

Beyond the Silk Road: Manila Galleons, Trade Networks, Global Goods, and the Integration of Atlantic and Pacific Markets (1680-1840)

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Abstract

This project offers a comparative and polycentric approach to the connection of trade nodes in the Asian, American, African, and European markets in the early modern period. These analyses reevaluate the great divergence debate by presenting new case studies at the local scale and observing the impact of global goods and changes in consumer behaviour connecting local markets of the Pacific and Atlantic area. In this manner, we explore the circulation and consumption of Chinese goods in the Americas and in Europe, as well as in the African slave market through the Royal Company of the Philippines. Conversely, we also analyse the impact of the introduction of Western goods (of American and European origin) into China.

Keywords: global history; Spanish empire; Qing empire; economic history; consumption; trade networks; China; Europe

Scholarship that privileges a transnational approach to the realities of trade networks between China, the Americas, and Europe in the modern period can benefit from a methodology that foregrounds the complexity of cultural exchange as well as the role of previously overlooked participants. This volume brings together essays that deploy an

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innovative critical perspective, based on a pioneering archival strategy. The Global Encounters between China and Europe: Trade Networks, Consumption and Cultural Exchanges Project (GECEM), based in Seville and Shanghai and with members from Europe, Asia, and the Americas, has developed an innovative methodology built on the process of clustering new empirical evidence on geostrategic locations to analyse complex socioeconomic systems. This approach elides the paradigm of much current scholarship, based on the imprecise notion of “national borders” as principal geographical and spatial units of comparison, which has produced inaccurate conclusions.¹ Specifically, then, we examine information on port cities (particularly Canton, Macau, Manila, Buenos Aires, Cartagena de Indias, Havana) as the point of departure for this discussion of the integration of Pacific and Atlantic markets. These port cities, most of them Spanish South American-controlled territories, were arguably key sites of the complex economic and cultural realities of the time. Focus on them has been largely absent from previous scholarship.

These important entrepôts in early modern China and in South American regions were part of a complex, mostly unregulated, and not institutionally or state controlled, economic structure. This polycentric trade node system integrated Asian, American, and European markets. To understand the setting requires us to adopt a *longue durée* chronology, from 1680 when the Kangxi emperor established the custom offices in Chinese ports and French merchants took over the Mediterranean market, to 1840 and the outbreak of the Opium Wars in China.² The larger context included major historical events, such as the War of the Spanish Succession that ended with the arrival of the French Bourbon dynasty to the throne. Importantly as well, Seville lost its monopoly in the Atlantic market to the detriment of the port of Cadiz. In China, the arrival of the Qianlong emperor to the Beijing court marked the beginning of a period of stiff

economic interventionism, that established the Canton system [*yīkǒu tōngshāng* 一口通商], which mandated that Canton could be the only port in China allowed to trade with foreign powers.³

Foregrounding information and new case studies about trade networks and negotiations in and around port cities allows scholars to re-envision cross-chronological and historical categories in their comparison of China and Europe. The studies included in this volume, therefore, focus on the circulation of global goods, trade networks, and circuits of information (i.e., trade letters, postal offices) in southern China, the Americas, and Europe within this historical frame, noting its influence on economic growth and the great divergence. Specifically, we focus on the diverse trade routes connecting the Mediterranean, Atlantic, and South China markets that led to the introduction of Chinese goods (i.e., silk, porcelain, and tea) into European and American markets, and of European goods (i.e., clocks, wine, and glasses, among others) into southern China.

Historical data on China comes from the Arquivo Histórico de Macau and the First Historical Archives of China (FHAC) in Beijing. These contain trade records, merchant letters, and imperial decrees, among others, that serve to analyse trade networks and the circulation of global goods in Macau, and the provinces of Guangdong and Fujian, the main coastal regions for international commerce from 1680 to 1840. The most valuable archives for information on trade in Europe and the Americas are the Archivo General de Indias (AGI) in Seville (Spain), the Archivo General de la Nación in Argentina, and the Archivo Nacional de Cuba. These key trade cities of the Americas connected with the western Mediterranean, forming the main economic axis, a vital artery, of eighteenth-century Europe and the Americas that integrated Eastern and Western markets.⁴

Our methodology is not based on a simple statistical recovery of data, as with conventional scholarship over the past few decades.⁵ Focusing on information about and around port cities, rather than merely on locations identified by complicated and shifting national boundaries, has allowed us to tease out previously undiscovered elements that reveal the complexity of trade at the time. Clustering data on port cities led us to ask new questions about the forms and key players in this exchange, as well as uncover important networks. A bottom-up approach to these trade networks, the so-called *jeux d'échelles* (playing with scales), blends microhistory and global history. This perspective supports the belief that global history is insufficient for explanations of events and systems beyond that of national narratives.⁶ The *jeux d'échelles* approach allowed us to create clusters of new historical data and cross-references Chinese and Western sources. These clusters then served as core empirical evidence for new case studies. Social network analysis supported our examination the circulation of global goods and the formation of long-distance trade partnerships. Notable among these were the networks of Chinese merchants in the Philippines (the *sangleys*), the merchants of Canton and Macau, Jesuits in Macau acting as traders, and South American trade groups in Argentina, Peru, or Brazil.⁷

To implement solid comparisons through a bottom-up approach, it became necessary to cluster data of diverse origins related to trader names, typologies of goods, circuits in which these goods were commercialised, and spaces and chronologies in which trade networks operated and were transformed over time. This methodology constitutes a breakthrough in the field of global (economic) history through its interdisciplinary framework (incorporating disciplines such as economics, sociology, sinology, digital humanities, international relations, among others) and possibilities to apply Big Data to historical analysis and comparative case studies between China,

Europe, and the Americas for the early modern period.⁸ Sources can be cross-referenced, leading to an empirically validated new global history that blends the local and the macro perspectives. This opens up the possibility of re-evaluating the great divergence debate from a local framework.

Fundamentally, this method illuminates the operations of complex systems such as the polycentric trade networks and informal institutions in South China, Atlantic regions, and western Mediterranean markets during the time of the so-called early globalisation, from 1400 to 1800.⁹ Specifically, clustering data through comparisons on trade, consumption, and fiscal registers within a local scale serves to integrate and understand the diverse sources from Chinese, European, and American historical archives. As the contributors to this collection of essays argue, we have to re-examine the conventional analytical frame that contends that market integration and early globalisation began in 1820.¹⁰ Accordingly, their research interrogates debatable and unreliable quantitative methods using macro-economic indicators and statistics such as GDP (gross domestic product) per capita.¹¹ The new comparisons and cross-referencing of data allowed us to re-order and analyse the historical Big Data contained in the Chinese and European archives.¹² The correction of biased historical data was enacted through proper quantification and analysis that cross-referenced historical sources of a different nature and origin.¹³

This process led to our research hypothesis: that the economic growth in South China and Europe from the late seventeenth to eighteenth century derived fundamentally from the circulation of global goods and trade networks.¹⁴ We argue that information on the circulation and consumption of goods serves as a more valid economic indicator than the GDP traditionally used by economic historians. Each of the essays in this collection focuses on a specific case study from the clusters built out of

the empirical evidence gathered from the archives. Together, they validate the usefulness of this methodology for a more accurate analysis of the self-regulating institutions, social networks, circulation of global goods and information, and smuggling activities that characterised the nonlinear markets of early modern China, Europe, and the Americas. These case studies show the advantages of introducing new comparisons and data analysis, as it foregrounds a comparison of trade and consumption information with eighteenth-century fiscal sources, trade records, and probate-inventories.

The essay by Manuel Perez-Garcia and Jin Lei analyses overseas trade and consumption in south China through the implementation of the Canton system [*yīkǒu tōngshāng* 一口通商]. This approach re-evaluates the so-called “High Qing” age [*shèng qīng* 盛清] in a period of high interventionism such as in Qianlong’s reign, where the court of Beijing aimed to control trade and smuggling activities.¹⁵ Clustering data from trade records, imperial decrees, and regulations from FHAC, and the Local Gazetteers of China [*zhōngguó dìfāng zhì* 中国地方志], revealed that the “non-state” agents and merchants who bypassed official supervision actually undermined state authority.¹⁶ Their focus on the demand side serves as a valuable indicator of economic growth, wealth distribution, and prosperity as it identifies new patterns of consumption, mainly in the middle-low social groups.¹⁷

Nadia Fernández-de-Pinedo scrutinizes the demand side and trade balances by presenting a case study of consumers’ purchases and choices in eighteenth-century Cuba by focusing on imported goods from Havana’s balance of trade. Looking at trade statistics, her paper explores the dependence of the Caribbean markets in general, and Cuba in particular, on external markets and the introduction of Chinese goods.¹⁸ She examines the relation supply side and trade dependency between the metropole and

peripheral areas of the Spanish empire. The geostrategic position of Cuba in the Caribbean made the colony a vital entrepôt of the Spanish empire for the redistribution of goods, formation of trade networks and informal institutions, and a source for fiscal revenues. As a trade and economic linchpin that integrated Atlantic and Pacific markets, Cuba made the Caribbean a crossroad of political disputes and international relation conflicts. The Spanish empire's weakness at the dawn of the nineteenth century made it difficult for them to control trade routes and markets, leading to rampant contraband and smuggling activities. Earlier Spanish decrees on free trade in the second half of the eighteenth century had similarly been unable to regulate such activities. This intertwining of trade routes and circulation of Asian, American, and European goods made the Caribbean, and Cuba in particular, a hybrid culture and society shaped by the flow of global goods and emulation of diverse patterns of consumption.

Similarly, using trade and ship records from the AGI and Archivo General de la Nación de Argentina, Antonio Ibarra analyses the implications of the Royal Company of the Philippines in the global trade by examining the slave operations between Africa and Spanish America in the Río de la Plata slave market in the late eighteenth century.¹⁹ Ibarra's contribution outlines the incapacity of the Spanish empire to control and regulate trade in the colonies, as well as its inability to eradicate contraband and competition with foreign powers. Enslaved persons and a wide range of goods were a valuable medium of exchange in Lima and other Peruvian regions, which Spain tried to control through the Royal Company. However, contraband persisted and competition increased in the exchange of European goods, enslaved Africans, American silver, and East Asian (Chinese) goods. Ultimately, the inefficiency of the Spanish administration in its South American colonies, stiff competition from Britain, and the growing

economic power of local elites and merchants fragmented the Spanish empire, making it difficult to control the global trafficking of slaves and goods.

Omar Svriz-Wucherer's focus on Qing China and imperial Spain from the late seventeenth to eighteenth century presents a case study of Jesuit networks as the main economic agents in the circulation of musk, among other goods, in the Pacific markets through the trade axis Canton-Macau-Manila.²⁰ His case study is based on the examination of trade nodes of Qing China such as Macau-Canton, the Jesuits' role as "non-state" agents who participated in this global trade, and their ties with the Manila galleons.²¹ Arguably, data on these "non-state" agents and complex trade networks in Manila provide key information for a micro-scale analysis of this unregulated trade system and the concomitant weakened capacity of the state for control in the peripheries of the Spanish empire. This demonstrates how "non-state" agents, such as the Jesuits, built a powerful polycentric network in peripheries of the Spanish and Qing empires, controlling trade and allowing the global circulation of Chinese goods such as silk, porcelain, and tea, but also musk and amber, among others.²²

Since global (economic) history scholarship has largely ignored the development of trade in the Americas, comparisons between South China markets and South America stand out as unique case studies.²³ Rocio Moreno Cabanillas's essay on the postal office in Cartagena de Indias as a node connecting Pacific, Caribbean, and Atlantic markets, reveals how institutions and groups of powers efficiently managed information and regulated markets. She discusses a series of postal modifications introduced by the Bourbons upon to ascension to the Spanish throne, which sought to strengthen the connection between the metropole and the periphery, which was usually disrupted by distance and the lack of reliable, regular communication. However, powerful local elites hindered the centralised Cartagena postal system because they controlled and

monopolised the circulation of information. Negotiation between central powers in the court of Madrid and local elites in the colonies was crucial. The exercise of power, control of information, and its dynamic circulation through mediators and agents such as informants, bureaucrats, and correspondents became a means of domination, sovereignty, and leverage in negotiations between central and local elites.

The GECEM Project deconstructs national narratives on the New Silk Road political strategy by People's Republic of China scholarship, therefore challenging conventional processes of archival interpretation by its method, clustering data as a comparative strategy to deal accurately with large amounts of information and scattered sources. Through such comparisons, along with mining new data and examining new case studies, the circulation of global goods and trade networks can be better located within the foundations of a new global history.

Identifying and deciding before-hand what type of data we need from the sources and for what purpose has allowed us to unveil non-official trade routes, merchant networks and agents, as well as typologies of goods (mainly of Chinese origin) that fostered the accumulation of American silver in hands of south China local elites. This demonstrates the inefficiency of the Qing and Spanish empires' strategies of trade regulation. The use of new Chinese and western sources and the implementation of new methodologies, as it has been done in this collection of essays, challenges historians as many global history studies have been negligent in comparing Chinese sources with Western (European and American) ones. In the historical sources all data cannot be used to solve historians' questions; we have identified what data are relevant and how these data can be analysed. Such interdisciplinary approach goes in line with the directions of the new global history based on the use of novel sources, methodologies and case studies.

This approach has allowed us to implement an accurate analysis of Qing China's provincial areas, focusing on markets cities such as Nanjing, Suzhou, Hangzhou, Huizhou, and Guangzhou, to investigate the connection between local markets in south China and those in the peripheries of the Spanish empire in the Philippines and the Americas. The case of silk as a key Chinese good demanded in western markets provides an important example. Our study invalidates the traditional idea that more silk was produced locally in western markets, the so-called import substitutions, than the original silk from local Chinese markets. From small villages and towns spread around south China provinces, different types of silk of low quality were produced for export to Western markets. In the Manila galleons and ship cargoes, whose historical records can be found in abundance at the AGI, low-quality silks such as *sayas*, *lanquines*, *elefantes*, *cedazos* made of silk, *sayasa*, *pequines*, *segríes*, *tafetanes*, *gorgoranes*, *damascos*, *wampu* silk (commercialised from Whampoa in Canton) among other types, were distributed to American and European localities such Lima-Callao, Veracruz, Havana, Buenos Aires, Cadiz, Seville, Cartagena, and Marseille, and were identified in trade records and probate-inventories as originally from China.

These data are integrated and compared in order to identify how these Chinese original silks were traded by American and European networks and introduced in end-markets such as Cadiz, Seville, Lisbon, or Marseille, where local demand for these products rose during the eighteenth century. This examination goes on to prove the incapacity of Qing China and Bourbon Spain, respectively, to regulate trade through the Canton system and the Royal Company of Philippines. It also discovered royal decrees that forbade the introduction of Chinese goods to foster domestic production of silk, for the case of Spain, and control overseas trade and local elites for the case of China.

Notes

¹ Vries, *State, economy and the Great Divergence*; Duchesne, *The Uniqueness of Western Civilization*; Goldstone, *Why Europe*.

² Sawyer, "Time after Time"; Levi, "On Microhistory," 93–113; Burke, *New Perspectives on Historical Writing*.

³ Van Dyke, *Merchants of Canton*; González de Arce, *El Negocio Fiscal*.

⁴ Ibarra, "El Mundo en una Nuez," 485–518; Ibarra, Alcantara, and Jumar, eds. *Actores Sociales*.

⁵ Lee, and Campbell, "China Multi-generational Panel"; Broadberry, Campbell, Klein, Overton, and van Leeuwen, *British Economic Growth*; van Zanden, Baten, Foldvari, and van Leeuwen, "Changing Shape," 279–297.

⁶ Brewer, "Microhistory," 87–109; Berg, "Sea Otters and Iron," 50–82.

⁷ de Vries, "Playing with Scales," 23–36; Revel, *Jeux d'échelles*; Anderson, "Cacique Democracy," 3–31.

⁸ Mostern, "Historical Gazetteers," 39–46; Manning, *Big Data in History*.

⁹ Flynn, "Big History," 80–106; Frank, *Re-Orient*.

¹⁰ O'Brien, "Was the First Industrial Revolution," 1–53; Pomeranz, *The Great Divergence*; Ma and Rubin, "Paradox of Power," 277–294; Cox, "Political Institutions," 724–755; Broadberry, Guan, and Li, "China, Europe, and the Great Divergence," 955–1000; O'Rourke and Williamson, "Once More," 109–117.

¹¹ Allen, Bassino, Ma, et al. "Wages, prices, and Living Standards," 8–38. Maddison, *Chinese Economic Performance*.

Bolt, Inklaar, de Jong, et al. "Rebasing "Maddison," 1–70.

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- ¹² Kantabutra, Owens, Ames, et al. “Using the Newly Created ILE,” 39–58. Codd, “A Relational Model,” 377–387. Kantabutra, Owens, and Crespo Solana, “Intentionally-linked Entities,” 57–78. Crespo Solana, *Spatio-Temporal Narratives*.
- ¹³ O’Brien and Deng, “Quantifying the Quantifiable,” 215–223.
- ¹⁴ Perez-Garcia, “Consumption of Chinese Goods,” 15–36.
- ¹⁵ Perez-Garcia, *Vicarious Consumers*. Perez-Garcia, *Global History with Chinese Characteristics*.
- ¹⁶ Mostern, *Dividing the Realm*; Wong, *China Transformed*.
- ¹⁷ McKendrick, “Consumer Revolution,” 9–33; McKendrick, Brewer, and Plumb, eds. *The Birth of a Consumer Society*.
- ¹⁸ Fernández-de-Pinedo, “Tax Collection in Spain,” 101–110. Andrés Ucendo and Limberger, *Taxation and Debt*.
- ¹⁹ Moutoukias, “Instituciones, Comercio y Globalización,” 141–182.
- ²⁰ Yun-Casalilla, *Iberian World Empires*. Svriz-Wucherer, *Resistencia y Negociación*.
- ²¹ Chaunu, *Les Philippines*.
- ²² de Sousa, *The Portuguese Slave Trade*. Díaz de Seabra, *A Misericórdia de Macau*. De Sousa, “The Jewish Presence in China and Japan.”
- ²³ Belich, Darwin, Frenz, et al. *The Prospect of Global History*. Riello and Tirthankar, *Global Economic History*; Riello, “Introduction,” 1–15.

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