**The Global Silk Trade**

0.0 - Module Plan for Instructors

This module is part of the History for the 21st Century project (H21). History for the 21st Century is a collaborative project designed to serve students in introductory college history courses and their instructors. Together, we build, assess, and progressively improve free, online educative, enquiry-based curriculum. You can find out more about H21 by visiting <https://www.history21.com/> .

**Module Overview**

This module examines how and why the first globalization happened in world history. It begins in the 16th century, uses the example of the production and trade of silk across the Pacific Ocean, focusing primarily on the links between southeast China and New Spain (colonial Mexico) through Manila. Through four to six class meetings, the module traces the production, consumption, and regulation of silk textiles as they circulated through these conjoined social worlds and trade networks, and examines how the Pacific Ocean became the center of new global exchanges.

The goal of this module is to help students learn how and why global interconnectedness emerged by understanding the factors shaping the production, transport, and consumption of goods on a global scale. To do so, it aims to help students understand:

* the interaction of environmental, social, cultural, economic, and political factors on historical developments.
* how to interpret diverse types of primary sources, including illustrated community books, agriculture treatises, material objects, government correspondences, literati notes, travel documents, and fictions.

By the end of the module, students should be able to explain the relationship between silk production techniques, the trading of silk as a commodity, the movement of labor and merchants, the spread of silk fashions, and the function of the Chinese and Spanish imperial states in this trade. In sum, wearing silk textile fashions served as a way of expressing social status, which contributed to the formation of global markets, and required the backing of the Chinese and Spanish empires. While both Chinese and Spanish imperial officials attempted to control and regulate those markets, they proved unable to effectively do so.

Included in this module are a series of readings, primary sources (textual and visual), and suggested discussion topics, as well as instructor guides for leading discussions, preliminary slide decks, and some suggested assignments to accompany this module. Feel free to adapt the materials to suit your needs! If you want to share an adaptation you find particularly successful or have a suggestion for a revision or update, feel free to contact the folks at *History for the 21st Century* for them to share with others.

**Module Map**

**Lesson 1 - Introduction to the Global Silk Trade, 1570–1700**

The first lesson can begin with an introduction discussing students’ understanding of current fashions, asking them to consider where those products were produced, and by whom, and what environmental factors might shape the production, manufacture and distribution of those products, as well as what kinds of supply lines, traders and intermediaries were required to make those products available to them. After this can follow a definition of globalization as a set of interrelated economic, cultural, social, environmental, and political processes.

This lesson also introduces the origins of globalization in the sixteenth century, specifically related to the trans-Pacific trade that connected Asia to the Americas. To help orient students, we recommend beginning with a map exercise, in which you ask students to identify a series of cities and regions they will encounter through the module on a blank world map that you provide to them, either electronically or in paper form. They may have to do some web searches to find out all these places are, and may not understand the relevance of each of these locations yet. However, the map can be a useful tool for visualizing the dynamics of globalization, and they can revisit it throughout the module.

The following three lessons compare Ming China and colonial Mexico, respectively, through three aspects: the production of silk (which entails both environmental and social history), the wearing of new silk fashions (which includes cultural and political history), and the global Manila galleon trade (which will focus on economic and political history).

**Lesson 2 – The Production of Silk**

The lesson on silk production (called sericulture) demonstrates the importance of the natural environment in economic development, and draws students’ attention to the ways humans have interacted with different climates and species. By the end of this lesson, they should be able to explain that the global production of silk and silk textiles was achieved through the global circulation of goods and knowledge, but also through adaptation to local environmental features.

**Lesson 3 – New Silk Fashions**

The third lecture on the fashion of wearing silk textiles starts with a discussion of how dressing was one crucial way of defining social classes. It compares similar fashion trends in China and Mexico: the pursuit of luxury textiles, red as a socially significant color, and the fondness for foreignness. This lecture also shows how some elites responded critically to the popularity of silk and government officials even issued sumptuary laws intended to restrict the wearing of silk. The take-away is that the fashion surrounding silk was a driving force in creating demand for it. In turn, this demand facilitated the formation of a global market and fueled trade relations between different regions.

**Lesson 4 – The Manila Galleon Trade and Conclusion**

The last lecture covers the global trade of silk by examining the operation and influence of the Manila galleon trade of Chinese silk, and governmental attitudes towards this trade. The take-away is that the silk trade connected different regions in the world, on the one hand facilitating the movement of people and, on the other, creating conflict between and within the Ming and Spanish empires.

At the conclusion of the lesson, students can be encouraged to reflect on their discussion of 21st century fashions and global production, consumption, and trade. They can also consider what this set of lessons teaches them about their own place in a globally interconnected world.