Vermeer’s Hat

Asian Material Impact on European Culture

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Throughout history different cultures have had lasting influences on each other. These customs and cultural behaviors have always moved from place to place by trade and commerce. This system of the spreading of knowledge historically was linked by overland trading routes which stretched from Europe all the way to Asia. This slow movement of information disabled many cultural ideas from being spread in a realistic fashion. The movement of goods and other such things took years on end to be transferred from one end of the trade route to the other. These two entirely different worlds that were inefficiently linked together led many desperate explorers to search for a route over the oceans. The unexplored waters were ripe for great men to conquer and further link the expanding world together. Many things began to develop as time passed, and slowly maps were being created and efficient routes were being navigated. The seventeenth century brought a new light to the global picture and trade with Asia became Europe’s number one priority. The biggest goal of these European entrepreneur countries was cornering the trade market in China. The Europeans were mesmerized by Chinese culture and cherished their material goods even more. These crazed Europeans became obsessed with Chinese made products such as porcelain, also known as “china”. This new market led many men to try and find even more efficient routes to the East such as attempting to find a route through the Americas. The riches that could be accumulated led many people to dedicate their entire lives to this endeavor. The end result to this new era was that Chinese material goods and the endless attempt to find more efficient routes to obtain these goods shaped European culture forever. Through exploration and trade in the expanding world during the seventeenth century, Asian material goods shaped what European culture became.

Exploration was one of the biggest driving points in the shaping of European culture. Everything changed once people became aware of the wealth that China could bring. Entire
cities were transformed and became home to trading companies. An example of a city becoming home to a trading company was Delft, Holland. This city was home to one of the Dutch East India Company chambers. According to *Vermeer’s Hat* by Timothy Brook, the Dutch East India Company, also known as the VOC, was the world’s first large joint-stock company. An example of how important foreign trade was to Europe is seen in the article “Riches, Power, Trade and Religion: The Far East and the English Imagination, 1600-1720” by Robert Markley. Markley states “Consequently, foreign merchants—whether Chinese, Dutch, Portuguese, Spanish, Japanese, or English—were essential to the regions international trade” (Markley 499).

Organizations such as the VOC were not solely based in Holland, but rather many other European countries had trading organizations which mirrored the VOC. In *Vermeer’s Hat*, it states “the VOC proved itself to be the most powerful trading corporation in the seventeenth-century world and the model for the large-scale business enterprises that now dominated the global economy” (Brook 16). An example of how such companies worked is seen in the “Charter of Privileges and Exemptions the Dutch East India Company”. It states that “that the navigation, trade, and commerce, in the parts of the West-Indies, and Africa, and other places hereafter described, should not henceforth be carried on any otherwise than by the common united strength of the merchants and inhabitants of these countries” (Charter 1). This shows how they expected to trade with foreign countries and dealt with the merchants of these countries.

These companies hired ships that were being sent over to China and brought great changes in many European cities both visibly and under the surface of what was seen. First off it brought many new material goods to these cities, but when digging deeper it is evident that it brought competition for trade. This competition led to an entirely new work force, which consisted of deck hands and explorers in search of more direct and quick routes to the far East. There was a
vast amount of money to be made through trade with Asia. In the article “East & West: Textiles and Fashion in Early Modern Europe” by Beverly Lemire and Giorgio Riello, it states “one of the principal sources of new wealth for the mercantile classes was the trade in Asian commodities and, to a considerable extent, the most politically contested commodities in European societies were those goods imbued with an exotic allure” (Lemire, Riello 891). This quote paints the picture of just how popular these foreign goods were, and how much money they could bring in. One example of how exploration affected European culture is Samuel Champlain and his journey through North America. As Tim Brook explores Champlain’s adventures in his book *Vermeer’s Hat*, many interesting connections are pointed out about the relationship between Europe and China. In Champlain’s adventures it is evident that he is attempting to establish trade with the Native Americans. These trade allies allowed him to gain access to one of the most coveted goods in Europe at this time period, which were beaver pelts. An example of Champlain’s intention of hunting and trading for beavers is seen in his book *The Works of Samuel de Champlain*. In his book he states “They might in the future more than ever before engage in hunting of beavers” (Champlain). During this era felt hats became very fashionable in Europe. The best raw material known to provide the highest quality felt was beaver fur which could only be found in North America and Russia after being hunted to extinction throughout Europe. Now how does trade with Native Americans for Beaver furs, in order to make felt hats in Europe, relate to China in anyway shape or form? Well these hats were not Chinese made material items, but in fact they had a direct correlation to China in Champlain’s case. Champlain’s initial reason for exploring North America was to search for salt water. To discover salt water would mean one thing, that it was connected to the Pacific Ocean. If Champlain found a water source that was connected to the Pacific Ocean than it meant that he
would have found a new route to China. This goal of reaching China by crossing the Americas was Champlain’s dream from the beginning. In *Vermeer’s Hat* it states “He needed to control the trade that supplied the felt makers of Europe, but far more than that, he needed to find a route to China” (Brook 51). The only way to fulfill this dream of reaching China was with a significant amount of money. The farther he traveled inland the more money he needed, which he gained by trading for beaver pelts and selling them to Europe. The cultural impacts of these felt hats were enormous. In *Vermeer’s Hat*, Brook reports that “Soon, anyone with any social pretension had to have a “beaver,” as these hats were known” (Brook 43). It was common for every man to have some type of hat on at almost any part of the day. The connection between Champlain and his exploration and his attempt to gain new trade routes for Chinese material goods indirectly had a lasting effect on European culture. The next influential aspect of exploration and the goal of obtaining Chinese goods was the influx of map makers and geographers throughout European society. Once again the interest of finding new routes to Asia was at the top of the minds of many people during the seventeenth century. There was a whole new expanding world ready to be discovered and mapped out. This brought in many new businesses that dealt with creating maps and other navigational objects in order to obtain knowledge. This knowledge was then used by many companies to navigate the seas. Asian material goods shaped in many ways how Europeans now thought about the world. The cultural interest in foreign goods was evident. Through exploration and the pursuit of knowledge about the outside world in search of Asian goods greatly affected European culture.

The actual Chinese material goods that were being traded for by Europeans had a more visible effect on European culture. These foreign goods were thought of by Europeans as must have items. They brought all types of competition between different countries and trading
companies in order to gain a strong grip on the Asian market. The different goods that were being transported by European ships consisted of an array of things including silk, pepper, cloves, nutmeg, diamonds, and porcelain. The most discussed in Brook’s book and possibly the most influential of all goods that were being transported to Europe was porcelain. The Chinese had been delicately producing porcelain made objects such as plates, vases and other items for years, but was brand new to Europeans. In many parts of Europe people began calling these porcelain made objects “China” which it is still commonly known as today. Porcelain was first brought over to Europe in small amounts and was a highly prized commodity. The blue and white porcelain was seen by Europeans as an object of wealth and was only affordable by the extremely wealthy. Porcelain couldn’t be bought up faster as soon as ships entered the harbor.

In *Vermeer’s Hat*, it states “The first Chinese porcelain to reach Europe amazed all who saw or handled it” (Brook 60). Soon every household with any type of wealth had porcelain throughout. It was used to hold flowers as vases, or as dinner ware or many types. This new style of wear was far superior to what the Europeans had been dealing with for centuries. The combination of being easily cleaned and its stylish appeal caused European culture to become obsessed with this Chinese good. In order to acquire porcelain Europeans had to trade silver to China. They would send thousands of pounds worth of silver every year in return for different goods but especially porcelain. The highly priced Chinese made porcelain had lasting effects on European culture, but it was only incorporating half of the market. The next cultural impact that porcelain had on Europe was that it created porcelain production by European nations to try and sell for a lower price and reach the less wealthy end of the market. Many European artisans began producing porcelain once European nations understood what effect porcelain items had on buyers. Of course Chinese porcelain was far superior then that being produced by Europeans. Brooke states
“Delft potters were unable to match the quality of Chinese blue-and-white, but they did manage to produce passable imitations at a low price” (Brooke 78). None the less it allowed the less wealthy citizens to be able to join in on this mania. Pretty soon every household had some type of “China” decorating their house, whether it was Chinese made or European made. The impact of porcelain on Europe was astonishing. Within a century Europeans went from not knowing what porcelain even was to having it as a common staple of their culture. From treating these items as prized possessions to even producing much of it on their own.

The fascination about China and the Far East was life changing for many Europeans during the seventeenth century. The power and might of such a mysteriously wonderful civilization brought many people to become infatuated with what China had to offer. The endless wealth that flowed from the interaction of trade, led many to stop at nothing in order to make their fortunes. The cultural impacts of such enormity can be broken down into two categories; what can be seen by the visible eye and also what indirectly is affected by the influx of Asian goods. The drive to acquire such goods is the biggest unseen impact that Asian material goods had on the European countries that were competing for these items. Society’s makeup was forever changed in many cases. Maritime trade was now a huge part of Europe’s social system. Trading companies effected European cities as new jobs were popping up everywhere. The new position of working on the ships that were traveling to trade was now abundant. Along with these new jobs came the longing for knowledge about this new and expanding world. The map makers and geographers became an important aspect of society. The visible changed to European culture were more obvious. The use of silk and other such fine linens had been traded overland for years, and certainly affected the culture. The most evident impact during the seventeenth century was the porcelain trade. Within a century practically every
household in Europe went from not knowing what the substance was to owning their own. The cultural infatuation was beyond anything else during the era. The Europeans even began to attempt to imitate the Chinese and create their own porcelain. The newly interconnected civilizations both had significant impacts on each other. The overwhelming evidence shows that China most certainly impacted what the Europeans thought fashionable and trendy as well as affected the way they lived their day to day lives in many cases. Without a doubt European culture felt the influence of Asian material goods during the seventeenth century both directly and indirectly.

Bibliography


