

## **CHINESE PORCELAIN, MEXICAN IDENTITY, AND THE EARLY MODERN WORLD ECONOMY**

### **INTRODUCTION**

In 1625, the English Dominican Friar Thomas Gage summed up the state of affairs in Mexico City, commenting: “It is a by-word that at Mexico four things are fair; that is to say the women, the apparel, the horses, and the streets.” Gages comments reflected several undeniable facts noticed by many observers during the early seventeenth century. The silver boom experienced by both New Spain and Peru had radically transformed Mexico City and Lima alongside other smaller cities and towns. For almost one hundred years, the Spanish crown kept its colonies relatively under its thumb. The silver boom however, changed such a relationship. While these colonial cities diverted the wealth generated from silver mines back to Europe, Gage couldn’t help but notice that much of this wealth stayed in the Spanish colonies—particularly New Spain’s capital, Mexico City. At the capital, an emerging merchant class, increasingly economically independent of Spain, began to develop a new sense of itself. While many merchants still held familial ties to the peninsula, many others identified with Mexican—rather than Spanish—interests.

In his account, Gage also pointed out in amazement, “the beauty of some of the coaches of the gentry [exceeds] in cost the best of the Court of Madrid and other parts of Christendom, for they spare no silver. . . nor the best silks from China to enrich them.” This wealth, created indigenously and relatively free of direct Spanish control, outstripped Spanish opulence (at least as Gage saw it) and expressed a distinctive Asian influence. Thus, Gage observed the display of a new merchant elite informed by the aesthetics of not only the West—but also the East. As Gage further observed, traces of Chinese goods were conspicuously displayed everywhere on the street:

Both men and women are excessive in their apparel, using more silks than stuffs and cloth. Precious stones and pearls further much this vain ostentation. A hat-band and rose made of diamonds in a gentleman’s hat is common, and a hat-band of pearls is ordinary in a tradesman. Nay a blackamoor or tawny young maid and slave will make hard shift, but will be in fashion with her neck-chain and bracelets of pearl and her ear-bobs of some considerable jewels.

Gage even observed the pervasive impacts of non-European styles and sensibilities among fellow clergy, who drank “the Indian drink called chocolate” out of Chinese porcelain cups. Thus, Asian fashions, alongside New World products and wealth, helped create an emerging American culture. In fact, consumption was not only an elite affair, but by the early seventeenth century permeated every social group in Mexico City. Within fifty years of the inauguration of the Manila Galleon voyages, Mexico had inserted itself into the world economy. As Gage marveled, Mexican merchants, priests, and slaves alike already tasted the global flavors yet to be fully

experienced by Europe. Although officially a colonial arm of Spain, Mexico became one of the engines of the early modern world economy—increasingly without Spanish financial and military assistance.

By 1625, Mexico City had become one of the richest cities in the world. Thanks to the establishment of silver mines in Peru and Mexico, and direct trade route via Acapulco and Manila, Mexican merchants quickly rose in power and wealth. As Asian goods like silk, porcelain, and tea, made their way into the Atlantic World, they also infiltrated Mexican society. Most of these goods moved along recently established roads emanating in all directions out of Mexico City—such as the *Camino del China* and *El Camino Real*. Both rare silks and porcelain moved alongside domestically produced goods as far north as Santa Fe and south as Guatemala.

Mexican merchants also re-exported Asian goods to Peru and other points within the Spanish colonial world. Peruvian merchants sailed up to Acapulco and traveled overland to Mexico City over the “China Road” to trade with Mexican merchants both crown-sanctioned and contraband goods arriving from the China and the Philippines. Within this inter-regional American network domestic and foreign goods crisscrossed along maritime and overland routes. At the same time, Spanish influence continued to assert itself. European demand for Asian goods increased as silver, silks, and porcelain made its way to Veracruz and into the Atlantic World. Within a decade, a complex series of global interconnections rapidly solidified with each annual arrival of the Manila Galleon ported in Acapulco.

Mexican and Peruvian demand acted as a “sink” for Asian producers equally hungry for New World silver. This vigorous Asian-American trade couldn’t be fully monitored or controlled by Spanish or even imperial Chinese authorities during the height of the first silver boom between the 1570s and 1630s. Indeed, Mexican merchants and Chinese exporters engaged in a nascent free market trading network despite the impositions and trading restrictions implemented by imperial and royal authorities. The enormous influx of new silver undermined traditional controls and restraints on the movement of commodities.

This unprecedented influx of wealth and exchange was clearly evident on the streets of Mexico City in 1625. Far from a peripheral region simply providing exports for Spain, Mexico City emerged as a major player of the global trading network. By the seventeenth century, it quickly transcended its role as merely a conduit of trade between Asia and Europe. It became one of *the* global cities for a brief, shining moment until the onset of the first silver bust at the end of the 1630s. During this period, Mexican merchants began to formulate truly American identities. At the same time, distinct American artistic forms—hybridizing Asian, Mediterranean, and New World styles—began to flourish in centers like Mexico City and Puebla.

Perhaps more than any other commodity, the production and consumption of Chinese porcelain encapsulated new consumption/production patterns, as well as the creation of new artistic and cultural traditions. The porcelain trade clearly illustrates is.

Other European traders like the Dutch and Portuguese engaged in extensive porcelain trade with China (and even acted as middlemen transporting Japanese and Mexican silver). Mexican traders, however, had silver and thus greatly influenced the production of porcelain.

Scholars Dennis O. Flynn and Arturo Giraldez have shown that Chinese demand for silver ignited the world economy. Yet, the “China craze” in New Spain and Peru also tugged on China’s economy as well. The demands for silver and porcelain (as well as silk) in Asia and North America fed each other. This frenzied trade loop continued until the first silver bust in the New World and ousting of the Ming dynasty in 1644. Indeed, many historians have made the link between the silver bust and Ming disintegration. Yet, none have looked at the Mexican consumption side of the equation. No study has revisited Gage’s observations that marveled at Mexico City’s sense of itself and its place in the world. While silver production provides one aspect of Gage’s view of Mexico, porcelain consumption provides another—perhaps even more pervasive—part of the story. Looking at the relationship between porcelain production and consumption at its height between 1590-1630, this paper will highlight another crucial piece of the early modern global economy. While undertaking this social biography of porcelain, I will highlight its production in Chinese centers like Jingdezhen, consumption by ambitious Mexican merchants, and influence on emerging artistic traditions at cities like Puebla. Throughout, I will emphasize the central role of an autonomous—rather than colonial—Mexico—in this emerging world economy.

## **THE SOCIAL LIFE OF PORCELAIN**

In his study, “The Pilgrim Art: The Culture of Porcelain in World History,” Robert Finlay highlights the global dimension of porcelain. As he sees it, the foundations of porcelain trade reach back millennia shortly after its inception during the Yuan dynasty. More importantly, Finlay argues that porcelain acted as the first true manifestation of a global culture: “porcelain and its imitations provide the first and most widespread material evidence for sustained cultural encounters on an ecumenical scale, perhaps even for intimations of truly global culture” (p. 187). Finlay traces not only European desires for porcelain, but west Asian and Middle Eastern appeal as well. Yet, while Finlay covers the globe, he fails to distinguish New Spain and Peru from Spain. Separating the desires and consumption patterns of the colonies from the metropole supports Finlay’s argument while further complicating the world historical picture.

Even before Spain began to trade directly with China, though, porcelain production situated itself within a vast international trading diaspora. The Jingdezhen region had long dominated porcelain production since the Song dynasty. They owed their success, in part, to the application of kaolin to their local aluminum oxide-deprived deposits of china-stone—thus resulting in brilliant white porcelain pottery. By the Mongol period, Jingdezhen potters produced bulk export porcelain for Middle Eastern markets more than 4,000 miles to the west. These consumers demanded what would become a trademark style for the next three hundred years—blue and white porcelain. Production expanded profitably over the next two centuries. As demand increased during

the Ming period, Jingdezhen served as the largest industrial operation in the world. Indeed, as European demand increased the intensity of production by the sixteenth century, porcelain accounted for 70,000 workers operating over 1,000 kilns. This assembly-line operation also created small cities that housed employees. A later Qing account of a Jingdezhen porcelain factory remarked at the growth of the town, “these rolls show that the town extends ten ‘li’ from north to south and ten from east to west. Its pottery business gives occupation to a thousand houses. Its population is a mixture drawn from all quarters of the compass, good and bad dwelling side by side.”<sup>1</sup>

At these massive industrial centers, blue and white porcelain—a style frowned upon by Chinese domestic consumers but highly prized everywhere else—became the primary export as well as most-produced commodity. Additionally, the types of ceramics fulfilled the needs and wishes of outsiders—not the Chinese. Wine jars, utensils, large dishes, basins, vases all catered to foreign markets.

While foreign demand kept Jingdezhen operating, another foreign influx—silver—helped to create a porcelain work force. The decision during the Ming to adopt a silver-based economy dramatically re-shaped the Chinese and global market. Without the influx of New World silver, the expansion of the porcelain industry might not have occurred. In other words, New World silver created mass-produced blue and white porcelain, which fed the aesthetic demands of New World merchants, artisans, and laborers alike. Not only did Spanish policy and the Chinese silver sink determine the flow of global trade, but Mexican consumption patterns and taste also influenced how things unfolded.

## **PORCELAIN AND MEXICO**

Along with the rest of the world, Mexicans greatly desired porcelain and “all things Asian.” Asian products served elite consumers. Uniquely situated at the crossroads of international trade (especially of luxury goods) Mexican merchants increasingly indulged in elite consumption. Mexico City, however, also served as the crossroads of major domestic trading routes for both rare and bulk goods. All major commodities produced, raised, or consumed passed through Mexico City. New World crops, Old World livestock, and various preciosities from the hinterland (i.e. turquoise) made its way to the city.

The same held true for demographic numbers. By 1634, over 58 percent of New Spain lived in and around the capital. Thus, most of the economic activity—both international and domestic—occurred in Mexico City. A rising merchant class quickly emerged to orchestrate these activities. The structure of international commerce within the Pacific Rim particularly became the domain of a small number of individuals. During the early 1600s, only 246 merchants invested directly in the Manila Galleon trade. In contrast to the Atlantic trading network, these merchants held a more monopolistic grip over the trade and maintained weaker ties with Spain.

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<sup>1</sup> Geoffrey R. Sayer, ed. and trans., *Ching-Te-Chen: T'ao-Lu, or The Potteries of China* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1951), p.xxiii.

These merchants also engaged in extensive lending arrangements with local mining agents and towns. At Manila and Acapulco, merchants hired trusted allied port officials and inspectors to negotiate according to the terms of Mexico City. All of these efforts put merchants based out of Mexico City in frequent opposition to Spain. The crown, however, allowed them to continue because of the immense profitability of silver mining and the Manila Galleon trade (known as the “Royal Fifth” of silver). This tension continued between royal action (which was undertaken in the case of Peru after 1582) and inaction throughout the period. Spain imposed restrictions on the number of Galleon voyages (two ships of 300 tons per year after 1593) only to discover that illegal trade continued while they lost out on the profits. Additionally, Spain desperately tried to limit and eventually outlaw trade between Mexico and Peru. Like the Galleon trade, Madrid saw unchecked domestic trade as a threat. The increasingly brisk trade in Chinese goods further threatened Spain. Lima held an insatiable demand for luxury goods and cheaper porcelain wares. Acapulco and Mexico City expanded to meet the consumption demands of both colonies. Seville merchants, alarmed at their quickly slipping trading monopoly, ultimately convinced the crown to prohibit inter-colonial trade in 1631. The Manila Galleon trade served somewhat as an economic addiction for Spain. Yet Mexican merchants also increasingly relied on the material goods flooding Mexico. As Mexicans increasingly donned silks and other textiles, porcelain rapidly spread among both the elite and commoners.

The types of porcelain pottery, peculiar by Chinese standards but nonetheless demanded by Mexican merchants in Manila, filled several distinctly New World tastes. First, since the Manila route served as one of the longest voyages without portage in the world, water and adequate supplies for the months long journey became a central concern. Thus, extremely large vessels used to trap rainwater on the ship’s deck became one of the distinctive features of exported Chinese porcelain. These surviving giant-sized vessels serve as clear reminders of the importance of the Manila trade. These vessels, primarily obsolete and of little practical use, became ornaments for wealthy merchants. Secondly, porcelain served as ballast protecting silks and more perishable commodities on board the Manila Galleons. Since large amounts of porcelain also assisted in weighing down returning ships, it also came over to Mexico in large quantities—and thus further stimulated Chinese production. By 1574, one galleon headed to Mexico contained an average of 22 thousand pieces of porcelain (as compared to 700 pieces of silk and 500 marcos of gold). Within a decade, a Mexican “taste” for porcelain grew alongside its newly discovered wealth and eating patterns. By the late 1500s, Mexicans regularly engaged in a practice inherited from Aztec elites—drinking hot chocolate. Like Aztec aristocrats, Mexican elites drank from coconut shells with silver mounts, called *mancerina*. As the Manila trade became regularized, Chinese potters in Jingdezhen crafted porcelain *mancerinas* to fit the export niche demanded by Mexico.

Mass export production of Chinese porcelain expanded as long as silver continued to flow. By the 1640s, though, Mexican silver mines exhausted themselves, and a global contraction occurred for several decades until the next silver boom and explosion of

sugar production occurred. In the absence of porcelain, artists and potters in ceramic centers like Puebla began to cater to the elite tastes in Asian wares and styles.

Puebla always served as a ceramic center since pre-contact times. Situated nearby suitable clay deposits and between Acapulco and Veracruz, Puebla potters quickly incorporated Jingdezhen styles—such as transparent and white glazes and overglaze enamels—into their domestic craft. While the Puebla pottery industry couldn't compete with the enormous wave of imported Chinese porcelain between 1590-1630, they quickly filled the void left by the slowdown in the Manila trade. Previously, Puebla potters incorporated indigenous Mexican styles with new technology and styles brought from Seville (which were in itself Iberio-Islamic). This style, known as *majolica*, now incorporated Chinese techniques and styles. As a 1653 Puebla pottery guild regulation demanded: “In making the fine wares the coloring should be in imitation of the Chinese ware, very blue, finished in the same style and with relief work in blue, and on this style of pottery there should be painted black dots and ground colors.”<sup>2</sup> Pueblan potters created their own version of the Chinese porcelain cup, the *pocillo*, for the consumption of hot chocolate. Similarly, they created oversize *tibors* that complemented the oversized vessels arriving from China in earlier decades.

Although Puebla potters strove to incorporate Chinese porcelain influences into their ceramics, a uniquely Mexican artistic tradition gradually coalesced as a continual stream of Asian influences (and relative freedom from European artistic traditions) made their way through Puebla on what became known as the “China Road.” As innumerable Mexican miners sacrificed their lives to produce fabulous wealth for elites and Chinese consumers, artists like the Puebla potters organized themselves as a skilled workforce to generate new types of consumer goods. Thus, the push and pull of Chinese porcelain and New World silver helped to create one of the most enduring artistic forms emerging in Mexico—the ceramic tradition.

While merchants and elites demanded niche items suited to particular tastes, blue and white porcelain made its way into Mexico to fill the daily needs of its citizens. Porcelain served as fine ware and humble coins. Shattered porcelain chards, accumulating on the ships of yearly Galleon voyages, proliferated in the cities and countryside. Called *chinitas*, these chards acted as small coinage for daily transactions. To understand the widespread usage of *chinitas*, it is important to highlight Mexican trading routes, roads, and distribution centers associated with Chinese porcelain. As mentioned above, all routes, towns, and ports connected with Mexico City and therefore with porcelain and the Manila trade. By 1600, the once-isolated and sleepy town of Acapulco periodically became a boomtown with each arriving Galleon.

Chosen for its deep harbor, Acapulco quickly became the only Manila Galleon harbor. Acapulco, though, never rose in power as a regional center. The economic, cultural, and political tug of Mexico City proved too great, and Acapulco merely swelled and retracted with the yearly galleons. While it didn't achieve the greatness of Mexico

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<sup>2</sup> George Kuwayama, *Chinese Ceramics in Colonial Mexico* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1997), p. 24.

City, it did become the yearly destination for a motley gathering of all classes of people. Once a courier announced the arrival of an incoming ship, thousands of artisans, merchants, and peddlers flooded the “China Road” connecting Mexico City with Acapulco. All strata of society—from king’s officials and soldiers to Indian hucksters and muleteers—mingled on the road and in Acapulco. Along this road inns and hostels accommodated weary travelers making their way along the 60-mile road. Next to Mexican pesos, *chinitas* served as a common currency—especially along the “China Road.” Thus, the yearly arrival of the Manila Galleons served as a cultural event that linked disparate segments of Mexican society through the influx of Asian goods.

### **China and Porcelain**

Large porcelain pottery factories sprouted up in Jingdezhen before increased Mexican and European demand. However, the Latin American arrival in the Pacific marked a new era of porcelain production. At the palace factory, no less than twenty-three jobs associated with porcelain manufacturing existed. Not simply a small operation of artisan craftsmen, porcelain production now entailed stampers, carvers, drawers, iron-workers, lacquerers, as well as food preparers catering to the many employees at the factory. How-to manuals for decorations as well as specialists associated with Kuan-Ku (official-old), Shang-ku (superior-old), Ch’ang-ku (ordinary-old), foreign, and myriad other porcelain styles provided guidelines for assembly-line production. Hundreds of types of wares could be produced by request in accordance with illustrated catalogs. Silver and demand from Mexico and Peru pushed much of this production, although with imperial controls firmly in place over factories.

The silver boom, however, didn’t last. Along with the Ming dynasty, porcelain producers in the Jingdezhen kilns faced a potential crisis. By the end of the sixteenth century, silver’s value began diminishing and the stability of the Ming dynasty stood in doubt. The reign of the Wanli emperor (1573-1620) further evinced rising corruption and imperial decadence. Although Jingdezhen held a firm monopoly of the porcelain trade and export production, the death of the emperor in 1620 marked the cessation of imperial patronage of porcelain production. With the decline of silver value and royal funding, the continued mass production of porcelain stood in doubt. Fortunately for the Jingdezhen region, freedom from centralized control paved the way for widely diverse styles and products.

No longer restricted by strict controls on styles, and in need of steady patrons, Jingdezhen potters and merchants began to work more closely with Dutch, Japanese, and Portuguese traders. Thus, the artistic styles of porcelain began to dramatically diverge from earlier styles (although blue and white continued to thrive within the Atlantic World). Known as the transitional ceramic period (1620-1683), the porcelain of these chaotic times stood at odds with earlier and later periods of production as completely new technical forms emerged to meet the demands of the emerging world market.

As China experienced decades of political and economic unrest, export porcelain appeared to be “recession proof”—expanding in production to meet the increasing

demand of coffee, tea, and chocolate drinkers across the globe. The first real disruption of Jingdezhen production, relatively unbroken since the eleventh century, didn't occur until the Manchus sacked the city and burned the kilns in the 1673. Although the establishment of the Qing brought order to China and facilitated renewed patronage of porcelain production, Europeans obtained the Chinese secret of porcelain production by 1708 and the earlier dynamic shared between New World silver and Chinese export porcelain would never replicate itself again.

## **Conclusion**

The period between 1590-1630 served as a unique moment that witnessed the birth of new cultural forms of expression connected by the emergence of the first global culture. On either side of the Pacific, remarkable parallels unfolded. In China, porcelain production increasingly took on industrial characteristics as factories expanded in size and complexity. Workers moved nearby, forming new neighborhoods plugged into a new wage-earning economy. Pegging itself to silver, the Ming dynasty made silver the currency used to pay wages to porcelain producers. Thus, silver and porcelain intertwined.

At the same time, Peruvian and Mexican silver mines also industrialized on an unprecedented level. Silver mining became increasingly mechanistic and efficient (the main difference between porcelain and silver production, of course, lay in the vastly different working experiences of the laborers). Like porcelain production, new techniques (i.e. amalgamation) and technology became institutionalized to assure the maximum effect. While miners didn't necessarily benefit materially from their labor, citizens of Mexico City and Lima certainly did. Silver exports ensured a wide array of goods coming in from China. The conspicuous consumption of Chinese porcelain became a Mexican pastime, not necessarily a Spanish one since very little porcelain made it to Spain. While Mexico and China reconvened their economic relationship via silver during the latter half of the seventeenth century, the years between 1570-1630 marked a unique period of material and cultural exchange. Indeed, while silver initiated the first truly global economy, porcelain forged the earliest inclinations of both a New World identity and a larger global culture.

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