The Manila Galleon Trade

Introduction

The expanding global demand discussed in Lesson 3 fueled exports of Chinese silk to Southeast Asia and then to New Spain. From the late 1560s until 1813, Manila galleons took silver from the Americas annually from the port of Acapulco across the Pacific Ocean to Manila, in exchange for goods from other Asian port cities, including Chinese silks and porcelain. In Manila, the traders were private merchants and smugglers – from China and Spain and elsewhere in Asia and Europe.

This trade network, however, was not necessarily supported by the Chinese and Spanish governments. Sometimes, those governments even banned or restricted that trade. As a result, historians have noted that this trans-Pacific trade was marked by constant negotiations between the two central governments' desire to regulate trade, local authorities' interest in promoting private commerce in their region, and traders' goals of maximizing profits. In this lesson, we will learn about the function of the trans-Pacific trade taking place in Manila and its influence both on Ming China and New Spain.

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INTRODUCTION

MING FOREIGN POLICY ON TRADE

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INFLUENCE OF THE MANILA GALLEON TRADE ON NEW SPAIN

RESTRICTIONS ON THE MANILA GALLEON TRADE

Ming Foreign Policy on Trade

The centuries-old Eurasian trade routes known to us as the Silk Roads had flourished under the Mongol-led Yuan Dynasty in China (1271–1368). After the collapse of that government and the rise of the Ming Dynasty in 1368, the first Ming emperor, Zhu Yuanzhang, emphasized China's ancient culture and viewed foreign powers in general with distrust. To counter perceived threats of invasion, early Ming emperors erected fortresses and placed garrisons of troops at China's western borders. The resulting decline in the Silk Roads trade also led to a steep drop in revenue generated by taxes on that trade.

Meanwhile, sea trade between China and the Indian Ocean continued. The most daring attempt made by the Ming court to expand this trade even further were the seven voyages conducted by Zheng He (1371–c.1434) in the early 15th century. These endeavors sparked a growing connection between China and Southeast Asia. However, the imperial government soon halted this exploration in the face of growing criticism at the court and the emerging threat from the Mongols to China's north. With the exception of Zheng He's voyages, historians usually emphasize the Ming Dynasty's tendency to restrict maritime trade. Early Ming emperors also forbade people from even owning foreign goods. The court made such regulations to promote a frugal lifestyle among Chinese subjects, but also to limit contact with the outside world. For a long time, the state banned foreign maritime trade, allegedly in response to provocations by Japanese pirates along the coastline.

Map of the seven voyages of Zheng He

Key Terms:

Macau

Junks

Emperor Jaijing

Philippines

Taiwan

Koxinga

Manila

Acapulco

Boletas

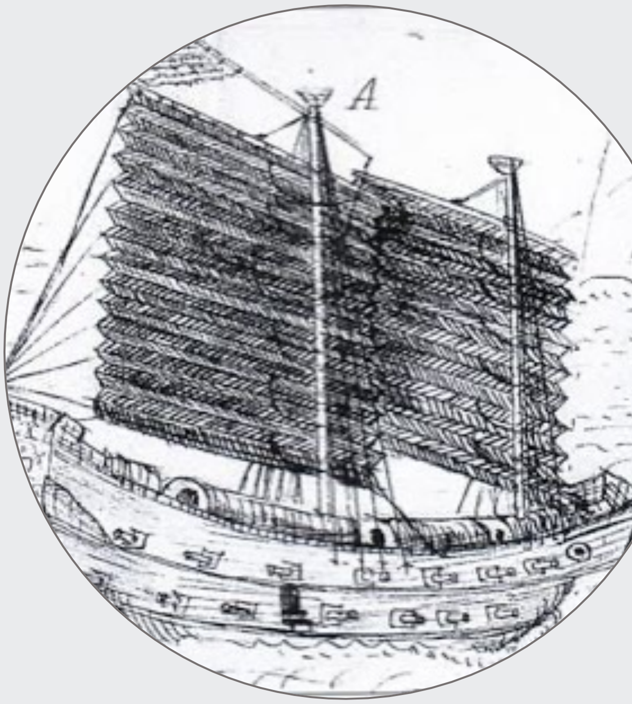
China Poblanos

19th c Chinese painting of Macao

Map of coast around Guangzhou City

Still, the available evidence suggests that there were vast differences between the central government's policy goals and the actual activities of China's population. Illegal trade between China and southeast Asia continued and it proved impossible for the Ming government to guard its entire coastline or the thousands of small offshore islands.

By the late 15th century, Europeans also started to explore the Indian Ocean world. In 1554, the Portuguese negotiated for the lease of land near the Chinese trade city of Guangzhou, where they built a trading post called Macau that maintained lively trade with China until the end of the Ming dynasty. In 1567, the Chinese government also began to license sailing ships called junks to trade legally in Southeast Asia, though still on a fairly limited basis. Ming attempts to limit this trade through regulation proved largely unsuccessful. Between 1610 and 1614 alone, the Ming government discovered seven major smuggling cases, though there were probably many more since officials only over captured a small percentage of illegal shipments. Silk accounted for a significant proportion of the goods being illegally exported out of China. According to a Portuguese geographer in the early 17th century, a third of the 2.2 million kilograms (about 2400 tons) of silk produced in China annually – some 725,000 kilograms (roughly 800 tons) – were being exported.



Ming junk, 1637

Meanwhile, bans on using foreign goods in Ming China were also relaxed, while those that remained were largely ignored. In early 16th century, civil and military officials in Guangzhou, the main trade port for China's Indian Ocean trade, sometimes even had their salaries paid in foreign goods. Ironically, the imperial court's harsh regulation of foreign trade did not stop smuggling, but it did prevent the imperial house from obtaining luxury goods for itself. In the mid-16th century, Emperor Jiajing (r.1522–1566) was so bothered by not having ambergris (an expensive type of incense) for over ten years that he sent officials to coastal cities seeking those who illegally traded with foreigners. The court's conflicting attitudes toward these smuggling activities later paved the way for ending the ban on foreign trade.

Palace portrait of the Jiajing Emperor

Macau Peninsula

The silk trade between China and the rest of Asia often involved collaboration among Chinese merchants and foreign powers, which included the Spanish in the Philippines, the Portuguese in Macau, as well as the Dutch and later the Zheng family (known internationally as Koxinga) on the island of Taiwan. The Zheng family's agents reached out to coastal Chinese cities to establish direct connections with the Chinese market.

Altogether, ten business firms came under Zheng's control. Five of them collected silk and other textile products from the ports of Suzhou and Hangzhou before smuggling them to Xiamen, the port city in the province of Fujian with the best access to the island of Taiwan. Another five business firms took over from there to secretly transport goods to Taiwan and then to Japan and the Philippines.

Statue of Zheng (Koxinga) in Taiwan

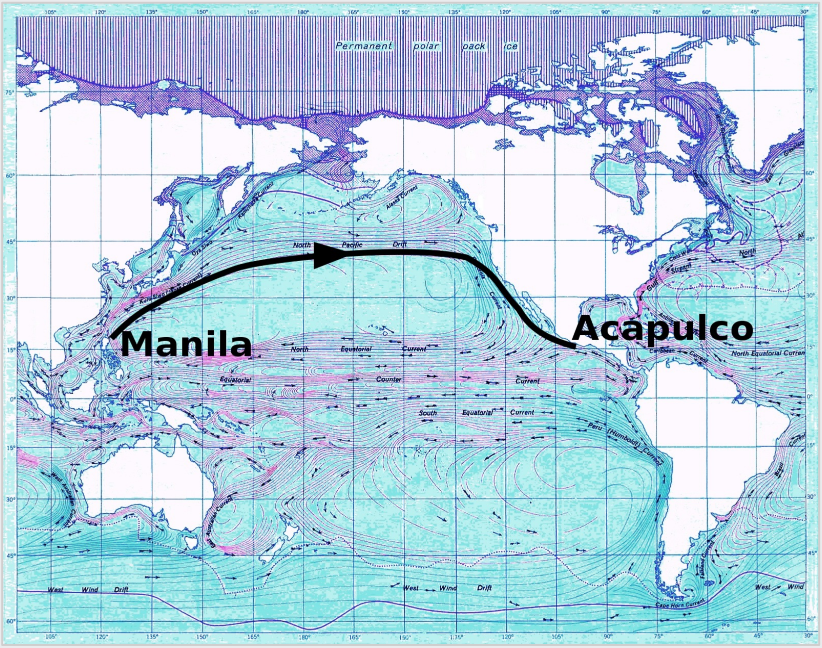
Miguel López de Legazpi

The Manila Galleon Trade

Map of Miguel López de Legazpi's voyage to the Philippines

The Spanish government's establishment of Manila in 1571 gave them a major base for sea trade in Asia. Spaniards used the port to connect the two ends of the Pacific Ocean. The exploration of the route started in November 1564 when the Spanish navigator Miguel de López de Legazpi left the port of Barra de Navidad (in the current Mexican state of Jalisco), with five ships, 500 soldiers, and the Augustinian friar and pilot Andrés de Urdaneta, seeking to find a safe route between Mexico and the Philippines. Legazpi's expedition arrived in the Philippines in February 1565. The first galleon loaded with goods from Manila arrived in New Spain in 1573, by which time sailors had discovered that Acapulco offered greater security than Barra de Navidad for their boats. After that, they largely travelled annually along an established route.

17th century global trade routes



Eastward route from Manila to Acapulco

The routes from east to west could be dangerous. It took a couple of days to have goods shipped from southeast China to the island of Taiwan, and from there about ten to fifteen days further to Manila. That's where the goods were sold and transferred to Spanish galleons. The first leg of these ships' travel out of Manila was determined by the southwesterly tailwinds offered by the summer monsoons. While these storms were dangerous to sail though, it was easer sailing than travelling against the strong and dangerous headwinds of the winter monsoons.

Thus, in 1620, King Philip III of Spain decreed that the ships should leave Manila before the end of June. They started the journey by traveling first through the Strait of San Bernardino, which took them out of the Indonesian archipelago and into the open ocean. This was an especially treacherous part of the voyage. Bad weather frequently caused the ships to return to Manila and some were lost on this leg. From there, ships travelled northward to the waters of the coast of Taiwan and then northeastward to Japan, to the 40th parallel. From there, ships left headed due east across the Pacific to North America. This part of the voyage was relatively safe. For the last leg, along the coast of North America to the port of Acapulco, dangers increased again due to hazardous weather and the threat of privateers and pirates. In all, the journey took an average of six months. From New Spain, most of the goods were transported by land to the port of Veracruz, on the Gulf of Mexico, and then re-shipped across the Atlantic to Europe.

Compared to the journey east, the westward trip from Acapulco to Manila was relatively easy. To take advantage of favorable winds and avoid the southwest monsoon (May–November in the northern Pacific), in 1620 King Philip III of Spain ordered that the last day for leaving Acapulco was March 25th. The ships departed Acapulco and travelled south along the coast to somewhere between the 10th and 15th latitudes, where they headed west across the Pacific Ocean to the Mariana Islands. Known then as Las Islas de Los Ladrones, the Mariana Islands – a archipelago of islands that includes Guam – became a steppingstone between the Americas and Asia in the seventeenth century. This part of the voyage took about two months. From the Marianas, it was another two to the three-week trip to Manila.

Copper print of Spanish Galleon, reading "Through the worst stormy waters, with courage, purpose, and zeal, this ship shows off its sails to Neptune," 1734

Manila-Acapulco galleon trade route, including onward route to Spain

According to a royal law of 1593, galleons were restricted to carry no more than 300 tons on this one-a-year trip. However, they usually carried more than 1,500 tons. A lot of the extra cargo were goods illegally smuggled by the ship's commander and junior officers. In Manila, residents of the Philippines and sailors were allowed to trade *boletas* (tickets), which granted them rights to shipping space on the galleons. The trade in *boletas* became a means to smuggle beyond the legal weight limits. In 1636, the Spanish king, aware of the degree of smuggling taking place, ordered inspectors to closely examine the cargo coming from the galleons arriving in Acapulco against ship manifests. When a galleon arrived in Acapulco that year, an inspector found that the value of the goods tremendously exceeded the limit. The offender had to pay a hefty fine and lost his goods.

In general, Manila's merchants were efficient at packing silk to maximize space. A list of goods on the Manila galleon *Santissima Trinidad* that survives today suggests that ships sailing from Manila to Acapulco were packed full of all sorts of silk products from China. Goods valued at more than 600,000 pesos were shipped from Manila to New Spain annually between 1616 and 1620 and remained at levels higher than 500,000 pesos per year until 1645. A Spanish naval officer in 1638 reported a profit margin of 400% for shipping Chinese silk from Manila to New Spain. For Chinese merchants too, the profits from selling silk abroad were enormous. Contemporary Chinese elites used these high profit as a primary reason to request the reopening of maritime trade.

On the return trip from Mexico, the galleons were filled with silver coins and bullion. Nearly 400 million pesos in silver were sent between 1570 and 1840. The viceroy of New Spain reported to the king very early on that silver was basically the only commodity that the Spanish had that the Chinese wanted. The westward galleons heading to Asia also brought passengers, including government officials and their families, merchants, missionaries, soldiers, and those seeking their fortunes in the Philippines.

View of Manila, 1665

Influence of the Manila Galleon Trade on China

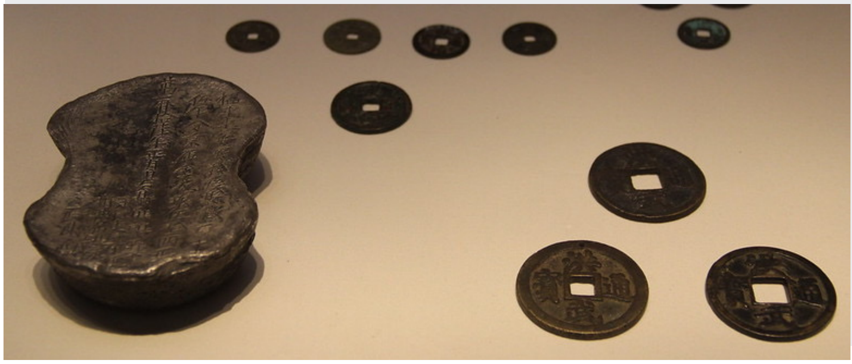
The Manila galleon trade brought considerable revenues into China, including increased taxes to the imperial government. While the Ming court was initially hesitant to profit directly from this trade, the opportunities to cover military expanses soon encouraged the central government to collect tax and fees. The basic fee for a license to trade with foreigners on a junk cost a merchant 3 taels (silver coins) per permit. Later that fee doubled. Other taxes were collected based on the size of the ship and the volume of goods it carried. Merchants who brought back only silver were initially charged 150 taels per ship, though they later negotiated for that fee to be lowered to 120 taels. By the early seventeenth century, the government earned about 20,000 taels per year from these import taxes, which mostly went to paying for the imperial army. The central government and local officials also often fought over who collected those taxes and fees.

In addition to the influence on the Ming fiscal system, trade – both legal and illegal – also shaped daily life in China. The large Ming-era painting that we looked at in Lesson 3, *Nandu fanhui tu* (*A Scroll of Scenery from the Prosperous Southern Capital*) depicts several stores that posted advertisements reading, "All the goods of the Eastern and Western Oceans." Not only did the painter depict foreign goods as widely available in markets, but as a way for shop owners to lure in customers. The prosperity brought by this foreign trade was the most prominent in Fujian Province due to its strong trade ties to Manila. The scholar from Fujian, Xu Bo (1570–1645) once wrote a poem to describe the prosperity of the city of Zhangzhou after the opening of the sea trade. Access to enormous wealth and foreign commodities not only allowed merchants to improve their social status in an otherwise very hierarchical society, but also empowered them to negotiate with officials, and even sometimes to refuse to comply with government orders. One time, merchants even caught and killed a servant of a high official to frighten him from returning to Zhangzhou.

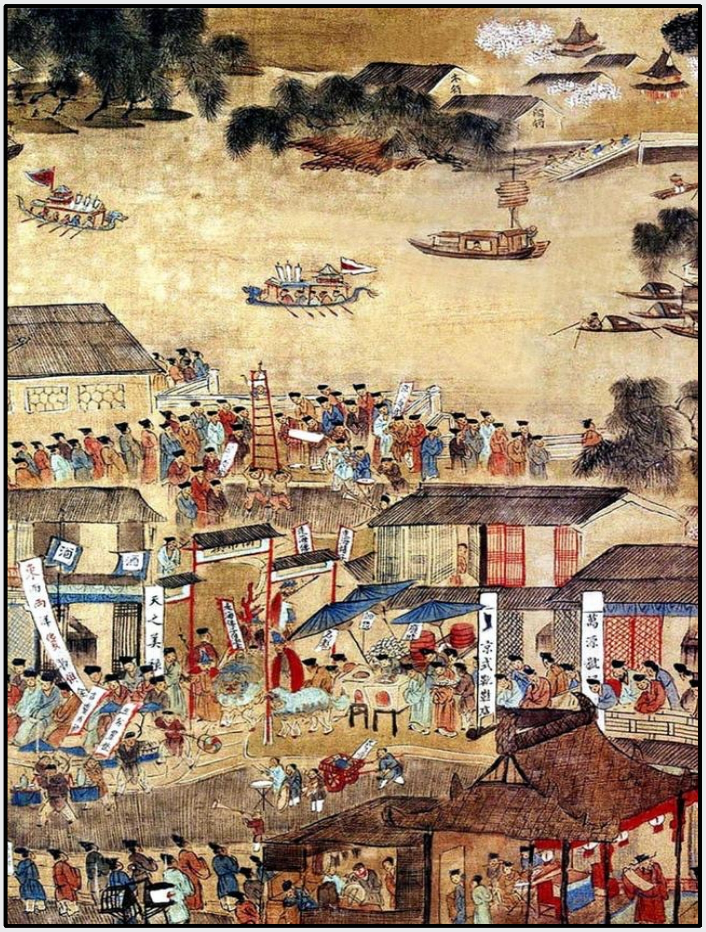
The Selden Map: A 17th c merchant map showing trade routes from Quanzhou to Manila

Of course, the Ming fiscal system also became dependent on the global supply of silver from New Spain, which peaked in the late sixteenth century, due to the development of a new process called amalgamation, that used volatilized mercury to extract pure silver from ore. This dependency was not a problem so long as silver was abundant. But starting in the 1620s, the output of silver from Spanish mines in Peru declined significantly due to the depletion of quality ores and the rising costs of extraction and labor. Matters worsened in 1649, after a case of fraudulent coin minting sparked a global financial panic.

Ming Dynasty coins (above) and a block of silver, called ingot, and coins (below)



In addition, after the large fine placed in 1636 on smuggled cargo mentioned above, the Spanish king ordered inspections and stricter punishment for violations. To make matters worse, in 1638, a cargo ship wrecked on the way from Manila to Acapulco, and all the freight onboard was lost. In the next year, two Manila-bound galleons wrecked, and over 50,0000 pesos were lost.



Historians debate the extent to which these trade problems led to the weakening of the Ming Empire and the fall of Beijing after peasant rebellions in 1644. After all, the 1640s also witnessed a series of natural disasters, and silk production faced huge losses, partly due to a cooling climate. These factors also converged with the growing threat of the Manchus from the north. It is difficult to assess the extent to which any one of these factors alone – including the decline in silver imports – led the government to collapse. Regardless, while the remnant of the Ming dynasty continued in a much weaker form in the far south of China until 1662, it never recovered after the successful rebellions in 1644, and was gradually replaced by the ascendant Qing Dynasty.

Detail from Nandu fanhui tu, depicting the commercial sector of Nanjing

Influence of the Manila Galleon Trade on New Spain

Before this trans-Pacific trade, New Spain's most valuable import were textiles coming from Europe. However, because few people could afford such luxury fabrics, most colonists wore clothes made in Mexico.

Sample of goods brought via the Manila Galleon trade to New Spain

Lithograph of Acapulco port, New Spain, 1628

After the Manila galleon trade began, merchants from New Spain and other viceroyalties of the Spanish Americas acquired all sort of luxury products from Asia, especially silks. Chinese silks became popular because they cost less than Spanish-made silks and were fancier than locally made clothes. A letter written by a Spanish official in Lima to Philip II around the end of the sixteenth century noted, "A man can clothe his wife in Chinese silks for two hundred reals [which is worth 25 pesos], whereas he could not provide her clothing of Spanish silks with two hundred pesos."

Chinese silk was less expensive because the larger scale of silk production in China, the higher efficiency of Chinese silk workers, and, most importantly, the fact that silver was worth far more in China than in New Spain, where silver was widely available and thus relatively cheap. In China, the limited supply combined with the high demand created by the Single Whip tax reform, which required that tax payments be made in silver, drove up the price of silver. By 1600, one gold peso was equal to twelve silver pesos in New Spain, but only five-and-a-half silver pesos in China. That is, the purchasing power of the silver more than doubled when Spanish and Mexican merchants spent their money in Chinese markets.

Silver coin, 8 reales, depicting Carlos III Viceroyality of new Spain, 1778

Poblana women in traditional dress

Chinese silks were also popular in the Americas because their small and mid-sized silk making workshops proved weavers the ability to adapt to changing fads among buyers in New Spain. Some Chinese weavers produced fabrics with European-style patterns. While Chinese silk workers usually followed set patterns, some took the liberty to incorporate both European and Chinese designs into their textiles. Most silk products carried by the galleons, however, were undyed white silk textiles and raw silk yarn. There were two reasons for this. First, brightly colored plant-based dyes used in Asia were highly sensitive to fading when exposed to water or sunlight. In contrast, the red dyes made from the cochineal insects in New Spain, which we learned about in Lesson 2, kept bright colors longer when exposed to light and moisture. Second, undyed silk allowed local artisans the freedom to cater to local tastes, including adding indigenous and European patterns. By combining Asian elements with European imagery, Mexican and Chinese weavers alike were able to create textiles that were both global and local.

The introduction of Asian styles into New Spain also paved the way for the emergence of the story of the "*china poblana*," (the Chinese woman from the city of Puebla), which became popular in colonial Mexico. A statue of this woman still stands in a fancy hotel in the city of Puebla. According to the story, a woman from Asia worked with local people in New Spain to design sleeveless silk dresses. Some people believe that "*china poblana*" may have referred to an actual Indian princess or perhaps a girl who had lived in the Philippines who had been brought to Mexico by a galleon after being captured by pirates. By the 19th century, the *china poblana* had become an iconic image that symbolized the complex cultural blending of Mexican culture. While the actual origins of the story is clouded by mythology, the story definitely demonstrates a widespread recognition of the influence of Asian silk on New Spain. Indeed, there is even evidence that suggests a substantial Chinese community existed in Mexico City by the mid-1630s.

Statue of "la china poblana," Puebla

Mid-17th c silk woven in Europe

Restrictions on the Manila Galleon Trade

Though local merchants and residents of New Spain usually welcomed the Manila galleon trade, the Spanish government was too remote to benefit from the trade directly. Instead, authorities back in Spain were concerned about silver draining out of their colonies. The crown sought to prevent colonists in New Spain and Peru from importing Chinese merchandise. Philip II's decree on October 17th, 1585 stated that, "Inasmuch as the trade in Chinese materials has increased to excessive proportions …we order and command the viceroys of Peru and New Spain to prohibit and suppress, without fail, this commerce and trade between both kingdoms, by all the ways and means possible…this prohibition shall be kept strictly and shall continue to be so kept." Philip's concerns were not baseless. The amount of silver sent from New Spain to China reached approximately one million pesos by 1600; this number doubled by 1700 and may have reached three to four million pesos during the eighteenth century.

Spanish galleon

In addition to concerns that the purchase of foreign fabrics entailed a significant outflow of money from Spanish lands, the Spanish crown's anxiety about foreign goods also derived from a desire to protect against competition from foreign markets. Many contemporaries blamed the decline of silk production in New Spain on the increased importation of Chinese silks. However, while the Spanish crown sometimes gave lip service to this concern, the king was more anxious that exports from China to Mexico would compete with exports from Spain to Mexico. That is, the government in Madrid preferred that the colonies always trade with Spain directly, and not with foreign states or even other Spanish colonies.

16th century Chinese textile for export to Iberian Peninsula

The monarchy even decreed that luxury cloth, such as silk and velvet, must be imported from Spain, supposedly to prevent the purchase of such luxury goods from foreign markets. The Crown reissued this ban in 1602, 1604, 1609, 1620, 1634, 1636, and again in 1706. But these regulations never worked. In the 1640s, the government also banned all trade between New Spain and Peru, because Chinese silks were also imported to Peru via New Spain. This ban also failed. Despite these prohibitions, the trans-Pacific trade continued to weaken trans-Atlantic trade. Indeed, some merchants in New Spain even shipped Chinese yarn back across the Atlantic to Spanish markets for processing, directly influencing the silk market in Spain.

Merchants in Asia and the Americas alike had strong economic incentives to ignore government restrictions on foreign trade. Seeking to guarantee their substantial economic profits, merchants and officials in Manila and New Spain worked hard to keep the galleons at full capacity. The foremost supporters of the trade were those well-connected long-distance merchants from Mexico City who controlled the Manila trade. Local officials also helped maintain the trade, flaunting rules issued from Madrid. In 1637, Juan Grau y Malfalcón, the king's representative in Manila, tried to convince King Philip IV of Spain of the benefit of this trade. Among his contentions were that if the workers in the silver mines wore clothes made of cheaper cloth from China, the government could save money, and thereby increase incomes to the Spanish crown generated by mines. Such arguments did not convince the king, but neither was the king ever able to halt the imports of textiles from China, though Manila.

Contemporary monument to the Manila-Acapulco Galleon, Manila

Three factors help us understand the ineffectiveness of these Spanish decrees. First, the government in the Philippines overseeing the Manila trade answered to the colonial government in Mexico City, not to the king directly. Second, the economy of New Spain operated largely independently from Spain. Finally, since New Spain continued to provide enormous profits to Spain, especially through the import of silver, the king could only get so angry about how the economy of the Spanish Americas function. The political and economic independence of the colonies allowed local officials in New Spain and the Philippines alike to disregard orders from Madrid when it came to imports from the Manila galleon trade. As a result, the trans-Pacific silk trade continued into the early nineteenth century.

View of Manila, c. 1665

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