

Global Silk Trade, 1570-1700



In 1573, 712 bales of Chinese silk arrived in the Viceroyalty of New Spain – colonial Mexico – on two galleons arriving from the port of Manila, in the Philippines. Though the trade of Chinese silk to Europe along the Silk Roads and the Indian Ocean routes dated back centuries, this was the first time that Chinese silk reached the Americas by crossing the Pacific Ocean. When it arrived, the viceroy Don Martin Enríquez de Almanza (1510–1583) regarded the cargo as insignificant. Within thirty years, the trans-Pacific silk trade had developed into a lucrative business that neither the Chinese nor Spanish imperial government was capable of fully regulating. In this module, we will ask how and why the trans-Pacific trade in Chinese silk grew so fast by tracing its production, demand, and trade. Using silk as an example, our goal is to understand forces contributing to the start of a process called globalization – which we are familiar with today – during the early modern era (1500s–1700s). The answers will help us better appreciate how our own fashion tastes relate to global economic and political forces, and appreciate the long history of the globalized world that we have grown up in.

INTRODUCTION

OVERVIEW OF MODULE

GLOBALIZATION

TRANS-PACIFIC TRADE

SILK

MANILA

MING CHINA

SPANISH MEXICO

Overview of the Module

Sometimes, we mistakenly think that global interconnectedness of the world we live in is a fairly recent development that was made possible by technologies like airplanes, satellites, and the internet. But that's not true at all. The global exchange of commodities, materials, ideas, and people was taking places as far back as the 16th century. Even those who do recognize that globalization goes back centuries sometimes wrongly assume that it resulted solely a result of European explorations around the world. And yet, as we will see, many diverse people participated in the processes that we call globalization. Our goal is to understand how and why globalization emerged, and what motivations led some of those diverse peoples to contribute to its spread.



Key Terms:

Globalization

Polycentric

Confucianism

Mercantilism

Sangleys

Parián

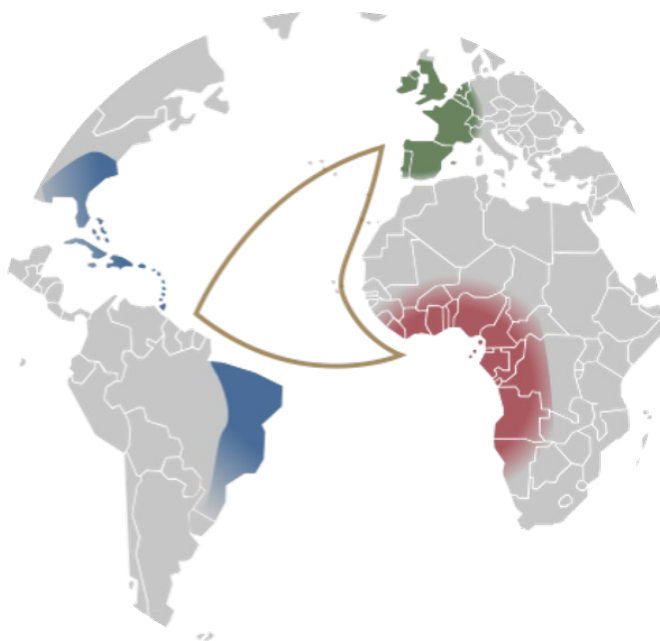
Ming Dynasty

Zhu Yuanzhang

Zheng He

Philip II

Casta system



Eurocentric versus Polycentric Globalization

Some scholars in the West used to assume that studying globalization meant looking at how a few European governments came to dominate so much the planet, politically, economically, and culturally. To understand the origins of globalization, they only looked to Europeans' activities moving goods and people between Europe, the Americas, and Africa across the Atlantic Ocean. The development of the trans-Atlantic slave trade and colonialism of the Americas were indeed critical developments in world history. But there was more going on as well. Looking at the Pacific Ocean helps us see that globalization was not just an outcome of European actions, but included a diverse array of people, including people from China and the Philippines, as well as indigenous people of the Americas. This approach allows us to see globalization as polycentric (having many centers) and not just Eurocentric. From its very start, globalization involved interactions between many diverse people around the world, sometimes peacefully and sometimes in conflict, but always in ways that has left lasting legacies even today.

Trans-Pacific Trade

This trans-Pacific trade emerged because of both Europeans' demand for Asian-made products and Chinese demand for silver. Of course, European's interest in purchasing products from Asian markets went back to the Middle Ages when such trade took place along the inland Silk Road trade routes and in boats operating in the Indian Ocean. Once Europeans established direct trade roots to the Indian Ocean trade, in the 16th century, European powers increasingly competed for access to these markets. The Portuguese, and later the Dutch, focused on travelling southward around Africa and then north and east into the Indian Ocean and to China. Initially, the Spanish government sought to access Asian markets by traveling west from Europe. Instead, they came upon, and soon started colonizing, lands and peoples in the Americas.

In the 1520s, with help from many other indigenous peoples, the Spanish government conquered the Mexica Empire (sometimes called Aztecs). Soon after, they resumed effort to teach Asia by traveling westward, attempting to cross the Pacific Ocean (starting in 1540s). By the 1570s, they had established a trading port, called Manila, in the Philippines, which the Spanish used to start trading with Chinese merchants. The establishment of the Spanish colony at Manila in 1571 was a key turning point in the creation of a globally integrated world.

Explore More:

[Hernan Cortes](#)



Looking at the trans-Pacific trade in silk allows us to see globalization as a polycentric process that included far-away places, including Guangzhou (China), Madrid (Spain), Manila (the Philippines), and Mexico City (New Spain). People in each of these places brought different values and ways of understanding the world to their exchanges. For instance, many Chinese understood the world through the lens of Confucianism, which emphasized self-cultivation and following the correct order. This sense of order shaped how people should behave within their families and how they should interact with others, as well as how the government should function.

Confucianism

Confucianism is an ancient philosophy developed by Confucius (Kongzi), emphasizing the importance of a virtuous life, filial piety and ancestor worship.



As a system of belief, Chinese imperial governments had promoted Confucianism for many centuries. However, China did not actively promote maritime trade, but treated as part of the world of diplomacy. East Asian political networks became the framework for large-scale commercial trade by merchants. But the imperial government did not directly involve itself much with foreign trade. Until 1567 it even had serious restrictions on maritime trade. Maritime trade still flourished but was largely conducted by pirates and smugglers operating without permission by Ming authorities. In 1567, moderated bans on sea trade, but – except for collecting fees and taxes – largely remained aloof from it.

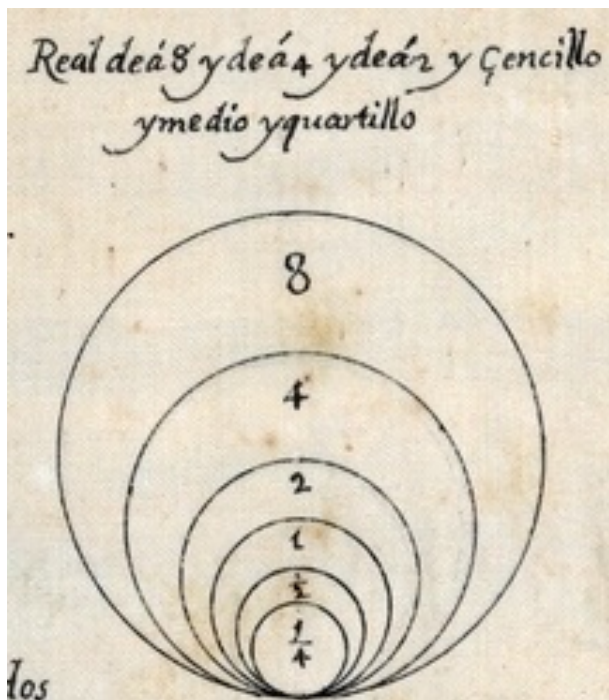
Did you know?

Early in the Ming Dynasty, Yongle Emperor (Zhu Di) commissioned Zheng He to build establish new trade routes. Zheng He oversaw the construction of a fleet of ships then led the fleet on a series of seven expeditions between 1405-1433. (We will read a bit more about Zheng He later in this lesson)

[What to learn more?](#)

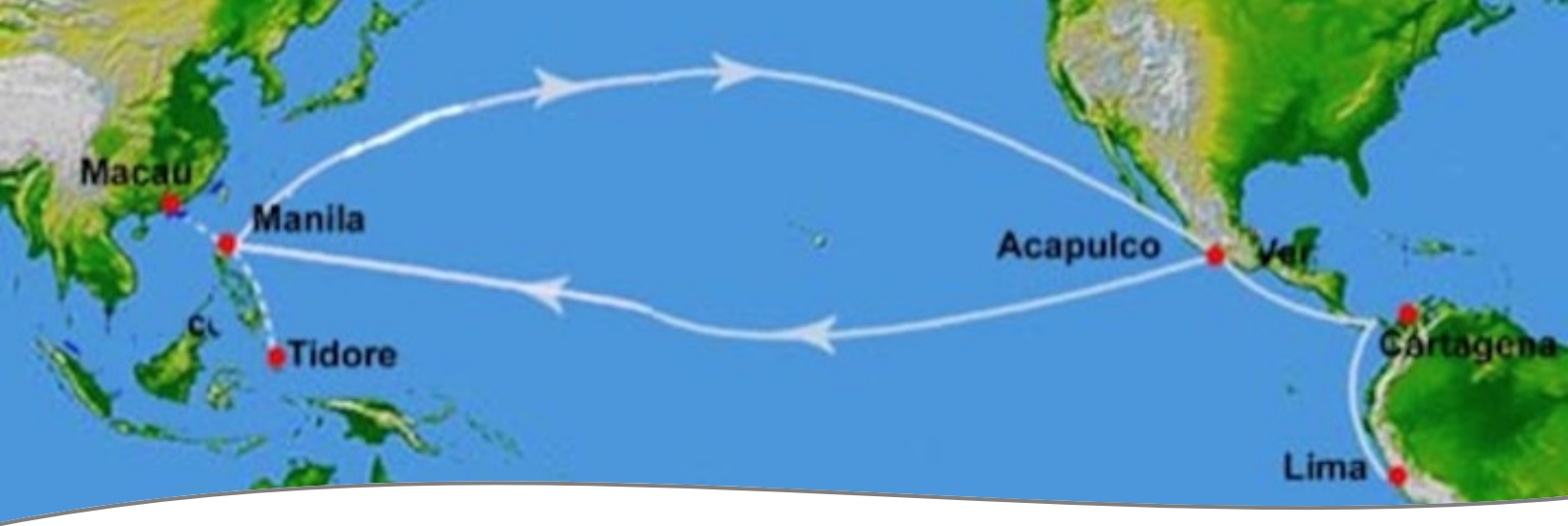


Zheng He



Sizes of silver coins

Starting in the 16th century, the Spanish started mining silver in their new American colonies. Silver became as an essential global trade good in the service Spain's mercantilist agenda. Spanish colonists oversaw the extraction of silver from mines by indigenous laborers working in exploitative and hazardous conditions. Much of that silver went back to Europe for Spain to fund its many wars. But a lot also went to China, where high demand meant that the price of silver was much higher there than in Europe. The prospect of enormous profits convinced the Spanish government to invest in the trans-Pacific trade, which would give them access to the tremendously rich Chinese markets for luxury goods, including silk.



Silk

While Spanish ships brought silver from the Americas to Asia, commodities such as silk and porcelain traveled in the opposite direction. In the process, these manufactured goods from China took on new meanings, generated new forms of human relations, and expanded the cultural horizons of many people around the world



China was home to the world's first silk production. Sometime probably in the fourth millennium BCE, groups of Chinese craftspeople learned the secret of unraveling the fine, rounded filament of the cocoons spun by a worm that fed on the leaves of mulberry trees. They used the unbroken thread secreted by the mulberry worm to produce fine fabrics. Silk makes excellent clothing because it is soft, sheer, lightweight, long-lasting, and can easily absorb dyes. The high value of silk gave it a particular appeal as a political and religious symbol, representing court privilege and social status. Since ancient times, then, China's silk products were restricted to only the nobility. Its delicacy implied that its wearer was free from daily agricultural labor.

Silk also became associated with status and luxury outside of China in the ancient world. The dissemination of silk relied on the inland Silk Roads – trade routes that took their name from the silk trade that took place along these routes from China to remote locations across the Eurasian landmass. By the 2nd or 3rd century CE, silk production also began in Central Asia. In the early 3rd century CE, a silk industry was also developing in the Persian Empire. By the 6th century, silk production was taking place in the Byzantine Empire, in southeastern Europe. By the mid-15th century Italy had become a European center of silk production. Silk workers later brought the technology to Spain, Portugal, France, the Netherlands, England, and elsewhere in Western Europe. When European states began forming colonies in the Americas in the 16th century, silk production spread there as well.



Because of the tremendous wealth that silk generated as a luxury good, political official all over the world sought to regulate silk production. We can see this from tax structures in Ming China, for instance, which allowed taxes to be paid in silk. Silk was also widely accepted as currency in China. Fine silks represented the owner's power to acquire rare and expansive commodities. As we will see later in this module, we can also see silk's value in the fact that governments sought so hard to regulate who could even wear it.



Explore More:

[The Silk Road: Connecting the Ancient World through Trade](#)
[The Silk Road Story](#)

Clothing may seem like a mundane part of our everyday lives, necessary for warm and protection from the elements. But in every culture clothing also offers a powerful form of visual communication. By using visual clues provided by clothing, people express ideas about gender, social status, occupation, ethnicity, and political identity. By challenging cultural norms about clothing, people can also express their distance from the social categories others expect them to adhere to, embrace a different social category for themselves, or challenge social norms entirely.

Often changes in politics, technologies, cultural values, or economics in a society have led people to adopt new fashions, as a way of articulating their place in the new order. You can probably think of examples if this in your own life, but it was just as true in the early modern world.

Manila

If the Spanish empire was going to access Chinese markets, King Philip II understood that he would need a base in Asia from which to operate. As soon as it became clear that the trans-Pacific trade route would be feasible, the Spanish government decided that the Philippine islands would serve that role well. After efforts to establish such a trade base in two other sites in the lands, in 1571, they successfully established at port at Manila, which had a safer harbor than the earlier location.



Manila

Philip II



Critically, as a colony, the Philippines were not ruled directly by the government in Spain, but as a part of the jurisdiction of the Viceroyalty of New Spain – that is, formally they were part of colonial Mexico. The colony was thus run by a captain-general who answered to the viceroy in Mexico City. In addition, its bishop, and its office the inquisition had to respond to the archbishop and inquisition office in Mexico City, not directly to Madrid. That also meant that merchants living in colonial Mexico controlled Spain's trans-Pacific trade with Asia. At a practical level, though, the sheer distance between New Spain and the Philippines meant that the captain-general in Manila had significant autonomy, which we will discuss further in lesson 4 of this module.



Spanish traders in Manila also developed connections with Portuguese, Dutch, and Japanese traders who operated in Macau (a Portuguese trade outpost near the Chinese city of Guangzhou), Dejima (a Portuguese and later Dutch trade post in Japan close to Chinese ports like Hangzhou), Taiwan (where the Dutch had trade forts off the Chinese coast), and Nagasaki (in Japan, close to eastern Chinese ports). Many foreign merchants regularly resided in or traveled to Manila, bringing merchandise from around Asia. From a global perspective, Manila's founding implied that for the first time in history, the planet's main landmasses were all connected by people, goods, and ideas.

Explore More:

[Interwoven Globe: The Worldwide Textile Trade, 1500-1800](#)





Chinese merchants in Parian Market

China was central to this new trans-Pacific trade because it produced so many highly desired commodities, purchased so much silver from the Americas, but also because it supplied so many immigrants required to maintain the trade. Among the merchants in Manila, the Chinese (whom the Spanish called “sangleys”) were the most important. The Chinese population who lived permanently in Manila reached 20,000 in 1600, and a more substantial number visited Manila only for the trade season. Chinese living in Manila ranged from highly specialized artisans who worked for the foreign market to those who provided everyday necessities, including operating trade ships and the shops selling goods to residents.

The main Chinese neighborhood in Manila was called Parián, meaning “silk quarter.” The fact that this name was also later adopted in Mexico City for its Centre Plaza shows that Asian immigrants influenced Mexican society and culture. They introduced palm wine to indigenous peoples, for instance. In 1635, Spanish barbers complained to the municipal council about the competition from two hundred Chinese barbers who had established shops in the Plaza Mayor. To protect the Spanish barbers, officials limited the number of Chinese-owned barbershops to twelve and ordered that they could only operate in the city’s suburbs.



Manila



Parian Market

To understand Manila and the diverse migrants who lived there, it is helpful to know the basics about Chinese and Mexican history, which we’ll cover in the following two sections, which will briefly summarize the administration of the two empires, especially their financial system and foreign relations.

Ming China

In China, the Ming dynasty was established in 1368 following peasant uprisings during the end of the Mongol-led Yuan Dynasty. Peasants' life towards the mid-14th century was no doubt difficult, especially after some years of poor harvests that led to many deaths from hunger and sickness and effective collapse of social order.

The founder of the Ming dynasty, Zhu Yuanzhang, came from a peasant family that had been among those devastated by epidemics and drought. They had lost their land and been forced to travel from place to place as tenant farmers.



Zhu himself had been sent to a nearby Buddhist monastery to do menial work. After the monks ran out of money to support him, Zhu turned to a life of begging in the countryside. When peasants revolted against these miserable conditions, Zhu joined up in their cause. He proved to be a great military leader and quickly rose the ranks to become a commander and - after the rebels toppled the Yuan Dynasty - even became the founder of the new Ming dynasty. The hardships that Zhu faced as a child shaped help us understand some of his policies, which shaped the Ming dynasty for centuries. His peasant background made him sympathetic to common people, which explains his promotion of the mythical ideal of life in the countryside.



Land Survey Map

Zhu focused on restoring the social order and asked local officials and peasant elders to spread newly issued legal codes to each village. He ordered a land survey to be completed to determine the tax from each county, the number of which remained largely intact throughout the dynasty. Other than collecting taxes, he planned to leave self-governing agrarian communities largely to themselves. He trusted peasant elders to appoint local officials, for instance. Zhu also savagely criticized leaders who wasted money. He issued a number of laws regulating conspicuous consumption (the so-called sumptuary laws that we will study in Lesson 3) and he also suppressed the expansion of commerce, which he felt threatened undermined agrarian communal order.

Guàn from Treasury of Ming Dynasty

For the first 50-60 years of the Ming dynasty, Zhu's vision worked. However, that changed as trade in commercial goods expanded dramatically. By the 16th century, China was no longer largely purely an agrarian society. The economy had become extensively commercialized, the population doubled, and people became more mobile. Merchants traveled across the country and even abroad. But since the later Ming emperors felt compelled to follow their ancestors' vision of self-operating agrarian community, the imperial court policy never embraced policies to openly promote this commercial development.



One of the few essential policy changes that did occur, however, was the adoption of the so-called Single Whip Reform in the late 16th century, which required that all forms of taxation be collected in the form of silver. More farmers shifted from self-sustaining production to specializing in cash crops such as fruits, tobacco, tea, and vegetables that they now sold at markets. As a result of these two developments, silver became the major exchange medium in markets. Rather quickly, the value of silver in China nearly doubled. Foreign merchants too found it profitable to bring silver to China to exchange for the Chinese commodities they sought. Chinese silk merchants were also encouraged to export silk in exchange for silver to satisfy general tax obligations.



As it happened, these developments coincided with the introduction in colonial Mexico of so-called amalgamation technique that used liquid mercury to extract pure silver from poor quality ores in both Mexican and Peruvian mining centers, which increased the output of silver. Therefore, a massive increase in Chinese demand for silver was taking place at the same time as the massive increase in the Spanish silver production in the Americas. While estimates vary, about a third of that silver ended up in China.

As foreign trade increased, the Chinese government's attitude about sea trade still followed Emperor Zhu Yuanzhang's original policy from 1372, banning overseas trade. Zhu's son, who usurped the throne (and ruled as the Yongle Emperor), expressed great interest in maritime exploration. He sponsored the explorer Zheng He to take seven voyages in the early 14th century. Zheng even reached as far as East Africa, though this voyage faced criticism at court for being so expensive, after which Zheng's explorations halted. It was only the 1570s that the sea trade was reopened with loose regulation from the central court—which we will discuss more in Lesson 4 of the module.

Explore More:

[Potosi: The Silver Mine that Changed the World](#)

[Zheng He](#)



Yongle Emperor

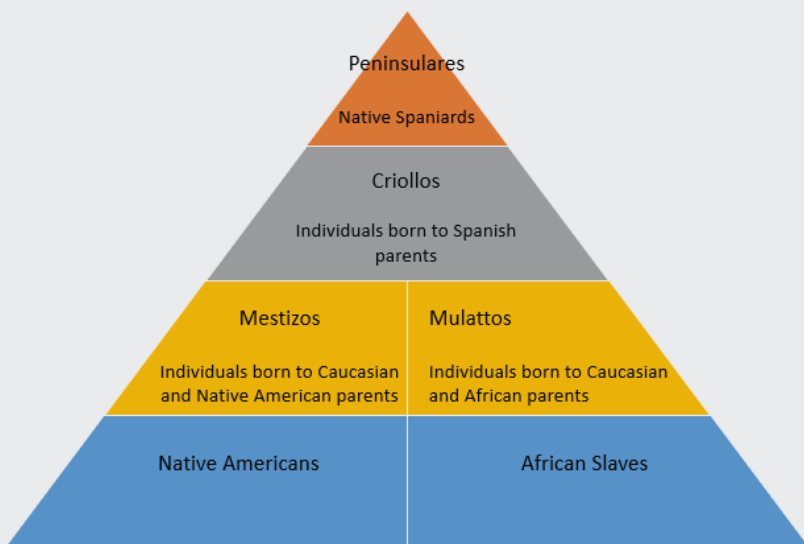
Spanish Mexico

Viceroy **Martín Enríquez de
Almansa**



Let's next look at the Viceroyalty of New Spain. Spanish colonization of the Americas started at the end of the 15th century, motivated by the search for wealth and the desire to spread Christianity. In the 16th century, the Spanish crown established two viceroyalties there: the Viceroyalty of New Spain which was established in 1535 in the lands of present-day Mexico and Guatemala, and the Viceroyalty of Perú in 1542 in South America. The capital city in the Viceroyalty of New Spain, Mexico City, was established on the site of the former Mexica (or Aztec) capital of Tenochtitlan. Starting in 1565, the viceroy of New Spain also governed the Philippines.

The two priorities of the Spanish crown in its colonies in the Americas and the Philippines were to collect revenues in support of the monarchy and to manage the people and commerce in those colonies to ensure that those revenues remained stable. To raise money, King Philip II (r.1556-1598) turned not only to taxation but also to unusual measures, such as issuing royal favors and patents in exchange for payment and taking costly loans. These measures contributed to a long-standing tension between the monarch's desire to assert its control over his colonies and his choice to delegate day-to-day administration to the colonial governments in the Americas.



The Spanish empire maintained its authority over indigenous populations of the Americas through a combination of violence and negotiation. Spanish power in the Americas required cultivating local delegates, as well as maintaining religious and political control over indigenous communities. Viceroys directly reported to the king. Under the viceroys there were courts called *audiencias*. Consisting of governors, captains, generals, judges, and other officials, the *audiencia* was responsible for administering royal justice. Fiscal authorities also played a key role in ensuring that incomes from the colony flowed back to Madrid. The colonial government also created broad categories of races and mixed races, that together made up something called the *casta* system. The racial categories that made up this system were carefully defined and determine an individual's legal status. We will discuss this topic more in Lesson 3. However, it's important to recognize that people sometimes defied these racial categories.

Further Reading

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