

Primary Sources

On the Manila Galleon Trade

Introduction

Below is a series of texts and images related to the history of the early global silk trade through Manila, offering various perspectives of people in China, New Spain, and Spain.

As you read, consider the following questions:

- What were the relative benefits or dangers of the Manila galleon trade from the perspective of the Chinese emperor in Beijing and the Spanish king in Madrid?
- What factors thwarted these two governments' efforts to regulate international trade?
- The Manila galleon trade started in the 1570s, expanding in value to a high point in the 1620s and 30s, after which it saw a noticeable decline. With the evidence we have available, what factors contributed to this drop off?
- What, if any, were the long-term impacts of the Manila galleon trade on China and New Spain?

Advice to the Ming Emperor

He Qiaoyuan (1558–1632) was a governmental official, scholar, and influential chronicle from Fujian Province. He was known under the pseudonym Jingshan xiansheng, or Mr. Jingshan. In 1629, He was appointed as Vice Minister of Finance in 1623, and in 1629 as Vice Minister of Works and soon after to a second position in as the Minister of Finance. In 1630, shortly before retiring, he wrote Qingkai haijin shu (Memorial Requesting the Lifting of the Ban on Coastal Trade), advice to the Chongzhen Emperor (r.1627–1644), asking for a repeal of the 1626 ban on foreign trade.

Transcribed by Xiaolin Duan from Richard von Glahn, *Fountain of Fortune: Money and Monetary Policy in China, 1000–1700* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), p.127.

“By the ‘East Ocean’ we mean Luzon,* which is populated by the Portuguese.[†] Their country contains silver mountains, the product of which the foreigners mint into silver coins in prodigious quantities. When our Chinese subjects journey to trade in the ‘Western Ocean’ [i.e., continental Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean] they trade the goods we produce for the goods of others. But when engaging in trade in Luzon they have designs solely on silver coins...A hundred *jin* of Huzhou[‡] silk yarn worth 100 taels can be sold at a price of 200 to 300 taels there. Moreover, porcelain from Jiangxi,[§] as well as sugar and fruit from my native Fujian, all are avidly desired by the foreigners.”

*An old Chinese name for the Philippines. Today the world only refers to the largest and most populous island in the Philippines, which is also home to Manila.

[†] This seems to be a misunderstanding. He Qiaoyuan confuses the Portuguese and the Spanish.

[‡] A city in northern Zhejiang Province.

[§] Jiangxi Province, to the southwest of Zhejiang Province, was home to the city of Jingdezhen, the preeminent area for porcelain in China. During the Ming period, the kiln of Jingdezhen became the main production center for porcelain intended for export to European markets.

A Scholar-Official Evaluates the Importance of Foreign Trade

The scholar Zhang Zie (1574-1640) wrote Dong XiYang kao (On the Countries in the Eastern and Western Oceans), a report about countries of East and Southeast Asia. It provided detailed information about the finances and trade of these regions. The preface to that work was written by another scholar and governmental official, Zhou Qiyuan (1572-1626). Here Zhou Qiyuan recorded the outcome of the reopening of the foreign maritime trade under the new Emperor Muzong, also known as the Longqing Emperor, whose reign began in February of 1567.

Translated by Xiaolin Duan from Zhou Qiyuan, preface to Dong XiYang kao (Beijing: 1981), 17.

“During the reign of Emperor Muzong, 1567-1572, the laws restricting trade with foreigners were abolished. Therefore, merchants from all over the country have flocked to the southeastern coast where they have constructed sailing vessels and dispersed over the eastern and western maritime trade routes. They carried and transported precious stuff, the exotic things are beyond record. And the money that they trade amounts to several hundred thousand taels [silver coins] of silver annually. Public and private have become mutually dependent, and the southeast coast had become the emperor’s southern treasure.”

A Scholar Describes the Prosperity Brought to Zhangzhou by Foreign Trade

Zhangzhou is a large trade city in the Fujian Province on the southeast coast of China that developed strong ties to the foreign trade because of its proximity to Taiwan, which served as a jumping off place for travel to the Philippines. The scholar from Fujian, Xu Bo (1570–1645) wrote this poem describing the prosperity of Zhangzhou after the opening of the sea trade

Translated by Yiaolin Duan from Cai Guozhen Liang Zhaoyang, et al., eds. [Chongzhen] Haicheng Xianzhi. Riben cang Zhongguo hanjian difangzhi congkan (Beijing: Wenxian Chubanshe, 1992), 20.6.

“... [Zhangzhou] connected to Japan on the east, on the south it reaches to the Baiyue region*

It does not rain in deep fall, and no frost throughout the winter.

Commodities traveled with people, wealth and money concentrates in the hands of merchants.

The rhinoceros’s horn is exquisitely carved, and the elephant teeth is nicely polished.[†]

There are bamboo coming from foreign lands, along with a fragrance from imported incenses.

Swallow’s nest is as white as snow, the bee wax is as yellow as flower.

Every garden has oranges, every household is burning sugarcane.

Profits go to the big families, and the tax went to the powerful officials....”

* Baiyue – also called the Yue – is an older term for non-Chinese ethnic groups that lived to the southeast and far south of the Chinese empire.

† Rhinoceroses and elephants are native to Southeast Asia and the northern parts of South Asia, but not China.

A Scholar-Official Assesses China's Foreign Trade

Gu Yanwu (1613–1682) was a scholar-official during the early Qing Dynasty, which immediately followed the collapse the Ming government. As a young man, he witnessed the final years of the Ming dynasty. Between 1639 and 1662 Gu wrote this work, called *Tianxia junguo libing shu* (An Economic and Strategic Geography of the Empire), which offered a geographical survey, a history and, a description of local administrations during the Ming Empire. In the passage below, we can read Gu's evaluation of the Manila galleon trade in 1639.

Translated by Yiaolin Duan, from Gu Yanwu, *Tianxia junguo libing shu*, ce 26 xia, "Fujian," (Taipei, 1979), 6753-6754.

"There is a West Ocean and an East Ocean... In the East Ocean is the Philippines; it belonged to the foreigners, whose country has silver mountains so they can produce a large number of silver coins. When Chinese traded with the West Ocean, then they got local products [such as pepper and rhinoceros' horn], but if they trade with the East Ocean, the Chinese can get silver. Both regions need our silk textiles. The foreign countries cannot do silk production well, so they import raw silk from China and then make exquisite textiles and wear them; they consider these textiles as exquisite luxuries. Therefore, the craftsmen from our country sometimes go to foreign countries with our expertise. They can easily make a living with their hands. A lot of people have thus moved to the East Ocean.

If we start to collect a tax on foreign trade, we can allow Fujian natives to trade their local products, and also allow the silk merchants from the Zhejiang Province and porcelain merchant from the Jiangxi Province to trade with the foreigners—as long as we prohibit the trade of weapons, sulfur, firecrackers and other banned stuff. We can then bring back the prosperity of the Wanli reign, when every year the government collected 20,000 taels of silver—this can be used to support military expenses. Some even say that this revenue could reach 50,000–60,000 taels. Then we can solve the difficulty of supporting the army—this is the first benefit. The poor people along the coastline could then engage in trading, avoiding hunger and cold, so they won't become bandits, this is the second benefit. Those military generals from the coastline would no longer seek profits by secretly communicating with pirates—this is the third benefit."

* The Indian Ocean.

† The Pacific Ocean.

‡ Jiangxi Province, to the southwest of Zhejiang Province, was home to the city of Jingdezhen, the preeminent areas for porcelain in China. During the Ming period, the kiln of Jingdezhen became the main production center for porcelain intended for export to European markets.

§ This refers to the rule of the Wanli Emperor (r.1572–1620) of the Ming Dynasty. The early part of his reign saw noticeable political, military, economic and cultural flourishing.

A Ming-era Agricultural Manual

During the last years of the Ming Dynasty, someone who is known only to use as “Shen” produced a book that offered an in-depth assessment of agricultural practices of the Jiaxing region on the coast of Zhejiang Province, titled Bu Nongshu yanjiu (A Study of Supplementary Agriculture). The book is also known as Shen’s Agricultural Book or just as Supplementary Agricultural Book. During the Qing Dynasty, the work was reworked by a scholar named Zhang Lie. As a result, in places, it can be difficult to distinguish who wrote what. Here, however, Mr. Shen described the decline in silk producing taking place in the 1640s, well before Zhang Lie ever lived.

Translated by Yaolin Duan from Chen Hengli (ed.), Bu Nongshu yanjiu (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1958), 290.

“Today sericulture is the basis of livelihood for the people of Huzhou. How could it be expected that in 1641... mulberry leaves would be scarce and valuable while raw silk was practically worthless. Then in 1642, the price of raw silk improved a little, but mulberry leaves were extremely cheap and the second crop of silkworms was a total loss. The remainder of the first crop of mulberry leaves on the ground together with the newly sprouted second crop brought only half the usual return... how can the affairs of men be so uneven for the people of Huzhou* to be this unfortunate?”

* A coastal city in Zhejiang Province.

Letter from Martin Enríquez de Almanza y Ulloa, Viceroy of New Spain, to King Philip II of Spain, December 5, 1573

As viceroy of New Spain, Martin Enríquez de Almanza y Ulloa ruled the colony largely independently, as a representative of the king from 1568 to 1580. A high nobleman with royal heritage, Enríquez de Almanza was appointed as viceroy of New Spain at sixty years old. He quickly defeated a group of English pirates, waged a brutal war against groups of indigenous peoples in Mexico, and by 1570, established an inquisition in New Spain. In this letter from late 1573, he reported to the king what he had learned about China and the prospects for the trans-Pacific trade.

*Transcribed by Yiaolin Duan from Emma Helen Blair and James Alexander Robertson (eds.), *The Philippine Islands: 1493-1803: Explorations by Early Navigators, Descriptions of the Islands and their Peoples, their History and Records of the Catholic Missions, as Related in Contemporaneous Books and Manuscripts*, vol. 3 (Cleveland, OH: Arthur H. Clark Company, 1903), 209, 211-12.*

“On the fifteenth of November there arrived at the port of Acapulco one of two ships which sailed from the Philipinas islands on the first of July...

As for the mainland of China, it is so large a land and so thickly settled that one of its hundred divisions, according to report, is as big as half the world itself. It is learned from the Chinese that they admit strangers only with reluctance to their land. For this reason, more and better soldiers would be needful than those who could go from this land, for those born here are but little used to hardship—although it is also understood that the people of China, in spite of possessing weapons, horses, and artillery, are but little superior in valor to the Indians. Commercial relations are now beginning to be established with the Chinese; but until this is definitely completed the hopes of the merchants here will not rise, in spite of all I do and contrive with them to encourage and spur them on; for, to tell the truth, no certain information comes of a nature to induce them to go. And one of the difficulties consequent upon this commerce and intercourse is, that neither from this land nor from España, so far as can now be learned, can anything be exported thither which they do not already possess. They have an abundance of silks, and linen likewise, according to report. Cloths, on account of the heat prevalent in the country, they neither use nor value. Sugar exists in great abundance. Wax, drugs, and cotton are super-abundant in the islands, whither the Chinese go to obtain them by barter. And thus, to make a long matter short, the commerce with that land must be carried on with silver, which they value above all other things; and I am uncertain whether your Majesty will consent to this on account of having to send it to a foreign kingdom. I beg your Majesty to consider all these matters, to inform me concerning them, and to give explicit orders to the person in charge here so that no mistakes may be made.”

Philip II's Decree on February 11, 1593, on Restrictions on Commerce

Throughout his reign, King Philip II (r. 1556–1598) was committed to the mercantilist principle of using the colonies to benefit the finances of the Spanish state. To protect the interests of merchants back in Spain, therefore, in 1582, he banned trade between the Viceroyalty of Peru and the Philippines. This goal was to limit all trans-Pacific trade to that between Manila and Acapulco. In 1593, he issued this decree, further regulating that trade.

Transcribed by Yaiolin Duan, with minor edits by Jesse Spohnholz, from Emma Helen Blair and James Alexander Robertson (eds), *The Philippine Islands: 1493–1898: Explorations by Early Navigators, Descriptions of the Islands and their Peoples, their History and Records of the Catholic Missions, as Related in Contemporaneous Books and Manuscripts*, vol. 8 (Cleveland, OH: Arthur H. Clark Company, 1903), 316–18

“The King: Inasmuch as, whenever we have promulgated ordinances prohibiting trade between the Western Yndias* and China, and regulating that of the Philipinas, I have been informed that there has been neglect in the execution thereof; and that, as the merchants and other persons in the Northern Sea who trade in these our kingdoms of Castilla,[†] and in the Yndias, have suffered so many losses during past years, and those engaged in the profits of the Chinese trade have gained so much, the latter has increased greatly, while the commerce of these my said kingdoms has declined, on which account both these kingdoms and my royal income have received great damage: therefore, since it is so important that the commerce of these my said kingdoms and of the Yndias be preserved and increased, and that there be quite usual communication and trade between them, I have, with the concurrence of my royal Council of the Yndias, determined to prohibit by new orders—as by this present I do prohibit, forbid, and order—in the future, in any manner and under any circumstances whatever, any vessel from sailing from the provinces of Peru, Tierra Firme,[‡] Guatimala,[§] Nueva España, or any other part of our Western Yndias, to China, for trade or traffic or for any other purpose. Neither can they go to the Philipinas Islands, except those from Nueva España, which are permitted to go by another decree of this same date. We have ordained that, should this be done, such vessel will be regarded as confiscated, with all its money, merchandise, and other cargo. One third part of all of this shall be applied to our exchequer, a second third to him who shall give information thereof, and the other third to the judge who shall pass sentence...

* By this he means the Americas.

[†] This is Castile, which was once a kingdom and later merged with other kingdoms of Iberia to form the kingdom of Spain.

[‡] The Spanish name for the northern areas of South America on the Caribbean coast that was part of the Kingdom of New Grenada.

[§] An *audencia* of New Spain located in the area of present-day Guatemala.

Philip II's Decree on February 11, 1593, on Restrictions on Commerce, cont.

...And further, we forbid that any merchandise brought to the said Nueva España from the Philipinas Islands be transferred to the said provinces of Piru and Tierra Firme, even when the duties imposed on such merchandise have been paid. For our purpose and will is that nothing from China and the Philipinas Islands be used in the said provinces of Piru and Tierra Firme, except what may be there at present, and for which we allow them four years, to be determined from the date on which this our decree shall be promulgated. For this purpose every person shall register what he has at present before the justice of the city, town, or hamlet, where he lives, or of which he is a citizen. Henceforth whatever of the aforesaid merchandise shall be taken to the above-named provinces, or whatever shall be found in the possession of any person whatsoever, outside of the said register, or after the conclusion of the above time-limit, we order that it be confiscated also, and divided and shared as above stated. But we permit them to bring to these kingdoms, anything of the above-named articles that they may have had hitherto, within the limit of the said four years. I order my viceroys of Piru and Nueva España, my governor and captain-general of the Philipinas, the presidents and auditors of my royal audiencias of the Yndias, and all other magistrates therein, that they observe and fulfil this our decree, strictly, inviolably, and punctually; and that they execute the penalties contained herein without any remission or dispensation whatever, as is thus my will, and as is fitting for my service. They shall promulgate it in all places where this shall be necessary and desirable, so that all may have notice of it, and none may plead ignorance. Given in Madrid, February eleven, one thousand five hundred and ninety-three.”

Juan Grau y Monfalcón's Informatory Memorial of 1637. Number 95, Trade of the Islands Necessary in Nueva España, Because of their Goods.

Gau y Monfalcón was the procurator-general for the Philippines at the Spanish court. In 1637 he wrote a lengthy report to King Philip IV of Spain explaining the benefits of Manila galleon trade. While this had long been a matter of debate at the Spanish court, the context of this moment explains Grau y Monfalcón's urgency. In 1636, aware of widespread smuggling that was cutting into royal tariffs on trade, Philip IV had sent a new royal inspector to review cargo manifests on galleons coming in from Manila (discussed in Reading 4). In protest, Spanish merchants in Manila halted trans-Pacific galleon shipments for 1636 and 1637. The trade embargo proved costly for the colonies of the Philippines and New Spain. It also cut off tax revenues from this trade to Madrid and halted highly desired silver imports to China. Normal shipments resumed in 1638.

Transcribed by Jesse Spohnholz from Emma Helen Blair and James Alexander Robertson (eds.), The Philippine Islands: 1493-1898: Explorations by Early Navigators, Descriptions of the Islands and their Peoples, their History and Records of the Catholic Missions, as Related in Contemporaneous Books and Manuscripts, vol. 27 (Cleveland, OH: Arthur H. Clark Company, 1903), 198-200.

“In regard to the first part, which pertains to the merchandise, the trade of the Filipinas is so necessary today in Nueva España, that the latter country finds it as difficult as do the islands to get along without that trade; and its lack cannot be supplied with merchandise from these kingdoms. The wares taken to Acapulco are plain and figured velvets, satins, and damasks; grograms,* taffetas, and picotes; † headdresses and stockings; silk, loose and twisted, in skeins, that reeled on spindles, and woven; thread; tramas, ‡ plushes, § and other silk stuffs and textiles. Of cotton, there are *sinavafas*, || fine glazed buckrams [*bocacies*], ** glazed linen [*olandilla*], †† fine muslins [*canequies*], ‡‡ and *semianas*; §§ and of cotton and silk, beds, curtains, coverlets, quilts, and other pieces...

* Grosgrain is a thick, loosely woven fabric.

† A type of plain wool cloth.

‡ A type of weaving silk.

§ Plus is a long napped fabric of wool, cotton, or silk.

|| Material that is unbleached and is of its natural color.

** A heavy weight, fairly coarse cloth made from linen, cotton, or a mixture of both.

†† The glazing of linen gave it a smooth finish.

‡‡ A kind of plain cotton fabric.

§§ Another plain cotton fabric, but of South Asian origin.

Juan Grau y Monfalcón's Informatory Memorial of 1637. Number 95, Trade of the Islands Necessary in Nueva España, Because of their Goods., cont.

...[They also carry] civet,^{|||} musk,^{***} and amber; gold and pearls; crockery-ware, cabinets, and articles made of wood, and other things...

But the bulk of the commerce is reduced to the silk and cotton textiles; for there is but little else that is rare or elegant, or that has much export. From the skeined silk, and the silk thread, and trama are manufactured in Nueva España velvets, veils, headdresses, passementeries, and many taffetas, which were taken to Perú when there were ships that went to Callao,^{†††} and to other parts of the Indias—where the black, brown, and silver-colored goods that are sent from Sevilla do not arrive in good shape, because the sea rots them. It is known that the skein silk of China is more even and elegant for delicate and smooth fabrics than is the Misteca^{‡‡‡} which is produced in that kingdom; besides that, there is less of the latter kind than is necessary in the country. By this trade and manufacture, more than fourteen thousand persons support themselves in Mexico, La Puebla, and Antequera,^{§§§} by their looms, the whole thing being approved by royal decrees. Of the cotton textiles, linens [*lienzos*] are used in Nueva España more than any other stuff, as they are so cheap that they sell for one and one-half or two reals per *vara*.^{||||} Therefore, they are desired by the Indians and negroes; and when these are lacking, even though there should be an over-supply of the linens of Europa, they do not want them or use them, as those are dear and not so much used by them; and they get along with their own cloths from Campeche^{****} or La Guasteca,^{††††} and others that they weave. Hence the importation of these linens (which are brought from China) is now proposed as an expedient measure; if that be administered at the account of the royal treasury, it would gain annually more than one hundred and twenty thousand pesos, as is apparent from a decree of November 20.”

^{|||} A musky perfume produced by a cat-like animal from Asia and Africa called a civet.

^{***} A name of an aromatic perfume usually obtained from the musk deer, a native of Asia.

^{†††} The port serving Lima, the capital of the Viceroyalty of Peru.

^{‡‡‡} This refers to the silk produced in Misteca, a region of New Spain that today is part of the state of Oaxaca.

^{§§§} A settlement in New Spain that is in the present-day city of San Juan Bautista Atlatlahuca, in Oaxaca.

^{||||} A unit of length roughly equivalent to the English yard.

^{****} A coastal settlement in southwestern Mexico, on the Gulf of Mexico.

^{††††} This seems to refer to La Huasteca, a region in eastern Mexico along the Gulf of Mexico.

Late 16th-Century Chinese Textile for Export

This silk textile, which measures 50.8cm x 55.9 cm (20" x 22") was produced in China explicitly for the export market to Spain. It must have thus travelled in one of the galleons travelling from Manila to Acapulco, and then via land route to Veracruz, and then on to Spain. It adopts the symbol of the double-headed eagle, which represented the Habsburg dynasty ruling Spain at the time. The image of the heart pierced by arrows, just below the eagle, is an image associated with the Augustinian religious order. The other elements of the design, like the peonies, are Chinese.

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Accessed at, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/219396>



17th-Century Coverlet

This silk bed covering, which measured 213cm x 200.7 cm (84" x 79") was made in China for export to the European market. Some of the imagery is typically Chinese, including the two dragons and the flaming jewel in the center. However, the pheasants on the right stand out as unusual, as do the four men wearing kinds of clothing - breaches for pants and doublets on their torsos - that were fashionable in Europe, not China.

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Accessed at, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/229483>



18th-century Embroidered Bed Cover

A noblewoman named Doña Rosa Solís y Menéndez made this coverlet, in Spanish called a *colcha*, in 1786 to commemorate a wedding in Mérida, a city on the Yucatan Peninsula of New Spain. She stitched the *colcha*, which measures 254cm x 185.4 cm (1,100" x 73"), with silk imported from China, attesting to the long duration of the Manila galleon trade. Yet cotton on which she stitched was made in Mexico. Some of the dyes she used were from Europe, while others were from Mexico, including that had made from the cochineal insects by indigenous people of the region since before Spanish colonialism.

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Accessed at, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/13604>

