

# Correlating European Age of Discovery Through Asiatic Trade in 15th – 18th Century

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## ABSTRACT

European history during the Age of Exploration (15th -18th century) is known primarily for a period of expansion and discovery, constituting for much of the socio-economic and political developments that significantly impacts its historical trajectory. Trade, being one of the major aspects which facilitated such developments, saw the European influence extend into the Asian sphere. Therefore, the objective of this paper is to reconstruct the history of the Age of Discovery through the movement and trade of goods from Asia, examining their role as catalysts in important historical events of the period. This cross-examination will primarily be conducted through relating different types of commodities, such as porcelain, to broader European trends such as the rise of materialism. Multiple primary sources will be drawn upon, such as museum objects, in combination with secondary sources such as research from previous historians. The concluding finding was that broader trends through the Age of Discovery history were able to be reconstructed through examining the impact and movement of Asiatic goods.

**Keywords:** *Trade, Cultural comparison, Age of Discovery, 15th-18th century, Developments.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

15th to 18th century Europe is canonized in historiography as the “Age of Exploration” due to novel discoveries such as North America and the expansion of the European sphere into Asia. A large part of what constituted this age of discovery was trade with the Orient, as exotic goods flooded European markets, not only resulting in the Orient being shrouded in an aura of mysticism, Europe also underwent a period of socio-economic and political revolution. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to correlate important events and turning points in 15th to 18th century European history with movement of Asiatic goods/commerce. Firstly, this paper introduces a cultural examination of Asian influences into European culture; secondly, considers of the role of Asiatic commodities in Europe’s social reconstruction. Lastly, the European imperialistic impetus will be explored through the lucrative spice trades in the East Indies. The purpose of such cross-examination is to demonstrate the importance of the role which Europe’s interactions with Asiatic markets played in defining such a crucial era of their history.

## 2. CULTURAL AND THEOLOGICAL IMPACTS

“Wij waren altegaar verwondert over de pracht en praal van deze heydens” [1] (we were always amazed at the splendors of these heathens), was the impression of Dutch contemporaries on early Modern Chinese society. This observation is based off the materialistic culture of Chinese society, such as the importance placed in decorative arts such as porcelain, the emphasis on artistic style and the distinctions of the artist himself (scholar vs professional painters, as paintings by scholars were viewed with much higher regard), along with the fascination of connoisseurship of antiques, which Craig Clunas notes to be “an essential form of consumption which was central to the maintenance of elite status” [2]. This observation is important because this materialism was exported to Europe alongside porcelain. For example, the influx of porcelain into European markets notably led to the “maladie de porcelain” (the porcelain malady), where many royals and nobles, such as Augustus the Strong, Louis XIV and the Medici family, to spend fortunes in its patronage and collections. In

fact, at the end of the 18th century, an estimated 70 million pieces had been imported into Europe [3]. Thus birthed the wunderkabinetts (Wonder cabinets), where the affluent classes and professions, such as nobility and doctors, collected exotic goods as demonstrations of wealth. The importance of these advents is its reflection of an increasingly commodity influenced European society. This is further substantiated when considering later porcelain pieces exported from China, such as “Figure 1”, have later come to include European motifs such as the English flag and Caucasian figures to satisfy European demand.



Figure 1 Jingdezhen made plate made for English and Scottish market [4]

Not only was Europe impacted culturally through interactions with the Orient, the transmission of literature during this era also instigated a theological impact of Confucianism to European society. Through the efforts of Jesuit missionaries such as Prospero Intorcetta’s translation of Confucian ideals and texts into Latin in his magnum opus *Life and Works of Confucius*. The importance of his work is demonstrated through the influence of Confucianism on a number of philosophers within this era. For example, Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz heavily featured Confucian ideals within his works, as he advocated for elements such as “simple substance” and “pre-established harmony” [5], which coincided with the importance that Confucianism placed upon ‘harmonization’, which Chenyang Li noted to be “the most cherished ideal in Chinese culture” [6]. Confucianism from the transmission of Chinese literature also introduced the aspect of morality and virtuosity to Enlightenment thinkers, as Voltaire famously advocated for the ethic and rationality of

Confucianism to be applied as a model for European sociopolitical institutions, claiming that “Confucius has no interest in falsehood...used no delusions” [7]. More evidence of this ideological transmission can be seen during, and a little beyond the first French Revolution. For example, within the revolutionary document of Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen, many of its articles such as 4, “liberty consists in the freedom to do everything which injures no one else” and 6, “liberty is the power that belongs to man to do whatever is not injurious to the rights of others” all stem from the Confucian ideal “what you do not want done to yourself, do not do to others” [8] that Intorcetta originally helped export. Therefore, the movement and import of Chinese literature during this period also helped facilitate Europe’s socio-cultural restructuring.

### 3. SOCIAL RECONSTRUCTION

Commodities traded from East Asia notably also helped facilitate much of the social changes within Europe during this period. Although silk, having been featured in European trade since the 2nd century from the silk road, continued to influence European society throughout the Age of Discovery. The most prominent way where features into Europe’s social revolution of this era silk is through its importance in Europe’s changing trends of fashion and desire to demonstrate wealth and prestige. Being the “most expensive and prestigious of all woven textiles” [9], combined with the increasingly materialistic state of European society, silk largely began to be incorporated into the clothing of the higher classes again (after the Roman empire denounced such fashion as immoral [10]) in the 15th century. An example of this can be seen early in the period in the sumptuary laws passed by the Byzantines among other European states of the period prohibited “individuals positioned below the elite from wearing luxury textiles or by curbing the latter’s [lower socio-economic classes] display in the urban environment” [11]. This legislature is important as it clearly defines the upper and lower classes from each other in terms of silk, which, as established, was considered to be the most popular “luxury textile” among the wealthy. This trend continues on through the middle of the period, as Queen Elizabeth’s 1562 proclamation of “none shall wear in his apparel any silk of the color purple...except dukes and marquises” [12]. 17th century writers also denote the importance of clothing and the role of silk in signifying the status of nobility, as in the

Merchant of Venice, Shakespeare stereotypes an English noble as “he bought his doublet in Italy, his round hose in France, his Bonnet in Germany” [13]. This is significant because the all the clothing articles mentioned primarily consists of silk, or embroidered silk as its primary material, hence cementing the association of silk and nobility. Later on in the period, silk Asiatic silk also features favorably with the French nobility, as seen in “Figure 2” (habit a la Francais) and “Figure 3” (sans culottes), the difference in the affluent, represented by “Figure 1” and the artisans or lower social classes, represented by “Figure 2” are the difference of silk breeches, giving the artisans the affectionate nickname the “sans culottes” (without breeches), demonstrating the influence of silk upon shaping the class difference of European society within the Age of Discovery.



Figure 2 Suit of Count Axel Fersen the Younger [14].



Figure 3 A sans-culottes with a halberd [15].

Influx of commodities such as spices, tea and sugar into Europe notably coincides with the gastronomical developments with European society and the subsequent function of food and food etiquette as means of class distinction. Braudel, in *Civilization and Capitalism 15-18<sup>th</sup> Century*, noted that culinary tradition stressed the quantity of food instead of the sophistication of preparation as hallmarks of fine dining [16]. However, Mennell postulates that such forms of social distinction are too easily replicated by the lower classes, as increasing food consumption was a wasteful and unsustainable solution [17]. Therefore, the introduction of spices into European cuisine was popularized, as professor Marijke Van der Veen (Leicester University) notes, “spices give the elites opportunity for extravagant display” [18]. This is seen through the immense amounts of spices seen in 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> century cookbooks, as spices from the spice trade featured heavily in the majority of recipes. For example, Mestre Robert’s cookbook for the king of Naples featured 200 recipes, of which 154 contained sugar, 125 with cinnamon, 76 ginger, 54 saffron and 48 pepper [19]. The lavish appetites of nobilities can also be represented by the 1475 marriage of the Duke of Bavaria-Landshut (nicknamed George the Rich), wherein 386 pounds of pepper were ordered with 286lbs of ginger, 207 lbs. of saffron among large quantities of other spices such as cloves and nutmegs [20]. Aside from

the variation in taste, the new luxury foods that the spices helped engineer also created new etiquettes. To further distinguish the social classes, an “order” for the preparation and the serving of dishes was established [21], popularizing the need for the upper classes to be familiar with the knowledge of the order of food, along with the necessary etiquettes of handing cutleries. These changes in culinary culture than represents the coincidence of spice and the dietary revolution of European gastronomy, plus its sophistication within the period.

Similarly, tea also played a similar role as spices in defining the upper echelons of European societies, notably the English. The Duchess of Bedford, similarly imbrued etiquettes into the correct time of enjoying an afternoon tea, which was to “begin between 4 and 4.30 in the afternoon and should last just one hour” [22], hence gentrifying the action of consumption similarly to the introduction of the order for which food is served. Throughout the 17-18<sup>th</sup> century, tea is transformed from an exotic product consumed only by the affluent into the emblem of a nation. Initially, tea, similar to spices, was accessible to only the wealthier classes, as establishments such as coffee houses (which sold tea) were usually frequented by wealthy men for business [23], however, by the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, tea began to help define the English national identity due to its heavy consumption in the commonplace. As Sigmond advances in *Tea: Its Effects, Medicinal and Moral*, the consumption of tea “influences all parts of an Englishman’s existence: moral physical and social; individual and national” [24]. This is important in displaying the extent of how much tea as a commodity was constructed to function as a staple in the English national identity. However, the dichotomy of establishing such an important value upon an Asiatic product is noted by Julie Fromer, noting that “configuring tea as a domestic, English commodity...raised fears about basing ideals of...national identity on a foreign product” [25]. This contradiction is then important in demonstrating the overlap between the movement

of oriental commodities, in this case the *camellia sinensis*, to European history during the Age of Discovery through tea’s importance in developing the English national identity.

#### 4. SPICE, TEA AND IMPERIALISM

The matriculation of spices and tea into Europe also strongly correlates with the history of European imperialism, as Vasco de Gama initially said upon setting foot in Calicut (India), “we have come to seek Christians and spices” [26]. Thus, the infamous Dutch East India company (VOC) was established on the basis of the demand for spice, as in 1599, Dutch investors were reportedly getting 400 percent returns in their spice investment [26], combined with the mercantile spirit of the era, led to the formation of the VOC in 1602. This is significant because the popularity, and subsequent demand for spices, drove VOC’s corporate imperialism in the East Indies, as throughout the period, settlements and posts were established in Indonesia, the Indian subcontinent, Japan, Taiwan, Malaysia, Thailand and Vietnam, being an evident precursor to the later expansionist aims of European states. Furthermore, as demonstrated by figures compiled by O’ Rourke and Williamson (“Table 1”, “Table 2”, “Table 3”), from the establishment of the VOC to 1649, Dutch East India imports from their Asian settlements such as Gujarat accounted for the most growth in volume of goods traded within European intercontinental trade [27]. A similar institution, the Casa da India, started financing Portuguese armadas to exploit the rich spice trade in 1497, sponsoring Vasco de Gama’s journey around the Cape of Good Hope, as well as the later Canton colony in China, all to establish monopoly over Asiatic commerce and to wrestle the spice monopoly away from the Ottoman empire.

Table 1. Intercontinental and World Trade Growth in 1500-1549 [28]

Trade Route/Type	Growth Per Annum (%)	Denomination
Portugal to/from Asia	1.37	Tonnage
Southeast Asia spice exports	2.53	Exports (1940US\$)
Cloth exports from London	1.84	Export volume
Shipping volume to/from Spanish Indies	3.94	Toneladas
Average	2.42	

**Table 2. Intercontinental and World Trade Growth in 1550-1599**

Portugal to/from Asia	0.94	Tonnage
Southeast Asia spice exports	2.31	Exports (1940USD)
Cloth exports from London	0.10	Export volume
Shipping Volume to/from Spanish Indies	1.22	Toneladas
Sugar exports from Span colonies	-6.11	Weight
Sugar exports from Portuguese Colonies	0.68	Weight
Hide exports from Span Colonies	1.73	Number
Average	0.12	

**Table 3. Intercontinental and World Trade Growth in 1600-1649**

Portugal to/from Asia	-3.36	Tonnage
Southeast Asia Spice Exports	0.71	Exports (1940USD)
Dutch East India to Asia	1.62	Tonnage
Dutch East India from Asia	2.17	Tonnage
Dutch East India imports from Asia	2.71	Imports(florins)
Dutch East India from Coromandel	2.76	Exports(florins)
Dutch East India from Gujarat	1.65	Exports(florins)
English tobacco imports from Amer	0.12	Imports(kilos)
English East India to Asia	2.99	Exports (£)
Shipping volume to/from Spanish Indies	-1.7	Toneladas
Sugar exports from Span colonies	0.15	Weight
Sugar exports from Port colonies	0.92	Weight
Hide exports from Span colonies	-0.96	Number
Average	0.75	

The importance of tea as a catalyst to the expansion of the English empire should also be noted. The minor development of putting sugar into tea fostered British imperial aims in Asia [29], as the popularity of the complementary pair soon led to increased demand for both products. However, due to the protectionist policies of China at the era, companies during the 18th century did not conduct direct tea trade with China, resulting in an imbalance of tea prices between 3.2 to 50 shillings in 1660s and 5 to 20 shillings in the 1690s [30]. This is important because one of the reasons for the later British conquest, and subsequent defense of India was the attempt of the British East India Company to break the Portuguese, and now Dutch duopoly over trade within the region, which subsequently gave them access to set up tea plantations and to orchestrate the smuggling of opium into China as an attempt to stabilize their export revenue lost to tea trade, inciting the infamous Opium wars shortly after the end of the 18th century. Therefore, the movement of tea and its permeation in British society can be married to the developing impetus for subsequent British expansions later in the Age of Imperialism.

## 5. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this paper set out to discuss, explore, and attempt to reconstruct important events and turning points of the Age of Discovery history via the movement and trade of Asiatic

commodities. In results, first, a cultural impact was noted, due to the movement of exotic, collectible goods such as porcelain. Then, the transmission of Chinese literature, through efforts from people such as Prospero Intorcetta's translation of Confucian texts, influenced Europe's theological development, as Confucian values were evidently factored into the European sphere of philosophical thinkers, as well as intellectual movements such as the Enlightenment. Second, the impact of Asian commodities to the social restructuring of Europe was also examined, as many exotic materials such as silk helped define social classes, the vast import of spices brought about a gastronomical revolution as well as redefine class hierarchies in relation to dining, and the importance of tea in establishing the English national identity, which started to develop during the conclusion of 18th century. Lastly, spices and tea were examined in their importance in developing the European impetus for imperial expansion, especially in the formation of the first multinational corporations such as the VOC (Dutch East India) and the English East India Company. Hence, history of Europe's Age of Discovery was able to be recreated through the perspective of Asiatic trade.

## AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

This paper is independently completed by Qianyi Sun.

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