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Silk, porcelain and lacquer : China and Japan and their trade with Western Europe and the New World, 1500-1644. A survey of documentary and material evidence

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[Chapter V]

Conclusions

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The great maritime voyages of exploration launched by the Iberian kingdoms of Portugal and Spain at the end of the fifteenth century led to the emergence of a global long-distance trade system between Europe, the New World, Africa and Asia via both the Atlantic and Pacific oceans. This resulted in the trade of a variety of luxury manufactured goods from Asia, that were much sought after in Renaissance Europe, among them Chinese silk and porcelain. Lisbon became the most important commercial marketplace in Europe for Asian luxury goods, rivalling Seville, Antwerp, Venice and Genoa.

Portuguese trade relations with China began in the early sixteenth century. When trade relations were banned, the Portuguese continue to trade clandestinely at various places off the south China coast. By the mid-sixteenth century, Japan was linked to this global trade system. Portuguese merchants and missionaries of the Society of Jesus actively participated in the silk trade between Macao and Japan. Japanese lacquer objects were made to order for the Jesuits residing in Japan, and later for Portuguese merchants, who began to import them into Portugal. The Portuguese, based in Macao, had a monopoly in the Asian trade until the Spanish settled in the Philippines, founding Manila in 1571. The Spanish began a regular trans-Pacific trade with the vast Spanish colonial empire in the New World that encompassed the viceroyalties of New Spain and Peru. By the turn of the sixteenth century, the desire to participate in the highly profitable trade in East Asian spices and Asian manufactured goods drove the countries of northern Europe to search for a route to Asia, and this put them in direct competition with the Iberian trade monopoly. The trading companies formed in the Northern Netherlands/Dutch Republic and England to trade directly with Asia via the route round the Cape of Good Hope, would partly gain control of the Asian maritime trade in the seventeenth century. The European-Asian encounters and the historically unprecedented growth of direct intercontinental maritime trade between Europe, the New World and Asia prompted an economic interdependence between these distant regions of the world, and ultimately led to a continuous flow of cultural and artistic influences in all directions and a wider interest in non-Western cultures.

This research study has focused on the prolific early European trade and consumption of three Asian manufactured goods: Chinese silk and porcelain, and Japanese lacquer and has shown how the material cultures of late Ming China and Momoyama/early Edo Japan became inextricably linked with the West. A new approach was adopted for this multidisciplinary research. Multiple sources were consulted in search for documentary and material evidence. These included a wide variety of published primary and secondary sources, which contained information relating to the actual trade as well as to the varied types and quantities of these Asian manufactured goods brought by Europeans as merchandise, private consignments or gifts. These sources also provided information relating to the commercial networks through which these Asian goods circulated, and the way in which they were acquired, used and appreciated in the Portuguese, Spanish, Dutch and English societies in Western Europe as well as in the multi-ethnic societies of the European colonies in the New World.

The study of the trade in Chinese silk proved to be the most challenging. The fact that silk does rarely survive in archaeological contexts and that extant silks of this period are exceedingly scarce made it difficult to compare the information provided by textual sources with surviving examples that would have served as tangible evidence of the trade in silks and its consumption in Western Europe and the colonies in the New World. Nevertheless, an attempt was made to give an idea of how the various silks traded may have looked like. In the case of the Dutch silk trade in the early seventeenth century, however, this approach proved largely unsuccessful. The fact that I am not able to read Dutch did not allow me to consult Dutch primary sources, but obviously this is an area that needs attention in future academic research.

Textual sources brought to light some new and surprising information concerning the use of porcelain in Western Europe in the sixteenth century. From the late sixteenth century onwards, this was mainly *Kraak* porcelain, a type specially made for export, which dominated the ceramic cargoes imported into both Western Europe and the New World. Portuguese and English textual sources have demonstrated that the custom of displaying a large quantity of porcelain in a separate architectural space or in a room specially created for that purpose began in Western Europe much earlier than previously thought, and not, as is generally assumed, in the Dutch Republic. In 1563, more than 100 pieces of porcelain were listed among the contents of the dowager Duchess's 'House of glass and porcelain' at Vila Viçosa in central Portugal while the 1605 inventory of the furnishings of Wardour Castle in Wiltshire lists 154 pieces of porcelain displayed in the 'possylen house'.

Another interesting find refers to the terminology employed in northwestern Europe to refer to *Kraak* porcelain. Two English inventories from Exeter, dating to 1596 and 1598, have provided the earliest written references known thus far of the use of the terms 'carracke' and 'carricke', i.e. *Kraak* porcelain. In Dutch sources, the earliest use of the terms referring to *Kraak* porcelain date to 1638 and it is clear that these terms were already commonly used in northern Europe around 1600. No references to such terms have yet been found in Portuguese or Spanish textual sources.

For the research study of the trade in porcelain, information from textual sources was combined with a vast quantity of material evidence provided by marine and terrestrial archaeological finds from Portuguese, Spanish, Dutch and English shipwrecks, survival campsites, colonial settlements in Asia, the New World and the Caribbean, and their respective mother countries in Western Europe; as well as finds from Chinese junks and kilns sites in China. In addition, research trips were undertaken by the author to study archaeological material recovered from kiln sites at Jingdezhen and Zhangzhou in China, and from shipwrecks in Mozambique, Bermuda and the Dominican Republic, which is still mostly unpublished. Although I am not an archaeologist, important new evidence came to light through the first hand study of the porcelain pieces and shards yielded from these shipwrecks. The Portuguese ship *Espadarte*, which sank in 1558 on the island of Mozambique, provided material evidence of large-scale porcelain shipments destined to Lisbon, about a year after the Portuguese established themselves in Macao. In addition, it showed that the Portuguese mostly acquired blue-and-white porcelain of open Chinese forms and decoration, ranging from high to rather low quality, that was readily available for trade at the time. The shipwrecks in the Caribbean provided material evidence of the Spanish trans-Atlantic trade in porcelain between the viceroyalty of New Spain and Spain, which was still largely unknown. The *San Pedro*, which sank off the island of Bermuda in 1595, while sailing from Cartagena (present-day Colombia) to Spain, demonstrated that by the end of the sixteenth century, when the Crowns of Spain and Portugal were united, a small quantity of various types of fine and coarser blue-and-white porcelain reached Spain not only via Lisbon but also via Seville. The *San Antonio* and the *El Galgo*, which sank off Bermuda while en route to Spain in 1621 and 1639 respectively, both demonstrate that small quantities of blue-and-white porcelain continued to be imported into Spain during the first half of the seventeenth century, most probably as personal consignments or as private trade. The most important and exciting new evidence was provided by the *Nuestra Señora de la Limpia y Pura Concepción*, which sank on the north coast of present-day Dominican Republic in 1641 while en route from Veracruz to Seville. The wreck site yielded a few new types of Jingdezhen blue-and-white porcelain that had not been recorded in earlier Spanish shipwrecks of either the trans-Pacific or trans-Atlantic trade routes. These included an unrecorded type of *Kraak* plate with a shallow central ring cut into the porcelain body, most probably intended to hold a cup; and tall, bell shaped blue-and-white cups with or without handles decorated in the so-called Transitional style. Visual sources attest that such cups were used in Spain for the consumption of hot chocolate and despite the fact that these cups do not fit perfectly into the central ring of the *Kraak* plates, it is possible that they would have been used together as early models of *mancerinas*. Another surprising find was a *Blanc de chine* Buddhist Lion incense stick holder, which proves that the Spanish began acquiring *Blanc de chine* porcelain about ten years earlier than previously thought. These finds have clearly shown that the field of marine and terrestrial archaeology must be part of any future academic research of the European trade in porcelain to Western Europe and/or the New World, which still has so many questions unanswered, particularly relating to trade in the sixteenth century.

Textual sources and porcelain material from marine and terrestrial archaeological excavations has also demonstrated that although the thicker and somewhat coarser porcelain from the private kilns of Zhangzhou was imported into Western Europe and the European colonies in the New World in lesser quantities in comparison with that of Jingdezhen during the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, it was much more widely distributed, appreciated and used than previously acknowledged.

Visual sources, including paintings and prints, served to illustrate the consumption and different uses of porcelain among these societies, and whenever possible these were tentatively matched with extant porcelain pieces from public and private collections around the world. By combining the information provided by scattered textual, material and visual sources it has been possible to gain a better understanding of how the Chinese porcelain potters and painters, especially those at Jingdezhen and Zhangzhou, responded to the increasing European demand of porcelain, and how that changed over time with the shift of European maritime trade and power in Asia. It has become clear that research in primary sources continues to be important in this field, but it is imperative to complement it with these other sources of information.

Through the study of the trade in Chinese silk and porcelain, and Japanese lacquer to the Spanish colonies in the New World, incorporating both documentary and material evidence, it has been possible to gain a better understanding of the importance of this Spanish colonial market not only as a direct consumer of these Asian goods, but also as a distributor via the trans-Atlantic trade route to both the Caribbean and Spain. The fact that Chinese silks and porcelains, as well as some Japanese lacquers, were sent as private consignments or gifts to individuals of the secular and religious elites in Spain helped to satisfy the growing demand for such Asian manufactured goods in Spain, which appears to have increased by the second decade of the seventeenth century. It has become clear that the distribution, appreciation and use of these Asian goods among the multi-ethnic societies of the Spanish colonies in the viceroyalties of New Spain and Peru were all different than in Spain. The urge of the Peruvian merchants to participate in the profitable trade of these and other Asian goods and the insatiable demand for them led them to participate in illicit trade between the two viceroyalties. It became clear that in the New World, despite the sumptuary laws against luxury dress and ornamentation, Chinese silks were inextricably linked to the individual's social identity, and thus were used for ostentatious public displays of their wealth and social stance, as well as in their households, not only in the viceroyalty's capitals, Mexico City and Lima, but also in other cities and remote settlements. By the late sixteenth century, silks were available for purchase to a multi-ethnic clientele from almost all colonial classes to be used in both secular and religious contexts.

The comparative study of the impact that the Portuguese and Spanish empires, and later the Dutch and English trading companies had on the export production in China and Japan, proved to be most rewarding. In order to address the cultural and artistic influences exerted by the Europeans a wide variety of textual sources were consulted in search for any references to special orders of particular types, shapes and/or decorations, as well as to changes in European tastes that were reflected in the silks, porcelains or lacquers made to order. The material and aesthetic qualities of a large number of extant silks, porcelains and lacquers housed in public and private collections around the world, and monasteries and convents in Portugal and Spain, were studied in search not only for tangible evidence of any European influence, but also to get a better understanding of the extent in which European shapes, motifs and colour palettes were adapted from models provided by European merchants; some models, until now unknown, were traced and are discussed. In this context, visual sources were very useful while archaeological finds of porcelain made to order provided

evidence of the markets for which they were intended to, as well as to how widely they were distributed.

From the research study of the extant Chinese silks made to order it was possible to conclude that only the Iberians and Christian missionaries exerted influence on such orders, but their influence was quite limited. Orders were intended for both secular and religious use. Although the Chinese silk producers were most likely provided with a European textile or printed model for the woven or embroidered silk ordered, they always created a hybrid design, incorporating a single or more European motifs with many traditional Chinese motifs. They even rendered some European motifs in a manner that recalls certain floral or animal motifs of embroidered or woven silks made for the domestic market. The exact place of manufacture of the silks still remains unknown. Future research in Chinese textual sources and silks housed in both public and private collections in China may shed light on their place of origin. Beijing and Macao have been suggested as possible places, and if this could be proven, it would indicate that Western influence not only reached the silk producers that worked closely with Iberian customers, but also those in mainland China that were less likely to have contact with any Europeans. It appears that the Dutch and English were not interested in having silks made to order for them at the time.

From the analysis of a selected group of extant porcelains made to order at the private kilns of Jingdezhen and Zhangzhou a similar conclusion was reached. This is that the European influence was quite limited. This is not surprising as the Portuguese, Spanish and Dutch would have always ordered the porcelain via the Chinese junk traders who acted as middleman for the Europeans. It has become clear that the influence exerted by the Dutch was much more prominent than that of the Iberians, though still limited. The Dutch, unlike the Portuguese, and in lesser extent the Spanish and Germans, were not interested in having coat of arms or monograms depicted on the porcelain made to order for them. Instead, they desired porcelain for use in their daily life activities made in European shapes that suited their own culture but decorated with Chinese motifs that would have been considered exotic. No evidence of any influence exerted by the English in the porcelain made to order at the time was found during this research study.

In Japan, the situation was very different. The overwhelming majority of the Japanese lacquer traded by the Europeans was made to order for them. It was first made for the Jesuits in about 1580, and then for missionaries of Mendicant Orders and the Iberian merchants present in Japan. From the early seventeenth century, lacquer orders began to be made for the Dutch and the English, even though the latter stayed in Japan only for ten years, from 1613 to 1623. The lacquer craftsmen made hybrid objects, first in the new style known as *Namban* created to suit the new European demand, and later in the so-called Transition style with a more restrained use of mother-of-pearl, and the Pictorial style. The majority of the lacquer objects made to order for the Jesuits, Augustinian and Dominican missionaries, and the Iberians for religious and secular use, were decorated in the *Namban* style. While those made to order for the Dutch were utilitarian objects, some in new shapes, they were initially made in the *Namban* style. By the 1630s the Dutch, unlike the Portuguese, began to order pieces made in European shapes but decorated with high quality and expensive traditional Japanese lacquer techniques, resulting in the so-called Transition and Pictorial styles which clearly reflect a preference of the northern European countries for exotic decorations, just as with the orders made to order for them in Chinese porcelain.

This study has provided new and unexpected documentary and material evidence of the trade by the Iberian Kingdoms of Portugal and Spain, and the trading companies formed in the Northern Netherlands/Dutch Republic and England in Chinese silk and porcelain, and Japanese lacquer in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. It has also provided a better understanding of the complex and fascinating intercultural exchanges that occurred between the East and West at the time. There are still questions to be answered, which have been stated throughout this study. This may inspire others to continue research in this field.