

An Object of Seduction: Chinese Silk in the Early Modern Transpacific Trade, 1500-1700. Xiaolin Duan. Lanham: Lexington Books, 2022. xi + 216 pp. \$100. Hardcover ISBN: 9781793614902.

Xiaolin Duan's book *An Object of Seduction* provides new insight into the final formation of the global circulation network that began in the mid-sixteenth century by studying the trans-Pacific silk trade that linked Ming China with New Spain. This book, focused on trade around the Pacific Rim that emerged in the sixteenth century, provides an important counter-narrative to most studies of early modern globalization that focus on the Atlantic and Indian Ocean trade networks and posit that Europe was the new center. Duan's study is particularly compelling because it provides a narrative that illustrates important connections between China and New Spain that were formed as a result of the trans-Pacific trade but that have eluded most studies focused on Latin American and Spanish silk production and markets or on Chinese government policies that limited the domestic market and foreign trade.

Duan draws on an impressive number of Chinese and Spanish primary sources to illustrate how new links were formed between two hitherto unconnected continents based on a rapidly growing demand for raw silk and finished goods on both sides of the Pacific in the sixteenth century. The more numerous Chinese primary sources range from entries in imperial diaries to local gazetteers to essays by prominent writers about local culture. Spanish sources include descriptions of various localities by Spanish secular and religious officials in New Spain, minutes of the city council of Mexico City, entries in the Spanish imperial naval archives, and a history of Spanish luxury and sumptuary laws. The demand for silk pushed the rise of regular shipping routes that serviced a growing interconnectedness of commodities, fashion styles, people, and technical knowledge. One of the most interesting findings from Duan's comparative approach is seeing how styles and fashions converged on both sides of the Pacific, a fact that was celebrated by merchants and consumers alike. Equally interesting are the negative responses to that burgeoning trade by both the Ming and Spanish governments, and which Duan has excavated from the data. Both China and Spain sought to limit the silk trade precisely because its vibrancy was due largely to local-level activity that neither of the central governments were able to control. The Ming saw a threat to their ability to regulate state and society because more households were drawn into the silk economy at the expense of growing rice or other staples. Similar productivity in the colonies of New Spain caused them to become dissatisfied with their assigned roles as suppliers of raw silk to the Spanish center.

Duan presents her analysis and arguments skillfully in four chapters focused on the four main sectors at the heart of the new trans-Pacific silk trade: production, trade, fashion, and regulation. Each chapter provides a wealth of data from primary sources for the reader, presented in a highly accessible writing style that will not intimidate any reader, not least due to Duan's use of endnotes that do not distract the reader from the main argument while providing the specialist or student access to the sources and relevant scholarship. Because Duan has organized each chapter to focus on one sector of the silk trade, each chapter can stand on its own and provides its own argument for the reader. Chapter-specific arguments are helpfully summarized by Duan with

appropriate subheadings that follow the chapter title. Thus, for example, the title of the first chapter, “Production. The Development of Sericulture and Interacting with the Natural Environment” (23) underscores Duan’s intentional focus on the varying local approaches to using the natural environments that made sericulture a global practice with quite different local features.

The second chapter, titled, “Trade. Negotiations between Central Governments and Local Societies” (67), was one of the most interesting chapters for this reader because Duan aptly illustrates how and why the Ming and Spanish central governments saw the trans-Pacific silk trade as a threat, and what they did to try to control it. Her last two chapters in the book, “Fashion. The Desire for Luxury Silk, the Color Red, and Foreignness” (105), and “Regulation. Sumptuary Laws and the Decline of Traditional Authorities” (145), support her argument in the second chapter. Each of the last chapters also could stand alone and be read independently since each contains a discrete thesis supported with data from both Chinese and New Spain sides. But Duan’s argument in the second chapter will make most sense if the reader also forges ahead and reads these last two chapters.

As already commented on above, Duan’s writing is easily accessible because she has created an interesting story with a narrative arc that runs through all the chapters in prose that is largely jargon-free. The introduction situates the case study in scholarship on globalization. Students will find her detailed description of the relevant primary sources and concise description of methodology useful, focusing on sources that “lie at the edges and margins of the traditional focus of historiography” and that “examine the materiality of the trade as an infrastructure” (16-17). Likewise, Duan helpfully points to questions left unanswered as possibilities for future research in the conclusion. The book also includes a good selection of figures and a map which complement the chapters, along with a full bibliography and detailed index.

This book will be useful for readers of all levels who are interested in areas that range from global history to the history of colonialism, early modern trade and economic systems, the history of sericulture, and maritime history, as well as those focused more particularly on late-imperial China or Spain and its New World empire. It has also aptly been published as part of a new series launched by the press titled “Empires and Entanglements in the Early Modern World” whose monographs all focus on different connections across regions and oceans. There really is no comparable monograph that examines the trans-Pacific silk trade, and as such it fills an important gap in scholarship.

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