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Title: 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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Conclusions
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 Spanish colonial empire in the New World.

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For the research study of the trade in porcelain, information from textual sources was combined with a vast quantity of material evidence provided by maritime 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 kiln 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, aboard 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 Gafio, 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 existing 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 archaeological research must be advanced by 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 ceramic material from marine and terrestrial archaeological excavations has also demonstrated that although the thickest 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 later the viceroyalties of the porcelain, 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 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 status, 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 porcelain trade 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 exporter’s productions. 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. For the research 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 an indirect consumer of the goods that were traded to them. 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 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 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. 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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 porcelains 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.