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From Long-Distance Trade to the Global Lives of Things: Writing the History of Early Modern Trade and Material Culture

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Abstract

Until quite recently, the field of early modern history largely focused on Europe. The overarching narrative of the early modern world began with the European “discoveries,” proceeded to European expansion overseas, and ended with an exploration of the factors that led to the “triumph of Europe.” When the *Journal of Early Modern History* was established in 1997, the centrality of Europe in the emergence of early modern forms of capitalism continued to be a widely held assumption. Much has changed in the last twenty years, including the recognition of the significance of consumption in different parts of the early modern world, the spatial turn, the emergence of global history, and the shift from the study of trade to the commodities themselves.

Keywords

Long-distance trade – material culture – the spatial turn – gift-giving – food history

Introduction

Sometimes conferences disappear from view as soon as the delegates disperse. Other times, when the papers are published in an edited volume, conferences come to be seen as important milestones in the historiography. The two volumes edited by James Tracy, entitled *The Rise of Merchant Empires* and *The Political Economy of Merchant Empires* published in 1990 and 1991, respectively,

are an example of the latter.¹ Based on papers delivered at a 1987 conference entitled “The Rise of Merchant Empires” and held at the Center for Early Modern History at the University of Minnesota, these two volumes mark a specific moment in time in the historiography of merchants and trade. In the late eighties when the conference was held, and on the cusp of the nineties, when these volumes appeared, the field of early modern history was almost exclusively focused on Europe, and individual European nations. The overarching narrative of the early modern world was unquestioned: it began with the European “discoveries,” proceeded to European expansion overseas, and ended with an exploration of the factors that led to the “triumph of Europe.” Within that narrative, Tracy’s two volumes heralded the beginning of significant change in the field, most notably by highlighting the important part played by merchant communities in the establishment of political units that transcend the Europe-based nation. The volumes highlighted the contribution of specific overseas regions that contributed to the European trajectory towards a capitalist modernity. The volumes took comparison seriously, such as between southern and northern Europe, as we see in Herman van der Wee’s chapter, or between the Dutch and the English companies and their overseas activities in Niels Steensgaard’s.² And the volumes recognized the significance of traded goods, such as silver, grain and the so-called colonial groceries like tea, coffee and chocolate, for the economic growth of early modern Europe.

The Founding of a New Journal

Despite Tracy’s efforts, European actors continued to hold central stage in the field. When the *Journal of Early Modern History* (*JEMH*) was established in 1997, a decade after the Minnesota conference, the centrality of Europe in the emergence of early modern forms of capitalism, for example, continued

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- 1 James Tracy, ed., *The Rise of Merchant Empires: Long-Distance Trade in the Early Modern World, 1350-1750*, Studies in Comparative Early Modern History (Cambridge, 1990); James Tracy, ed., *The Political Economy of Merchant Empires*, Studies in Comparative Early Modern History (Cambridge, 1991).
 - 2 Herman Van der Wee, “Structural Changes in European Long-Distance Trade, and Particularly in the Reexport Trade from South to North, 1350-1750,” in *The Rise of Merchant Empires*, 14-33; Niels Steensgaard, “The Growth and Composition of the Long-Distance Trade of England and the Dutch Republic before 1750,” in *The Rise of Merchant Empires*, 102-52; The importance of comparative methodologies is also spelled out in the short editorial that accompanies the first part of the first volume of the *JEMH*. See James D. Tracy, “From the Editors,” *Journal of Early Modern History* 1 (1 January 1997): 1.

(and still continues) to be a widely held assumption. In part, this can be explained by the powerful legacy of giants in the field like Fernand Braudel and Immanuel Wallerstein.³ Braudel's concern was entirely with European history over the *longue durée*; Wallerstein's 1976 study identified Europe as one of the core regions in the modern capitalist economy as it emerged in the sixteenth century. Regions like Central Africa, India and China were designated as peripheries, meaning that their natural resources and low-skill, labor-intensive production sustained the economic growth of the core region. Wallerstein's framing of the relationship between the early modern European core and its peripheries formed the base for much of the scholarship of the past decades, including numerous studies of the long-distance or intercontinental trade between core and periphery.

Much that was written also continued to identify long-distance trade as the preserve of either the various East India Companies associated with individual nations, or of the specifically named merchant communities such as the Armenians, the Jews, Wang Gungwu's Hokkien merchants, or the Bajasas and Banyas merchant communities.⁴ Such groups appear in the literature as having a clear identity that separates them from other groups and an often marginal status that makes them especially suited to the life of the itinerant merchant who covers vast distances.

And for much of the 1990s and beyond, the emphasis continued to be on commodities traded over long distances, from Asia to Europe via land or sea routes, including luxury items that justified the high cost associated with their transport. Precious metals were sent from the Americas to Asia, silks and spices arrived in the Levant via overland trade routes, and once the Europeans had rounded the Cape of Good Hope, luxury goods like porcelains, precious stones, and exotic hardwoods were shipped across the oceans along with silks and spices. Long-distance trade as it appears in Tracy's two volumes on merchant empires was undoubtedly seen as important, but as essentially different from the bulk trade in grains, timber and salt that, for example, underpinned the

3 Fernand Braudel, *Civilization and Capitalism, 15th-18th Century*, trans. Siân Reynolds, 3 vols. (Berkeley, 1992); Immanuel Maurice Wallerstein, *The Modern World-System: Capitalist Agriculture and the Origins of the European World-Economy in the Sixteenth Century* (New York, 1976). At least 23 research articles published between 1997 and the present in *JEMH* quote Braudel's work, and a further five quote Wallerstein.

4 Gungwu Wang, "Merchants without Empire: The Hokkien Sojourning Communities," in *The Rise of Merchant Empires*, 400-422; Irfan Habib, "Merchant Communities in Precolonial India," in *The Rise of Merchant Empires*, 371-99.

growth of the early modern Dutch economy.⁵ In other words, when the *JEMH* was founded, the centrality of Europe in shaping global trade relations, the separation of agents into distinct nation-based groups, and the classification of goods over long distances as luxuries of less importance all still had a very strong presence.

One major change did occur, however, more or less between the appearance of *The Rise of Merchant Empires* in 1990, and the establishment of the *JEMH* in 1997. John Brewer and Roy Porter's 1993 *Consumption and the World of Goods* was one of those transformative collections of articles that inaugurated a whole new way of doing history.⁶ Brewer and Porter were not the first to use the title; Mary Douglas and Baron Isherwood had already published a book with a very similar title in 1979.⁷ But Brewer and Porter, and many others who went on to publish in the field of what we might call consumption studies, took the study of the consumer in a new direction, away from the eighteenth-century European debates over whether the consumption of luxury goods was morally justifiable, and towards sophisticated studies of the complex contexts in which people desired goods and in which that desire and demand for goods went on to transform society, culture and the economy.⁸ Having identified the economic and socio-cultural power of consumers and their desire for things, the scholarly gaze shifted away from mostly quantitative studies of necessities such as grain and wood and began taking luxuries, including fine goods imported from other places, seriously.⁹ The consumption of things had

5 Jonathan I. Israel, *Empires and Entrepreneurs: The Dutch, the Spanish Monarchy and the Jews, 1585-1713* (London, 1990); See also Jan de Vries, "Understanding Eurasian Trade in the Era of the Trading Companies," in *Goods from the East, 1600-1800: Trading Eurasia*, ed. Maxine Berg (Basingstoke, 2015), 8-9.

6 John Brewer and Roy Porter, eds., *Consumption and the World of Goods* (London, 1993). This book was reviewed by Bob Harris in Issue 3 of the first volume of the *JEMH*.

7 Mary Douglas and Baron C. Isherwood, *The World of Goods: Towards an Anthropology of Consumption* (New York, 1979). This book sought to bridge the gap between economic studies of the behavior of consumers and anthropological studies of why people desire things.

8 Maxine Berg and Helen Clifford, eds., *Consumers and Luxury: Consumer Culture in Europe 1650-1850* (Manchester, 1999); Maxine Berg, "Asian Luxuries and the Making of the European Consumer Revolution," in *Luxury in the Eighteenth Century: Debates, Desires and Delectable Goods*, ed. Maxine Berg and Elizabeth Eger (Basingstoke/New York, 2003), 228-44; Frank Trentmann, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Consumption*, Oxford Handbooks (Oxford/New York, 2012).

9 For two examples of studies of the world of goods and the transformative power of consumption, see Linda Levy Peck, *Consuming Splendor: Society and Culture in Seventeenth-Century England* (Cambridge, 2005); Ann Smart Martin, *Buying into the World of Goods:*

emerged as a serious subject for study, and transformed not only the practice of history, but also, to name but a few cognate fields: anthropology, economic history, art history and geography. Right from the beginning, the *JEMH* was well-placed to take advantage of this development and encouraged the publication of articles that took consumption seriously.¹⁰

Early Modernity in World History

If recognition of this shift towards the study of consumption remained perhaps implicit, the editors were not implicit about the *JEMH*'s aims: the editorial comments that accompanied the first issue of the journal proclaimed its explicit aim of exploring contacts, comparisons and contrasts in the "early modern period of world history."¹¹ The most striking aspect of that aim was its emphasis on the possibility that it was not only Europe that experienced "early modernity." From the outset, the *JEMH* saw early modernity as a period in world history, and over the past twenty years, it has maintained a strong commitment to challenging the (still) conventional practice of using the term "early modern" to refer to the transformations of Europe between 1500 and 1800.¹² Throughout the last twenty years, this debate has continued. Some have argued that only Europe could have an early modernity; others have questioned whether the term is still meaningful when it is applied to widely different times and places, and whether there is such a thing as a global early modernity.¹³

Within the field of Chinese history, the use of the term "early modern" to refer broadly to the developments that took place in China between 1500 and 1750,

Early Consumers in Backcountry Virginia, Studies in Early American Economy and Society from the Library Company of Philadelphia (Baltimore, 2008).

10 As far as I can tell, every volume of the *Journal* engages somewhere with an aspect of consumption. The only volume that does not is Volume 11.

11 Tracy, "From the Editors," 1.

12 See, for example, the title of this volume: Beat A. Kümin, ed., *The European World 1500-1800: An Introduction to Early Modern History* (London/New York, 2009).

13 See, for example, Randolph Starn, "The Early Modern Muddle," *Journal of Early Modern History* 6 (2002): 296-307; The colonial roots of European modernity are discussed in Jorge Cañizares Esguerra, "Spanish America in Eighteenth-Century European Travel Compilations: A New 'Art of Reading' and the Transition To Modernity," *Journal of Early Modern History* 2 (1998): 329-49; The following review discusses the issue briefly for the Ottoman empire: James E. Baldwin, "Tezcan, Baki. The Second Ottoman Empire: Political and Social Transformation in the Early Modern World [Cambridge Studies in Islamic Civilization] (Cambridge, 2010)," *Journal of Early Modern History* 16 (2012): 451-53.

is relatively widespread, even if it is not universally applied.¹⁴ Craig Clunas and Laura Hostetler are two examples. For both scholars, the term “early modern” is used emphatically to refer to a set of developments that took place from the late Ming dynasty onwards, or from around 1500, which echo similar developments in Europe. These include the challenge to the authority of previously accepted orthodoxies in the received textual tradition, the growth of printing, the spread of literacy and the growing participation of new social groups in elite cultural practices, urbanization, the increased availability of global goods in the market place, and the exploration and ethnographic and geographical charting of previously unknown territories and peoples.¹⁵ Of course one might ask about the different kinds of modernities that did or did not arise from a variety of early modernities, and such debates will continue in decades to come. But it has been extremely valuable that the *JEMH* positioned itself squarely within these developments and debates.

The Spatial Turn

Meanwhile, the study of the history of trade has also been transformed by what has been dubbed “the spatial turn.”¹⁶ Without expanding on this historiographical development in too much detail, one might describe it as following on from the simple but crucial insight that space is not a static, given condition but a contingent construction. Moreover, the spatial turn urges us to see space as having agency; humans not only shape the environment in which they act, but space is also a major actor in the historical field.¹⁷ These insights have far-reaching consequences. For example, the various and innumerable forms in which spaces are represented to us—maps, geological and environmental descriptions, archaeological excavations, architectural drawings, to offer but a

14 The term “early modern China” appears throughout the *JEMH*. See, for example, Toby Osborne and Joan-Pau Rubiés, “Introduction: Diplomacy and Cultural Translation in the Early Modern World,” *Journal of Early Modern History* 20 (2016): 313–30.

15 Laura Hostetler, *Qing Colonial Enterprise: Ethnography and Cartography in Early Modern China* (Chicago, 2001); Craig Clunas, *Empire of Great Brightness: Visual and Material Cultures of Ming China, 1368–1644* (London, 2007).

16 For a classic study of the transition from the conceptualization of place to space, see Edward S. Casey, *The Fate of Place: A Philosophical History* (Berkeley, 1997); The field is too large to provide an adequate overview here, but perhaps this study may serve as introduction: Doreen B. Massey, *For Space* (London, 2005).

17 See, for example, Tim Ingold, *The Perception of the Environment: Essays on Livelihood, Dwelling and Skill* (London, 2000).

selection of examples—do not describe a reality but seek to create one. Maps are the product of a desire to impose order upon geographical features and thus reveal the structures of power in which the map-maker operated. Continents, too, are not the unshakable foundations of many a schoolchild's geography lessons but the contested outcome of a desire to impose political and economic control over landmasses.¹⁸

The spatial turn, which developed both in tandem with and as a consequence of the linguistic turn and more broadly the shift away from normalizing grand narratives, transformed the field of history in many ways, including approaches to the study of trade. One such transformation is the shift away from the land-based unit of the nation towards the study of the seas and oceans.¹⁹ Of course Braudel's masterpiece of 1949 that focused on the Mediterranean led the way, but studies of oceans in other parts of the world soon followed. Some stayed close to Braudel's work and invoked the Mediterranean in their studies of other parts of the world, as most notably perhaps in the case of the Asian Mediterranean.²⁰ Others took as their unit of historical analysis the extended littoral zones surrounding a single ocean, such as the Atlantic or the Indian oceans.²¹ The term thalassology, referring to the field of study that focused on the sea, has perhaps not become part of everyone's parlance but certainly enough to be common.²²

Studies of the Atlantic and Indian Ocean worlds, to take these two as examples, have become so numerous as to have become entire fields in their own right;

18 Martin W. Lewis and Kären Wigen, *The Myth of Continents: A Critique of Metageography* (Berkeley, 1997).

19 Carla Rahn Phillips, Lisa Norling, and Giancarlo Casale, "Introduction to the Social History of the Sea" Special Issue, *Journal of Early Modern History* 14 (2010): 1-7.

20 Eric S. Casino and Myongsup Shin, "South China Sea or 'Asian Mediterranean Sea': Re-Conceptualizing a Common Regional Maritime Zone," *International Area Studies Review* 2 (1999): 43-64; Angela Schottenhammer, ed., *The East Asian Mediterranean: Maritime Crossroads of Culture, Commerce and Human Migration*, East Asian Economic and Socio-Cultural Studies. East Asian Maritime History, 6 (Wiesbaden, 2008); François Gipouloux, *The Asian Mediterranean: Port Cities and Trading Networks in China, Japan and Southeast Asia, 13th-21st Century* (Cheltenham, 2011).

21 In fact, Bailyn is keen to disaggregate the field of Atlantic history from Braudel's work. See Bernard Bailyn, *Atlantic History: Concept and Contours* (Cambridge, 2005), 4-5.

22 Peregrine Horden and Nicholas Purcell, "The Mediterranean and 'the New Thalassology,'" *The American Historical Review* 111 (6 January 2006): 722-40; M. P. M. Vink, "Indian Ocean Studies and the 'New Thalassology,'" *Journal of Global History* 2 (2007): 41-62.

doing them justice would take us well beyond the confines of this short essay.²³ But it is worth reflecting on what they have in common and how they have moved the history of trade in new directions. Political formations create boundaries from which enduring myths about shared national identities and mutual differentiation emerge. The shift from land to sea allows historians to ignore land-based boundaries set by those with political power and focus on those factors that shape cohesion and integration: geophysical features, climate and ecology; religion and language; and the challenges and opportunities of the marketplace.

The Atlantic Ocean, with its politically and culturally very diverse littoral that ranges from Ireland and Nova Scotia in the north, and the coast of Brazil and West Africa in the south, merits being studied as a single, integrated unit because of the circulations of people, goods and ideas that occur within this space. Similarly, approaching the region that stretches from southern Africa to Java and Western Australia, via the Gujarat and the Persian Gulf in the north as a single unit, opens up an entirely different vista on the past. Brought together by monsoon winds, seafaring technologies and shared tastes for printed cotton textiles, the Indian Ocean makes far more sense as an economic sphere than as a body of water that separates Africa from Asia. Reorganizing the spaces of the past by oceanic rather than land-based units brings to the fore very different communities of traders and sets of commodities. Instead of focusing on the long-distance trade of the Europeans, who traversed such oceanic spaces rather than inhabiting them, we see the indigenous participants: the Malay who brought spices to Zanzibar, the Armenian merchants who traded textiles in Java, or the Upper Guineans who planted rice in the Americas.²⁴ They show the limitations of seeing merchants as representatives of empires, as *The Rise of Merchant Empires* implicitly did, and of identifying long-distance trade as the preserve of the various East India companies associated with individual nations.

23 Marta V. Vicente, *Clothing the Spanish Empire: Families and the Calico Trade in the Early Modern Atlantic World* (Basingstoke, 2006).

24 Abdul Sheriff, *Slaves, Spices, & Ivory in Zanzibar: Integration of an East African Commercial Empire into the World Economy, 1770-1873*, Eastern African Studies (Athens, OH, 1987); Judith Ann Carney, *Black Rice: The African Origins of Rice Cultivation in the Americas* (Cambridge, MA/London, 2001); Walter Hawthorne, "The Cultural Meaning of Work: The 'Black Rice Debate' Reconsidered," in *Rice: Global Networks and New Histories*, ed. Francesca Bray et al. (Cambridge, 2015), 279-90; Giorgio Riello, *Cotton: The Fabric That Made the Modern World* (Cambridge, 2013), 170.

The Global Turn

Without the spatial turn, it is unlikely that the field of global history would have emerged when it did, and how it did. Of course, the attempt to capture the known past in its entirety has a long and venerable history of its own, going back to Thucydides (460-ca. 395 BCE) and Sima Qian (ca. 145 - ca. 86 BCE), and the study of the great civilizations of the past is also nothing new.²⁵ Both of these approaches take civilizations as their unit of analysis, either by taking the civilization known to the author as the lens through which to view what is known about other worlds, or by taking a birds-eye view in describing the history of the world through a succession of great civilizations, an attempt that is inevitably also shaped by the perspective of the author. When Kenneth Pomeranz published *The Great Divergence* in 2000, establishing a new field known as global history was very far from his mind.²⁶ As an economic historian and Chinese specialist, he wanted to engage in a sustained comparison between the most developed parts of Europe and China in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries so as to reveal not only their great similarities in economic terms but also the rather contingent factors that facilitated the rapid development of initially Britain and later the rest of Europe from the mid-eighteenth century onwards. But a field of “global history” did follow on from this publication, with its own historiography, research centres, and MA and PhD degrees. And even if not everyone has taken the “global turn,” and controversies remain over the meaning of the term, its feasibility, and the nature of its connection to what we might term “the neo-liberalist globalization project,” its impact continues to be profound.²⁷



In the field of early modern economic history, for example, it seems much less feasible, in the wake of Pomeranz's publication, to write the history of a single nation's economy in complete isolation from its global entanglements. Books that were once presented as nation-based narratives, such as *An Economic History of West Africa*, ~~or~~ *An Economic History of Russia* or *The*

25 Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, trans. Rex Warner, Rev. ed., The Penguin Classics (Harmondsworth, 1972); Sima Qian, *Records of the Grand Historian: Han Dynasty*, trans. Burton Watson, Rev. ed. (Hong Kong/ New York, 1993); See also the discussion in Patrick O'Brien, “Historiographical Traditions and Modern Imperatives for the Restoration of Global History,” *Journal Of Global History* 1 (2006): 3-39.

26 Kenneth Pomeranz, *The Great Divergence: China, Europe, and the Making of the Modern World Economy*, The Princeton Economic History of the Western World (Princeton, NJ, 2000).

27 Some of those points are made very effectively in Sarah Hodges, “The Global Menace,” *Social History of Medicine* 25 (2012): 719-28.

Economic History of Japan, are now often framed in a different way.²⁸ The history of the Industrial Revolution in Britain cannot be told without highlighting the central role of Africans and their labor on the slave plantations; the “silverization” of the Chinese economy in the late sixteenth century is intricately connected to the new methods of extracting silver from the mines in Potosi.²⁹



The move towards global approaches has had a profound impact on the ways in which the history of trade is being written, as we see, for example, in the ways in which the narratives of the trading companies, or more precisely, the chartered companies, have been complicated in recent years. Of course chartered companies were given their trading privileges by states, and thus a national element is an inextricable part of their foundation. But these companies were also “global organizations,” in terms of their impact at home and abroad, and in the make-up of their workforce.³⁰ The Dutch East India Company, for example, may well have served in some ways as an extension of the Dutch government, but it relied heavily on non-Dutch contributions to achieve its political and economic prowess. It drew on both Asian and German recruits to provide its military force; around 1770, 80% of the VOC’s military force came from “foreign Europeans.”³¹ The Swedish and Danish companies similarly were dependent on both recruits and investments from the rest of Europe.³²

28 A. G. Hopkins, *An Economic History of West Africa* (London, 1973); James Mavor, *An Economic History of Russia*, 2nd ed. (New York, 1965); Akira Hayami, Osamu Saitō, and Ronald P. Toby, eds., *The Economic History of Japan, 1600-1990. Vol. 1, Emergence of Economic Society in Japan, 1600-1859* (Oxford, 2004). One exception that perhaps proves the rule is Richard von Glahn, *The Economic History of China: From Antiquity to the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, 2016).

29 Joseph E. Inikori, *Africans and the Industrial Revolution in England: A Study in International Trade and Economic Development* (Cambridge, 2002); Dennis Owen Flynn and Arturo Giraldez, “Cycles of Silver: Global Economic Unity through the Mid-Eighteenth Century,” *Journal of World History* 13 (2002): 391-427; Arturo Giraldez, “China and Counterfeiting in 1650 Potosi,” in *Metals, Monies, and Markets in Early Modern Societies: East Asian and Global Perspectives*, ed. Thomas Hirzel and Nanny Kim (Berlin, 2008), 15-43.

30 Emily Erikson and Valentina Assenova, “Introduction: New Forms of Organization and the Coordination of Political and Commercial Actors,” ed. Emily Erikson, *Political Power and Social Theory* 29 (2015): 3.

31 Chen Tzoref-Ashkenazi, “German Auxiliary Troops in the British and Dutch East India Companies,” in *Transnational Soldiers: Foreign Military Enlistment in the Modern Era*, ed. Nir Arielli and Bruce Collins (New York, 2013), 34; See also the much earlier book by Roelof van Gelder, *Het Oost-Indisch avontuur: Duitsers in dienst van de VOC (1600-1800)* (Nijmegen, 1997).

32 Hanna Hodacs, *Silk and Tea in the North: Scandinavian Trade and the Market for Asian Goods in Eighteenth-Century Europe* (Houndmills, 2016).

The various European trading companies, in light of this multinational workforce, are now seen as far more diverse agents in the early modern global market. Attention has shifted away from the singular focus on the contributions the companies made to national states in Europe to viewing the companies as informal, global networks that facilitated, for example, the accumulation of knowledge in specific entrepôts, ports and trade nodes.³³ The extent to which the chartered companies created spaces for and facilitated the activities of individual adventurers, researchers and traders has also become clearer in recent years.³⁴ For many years the scholarship on private trade was built on the assumption that the Dutch East India Company (VOC) forbade intra-Asian private trade, and had strict rules about the amount of goods a servant of the Company could bring home, while the English East India Company (EIC) gave private traders the freedom to profit from intra-Asian commercial activities.³⁵ But as Els Jacobs has shown, Dutch Company servants were allowed to trade privately—Dutch merchants exported Javanese sugar to the Malabar coast, for example, and in Nagasaki, VOC servants were allowed to enter into private trade—and senior Company servants increased their private wealth by trading illicitly, especially in opium, or under the cover of their Company's rivals.³⁶ And for the English case, the work by Emily Erikson has complicated the picture by showing how intertwined monopoly and private trade were, and how crucial the private traders were for strengthening the commercial networks throughout Asia.³⁷ For example, private trade widened the



33 An example of this can be seen in Elmer Kolfin, Jan L. de Jong, and Siegfried Huigen, eds., *The Dutch Trading Companies As Knowledge Networks*, vol. 14, *Intersections: Interdisciplinary Studies in Early Modern Culture* (Leiden, 2010) The book was reviewed by Markus Vink in the *Journal of Early Modern History* 15 (2011): 561-594.

34 The involvement of scientists and researchers in the Dutch VOC is one of the subjects of *ibid.*

35 The argument is laid out most explicitly in Holden Furber, *Rival Empires of Trade in the Orient, 1600-1800*, *Europe and the World in the Age of Expansion 2* (London, 1976), 275; Om Prakash, "English Private Trade in the Western Indian Ocean, 1720-1740," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 50 (2007): 217; Maxine Berg et al., "Private Trade and Monopoly Structures: The East India Companies and the Commodity Trade to Europe in the Eighteenth Century," ed. Emily Erikson, *Political Power and Social Theory* 29 (2015): 127.

36 Els M. Jacobs, *Merchant in Asia: The Trade of the Dutch East India Company during the Eighteenth Century* (Leiden, 2006), 78, 124, 130, 156-7.; Berg et al., "Introduction," 135-36.

37 Emily Erikson, *Between Monopoly and Free Trade: The English East India Company, 1600-1757*, Princeton Analytical Sociology Series (Princeton, 2014).

assortment of goods that were brought to Europe from Asia.³⁸ Bottled soy sauce only became part of the official list of imported goods in the Netherlands after 1739, but started to enter the Dutch market at least 15 years earlier.³⁹ Maxine Berg and her fellow researchers in the “Europe’s Asian Centuries Project” at the University of Warwick have shown how private trade brought not only new goods to Europe but new varieties and different qualities of goods. All this serves to underscore the shift away from the centrality of Europe and European trading companies towards the study of complex, multinational and multicultural trading networks with global reach.

The European nation-states no longer offer the fundamental structure for organizing our understanding of early modern global trade, and the Asian states and the territories under their control have similarly been called into question. As a consequence, instead of seeing commercial agents acting on behalf of nation-states, different groups and types of agents in trade have become more visible. Some of these are diasporic communities that share religious practices or linguistic identities, such as the Armenians that feature in Sebouh Aslanian’s study of networks of merchants in the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean.⁴⁰ But more importantly, these communities of traders are mobile, transnational in their outlook and their network of connections, well-placed to serve as “cross-cultural brokers” and intermediaries.⁴¹ Perhaps most important of all, they left a documentary record of their activities that completely bypasses the mindset and record-keeping practices of European traders.⁴² Aslanian’s ground-breaking work is important not only for the new Armenian documents he has uncovered but for his suggestion that circulation society is a more useful analytical term than the more descriptive term “trade diaspora” that scholars like the historian Philip Curtin and the sociologist Robin Cohen had established several decades earlier.⁴³ Several other scholars have taken up this idea of a circulation society, including Gagan Sood in his work on the Islamic worlds of circulation and exchange, and Liu Yu-ju

38 Jacobs, *Merchant in Asia*, 157.

39 Anne Gerritsen, “The Global Life of a Soya Bottle” (Leiden, 2014).

40 Sebouh David Aslanian, *From the Indian Ocean to the Mediterranean: The Global Trade Networks of Armenian Merchants from New Julfa*, The California World History Library 17 (Berkeley, 2011).

41 *Ibid.*, 4.

42 *Ibid.*, 5.

43 Philip D. Curtin, *Cross-Cultural Trade in World History*, Studies in Comparative World History (Cambridge, 1984); Robin Cohen, *Global Diasporas: An Introduction*, Second edition (Abingdon, 2008).

and Madeleine Zelin in their volume on merchant communities in East and Southeast Asia.⁴⁴

The “Asia Inside Out” project led by Eric Tagliacozzo (Cornell), Helen Siu and Peter Perdue (both at Yale) has also explored alternatives to nation-based narratives. The project has produced several edited collections that challenge the primacy of the land-based nation and shift our attention to maritime spaces, cross-border interactions, and the diverse networks and dynamic developments that have connected peoples throughout Asia.⁴⁵ If the focus in the first volume was mostly on the specific moments in time that structured connections in Asia, space featured most heavily in the second volume.⁴⁶ The various studies in these volumes show that even if we do not yet have an easy alternative for identifying spatial units by the names of political states, the history of interactions across geophysical, linguistic, and religious boundaries is far richer than we ever presumed. It is only when we bring these to the fore explicitly that we can effectively challenge the Eurocentric biases that continue to plague much of our research.

The Material Turn

Another aspect of Aslanian’s “circulation societies” is that it centralizes not the source of the financial capital that paid for the commodities in circulation between Asia and Europe (i.e. in Europe), but the commodities themselves, such as the printed cotton textiles made in Gujarat and in circulation throughout the Indian Ocean and beyond.⁴⁷ The shift from the study of bulk goods to luxury goods, and from traded goods to material culture and the study of the global lives of goods, is another very significant transformation of the field that occurred within the last 20 years. As discussed above, the emergence of consumption studies as a field in its own right happened well before the establishment of the *JEMH*.⁴⁸ But the transition from studies that assumed

44 Gagan Sood, *India and the Islamic Heartlands: An Eighteenth-Century World of Circulation and Exchange* (Cambridge, 2016); Madeleine Zelin and Yu-ju Liu, eds., *Merchant Communities in Asia, 1600-1980*, Perspectives in Economic and Social History (London, 2014).

45 Eric Tagliacozzo, Helen F. Siu, and Peter C. Perdue, eds., *Asia inside out: Changing Times* (Cambridge, MA, 2015).

46 Eric Tagliacozzo, Helen F. Siu, and Peter C. Perdue, eds., *Asia Inside Out*. 

47 See also discussion of Gujarati textiles traded by Armenians in Riello, *Cotton*.

48 Neil McKendrick, John Brewer, and J. H. Plumb, *The Birth of a Consumer Society: The Commercialization of Eighteenth-Century England* (Bloomington, 1982); Lorna Weatherill, *Consumer Behaviour and Material Culture in Britain, 1660-1760* (London, 1996).

the emergence of a consumer society was a European, or even just an English development, to studies that explore the complex global lives of objects has taken place gradually over these twenty years. When Bob Harris reviewed *The World of Goods* for the *JEMH* in 1997, he mentioned Peter Burke's chapter, which aims to "place a western phenomenon in a global context," along with a question about the geographical boundaries of consumption, but ultimately, for Harris, it was the implications of consumption patterns for the history of early modern Europe he was interested in.⁴⁹ This in sharp contrast to Craig Clunas' review of the same book, which raised far more pertinent questions about the parochialism of Brewer and Porter's approach.⁵⁰ Research in the field of consumption over the last twenty years has shown early modern consumption's global ubiquity and its multiple variations.⁵¹ Drug-taking in the Safavid empire, tobacco-smoking in late Ming China, cosmopolitan consumer imports in Zanzibar, or book consumption amongst middle-class readers in eighteenth-century Cairo, examples abound of the transformative processes involved in the desire, buying, selling, and flaunting of material goods.⁵²

So consumption is global because it was a key part of life throughout the early modern world, but also because almost everywhere, the most desirable goods for consumption were goods from afar. The coffee consumed in the Safavid Empire came from the Yemen, the tobacco smoked in China was a New World crop, the sugar in the market in Zanzibar came from American plantations, and the cheap paper on which the books in Cairo were printed had been imported from Europe. The desire for exotic goods transformed

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- 49 Bob Harris, "Consumption and the World of Goods" (Book Review), *Journal of Early Modern History* 1 (1997): 269-72; See also Peter Burke, "Res et Verba: Conspicuous Consumption in the Early Modern World," in *Consumption and the World of Goods*, 148-61.
- 50 Craig Clunas, "Modernity Global and Local: Consumption and the Rise of the West," *The American Historical Review* 104 (1999): 1497-1511.
- 51 John Brewer and Frank Trentmann, eds., *Consuming Cultures, Global Perspectives: Historical Trajectories, Transnational Exchanges*, Cultures of Consumption Series (Oxford, 2006).
- 52 Rudolph P Mathee, *The Pursuit of Pleasure: Drugs and Stimulants in Iranian History, 1500-1900* (Princeton, N.J., 2005); Donald Quataert, *Consumption Studies and the History of the Ottoman Empire, 1550-1922: An Introduction* (New York, 2000); Craig Clunas, *Superfluous Things: Material Culture and Social Status in Early Modern China* (Honolulu, 2004); Carol Benedict, *Golden-Silk Smoke a History of Tobacco in China, 1550-2010* (Berkeley, 2011); Jeremy Prestholdt, *Domesticating the World: African Consumerism and the Genealogies of Globalization* (Berkeley, 2008); Nelly Hanna, *In Praise of Books: A Cultural History of Cairo's Middle Class, Sixteenth to the Eighteenth Century* (Syracuse, 2003).

marketplaces all over the world.⁵³ Moreover, it transformed the ways in which goods were made: new materials, technologies, designs and applications emerged in response to the global circulations of goods. Maxine Berg already pointed this out in her seminal 2004 article in *Past and Present*, and the ideas were developed further in her edited collected *Goods from the East*.⁵⁴ The exotic goods that started to flood the British market when the trading companies brought shiploads full of Asian silks, cottons, tea and porcelains inspired the making of many of the goods manufactured in the Industrial Revolution. Xu Xiaodong's contribution, for example, shows how China's production of porcelain decorated with enamel (made from ground glass and iron-ore pigments) was transformed by the arrival of European goods, such as enamelled copper decorated with pastel colours. Appropriating these new colours and technologies and integrating these into existing methods of production led to the manufacture of new enamel products, which, in turn, appealed to European consumers.⁵⁵ Not only the traded goods themselves, but also manufacturing and marketing know-how, product and design technologies circulated and moved along the same trajectories that trends and fashions travelled across time and space.

Despite general scholarly agreement over the global circulations of goods and their accompanying knowledge complexes, there is less agreement over whether objects have their own innate identities and meanings, or whether an object only gains meaning in processes like exchange and appropriation.⁵⁶ Appadurai, in his introduction to *The Social Lives of Things*, emphasized the latter view, based on his economic analysis of the exchange of commodities.⁵⁷ In *Global Lives of Things*, a collection of articles edited by Giorgio Riello and myself, we saw objects as accumulating layers of meaning as they

53 This certainly included China. See, for example, Yangwen Zheng, *China on the Sea: How the Maritime World Shaped Modern China* (Leiden/Boston, 2012).

54 Maxine Berg, "In Pursuit of Luxury: Global History and British Consumer Goods in the Eighteenth Century," *Past & Present* 182 (2004): 85-142; Maxine Berg, ed., *Goods from the East, 1600-1800: Trading Eurasia*, Europe's Asian Centuries (Basingstoke, 2015).

55 Xiaodong Xu, "Europe-China-Europe: The Transmission of the Craft of Painted Enamel in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries," in *Goods from the East, 1600-1800: Trading Eurasia*, ed. Maxine Berg (Basingstoke, 2015), 92-106. See also the forthcoming Warwick University Ph.D. by Tang Hui.

56 Clunas, "Modernity Global and Local," 1500. Clunas points to the piece by Lorna Weatherill as an example of the former, while T.H. Breen holds the latter view.

57 Arjun Appadurai, "Introduction: Commodities and the Politics of Value," in *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, ed. Arjun Appadurai (Cambridge, 1986), 3-63.

move through their various stages of production, ownership, transmission and transformation.⁵⁸ Moreover, those stages are overlapping, circulatory and contradictory; objects move in and out of collections, as they move in and out of fashion, and meanings are never stable. When a feathered crown is produced in Spanish America, for example, it has a very different meaning from when it enters into a cabinet of curiosity, and when it is taken out of the cabinet to appear in a spectacular performance in the street or in the theatre, it once again takes on a different meaning.⁵⁹ Objects gain biographies; earlier meanings of objects are never erased but reshaped and translated to new circumstances, as Leah Clark showed in her study of the circulations of gems and jewels through the hands of a variety of owners in quattrocento Italy.⁶⁰ Such insights have benefited not only from the global turn but also from developments in the fields of anthropology and art history, making the field more interdisciplinary than it was when the study of the trade in goods focused more on their trade than on the goods themselves.

New Directions: Revisiting the Gift

This recent work shows that buying and selling are by no means the only way in which objects move from one context to another: gifting also plays a key role in the movement of goods. The practice of gifting refers to far more than merely the incidental exchange of an object from one person to a chosen other; the exchange of gifts played a central role in the establishment and development of commercial and political interactions, especially across different cultural zones. Recent studies have shown the key importance of gifting for the commercial strategies of both the VOC and the EIC.⁶¹ As Cynthia Viallé has shown for the VOC, “offering gifts was part of a fixed ritual in which the Company reconfirmed its acceptance of the host’s sovereignty and

58 Anne Gerritsen and Giorgio Riello, eds., *The Global Lives of Things: The Material Culture of Connections in the Early Modern World* (London, 2016).

59 Mariana De Campos Françaço, “Beyond the Kunstkammer: Brazilian Featherwork and the Northern European Court Festivals,” in *The Global Lives of Things*, 105-27.

60 Leah R. Clark, “Transient Possessions: Circulation, Replication, and Transmission of Gems and Jewels in Quattrocento Italy,” *Journal of Early Modern History* 15 (2011): 185-221.

61 Christina Brauner, “Connecting Things: Trading Companies and Diplomatic Gift-Giving on the Gold and Slave Coasts in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries,” *Journal of Early Modern History* 20 (2016): 408-28.

re-established its own trading rights.”⁶² The VOC servants based in Asia compiled *eisen tot schenkage* (literally: demands for gifts): detailed lists of the kinds of goods that would be well-received by Asian rulers and potentates, including specifications of sizes, quantities, and materials, and descriptions on goods that would not be welcome. Overall, Viallé’s study shows that the importance of gift-giving for the success of the entire Dutch enterprise in Asia can hardly be overestimated. Nancy Um focuses on the “distribution, content, and timing of the commercial gifts” that EIC merchants offered to the decision makers in Yemen, showing that the exchange of gifts in Mocha was far from arbitrary and, in fact, both structural and procedural.⁶³

Building on such studies where the exchange of objects takes centre stage, in 2016 the *JEMH* devoted two issue to the place of objects and images in diplomatic exchange.⁶⁴ In a variety of contexts, Clark and Um’s introduction and the pieces themselves show gifts were highly contested means of communication, and only by combining text, image and objects can the complexities of the often conflicting meanings assigned to the early modern exchange of gifts be pieced together. The editors of the special issue are both art historians, and one of the great contributions of their special issue is that it highlights the importance of the art object in the early modern ambassadorial encounter. A forthcoming edited volume on the material culture of early modern gift exchange in Eurasia builds on the special issue and develops several new directions. Luca Molà’s study of the Venetian silk that was produced especially to fulfil the expectations of the Ottoman recipients of these gifts shows the impact of gift-exchange on modes and methods of silk manufacturing during the Renaissance. Barbara Karl’s study of Ottoman objects in circulation in Habsburg patterns of gift-giving highlights the importance of war and the multiple practices associated with armed conflict for understanding how objects become charged with multiple layers of meaning. And Natasha Eaton, to give a final example, shows the significance of coercion in the creation of gifts,

62 Cynthia Viallé, “To Capture Their Favor: On Gift-Giving by the VOC,” in *Mediating Netherlandish Art and Material Culture in Asia*, ed. Thomas DaCosta Kaufmann and Michael North (Amsterdam, 2014), 292.

63 Nancy Um, “Order in the “Arbitrary”: The Distribution, Content, and Temporal Cycles of English Merchant Tribute in Eighteenth-Century Yemen,” *Journal of Early Modern History* 18 (2014): 229 and 252-3.

64 The special issues can be found in Volume 20, Issues 1 and 4. See Nancy Um and Leah R. Clark, “Introduction: The Art of Embassy: Situating Objects and Images in the Early Modern Diplomatic Encounter,” *Journal of Early Modern History* 20 (2016): 3-18; Osborne and Rubiés, “Introduction.”

especially at the later end of the early modern period, when the colonial framework shaped the patterns surrounding gift-giving.⁶⁵

This work also shows the ongoing difficulties of moving beyond European centrality in gift-exchange. Throughout the past twenty years, the *JEMH* has published numerous articles that cover aspects of the early modern exchange of gifts, but the vast majority of these cover either gift-exchange within Europe, or with a European power as one of the partners. “The stranger the cultures to one another, the greater the importance of the gift, as verbal language becomes difficult to use and gestures fail to convey their intention,” as Liebersohn pointed out in his 2011 study of the European history of the gift.⁶⁶ Intercultural “strangeness” forms a key part of political and commercial interactions across the early modern globe, as Liu Lihong’s study of the diplomatic exchange between Qing China and Chosŏn Korea on the basis of an album of paintings created in 1725 by the Manchu envoy Akedun (1685-1756) shows.⁶⁷ Thomas Allsen’s work has done a great deal to reveal the importance of gift-giving strategies in and around the Mongolian empire, as have David Robinson’s publications.⁶⁸ But far more will need to be done to explore gift giving in the different parts of the Ottoman Empire, the Islamic empires, or between the various communities in the Pacific Ocean.

New Directions: The History of Food

We rarely find topics of historical study that have never been studied before; like with the study of the gift, we rediscover older topics and approach them with new perspectives. The history of food is another example; even though “food history” hardly features in the pages of the *JEMH*, food appears throughout; in fact, the field is far too large even to present its broad contours here. For a long time, food was exclusively studied from within the historical context of a specific place, with titles such as *Food in Early Modern England*, *Food in*

65 Zoltan Biedermann, Anne Gerritsen, and Giorgio Riello, eds., *Global Gifts: The Material Culture of Diplomacy in Early Modern Eurasia* (Cambridge/New York, forthcoming).

66 Harry Liebersohn, *The Return of the Gift: European History of a Global Idea* (Cambridge/New York, 2011), 6.

67 Lihong Liu, “Ethnography and Empire through an Envoy’s Eye: The Manchu Official Akedun’s (1685-1756) Diplomatic Journeys to Chosŏn Korea,” *Journal of Early Modern History* 20 (2016): 111-39.

68 Thomas T Allsen, *Commodity and Exchange in the Mongol Empire: A Cultural History of Islamic Textiles* (Cambridge/New York, 1997); David M Robinson, *Empire’s Twilight: Northeast Asia under the Mongols* (Cambridge, MA, 2009).

Early Modern Europe, and *Food in Colonial and Federal America*.⁶⁹ Beat Kümin's *A Cultural History of Food in the Early Modern Age* shows that within the study of food history, the assumption that the early modern age occurred in Europe rather than in the world also remains well-established.⁷⁰ The combination of the global and material turns, however, has begun to transform the ways in which the study of food is approached, and promise exciting new directions for research.⁷¹ Of course Alfred Crosby's *The Columbian Exchange* showed long ago that global connections transformed the pre-Columbian patterns of which crops were cultivated and consumed where, but approaching the wider category of food from the perspective of global history allows us to see the rich trajectories of crops, foodstuffs, including medicinal and mind-altering substances, as well as culinary practices, across the globe. National or imperial boundaries fade away from view when we look at the ways in which a medicinal substance such as rhubarb root traversed early modern Central Asian worlds; Europe relinquishes its assumed central position when we look at the impact of New World crops in Africa; long-distance trade seems less important than the intricacies of small and diverse trading groups when we look at the transmission of drugs from Central Asia into Iran.⁷² The broad area of early modern global food history is surely not the only topic ripe for future explorations, but certainly a promising one, especially in light of the general trend this overview has charted from Europe-centred conceptions of the long-distance trade between nations and empires to the study of goods, commodities, foodstuffs and their associated cultural practices as they move across borders and frontiers, space and time.

69 Joan Thirsk, *Food in Early Modern England: Phases, Fads, Fashions 1500-1760* (London/New York, 2006); Ken Albala, *Food in Early Modern Europe* (Westport, CT, 2003); Sandra L. Oliver, *Food in Colonial and Federal America* (Westport, CT., 2005).

70 Beat A Kümin, *A Cultural History of Food in the Early Modern Age* (London, 2012).

71 See, for two examples, Rebecca Earle, *The Body of the Conquistador: Food, Race, and the Colonial Experience in Spanish America, 1492-1700* (Cambridge/New York, 2012); Rachel Laudan, *Cuisine and Empire: Cooking in World History* (Berkeley, 2013).

72 Matthew P. Romaniello, "True Rhubarb? Trading Eurasian Botanical and Medical Knowledge in the Eighteenth Century," *Journal of Global History* 11 (2016): 3-23; Matthee, *The Pursuit of Pleasure*; Bertie R. Mandelblatt, "Beans from Rochel and Manioc from Prince's Island: West Africa, French Atlantic Commodity Circuits, and the Provisioning of the French Middle Passage," *History of European Ideas* 34 (2008): 411-423; James McCann, *Maize and Grace: Africa's Encounter with a New World Crop, 1500-2000* (Cambridge, Ma., 2005); John F. Richards, "Early Modern India and World History," *Journal of World History* 8 (1997): 197-209.