CHAPTER 3

The Akita Domain and Osaka Merchant Houses at the Time of the Establishment of the Meiwa Copper Agency

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1 Introduction

It is generally understood that copper production in early modern Japan was severely restrained by the Tokugawa Shogunate’s monopoly and low-price policy, as suggested among others by Ishii Takashi. However, when taking into account the involvement of Osaka merchant houses in the copper business, a new picture emerges. In the Akita domain (秋田藩), the Osaka copper merchant house (大阪問屋) Nagahamaya (長浜屋) financed the copper mine and took the responsibility for copper transport to Osaka; it generated sufficient income to compensate for the high costs of mine management and to cover the domain’s expenditure in Edo. Thus, not only the Shogunate’s policy on copper regulation, but also the Osaka copper merchant houses significantly influenced copper production. I will demonstrate this by

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1 See Ishii, “Bakumatsu ni okeru bakufu no dō yushutsu kinshi seisaku.” A recent study by Imai Noriko is an exception. Based on a comprehensive study of copper production in the Edo period, she proposed a new interpretation of the function of the Shogunate’s copper monopoly, that is, the monopoly was created not for the purpose of restricting copper production but in response to the maturation of the copper market. Imai supported this argument by regarding copper in early modern Japan as a commodity (Imai, “Kinsei Nihon no dō: dōishijō to dōtōsei”). My study concurs with this new approach to the early modern copper business by delineating the Akita domain’s relationship with the Nagahamaya merchant house and demonstrating that the influence of the Shogunate’s copper monopoly on the domain’s copper production was limited.

2 Some studies on the involvement of Osaka merchant houses in the copper business have been published, though there are still desiderata. For instance, Sasaki Junnosuke closely examines the Akita domain’s operation of its copper mine from the perspective of mine history. Regarding the question how the income from the sales of copper for overseas export was invested for the domain’s copper production, however, he only analyzed the amount of silver payment for copper but not the role of Osaka merchant houses. See Sasaki, “Kinsei sandō seisaku ni kansuru ichikōsatsu,” 11.
scrutinizing the relationship of the Akita domain with Osaka merchant houses around the time of the establishment of the Meiwa Copper Agency (Meiwa dōza 明和銅座 or the Third Copper Agency) as evinced by the diaries of Ishii Shōzaemon Tadayuki 石井庄左衛門忠運, who was a motokata bugyō (financial magistrate 本方奉行) of the Akita domain.3

2 The Akita Domain and the Osaka Copper Merchant House Nagahamaya

2.1 Shipment of Akita Copper to Osaka

Table 3.1 shows the sales of Akita copper from the end of the Hōreki 宝暦 period (1751–1763) to 1774. Until 1762, the domain sold the annual quota of 1,800,000 kin 斤 (1,080 tons) of copper. However, the volume of copper supplied to Osaka subsequently decreased. As a result the amount of copper reaching Nagasaki 長崎 stagnated and this in turn caused a serious decline in copper exports to foreign countries. In 1763 sales fell below the pre-determined quota and in 1764 and 1765 amounted to only about half the level of 1762. From 1766, there was a sign of recovery and relatively stable sales continued until 1774. How can the decline and recovery of Akita copper sales before the establishment of the Third Copper Agency in 1766 be explained?

While the fluctuation in sales of Akita copper was quite an important issue, no studies have hitherto attempted to find the reason for this development. In order to do so, I analyze copper mine management and the domain’s finances which were closely linked to the fluctuation in copper sales.

Let us briefly outline the relationship between the Akita domain and Osaka copper merchant houses prior to 1761. The Ani copper mine (Ani dōzan 阿仁銅山) opened in Akita during the Kanbun 寛文 period (1661–1672) and the domain took over the direct management of the mine in 1701. In 1708 the total production of copper and lead amounted to 36,000 ko 箇 which was equivalent to 3,600,000 kin. As a tedai 手代 (clerk) of the mine wrote, Akita’s copper

3 Ishii Tadayuki nikki. The diary covers the years from 1757/7 to 1790/7, or from the age of thirty-eight to the age of seventy-one. The diarist’s records during his term as a magistrate of finance are particularly detailed. Together with Kokuten ruishō the diary is a significant source for the study of the domain’s government during the Edo period. The translation into modern Japanese was published in May 1973 as part of the second series of Shin Akita sōsho dainiki 新秋田叢書第二期 but I consulted the original text as much as possible. As for the quotations in this essay, I have mentioned the dates of the diary entries rather than the page numbers of Shin Akita sōsho dainiki.