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## Ainu Sea Otter Hunting from the Perspective of Sino-Japanese Trade

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## Chapter 6

# Ainu Sea Otter Hunting from the Perspective of Sino-Japanese Trade

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### 1. Introduction

It has been assumed by both scholars and the general public that the Ainu people freely hunted, fished, and gathered food until very recent years in a land rich in natural resources, of their own volition rather than as a result of compulsion. The hunting of small fur-bearing animals has attracted less interest to date, because people are more interested in the bear hunting that was thought to be at the core of the religion, economy and society of the Ainu culture, and in the deer hunting and salmon fishing that provided their staple diet. Hunting activities were considered as an issue for Ainu society alone regardless of trends in Northeast Asia as a whole. However, there are absolutely no valid grounds for this conclusion, and a historical analysis of diachronic changes in Ainu society and culture does not support the idea (Tezuka 1998). It is therefore important to investigate the hunting activities of indigenous peoples in Northeast Asia from the viewpoint of the acquisition and circulation of trade goods. Ainu hunting in the pre-modern and modern periods was influenced by neighbor states and can be categorized as enforced hunting in some respects. Their hunting activities were strongly influenced by the demand from Imperial Russia and China for highly valuable furs.

This overview can also be applied to the hunting of marine animals, such as seals, sea otters, and sea cucumbers, as well as to that of land animals. These marine products were produced by the Ainu in the Ezo-chi area (the former name of the area consisting of Hokkaido, Sakhalin and the Kuril Islands) during the Edo period (1600-1868) (Figure 1). In this paper I describe the changes in the circulation and quantity of sea otters that were hunted by the Ainu in the Kuril Islands during the eighteenth century, especially around the island of Urup.

### 2. The rule of Ezo-chi: Historical Overview

After the Matsumae feudal domain was incorporated into the Tokugawa Shogunate system, the domain was granted exclusive trading rights with the Ezo people (the ancestors of the present-day Ainu) by the Tokugawa Shogunate. The Matsumae domain consolidated its position in Ezo-chi and tried to control trade activities in the region by setting up a border and advancing a new trade zone system (giving vassals the right to trade with the Ainu within a certain zone), eventually limiting Ainu economic activities within the region. As a



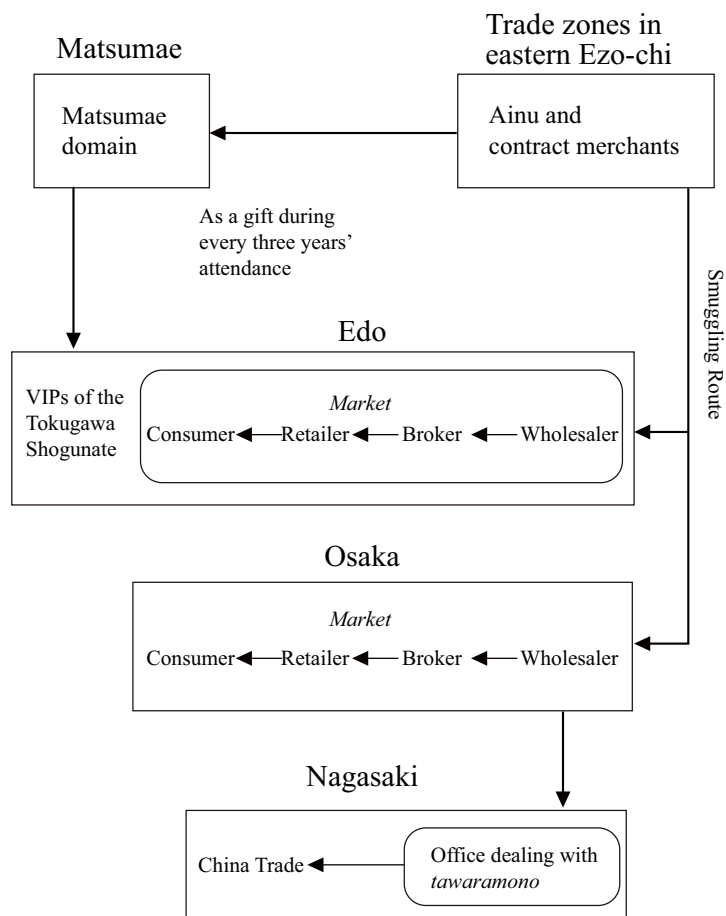


Figure 2 Flow of sea otter pelts by the 18th century.

in the Tokugawa Shogunate from the lord of the Matsumae domain during his attendance in Edo (present-day Tokyo) once every three years (Figure 2). It was conventional to offer horse saddles with skirts and fenders made of sea otter or bear skins to the Tokugawa family. Sea otter pelts were superior to bear skins in quality. The amount of *karumono* required for such ceremonial offerings was limited, and the Ainu were not required to catch a large number of sea otters.

In the second half of the eighteenth century the Matsumae domain, suffering from financial difficulties, borrowed large amounts of money from the newly powerful merchants of the Edo region and began to oversee the management of the eastern part of Ezo-chi.

The merchants took advantage of this opportunity to employ the Ainu people in large-

scale fishing in order to make profits commensurate with their higher tax or debt to the Matsumae domain, and to smuggle the *karumono* items out of the trade zones into the markets in large cities in Honshu (Figure 2) (Hezutsu 1785 [1969]). As the production of commercial agricultural crops such as cotton, rape seed and sesame oil, mandarin oranges, and Japanese indigo developed and grew widespread in southwest Japan during the eighteenth century, the demand for fertilizer made from Ezo-chi herring grew rapidly. The former trade zones were transformed into fishing grounds where the merchants produced huge amount of herring, salmon, and trout to fill the domestic demand for food and fertilizer, using the Ainu as their labor force (Tezuka 1995:16).

### 3. Sea Otter Hunting in the Kuril Islands

Urup Island has long been uninhabited, but has been famous since early times as one of the rare hunting grounds for sea otters. Japanese paid great attention to this rich resource from the eighteenth century (Tezuka 2003a). The Ainu from four areas—Etorofu, Kunashiri, Nemoro, and Akkeshi—hunted on this island annually from summer to autumn until 1803. The northern Kuril people from Simushir and the other northward islands were called “Chupuka” and regarded as another tribe by the Ainu living south of Urup. Sometime hunting around Urup was carried out by both the Ainu from the south and Chupuka from the north, but the former had priority over the latter in hunting there.

Until about 200 years ago, vast areas of the northern Pacific Ocean were inhabited by sea otters. The sea otters of the Kuril Islands, where one-third of the world sea otter population was concentrated, were noted for their high quality. The Chinese classified sea otter fur into eight to ten grades. The Russians divided sea otter pelts into four categories in terms of quality in the following descending order: Kurilian-Kamchatkan, Aleutian, Northwest Coast, and Californian (Gibson 1992: 7). It was no wonder that Russia and Japan soon began to compete for this resource.

Russian Cossacks reached Urup Island for the first time in 1768 and soon disturbed the order in the hunting grounds for sea otters established by the Ainu people. Russian hunters, hired by a fur company, began to come to Urup and to hunt sea otters with guns and fishing nets, conflicting with the Ainu coming from Etorofu in 1770. The Ainu took revenge on the Russians with the help of the Chupuka in the following year (Habuto 1807 [1936]; Koller 2002).

Traditionally the Ainu hunted sea otters with bow and arrow, leister, and harpoon (Kondo 1905 [1976]: 53). Because the Ainu also hunted them on a reef with automatically triggered crossbow (Hokkaido Suisan Kyokai [ed.] 1977: 518), they must have used poisoned arrows (presumably they used aconite) for hunting sea otters or at least sea mammals. The Russians hunted with guns and gill nets (Kondo 1905 [1976]: 53), which gradually influenced the Chupuka’s hunting method on the other hand. The Simushir Ainu in particular soon adopted the Russian way of life. They hunted sea otter and seal with guns obtained from the Russians (Habuto 1807 [1936]). By the 1790s the Ainu from Hokkaido and Etorofu began to obtain fishing nets from merchants engaged in the fishing business on Etorofu Island as well as making nets of their own for sea otter hunting. Since the Russians

who settled on Urup caught fish with large fishing nets around the island and the Ainu from Hokkaido or Etorofu sometimes experienced the convenience of dragging nets there, Russian net technology may have influenced the Ainu. At any rate, Japanese documents clearly state that an Ainu chief in Akkeshi, Ikotoi, and his men were making nets (presumably from linden bark) in the hinterland of Akkeshi in order to catch sea otter on Urup (Historiographical Institute the University of Tokyo [ed.] 2000:114). The Ainu were also able to hunt sea otter with clubs on the ice in the winter around their permanent settlement. A spring bow called *amak* or *taima* was popular for sea otter hunting on rocky coasts (Hokkaido Suisan Kyokai [ed.] 1977: 518) and enabled the Ainu to expand their catch.

It is easy to see how technology introduced by newcomers, as well as minor modifications of hunting devices by the indigenous peoples themselves, influenced this phenomenon.

The quantity of salmon and herring caught with large fishing nets in Ezo-chi, began to increase in the late eighteenth century, as did the the amount trout caught in the southern Kurils toward the end of the century. For example, as Ohba has argued, an increase in the amount of fish caught with the introduction of large Japanese dragnets for herring or salmon fishing resulted in the Tokugawa Shogunate, which was experiencing financial difficulties, bringing Ezo-chi under its direct control (Ohba 1988). This was followed by the swift spread of this technology among the Ainu of the Ishikari tributaries, which had begun from the Ainu of Chitose along the Pacific coast of the eastern part of Ezo-chi (Sapporo-shi Kyoiku Inkai [ed.] 1989: 445), even though they could catch an adequate number of fish for their daily life with the help of traditional gear such as harpoons, *marek* (a long pole gaffe with a detachable hook), dip nets, and fish weirs. Demand for marine products in the eighteenth century therefore promoted a shift to more efficient catching devices throughout Hokkaido as well as the southern Kurils.

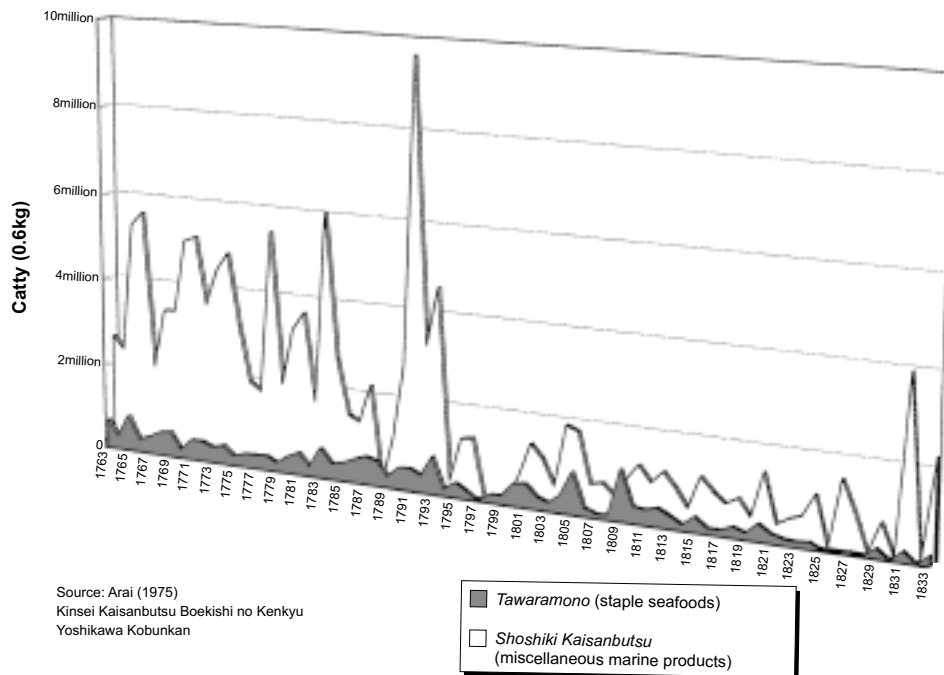
#### **4. The China Trade at Nagasaki and the Production of Marine Products in Ezo-chi**

In 1639 the Tokugawa Shogunate relocated the Dutch settlement to the island of Dejima outside Nagasaki, established the National Seclusion policy, and broke off contact with all foreign countries except for the Netherlands, China, and Korea. Vessels allowed into Nagasaki were restricted to those from the Netherlands and China, and trade with these countries increased every year. The Shogunate tried to reduce the quantity of trade with the Netherlands and China in 1685, and limited the number of vessels to 70 a year in order to avoid any further increase in trade. In 1715 it issued the New Shipping Act (*Kaihaku Goshi Shinrei*), which restricted the amount of trade and the number of the vessels at Nagasaki in order to reduce the outflow of gold, silver, and copper. After further decreasing the number of Chinese vessels entering the port, the Shogunate later increased the quota of marine products for export because of a shortage of copper production. Marine products exported from Nagasaki consisted of sea cucumber, abalone, shark fins, sea products such as kelp, agar-agar, Tosakagusa sea weed, cuttlefish, dried shrimp, dried fish, salted fish, and dried

clams. Of these the first three were categorized as *tawaramono* (staple seafoods), while the rest were categorized as *shoshiki kaisanbutsu* (miscellaneous marine products).

The Ezo-chi area attracted the Shogunate's attention because of its rich marine resources. From 1785 to 1805, the Shogunate shifted its policy from entrusting merchants with collecting marine products to direct management of their production, with the intention of improving their regular shortages. Just before beginning direct management, the Shogunate dispatched officials to Matsumae and Kyushu to survey marine resources and encouraged the feudal lords of those regions to increase the yield of such products. In the Ezo-chi area, abalone and sea cucumber were boiled and then dried in the fishing grounds along with kelp. They were shipped to Nagasaki along the Sea of Japan and the Inland Sea by way of Osaka, and traded with Chinese merchants from the Qing Dynasty as important commodities. This demonstrates that harvesting of these products began to prosper in accordance with state demand. At the outset, the Shogunate could successfully increase the productivity, but it soon decreased again after 1794. The reconstructed export of marine products (Figure 3) began to decrease as part of the China trade at that time. The Shogunate was forced to seek out alternative resources.

At that time, survey ships and naval vessels from Europe began to probe the waters surrounding the Ezo-chi area. After carrying out surveys and experimental trade with the Ainu in the northern and eastern parts of Ezo-chi several times, the Tokugawa Shogunate



**Figure 3** Export of marine products to China from Nagasaki.

decided to put the eastern part of Ezo-chi under direct rule in 1799 for the time being, replacing the control of the Matsumae domain. Eastern Ezo-chi was formally brought under direct control in 1802, as were western Ezo-chi and the castle town of the Matsumae town in 1807.

### 5. Analysis of the China Trade

After the opening of the Karafuto-basho (Sakhalin administrative zone) by the Matsumae feudal clan in 1790, the area of inflow of Chinese materials was transferred from Soya at the northernmost point of Hokkaido to Shiranushi at the southern tip of Sakhalin, where an administrative office was newly established. Silk fabric and glass balls were brought to Hokkaido and in exchange small land-animal furs and ironware were collected and sent to the continent via this northern Chinese trade. The Shogunate intervened in these trading activities and restricted them to Shiranushi, setting up an official trade rate from 1809. This was called the *Santan* trade<sup>1)</sup>, and it continued until 1867. Small fur-bearing land animals—otter, sable, and fox—hunted in Hokkaido by the Ainu were collected by government officials and taken to the government post at Shiranushi for this trade (*Iwanoke Monjo* 1855; Deriha 2002). While marine products such as dried abalone, dried sea cucumber, and shark fins were generally taken southward together with sea otter pelts and were shipped

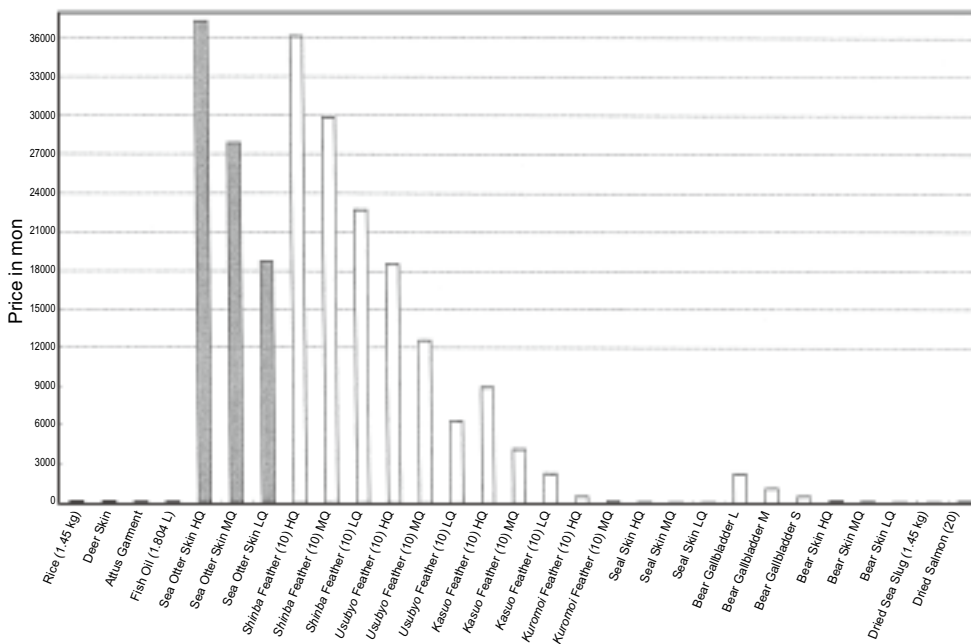
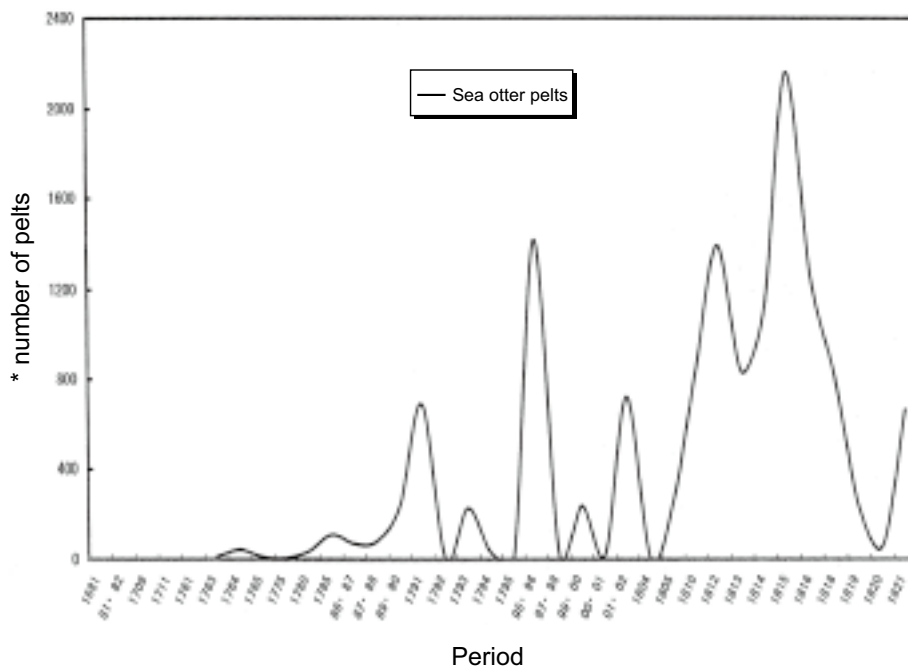


Figure 4 Average trade prices of specialty products in eastern Ezo-chi in 1786.

exclusively from Nagasaki as major exports to China, small land fur-bearing animals that were in high demand by the *Santan* traders tended to head north. Many Sakhalin Ainu were indebted to the *Santan* traders and were forcibly taken away to the continent with them when the Shogunate brought Ezo-chi under its control (Sasaki 1989).

Few researchers and historians of the China trade at Nagasaki have paid any attention to the importance of the sea otter trade and its sources. The main reason is that sea otter pelts formed such a small proportion of the total amount of marine products traded in Nagasaki as to be almost negligible. It should be noted, however, that sea otter pelts are of great value compared with other specialty products (Figure 4).

The Chinese and Japanese documents do not give a detail account of sea otter pelts as a trade product. Dutch documents, however, contain good descriptions of every aspect of Chinese-Japanese trade, including the number of sea otters (Arai 1975; Nagazumi 1987; Yamawaki 1964). As the Netherlands was China's only rival for trade with Japan in those days, the China trade was under strict surveillance by the Dutch, who obtained its details from Japanese informants, and their description was very accurate. Figure 5 shows the export of sea otter pelts based on the data of the diary of the chief merchant of the Dutch

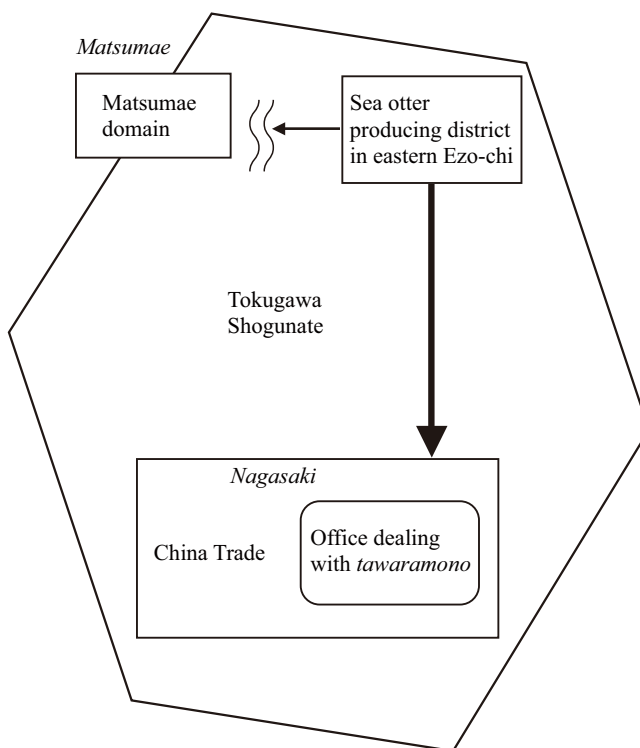


\* Numbers of pelts were calculated at 1 per bale and 30 per box from the information given in the documents. Modified from the original graph presented at CHAGS 8.

**Figure 5** Sea otter pelts loaded into Chinese ships at Nagasaki: Quantitative analysis of restored lists of exports from Dutch and Japanese documents.

settlement and that from the castle town of Batavia (present-day Jakarta) on the island of Java. A dramatic increase in sea otter pelts from 1807 onward, during the period of direct control of the Ezo-chi area by the Shogunate, is clear from the quantitative data of this graph. This suggests that the Tokugawa Shogunate set about the full-scale management of eastern Ezo-chi to strengthen the development of marine resources in addition to defending against the threat from overseas, especially Russia. The most important part of this argument is that the Shogunate could establish a direct connection between the sea otter-producing district and Nagasaki, the doorway for a flourishing international trade, bypassing the complicated merchant distribution system (Figure 6). Figure 5 shows several other peaks before 1804 (in 1791, 1796, 1799 and 1803), which were the result of various political and historical events.

The term “sea otter” in the Dutch documents might include river otter pelts because of their similarities in quality, but the Japanese documents distinguish between sea otter and river otter. It was more difficult to provide stably whether sea otter or river otter for the China trade at that time from places other than Ezo-chi. Japanese documents in the eighteenth century also identified sea otter caught in the Kurils as an export to China



**Figure 6** Flow of sea otter pelts under the direct management of eastern Ezo-chi by the Tokugawa Shogunate from 1799 to 1821.

(Tezuka 2003a: 145). However, it is necessary to note that all of the number of sea otter on the Figure 5 would not signify sea otter.

The Shogunate started out in 1791 and 1792 by trading experimentally with the Ainu in eastern Ezo-chi and researching what products would be suitable for the China trade. It seems reasonable to think that sea otters and baleen obtained in this kind of trade were transported to Nagasaki.

In 1795, a group of 35 Russian settlers and *promyshlenniks* and three women under the command of a foreman named Zbezdochetov, were sent to Urup Island and built a settlement. Recent archeological research revealed that various and plenty of artifacts including British ceramics and features (Shubin 1990; Jackson 1994; Tezuka 2003a). In the same year the Ainu chief Ikotoi from Akkeshi went to Urup and wintered there, hunting sea otter and trading with the Russians. Presumably, the next spring sea otter pelts were shipped to Nagasaki in larger quantities than the average for an ordinary year. Kimura, K, who took part in Eastern Ezo-chi research mission of the Tokugawa Shogunate in 1798, recorded a rumor that Russians shipped as many as three thousand sea otter pelts to their motherland (Kimura 1986: 142). From January 1799 the Tokugawa Shogunate embarked on the direct management of eastern Ezo-chi, based on the results of its research. A new shipping line between Etorofu and Honshu was opened in the same year, by which products could be transported directly to Edo with ease. Since the Tokugawa Shogunate had prohibited the Ainu people from going to Urup to hunt and from supplying the Russians with goods and food since 1803, the Russian settlement was abandoned in 1805. It was not until in 1807 that the Shogunate decided to organize a hunting group, consisting of 30 Ainu and 34 Japanese, to be sent to Urup annually (Habuto 1807 [1936]; Kikuchi 1995).

Records of fur imports by American vessels at Canton, China during the period 1804-1837 shows that the import of sea otter pelts converged in a specific period. Imports of sea otter to China peaked during the period 1804-1815. As they began to decline during the 1820s and 1830s, imports of land otter skins increased instead. Few sea otter colonies, however, survived the ravages of colonial and economic expansion by the dominant world states.

Competing with Russian caravans at Kyakhta and American vessels at Canton at the time, the Shogunate exported sea otter caught in the Kuril region to the southern part of China via Nagasaki, and the amount of this trade peaked during the early nineteenth century when the demand for furs in China was reaching its peak because of the increase in population and the popularization of the fashion for fur (Kishigami 2001). What must be emphasized at this juncture is that the expansion of American sea otter exports at the beginning of the nineteenth century corresponded with those of the Japanese toward 1815 (Figure 7) (Tezuka 2003b).

Sea otter pelts disappeared from lists of trade between China and Japan in 1822, and never reappeared. The previous year the Tokugawa Shogunate restored all the Ezo-chi territory to its original owner, the Matsumae clan, because of the establishment of amity between Russia and Japan after 1813 on the one hand and the burden of supporting the Ainu people and the Ezo-chi area on the other. It is also likely that a sharp decrease in sea otter-pelt production after 1818 discouraged the Shogunate from continued management of

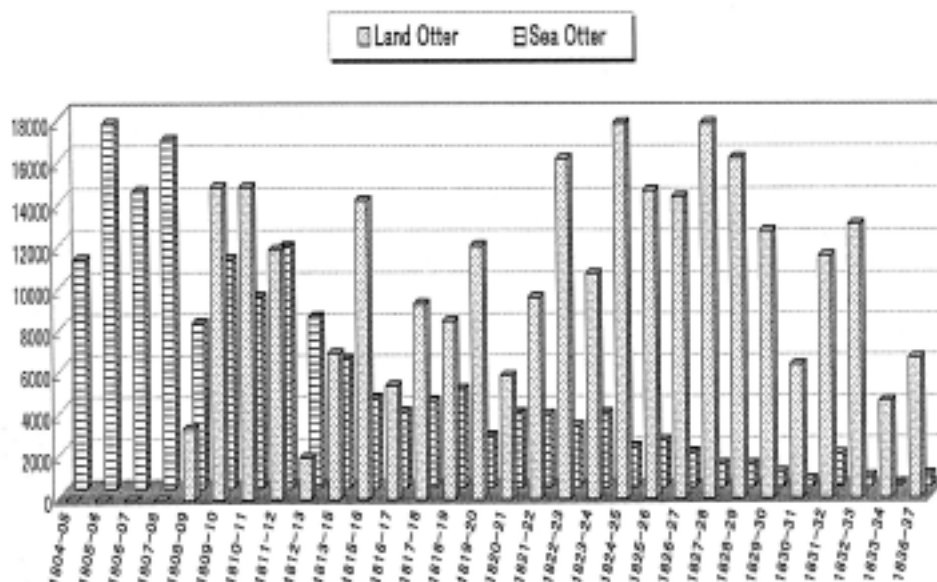


Figure 7 Fur imports by American vessels at Canton, China. Source: Gibson (1992).

Ezo-chi. I must point out the possibility that hunting pressure temporarily depleted the sea otter population of the waters around Urup. A Russian settlement on Urup revived in 1828, when it was established by Midshipman A. A. Etolen of the Russian-American Company with 50 Koniag and Aleut indigenous people. The fact that about 800,000 rubles-worth of skins were removed from Urup alone in 1828-1829 (Tikhmenev 1978:173) demonstrates that the sea otter population had recovered by these years, and that cooperative and intensive hunting by the indigenous people worked effectively.

The reason that sea otters in the Kuril waters came close to extinction in the latter half of the nineteenth century is thought to be frequent poaching, which ignored international conventions. As Snow has mentioned, if the Kuril waters had been properly resource-controlled, this area would not have been devastated so early (Snow 1910).

## 6. Conclusions

In this paper I have outlined the changes that took place before and during the direct control of Ezo-chi by the Shogunate in terms of the production, circulation, and consumption of sea otter.

In the first 80 years of the eighteenth century, before the area came under direct control by the Tokugawa Shogunate, the sea otter was hunted to be utilized for the greeting ceremony and to be sold on the domestic market, whereas immediately before and during the Shogunate's direct control the bulk of sea otter pelts were collected for export to China.

During these years the methods, techniques, and equipment used by Ainu hunters for hunting sea otter were still traditional. It was not until the late eighteenth century that the purpose and methods of production of sea otter pelts were modernized. Large-scale cooperative hunting between the Ainu and Japanese under government administration took place, and new technology was introduced.

Since the export to China of sea otter caught by the Ainu in the Kurils corresponded with the international development of the fur trade, especially that of the American Oriental Trade, it is evident that the policy decisions concerning Ezo-chi by the Shogunate were motivated in part by concerns for Russian invasion, and in part also with the intention of making a substantial profit there (Tezuka 2000). I thus conclude that the distribution of furs developed by the Ainu should be reviewed not only in the light of the northern fur trade, as seen in the *Santan* trade, but also from an international broad perspective inclusive of all East Asian and American Oriental trade.

Situated in a cold, foggy environment nearly 1,500 miles from Nagasaki, the only port open to foreign countries, Urup Island provided China with priceless sea otter pelts, and offered the Tokugawa Shogunate the benefits of the trade. The interests of the Shogunate, which was in search of a suitable substitute for other marine products, coincided with those of China, which had been planning to develop the coastal fur trade at the port of Canton with British, French, American merchants instead of the inland trade with Russia at Kiakhta since the end of the eighteenth century. It can be concluded that utilization of the sea otter was not only a question of Ainu society alone, but should also be considered in the social and economic context of mainland Japan and the international fur trade.

## Note

- 1) In more common and broader sense, the Santan Trade was the commercial activity done by the ancestors of the present indigenous ethnic minorities in the Lower Amur basin and Sakhalin in the eighteenth and nineteenth century. This trade activity played a role of a commercial mediator between China (Qing dynasty) and Japan (Tokugawa Shogunate) as well as between the local people. Its main commodities were Chinese silk garments, roles of cotton, sable and other animal fur, glass beads, and tails of hawks and eagles.

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