

Going Dutch: Trade in Asia

Harold Cook's *Matters of Exchange: commerce, medicine, and science in the Dutch golden age* lifts the Netherlands to a more prominent rank among other European countries regarding the sphere of influence on global history. His work analyzes the socioeconomic roots of the history of science. These roots, he believes "emerge from ways of knowing valued most highly by merchant-rulers of urban Europe" (40). The Dutch were precisely those merchant rulers who sought access to foreign trade goods. They not only wanted to ship and trade the goods, but also wanted to know what it was they were buying, what it was made of, what it was worth, and possibly if the parts were more valuable than the whole. Botanist, physicians, and those who ran apothecaries all asked the same questions.

Foreign trade exploded during the Dutch Golden Age, merchants as well as those practitioners of natural history sought the exotic. Java, Surinam, Batavia, Japan, India, and even Brazil are all areas that Cook's work explores. With such a geographic arc, *Matters of Exchange* might seem like a holistic global history, after all, trade is likely the best way to frame such a narrative. But, the 'exchange' that Cook is interested in is that between the merchants and the "men of science." Cook fully explores the relationship between the Dutch merchants and the Dutch 'scientists' (including physicians, etc.) and supports his thesis rather well.

The power that *Matters of Exchange* can have on global history is less obvious. Cook opens a few historical doorways through which works on indigenous "science" and "ways of knowing" could be welcomed. Many times there are examples of merchants dealing with native people for their knowledge. These instances of contact between the foreigners, in this case the Dutch, and the indigenous people could serve as the perfect segue into the history of a particular piece of indigenous knowledge. How did the lady come about getting the talking bird (which Cook postulates a mynah)?

Each of these instances can be studied back through the indigenous acquisition of knowledge before they existed as “rarities” or “exotics” to Dutch merchants and the rest of the world.

Spices alone would warrant another book or two. Black pepper derived from an immature berry is an interesting note on locality and local knowledge, but it leaves other questions. How did they discover that the immature berry made a spice but the mature berry did not? Do the mature berries make a spice different from black pepper or is it wholly unusable. What was this spice first used for, when and by whom? Every fleeting instant of a single description such as this, and there are many, is full of potential. If the sources are there, nearly every trade good from the East warrant a much more in depth analysis of how it got to Dutch hands in the first place. Framing a course around Cook’s book could utilize both the standard Eurocentric model and the idea of indigenous knowledge. The course could begin with the Dutch but then branched out to the countries traded in. Focus on a good: a spice, a plant (dreadful tulips?), combinations of the two used as medicine, glaze ware, decorative vases, or similar. Then take the point of European contact back through the indigenous knowledge to reveal that those ‘foreign’ to the Dutch were aware of the properties, or beauty of the good centuries, sometimes even millennia before the first “exchanges” with the European west.

Cook’s work looks at the non-European markets in the same manner as most historians: a source of things first and knowledge second (if at all). This can be likened to modern views on electricity, many see it as a place to get power, they never realize or stop to investigate that the glowing bulb in the lamp is the end product of a long and complicated process both of creating the light bulb and generating electricity. The same can be said of indigenous knowledge on the global scale. A vase bought at the Dutch market is not simply a product to hold your tulips, it is the end product of a long and complicated process involving many “exchanges” in “ways of knowing” well before it arrives in the Netherlands aboard a trading vessel.