The overworked Ainu who had fallen ill were not given any medicine or food and virtually left to

starve to death.¹²¹ Since the Ainu had last risen against the Japanese in this remote region, profit-seeking managers had clearly fallen back into the pattern of abuse, masked by their purported adherence to benevolent rule.

In 1855, prompted by rising Ainu hostility and a renewed concern for security after Perry's arrival, the bakufu brought the Ezochi once again under its direct control.¹²² Having reevaluated the merits of assimilation for national defense, Japanese authorities also reversed the earlier policy to now permit Ainu to marry outside the trading post, use rainwear and sandals, and learn and speak Japanese.¹²³ These measures implemented for the purpose of accommodation, however, did little to remedy the labor practices at many fisheries. Because the dispatching of Ainu labor could not be banned for managing distant fisheries, the bakufu instead required contractors to submit an "employment plan" for official approval. One such plan, submitted in July 1856 by the Sōya fishery's office, revealed a year-round regime of labor mobilization and transfers as hitherto pursued under Fujino's reign.

According to its outline, Ainu men and women from Monbetsu—108 in Sōya and 80 in Rishiri and Rebun—would all be gathered in Sōya after the summer fishing. Some 20 of these Ainu would be returned to Monbetsu for harvesting salmon, and the rest (some 160 workers) would be employed in fishing at Sōya. After that, about 70 Ainu would be shipped to Rishiri and Rebun for labor the following year, while another 20 in Sōya would be mobilized for winter work. The rest would be returned to Monbetsu, but the fishery hoped to dispatch them again to Sōya or Rishiri and Rebun as soon as the start of the new year.

A draconian schedule to keep the Ainu labor lashed to a mechanism of extraction was not limited to Fujino's fisheries. The following October, the Hakodate magistrate was compelled to issue yet another set of instructions, having already admonished basho contractors on the proper ways to trade with, hire, and compensate the Ainu.¹²⁴ His statement explicitly banning "exploitation" was directed at contractors of Monbetsu as well as Ishikari and Teshio—places the magistrate singled out for "the most relentless use of Ainu labor." Repeated official injunctions against abandoning the obligations of benevolence betrayed the fact that contractors kept defying them, following their own rules of conduct. This, in turn, underscored the official inability to fully rein in the merchants, who kept the government financially afloat, baring the fraught nature of the contract-fishery regime, where the state acted as but a fitful arbiter of native affairs. In truth, the Matsumae economy had become too reliant on fisheries and their operators to abolish this system of revenue generation, even though identified as the root cause of Ainu misery. The bakufu acknowledged as much.

It was for this reason that the bakufu blamed the brutality of individual contractors without entirely dismantling the system, which was kept in all but two basho after 1865. One of these two trading posts was Otarunai, long entrusted to the Ōmi merchant Okada Yasoji. As the Hakodate magistrate explained,¹²⁵ what impelled the abolition of basho contracting in Otarunai was none other than its

manager, Okada Hanbē. Among his many crimes the magistrate detailed, Hanbē was “stingy and cruel” and “poisonous in the extreme in his treatment of natives as well as [Wajin] settlers.” “Steeped in old customs, Hanbē gave no thought to promoting people’s welfare,” his selfish pursuit of profit at odds with the bakufu policy to develop and assimilate Hokkaido to the mainland. Prompted as well by the fishery’s swelling population,¹²⁶ Okada was discharged as a contractor, and Otarunai transformed into an administrative equivalent of a village on the mainland.¹²⁷

If the villainous deeds of managers like Okada ran afoul of the policy of “caring for Ainu,” one might pause here to recall that they also sat awkwardly with the very code of conduct Ōmi merchants had set down in their family creeds (see chapter 1). For the duration of its century-long tenure as a basho contractor, the Okada family is known to have been among the most faithful followers of Ōmi customs and precepts.¹²⁸ So how to reconcile the realities of abuse in fisheries with Ōmi merchants’ professed commitment to ethical commerce rooted in their Shin Buddhist belief? The family records of Fujino and Tatsuki pass no comment on the ethics of using Ainu labor; merchant contractors likely regarded provision of material goods, especially rice, as a gesture of altruism to Ainu, though these goods were essentially wages owed for their fishery labor.¹²⁹ As entrepreneurial outsiders in Matsumae, as in other business locales, Ōmi merchants also displayed their gratitude to the host society through donations and various acts of philanthropy in times of fire or famine.¹³⁰ But such efforts to gain acceptance from strangers, the *sine qua non* of diasporic commerce, appear to have lost their cultural meaning beyond the boundaries of the Wajinchi. As scholars have noted, the Ainu existed outside the social categories of the Tokugawa status order that was premised on a binary division between the civilized and the barbarian.¹³¹ Records of fishery practices suggest this perception informed the Japanese treatment of Ainu everywhere, with no scruples about labor abuse. Like status categories, central tenets of ethical commerce in Ōmi were upheld within the civilized confines of Wajinchi—but if they ever were extended to the Ezochi, it was only in the prescribed form of gift giving, divested of religious meaning and subsumed under the political strategy of “benevolent rule.”

Yet, as recent studies remind us, the Ainu were not docile labor at the contractor’s disposal. Hints of resistance in the form of attempted escape or work sabotage were recorded in a journal kept by the office of the Takashima fishery. One of the most daring acts of defiance occurred in April 1866, when a twenty-seven-year-old man named Sehoki ran away from the fishery. Having evaded capture for nearly two months, Sehoki was finally discovered in Shiraoi, about fifty miles away from Takashima.¹³² At a time when contractors were faced with a looming labor shortage, individual actions of Ainu like Sehoki’s could short-circuit, if not completely subvert, the operation of a contract fishery.

A singular focus on tragedy also prevents us from seeing how the Ainu seized on opportunities, however fleeting, to trade in the more open waters outside the

control of merchant contractors. As early as 1807, the Ishikari Ainu were reported to be selling their salmon catches to commercial vessels. Although the Yoichi Ainu were prohibited by their contractor from doing so, many nonetheless operated beyond his grasp, trading secretly with junks and boats plying to and from the fishery. They even ventured to other trading posts, especially Oshoro, to harvest salmon or herring, using their distinctive fishing methods.¹³³ At the Sōya fishery, some Ainu men proactively took on seasonal fishing labor and turned a profit, exchanging their catches with the basho contractor for mainland goods.¹³⁴ Examples of such enterprising Ainu, using their own boats and vernacular knowledge of fishing, abounded in the 1850s, showing a segment of the Ainu population remained unconquered, carrying on their way of life in the interstices and margins of the contract-fishery regime.

THE ROLE OF MERCHANT CAPITAL IN COLONIAL DEVELOPMENT

The Ainu refusal to surrender autonomy, however, was far outpaced by the changes wrought by the Japanese on their land and sea. As so often in colonial archives, the narrative of “development” (*kaitaku*), along with the trope of “abundance” in resources, reigns in Japanese records of early modern Hokkaido. Ōmi shōnin figure prominently in these accounts as trailblazers who pushed the edge of civilization into the northern borderland, where barbarism had prevailed and riches had long lain untapped.¹³⁵ The families of Fujino, Nishikawa, and Okada were among the most avid chroniclers of their role in ushering Hokkaido into modernity. Not only did they contribute to developing the Wajinchi as an economic and cultural extension of the mainland; they also used their wealth and power to transform trading posts into towns and transportation hubs—relatively fixed infrastructures that provide “a geographical scaffolding for the circulation of labor-power, commodities and capital on multiple scales.”¹³⁶ Through the territorialization of capital, Ōmi merchant contractors laid the foundations for territorial colonization of Hokkaido, blazing a trail for Japan’s modern state and capitalists to follow.

As seen in colonial frontiers, from the American West to the Sino-Mongolian borderland, towns and infrastructure in Hokkaido grew in tandem with trade and resource rushes. Stores run by big merchants from Ōmi and smaller merchants from Hokuriku and Tōhoku were the lifeblood of the castle town of Fukuyama. Wholesale and warehouse merchants also formed guilds, and others opened inns to assist their activities, marketing products freshly harvested in the Wajinchi or ferried from the Ezochi. The growth and settlement of these migrants brought greater stability to the domain, as indicated by the rise in home ownership among Ōmi merchants.¹³⁷ Powerful merchants from Ōmi and elsewhere also served in the upper echelons of municipal administration as town elders (*machidoshiyori*). They supervised townspeople and distributed ordinances at the behest of a

magistrate,¹³⁸ an intermediary role similarly performed by Shanxi merchants in the frontier entrepôt of Hohhot, who helped integrate the northern borderland into the Qing regime.¹³⁹

By the late eighteenth century, as many a visitor noted, the three ports of Matsumae bustled with commercial vessels from the mainland, even as far as Shikoku and Kyūshū. The traffic of migrants, ships, and goods had created a channel through which cultures of various provinces flowed into the Wajinchi. Furukawa Koshōken, who joined a party of bakufu inspectors to visit the Japanese enclave in 1788, marveled at its growing prosperity in his *Tōyū zakki*. Among the townspeople in Esashi, he wrote, one sees no signs of “the hinterland” but rather refined “customs of the Kyoto-Osaka region,” transmitted by merchants from Ōmi and its vicinity. Furukawa noted the good quality of housing, people, and language spoken in Esashi and Fukuyama, unrivaled by other places he had passed through since departing from Edo.¹⁴⁰

Like diasporic traders elsewhere, merchants of Ōmi also brought mainland gods and deities with them. Temples and shrines were “diasporic institutions” of equal importance to lineage or native-place associations through which migrants maintained spiritual ties to the homeland.¹⁴¹ Devout followers of Shin Buddhism, Ōmi merchants founded a branch temple of Nishi-Honganji in Esashi (Esashi Betsuin), whose edifice was reportedly made of lumber shipped from the home province.¹⁴² In 1864, when a fortress was erected in Hakodate to guard the Tokugawa realm against foreign incursion, Fujino and other merchants provided the funds for constructing a Tōshōgū shrine in its vicinity to worship the Tōshō Daigongen (Tokugawa Ieyasu posthumously deified) as “a tutelary god for the land of Ezo.”¹⁴³

Merchant contractors, as agents of the state, also helped carry its territorializing impulse into the Ezochi. Although the authorities never systematically promoted its settlement, migrant fishers began creating “permanent fishing villages” on the western seaboard of Hokkaido.¹⁴⁴ And when it became officially permissible in the mid-1850s, the bakufu and Matsumae domain ordered managers and overseers to relocate their wives and children from the mainland to their trading posts, not least as a means of preventing their mistreatment of Ainu women as “concubines.”¹⁴⁵

Basho contractors, for their part, refashioned their fisheries into coastal labor enclaves, using their own money and manpower to build physical infrastructures for more efficient extraction and processing of marine resources. In the western Ezochi, Ōmi merchants like Nishikawa and Tatsuki invested heavily on transport systems—roads, mountain passes, levees, bridges—to link fisheries scattered along the coast, in the hope of reducing periods of overland transport and regulating flows between land and sea. At the behest of the Hakodate magistrate, Fujino Kihē also reclaimed a swath of land that sprawled from the trade office of the Nemuro fishery to the southern Pacific coast and further to Atsubetsu in the west.¹⁴⁶ Making these investments to reshape the land and tighten its linkage with its maritime surroundings so as to “speed up the spatial circulation of commodities” was key to enhancing profitability and capital accumulation.¹⁴⁷

The opening of Otaru was credited to two basho contractors, Okada Yazaemon and Nishikawa Denemon, their stores “standing face to face astride the Okobachi River,” which flowed through the heart of the emergent port town.¹⁴⁸ When Matsumoto Kichibē, a vassal of the Akita domain, visited Otarunai around 1859, he found the fishery astir with “thousands of merchants” running dry-goods stores, groceries, inns, and restaurants, which had replaced the temporary street stalls of earlier years. He counted a total of five towns, ringed by outlying districts that included an Ainu *kotan* (village), a prostitution quarter, and three temples, and as many as five hundred houses within the precincts. The office of the trading post exuded affluence of its own. Having plenty of “beautiful” rooms with wide corridors and surrounded by a dozen warehouses, Matsumoto wrote, the unjōya’s grand structure housed a legion of overseers where “even servants and wives all look prosperous.”¹⁴⁹

Like the three ports of the Wajinchi, fisheries of the Ezochi were increasingly dotted with religious sites to perform rituals transplanted from the mainland. Many Inari shrines in Hokkaido trace their origins to crude edifices built by basho contractors and their managers to pray for safe and bountiful harvests. One shrine in Kamoena Village, attributed to Tatsuki Shinsuke, was reportedly constructed by transferring the “deity of Itsukushima” from the Inland Sea of Japan; “fishermen’s families as well as Ainu were made to worship” the deity as a tutelary spirit of the fishery.¹⁵⁰ A network of ancestor worship stretched from Ise Shrine in central Japan to reach the remotest island of Rishiri, where, under Fujino Kihē’s reign, Kitami Shrine was built to enshrine the sun goddess Amaterasu.¹⁵¹

By the early nineteenth century, Matsumae’s Wajinchi had become a mosaic of provincial Japan, where the urbane “culture of the Kyoto region imported by big merchants from Ōmi” melded with the coastal culture of Hokuriku sailors and Tōhoku peasant-fishers.¹⁵² But development was only half the story. The grafting of mainland institutions went hand in glove with the uprooting of Ainu communities. The steady influx of capital and migrants eroded Ainu’s traditional economy, transforming their lands and increasing their appetite for Japanese goods, which pushed many Ainu into a cycle of fishery labor. This inexorable process of cultural disintegration, chronicled by Brett Walker, was punctuated by periodic outbreaks of smallpox and other epidemics, making Ainu one more peripheral community in a global story of ecological upheaval.¹⁵³ By the time Fujino Kihē took over the management of Nemuro in 1832, the local Ainu population had fallen by fully 40 percent since 1808, from 1,219 to 741. In the next twenty-five years under his reign, some inland *kotan* near the fishery vanished altogether. The Akkeshi Ainu had registered an even more precipitous drop to total a mere 200-odd by the 1850s.¹⁵⁴ Matsuura Takeshirō, however, attributed these signs of depopulation not to cycles of epidemics but to the cruelty of basho contractors, who left the Ainu with few alternative means of sustenance.

In sum, the relentless drive of merchant capital and the territorializing impulse of the early modern state conjoined in the basho contracting system to lay not only

the basis for Japan's pelagic empire but much of the groundwork for full colonization of Ainu lands and people. So enfeebled were the Ainu by the end of Tokugawa rule, indeed, that the new Meiji government could assert its sovereignty over their lands "with little resistance" from below.¹⁵⁵ Viewed as "a dying race," the Ainu were subjected to the demographic fate of being assimilated or annihilated in the course of Japan's full embrace of capitalism. As Cedric Robinson once provocatively observed in the context of the Atlantic world, the advent of capitalism extended, rather than displaced, feudal social relations into modern forms of racial difference and bondage.¹⁵⁶ The post-Tokugawa story of Ainu in the Pacific world would seem to support Robinson's contention, illustrating an inextricable link between racial capitalism ("the entanglements of racial differentiation and capital accumulation"¹⁵⁷) and settler colonialism. Historians of Hokkaido have called attention to a similar relationship between settler colonization and primitive accumulation, treating both as part of the Meiji policy to build a "capitalist nation-state" by mobilizing "farmer-soldiers" (*tondenhei*).¹⁵⁸ When taking account of its prehistory and the role of private capital, however, we are compelled to view, from the perspective of the racialized Ainu, that their condition of bondage neither started nor ended with the modern regime that embraced Western ideas of capitalist modernity and "American-style settler colonialism as a model for national development."¹⁵⁹ More accurately, the Meiji modernizers inherited from their Tokugawa predecessors a changing geography of commerce and industry, along with a community ensnared in a mechanism of accumulation and exploitation. The co-colonization of Hokkaido, instigated and sponsored by feudal power in alliance with merchants, continued into the Meiji era, just as a racialized system of surplus extraction persisted under the guise of freedom.

THE END OF BASHO CONTRACTING IN THE MEIJI ERA

By the mid-nineteenth century, the three merchant contractors from Ōmi—Nishikawa, Okada, and Fujino—had established themselves as fishing entrepreneurs, living a life ensconced in wealth from the Hokkaido trade. But their status began to falter after the Tokugawa shogunate ended its two and a half centuries of rule. The most significant setback was the loss of their basho contractor's status. On the heels of the Meiji Restoration, the system of contract fisheries was dismantled across the island by the newly established Hokkaido Development Agency (Kaitakushi). For a while, the former contractors continued operating fisheries as before, many in their new capacity as agents of the Kaitakushi.¹⁶⁰ But their share of catches continued to fall as migrant fishers flooded into the area to pursue herding with pound traps. Their difficulties only grew after 1870, when merchant contractors were stripped of their right to collect access fees on which their business had come to depend.¹⁶¹ As the partnership of merchant capital and feudal power

dissolved, unleashing new forces and competitors in Hokkaido, the performance of fisheries managed by the three Ōmi merchants began to fluctuate wildly, while their shipping business stagnated.¹⁶²

During these volatile years, Fujino and Nishikawa consolidated land-sea linkages in their family business by further advancing a strategy of vertical integration between Hokkaido and Kansai.¹⁶³ At the same time, they responded to new uncertainties in the fishing industry by diversifying. They branched out into retail commerce and canning, invested in steamship lines, and forayed into farming, taking part in the Kaitakushi's land development projects in Hokkaido.¹⁶⁴ The most enterprising was Nishikawa family under Teijirō (the tenth head, 1858–1924), who also participated in the state project of deep-sea fishing in northern waters, one of the first ventures of Japan's pelagic empire.¹⁶⁵

After the turn of the century, however, signs of strain in their fishery business became ever apparent, and diversification began to yield a diminishing rate of return. To avert further losses, both Fujino and Nishikawa over the next decades drastically scaled back their operation of fisheries and other new areas of investment.¹⁶⁶ In the most spectacular sign of all, the Okada family became effectively bankrupt in 1901. The seeds of Okada's descent had been sown when it lost the two fisheries of Otarunai and Furubira, which had claimed the lion's share of family income. Like Nishikawa and Fujino, Okada made a foray into new ventures such as farming and steamship service, but few generated expected returns on costly investment. Okada also engaged in some fishing in Southern Sakhalin, but the Russian ban on the entry of Japanese fishers in 1899 cut off a crucial source of income, making it impossible for the family to stay in business.¹⁶⁷

WHITHER ŌMI SHŌNIN?

The three former contractors in Hokkaido represented a cross-section of Ōmi merchants, navigating a tectonic shift from the era of feudal patronage to one of free-market exchange. Their colleagues elsewhere in Japan similarly struggled through the transition. Big merchants, first of all, were mired in the political turmoil that marked the final years of Tokugawa rule. Some fell victim to a spate of violence carried out by imperial loyalists, following the 1860 assassination of Ii Naosuke (lord of Hikone and then chief minister of the shogunate), who had signed a treaty with the United States to open Japan's ports, without the court's approval. In Nihonbashi in Edo, a traditional turf of Ōmi shōnin, some two hundred *rōnin* broke into merchant houses and exacted funds for "chastising the barbarians" from across the Pacific. Chōjiya Ginzaburō (of Chōgin) was among the merchants in Kyoto and Osaka targeted for attack by a roaming band of *rōnin* for their "crime" of selling imported goods. These shop owners pleaded for life, as a fellow merchant recorded in his diary, pledging not to trade with foreigners in Yokohama and Nagasaki.¹⁶⁸

Many merchants, too, bore the costs of the civil war that ensued. Those tied to domainal treasuries, like Nakai Genzaemon who had lent his services to the Sendai domain, were forced to meet the hefty demands for war funds and after the fighting ended in 1869, to settle debts with the new Meiji government. If Nakai's demise was collateral damage of the political revolution, others fell prey to more far-reaching realignments in the economy. In Osaka and other cities, the rise of new entrepreneurs forced many Ōmi merchants to downsize or close their stores altogether.¹⁶⁹ But perhaps the greatest existential threat came with the advent of the telegraph. As noted, the advantages of *mochikudari* lay in its practitioners' ability to seize access to market information ahead of others in the parcellized geography of early modern commerce. In the age of time-space compression, however, merchants everywhere "knew prices in markets at the port of destination before they shipped their goods"; corporeal goods began to be traded as "conceptual entities," "abstract[ing] financial exchange from the space-time of the physical economy."¹⁷⁰ As the prospect of exploiting regional disparities further dimmed with the spatial integration of markets and commodity prices around the globe,¹⁷¹ Ōmi shōnin were stripped of their competitive edge—indeed, their *raison d'être* as diasporic traders.

The eclipsed status of Ōmi merchants appeared to mirror that of their province, renamed Shiga Prefecture in 1872. The official removal of the national capital to Tokyo had the effect of relegating Shiga to a periphery on the new map of Japan, spawning a rumor, taken seriously by local leaders, that Shiga would soon be merged with Kyoto.¹⁷² Nowhere was this more manifest than in the prefectural capital of Ōtsu, whose long-held status as a regional transport hub plummeted after the 1889 opening of the Tōkaidō Railway, which bypassed the city. With downward trends pronounced everywhere by a harnessing of regions to a nationally scaled regime of accumulation, contemporary observers lamented the apparent inaction of local merchants, whose skills began to atrophy.¹⁷³ Their decline seemed to present a sharp contrast to the rise of the House of Mitsui and other "political merchants," many already established in Edo, Osaka, and Kyoto, who amassed even greater wealth by forging personal and preferential ties to the new Meiji leadership. Some families skillfully parlayed government favor and enterprises they received into huge financial and industrial combines, known as *zaibatsu*, by the 1910s.¹⁷⁴ Even the largest merchants of Ōmi, who had served as purveyors and moneylenders to provincial lords, did not have the job security and opportunities enjoyed by these political merchants spawned by the Meiji state policy and patronage.¹⁷⁵

At first glance, the story of Ōmi merchants after the fall of the Tokugawa seems to parallel the fate of trading diasporas around the world. As Philip D. Curtin has claimed, the early modern diasporas of Armenians, Sephardic Jews, and others ceased to play a role as they transitioned to the twentieth century: they "worked themselves out of existence" "as [increased] commercial ties reduced the cultural

differences that called them into being in the first place.” In other words, the contraction of space and time lessened the need for cross-cultural brokerage in the dawning age of global capitalism.¹⁷⁶ But after a period of grave uncertainty, Ōmi merchants and their descendants, in fact, enjoyed a long afterlife to join Japan’s new entrepreneurial class and stay relevant in myriad ways overlooked by scholars.

In the early Meiji period, many Ōmi merchants like Fujino and Nishikawa launched a flurry of initiatives in and out of Shiga, creating banks, trading corporations, and modern factories at the encouragement of the governor.¹⁷⁷ Although most of these early ventures were short-lived, they pushed past the growing pains to keep pace with the new era. Hino merchants revived their fraternal organization, publishing a roster of designated inns along the Ise highway in 1875.¹⁷⁸ Impoverished samurai sent their sons to apprentice with merchant families, while enterprising locals strove to modernize Ōmi’s cottage industries, from hemp cloth and mosquito nets to the silk crêpe and velvet of Nagahama.¹⁷⁹ These efforts were followed by larger initiatives of national importance in the textile industry, as we will see.¹⁸⁰

Rather than the last gasp of Ōmi shōnin, these activities should be seen as the beginning of a new chapter in their long history of enterprise. For if some merchants still fell by the wayside, an even greater number expanded their business activity after the last samurai revolt against the new government was crushed in 1877.¹⁸¹ According to local gazetteers, merchants from the three districts of Echi, Kanzaki, and Gamō opened nearly a thousand stores outside Shiga (table 1).¹⁸² They were concentrated in Tokyo, Osaka, and Kyoto but also spread over the archipelago, with a significant cluster in the new frontier towns of Hokkaido, where merchants kept arriving from Ōmi, “with a momentum far surpassing those from other provinces.”¹⁸³ The historical mobility of Ōmi people also persisted in an outflow of young workers and sojourners outside the prefecture.¹⁸⁴ More notable, though far less acknowledged, were the forty-eight who moved abroad to open business in Korea, Manchuria, China, and Taiwan. Nine provincials had even ventured across the ocean to set up shop in North and South America.¹⁸⁵

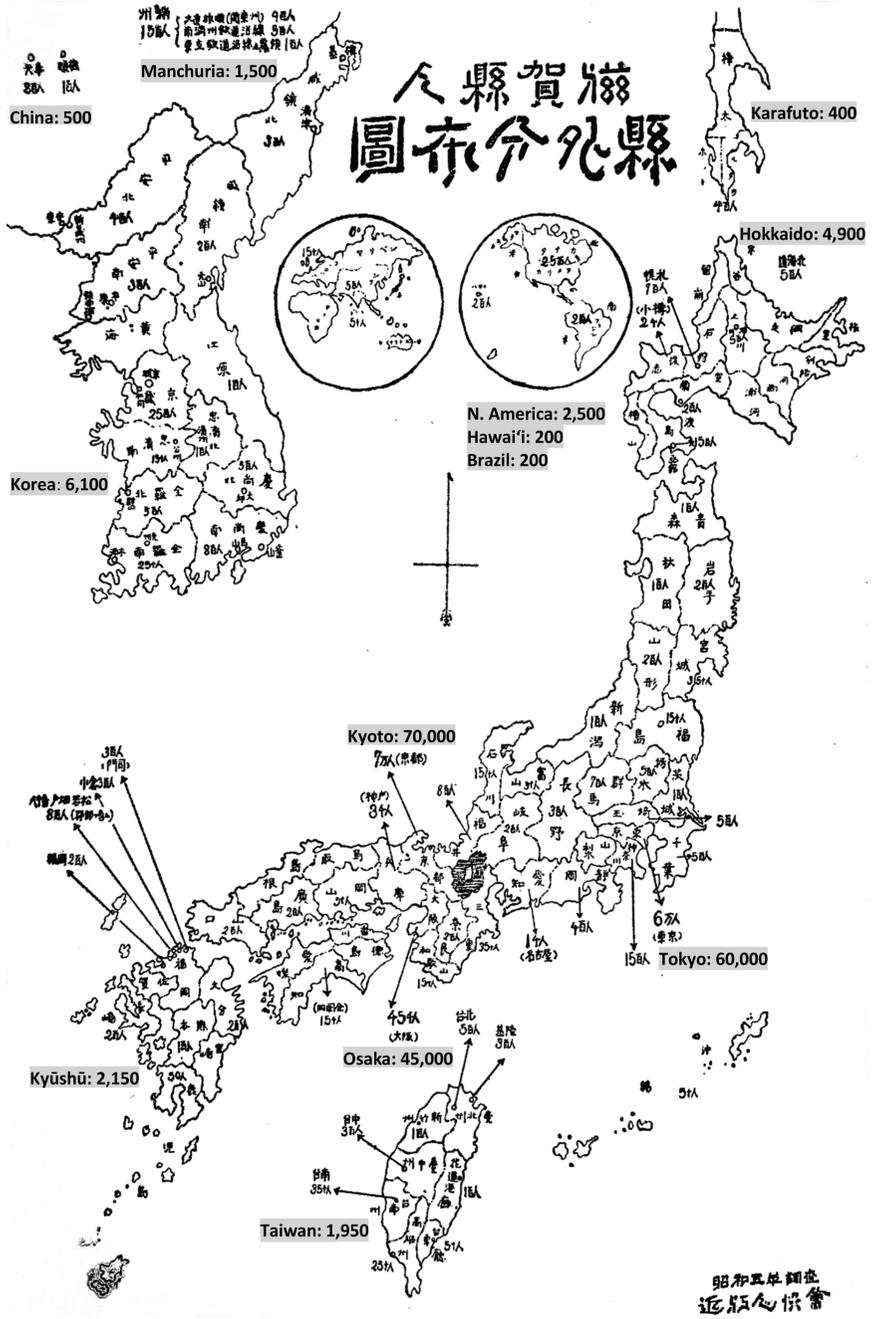
These statistics begin to tell a story of a larger community of Ōmi natives who looked beyond Hokkaido to pursue new opportunities in the broader Pacific world. Tracing their footsteps—as one native-place Association of Ōmi People did in 1930 (map 5)—reveals that a significant number operated at the front lines of export and import trade (chapter 5) and retail commerce (chapter 6) in colonial East Asia as well as Southeast Asia, where, as Seoka Makoto has observed, the “far-flung orientation” of Ōmi shōnin found its utmost manifestation.¹⁸⁶ A new breed of Ōmi shōnin were also annually dispatched by local schools to the Chinese continent for commercial research and training (chapter 4). Fewer merchants journeyed to North America, but their entire village might follow them to form a sizable community of immigrants who engaged in commerce and labor as proud sons and daughters of Ōmi (chapter 7).

TABLE 1 Stores opened outside the prefecture by merchants of the Echi, Kanzaki, and Gamō districts

Location and period	Echi			Kanzaki			Gamō			Total
	Tokugawa	Meiji	Taishō	Tokugawa	Meiji	Taishō	Tokugawa	Meiji	Taishō	
	Osaka		41	73	3	33	36	4	24	
Tokyo	2	44	61	4	47	35	11	12	1	217
Kyoto	2	22	38	4	42	28	5	5		146
Hokkaido/Karafuto		28	9		30	16	1	14		98
Tōhoku		1	1		2		3			8
Kantō		13	17	2	8	10	88	64	5	207
Chūbu	1	14	12		5	4	21	17	3	77
Kinki	1	9	8		5	6		6		35
Chūgoku/Shikoku		2	3			2		1		8
Kyūshū		24	16		3	4		3		50
Asia										48
China		1				1			1	
Manchuria		2	4		2	1		3		
Korea		7	4		10	6		3		
Taiwan			1		2					
America										9
United States			1		1			1		
Canada		2	2			1				
Peru										
TOTAL	7	211	250	13	190	150	133	143	10	1,107

SOURCE: Adapted from table 1 in Suenaga 1997, 2, with data from the following sources: Ōmi Echigun Kyōikukai 1929, 308–42; Ōhashi Kinzō (jō-kan) 1928, 1195–218; Gamō-gun (Shiga-ken), vol. 5 (1922), 881–97.

¹Tokugawa (1603–1867); Meiji (1868–1912); Taishō (1912–1926).



MAP 5. A transpacific diaspora of Shiga people (based on survey conducted in 1930 by the Association of Ōmi People). Source: Ōmijin Kyōkai 1930.

At the same time, what it meant to be a merchant from Ōmi changed as Japan began to project its power through these border-crossing activities. Traders and business owners abroad saw themselves as modern stewards of what they upheld as “Ōmi merchant tradition,” peddling mass consumer goods on supranational scales in service of their empire. Some in textile trade undertook a more fundamental rescaling from commercial to industrial capital. And many Shiga natives ventured across the Pacific, with a new claim to Ōmi’s entrepreneurial inheritance. The chapters that follow are, therefore, concerned less with how local practices and values remained intact after 1868 than with how they were reshaped, repurposed, and mobilized by people of Ōmi descent for the novel goal of overseas expansion.

The very term *Ōmi shōnin* took shape in the context of their burgeoning engagement with the transoceanic world, another point missed by the simple narrative of decay. Used interchangeably with *Gōshū shōnin*, the term entered the popular Japanese lexicon most likely in the Meiji period, becoming a cultural pronoun in use ever since. So did the past exploits of Ōmi merchants gain renewed significance on the cusp of Japan’s global emergence. One man of letters, born and raised in Ōmi, used the new power of the press to direct public attention away from Hokkaido to the southern waters of Nan’yō as the “proper orientation” for Japanese activity.¹⁸⁷ Mapping a grand vision of maritime Japan, he also gave voice to the hope of local boosters in Shiga that the famed merchants from east of Lake Biwa would resurrect their economic preeminence in Asia and in the far corners of the world. It is with this vision that we begin our exploration of the transpacific diaspora of Ōmi people.