

Southeast Asian Consumption of Indian and British Cotton Cloth, 1600-1850

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The importance of cotton cloth

It was Indian cloth, more than any other single article of import, which opened up Southeast Asia to the long-distance trade. A local trade was of course more ancient and always more substantial in terms of bulk. Rice, dried and pickled fish, salt, earthenware and metal tools were traded between upland and lowland communities from very early times. But long-distance traders sought some of the unique products of Southeast Asia – spices such as cloves, mace and nutmeg, birds of paradise, aromatic woods and resins such as camphor and sandalwood, tin, and above all gold. To persuade people to accumulate such goods for sale there was nothing so useful as cloth in superior quality. Hence Indian merchants learned to bring cloth with them to Southeast Asia, and before long Southeast Asian merchants themselves learned to seek out such cloth by loading their own cargoes of tropical and forest produce.

It was not that Southeast Asians could not produce their own cotton cloth. Cotton was grown from at latest the thirteenth century in those parts of Southeast Asia that had a marked dry season –Luzon, central Vietnam, eastern Cambodia, east Java and central Burma. Chinese sources note cotton as one of the exports from all these places to China.¹ The biggest such source, the dry zone of central Burma, was supplying about 1000 tons a year of raw cotton to Yunnan by 1600.² Bali, Sumbawa and South Sulawesi exported cotton and cotton cloth in more limited Archipelago

¹ Anthony Reid, *Southeast Asia in the Age of Commerce, c.1450-1680*, 2 vols (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988-93), I: 90-92.

² Victor Lieberman, *Strange Parallels: Southeast Asia in Global Context, c.800-1830*, vol. I (Cambridge University Press, 2003), p.145.

circles. Specialist weaving centres were established in urban centres and in those dry areas where agriculture was least rewarding.

Yet the quality and relative affordability of Indian cloth was a huge incentive to prefer the imported variety. Dressing the body, and often also the place of dwelling or feasting, in rich impressive cloth was a crucial part of the status game of most Southeast Asian societies. Observers from the 16th Century noticed how little of their wealth Southeast Asians put into houses and other fixed property, and how much into items of dress and bodily decoration.³ In arguing for the importance of the cloth trade in Java after the British conquest, Raffles asserted: “the lower classes of people, unlike those of Hindustan, are accustomed to wear clothing”.⁴ Indian cloths established their reputation by the brilliance of the colours, fixed by mordants not available to Southeast Asians. The larger scale and more developed commercialism of Indian production eventually also made Indian cotton cloth cheaper than local products in international markets such as Melaka, Aceh, Banten and Ayutthaya.⁵ In Southeast Asia spinning and weaving was largely still a household matter, exclusively performed by women on backstrap looms, and therefore unable to match the productivity of Indian wooden looms. Moreover cotton could not be grown in the year-round wet centre of Southeast Asia-- Sumatra, the Peninsula, western Java and Borneo—so that these areas had in any case to import from somewhere. These factors make it likely that coloured cotton textiles were prominent in the goods brought to Southeast Asian ports from the time India and Southeast Asia began interacting intensively by sea around the 5th century of the Common Era.

By the sixteenth century when we have more adequate descriptions, it was a very large trade. Gujarat, Bengal and the Coromandel (Tamil) coast

³ Reid, *Age of Commerce* I: 85-88.

⁴ Raffles memo of January 1813, cited H.R.C. Wright, *East Indian Economic Problems of the Age of Cornwallis and Raffles* (London: Luzac, 1961), p. 228.

⁵ K.N. Chaudhuri, 'The structure of Indian Textile Industry in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries,' in *Cloth and Commerce: Textiles and Colonial India*, ed. Tirtankhar Roy (New Delhi: Sage, 1996), pp.33-36.

were all shipping a great variety of cotton cloth to the markets of lower Burma (Pegu), Tenasserim (for the cross-Peninsula trade to Siam and Indochina), Melaka, Sumatra and Java. Tomé Pires estimated Melaka before the Portuguese conquest in 1511 received each year about 5 vessels each from Gujarat and South India, and several from Bengal, all laden with cloth for Southeast Asian markets. In addition a lively trade was carried separately to Pasai in Sumatra and Mergui and Tenasserim on the Mainland. I crudely extrapolate from his figures that about 600,000 Spanish dollars worth of Indian cotton cloth was then flowing to Southeast Asia (see Table 1).⁶

The Age of Commerce

The long sixteenth century was one of rapid expansion in the seaborne trade to and through Southeast Asia, as European, Chinese and Japanese traders joined the Indian and Southeast Asian shippers in increasingly fierce competition. The prices as well as the quantities of Southeast Asian pepper, clove, nutmeg and cinnamon increased, and in return increasing amounts of Indian cloth were consumed. Each new wave of Europeans learned the lesson that to acquire the pepper and spices they wanted from Southeast Asia, they should first stock up on Indian textiles. As explained by one experienced Portuguese to the neophyte Frenchman, Beaulieu,

It was necessarily appropriate that they have a post in Aceh, but there was no meaning to having one here, if one didn't have any in Surat, because reals and other French goods are not proper for this place, and one would be losing coming directly from France to here to buy pepper, instead of passing through Surat.⁷

⁶ These figures are drawn from *The Suma Oriental of Tomé Pires*, ed. Armando Cortesão (London: Hakluyt Society, 1944), as summarized in Reid, *Age of Commerce* II: 26-28.

⁷ Beaulieu, in Aceh in 1630s, as translated by Denys Lombard, 'The Indian World as seen from Aceh in the Seventeenth Century,' in *Commerce and Culture in the Bay of*

Overall I argue that this competitive commercial interaction reached its high point in the period 1620-50, after which a certain 'crisis' set in which reduced the returns to Southeast Asians of their exports, and eventually also reduced the quantities being traded. The final column of Table 1 shows my estimates of overall Southeast Asian imports, based on the known VOC shipments and an estimate of the extent of VOC market share at different periods. The figure of Spanish \$1,760,000 for the estimated value of imports in 1641 represents the consumption at this peak period

What this meant in terms of actual consumption is extremely difficult to calculate. As Ruurdje Laarhoven's dissertation makes abundantly clear, the size of a 'piece' of cloth differed greatly depending on the type of cloth and its supplier. Prices also diverged very widely. If I press this quantifying tendency to the limit, it is not in any false belief in accuracy, but rather to refute the assumption often made that this pre-industrial trade was only in 'luxuries' for an elite. During this peak period more than 1.7 million 'pieces' were imported from India for the Southeast Asian markets every year. If Ruurdje Laarhoven's calculations are correct that an average 'piece' might have been 11.5 square metres in area, this would mean about 20 million square metres of cloth were imported each year.⁸ This represents about one square metre for each Southeast Asian. If the cloth was spread around equally, which of course it was not, each Southeast Asian could have purchased enough Indian cloth for a single wrap-around garment of *sarung* or *panung* type every two or three years.⁹ Almost one metre of Indian cloth was available per person per year in Southeast Asia, enough in theory for a new Indian sarung for every person about every three years.

Bengal, 1500-1800, ed. Om Prakash and Denys Lombard (New Delhi: Manohar, 1999), p. 190.

⁸ Ruurdje Laarhoven, 'The Power of Cloth: The textile trade of the Dutch East India Company (VOC) 1600-1780,' Ph.D. dissertation, ANU, 1994, p. 39.

⁹ Reid, *Age of Commerce II*: 31.

No doubt the remotest and poorest parts of the region were not affected at all by Indian cloths. No doubt the large commercial cities, where perhaps one million of the Southeast Asian population lived, were disproportionately likely to buy Indian cloth rather than to buy or produce their own. Yet this amount of cloth cannot have been restricted to the cities or the elites. A Dutch envoy who made the arduous journey up the Mekong to the Lao capital of Vientiane to spy out commercial possibilities in 1642 reported that 40,000 'pieces' of Indian cloth reached that city for the Lao market every year.¹⁰ There can have been few more difficult markets to reach. Since the Mekong was not navigable between Laos and Cambodia, this cloth was brought to the Siamese capital of Ayutthaya by sea, or a mixture of sea and the painful transit of the Peninsula from Tennasserim, and then hauled on bullock-carts for the 600 km across the plain and low hills:

Since they go in great caravans of 60 to 100 carts [for security], if one of them breaks down the whole train is held up; also in the hot sun the buffaloes pull very badly, as well as other obstacles; so that five months is needed for the journey [Ayutthaya to Vientiane]; on the return since they have less heavy loads they do it in three months.¹¹

Inland communities in Sumatra, Timor and Sulawesi were also reached by these cloths, as was upper Burma, a thousand kilometres up the Irrawaddy.

Local habits of producing at home for local consumption certainly must have continued, and some centres of production for sale did withstand the competition of imports. But the major textile items actually traded over significant distances in Southeast Asia in this peak period were Indian.

¹⁰ Reid *Age of Commerce* II: 57.

¹¹ Gerrit Wusthoff 1642, in *De Oost-Indische Compagnie in Cambodia en Laos: Verzameling van bescheiden van 1636 tot 1670*, ed. Hendrik Muller (The Hague: Linschoten-Vereniging, 1917), p.196; see also Reid, *Age of Commerce* II: 61.

Table 1: Southeast Asian textile imports from India in quantity (thousand pieces) and value (thousand Spanish dollars equivalent)¹²

	<u>from Coromandel</u>		<u>from all India</u>		<u>Estimated SE Asia imports</u>	
	,000 pieces	Sp\$,000	,000 pieces	Sp.\$,000	,000 pieces	Sp. \$,000
1510 to Melaka		175		460		600
c.1600 estimate	410	430	900	940	900	940
1641 VOC	357	143	440	440	1760	1760
1686-7 VOC	458	331	485	359	1455	1077
1703-5 VOC	130	212	223	416	446	832
1723-5 VOC	112	228	196	471	392	942
1757-9 VOC	137	318	272	620	544	1240
1770-1 VOC	76	133	102	193	510	965
1811 Madras	412	597				
1821-2 Madras	761	959				
1828-9 S'pore				616 (861)		3080 (4305)

Decline of Indian imports and the rise of indigenous substitutes, 1660-1780

The end of that period, I argue, was a crisis of multiple causes, from which the only winners were VOC and its monopolies. Dutch monopolies were established first in the buying areas, starting with the nutmeg and mace of Banda (1621), then the cloves of Maluku more broadly (complete by the 1650s), and finally and less successfully the widely dispersed pepper-growing areas. Dutch monopoly of the vital supply of Indian cloth was never

¹² For 1600 the estimates (for SE Asia as a whole) are based on increases in shipping of factors of roughly 2 for Gujerat, 1.5 for Bengal and 2.5 for Coromandel. These are converted to pieces (of an average 11.5 m.) according to the formula of Laarhoven. I am assuming (crudely) that the Portuguese cruzado in which these estimates were made are equivalent to Spanish reals (dollars).

VOC imports for the (chiefly Archipelago) Southeast Asia market are taken from the careful calculations of summarized in Laarhoven 1964: 286. Estimates in the final column for total Southeast Asian imports are based on assumptions that the VOC occupied a quarter of the Southeast Asian market in 1641, a third in 1686-7, half in 1703-60, and a fifth in 1770-71 when India-based country traders were making gains (Reid 1993: 27-31; Reid 1997: 76-7).

Figures for 1811-22 are the recorded exports of Madras to the eastward, sometimes itemized as Aceh, Pinang, Java, Manila or "Malay ports", for which I am indebted to Tamara Hudec, personal communication. The 1828-9 figure is the export of Indian cloth (total cloth in brackets) to Southeast Asian destinations, chiefly the Indonesian Archipelago and Siam; from Wong Lin Ken 1960: 259-64 (see Table 2). I have estimated the Singapore share of the Southeast Asian textile market as 20% in 1828-9.

so complete, as demonstrated by the fact that they had to pay progressively higher prices for their Indian cloth. Laarhoven has been able to show that the average buying price of cloth by the VOC was 1.8 guilders per piece in the period 1619-23, 3.75 guilders in 1652-3, 4.66 in 1703-5 and 6.01 in 1723-4.¹³

Even though the Dutch Company was the winner from the crisis of the mid-17th century, even it was able to sell less and less cloth in the region. If we disregard the exceptional years 1683-5, when the VOC bought record amounts of Coromandel cloth in a vain attempt to monopolise supply and break the spirit of its rivals, the amount of cloth the VOC shipped from Coromandel to Batavia dropped steadily from a peak of two million guilders worth each year in the 1660s, to less than 800,000 guilders in the late 1680s.¹⁴ The longer-term downward trend is shown in Table 2.

If the Dutch suffered a downturn after the 1660s, most of their competitors in the trade to Southeast Asia were far more seriously affected. The English, Danish and French companies were excluded from the Archealgo ports controlled by the Dutch, but continued to carry significant amounts of cloth to non-Dutch ports, notably those of Burma, Siam, Aceh, Johor, Trengganu and Brunei. Masulipatnam and Nagatnam, which had sent 13 and ten ships respectively carrying cloth to Southeast Asian ports in 1624, sent only a half-dozen each a decade later and had largely dropped out of the contest by the 1650s. The Gujarati vessels which had played a major role in Southeast Asia in the sixteenth century had dropped out by 1700. Chulia merchants survived in the Southeast Asian cloth trade by using smaller vessels, trading out of San Thome, Cuddalore, Porto Novo and Alambaran to ports such as Aceh, Junkceylon (Phuket), Kedah and Mergui. By establishing good relations with French, English and Portuguese country traders on the one hand and the courts of Aceh, Kedah and southern Siam

¹³ Laarhoven, 'Power of Cloth', pp. 297-99.

¹⁴ Reid, *Age of Commerce II*: 30.

on the other, they were able to trade even when their ships were outclassed. Although making the case for continuity of Tamil cloth trading to Southeast Asia, Battacharya concludes that the biggest Chulia merchants like Sayyid Pillai Marakkayar, who died in 1755 with a fortune of 130,000 pagodas derived from trade with Aceh, Pegu, Malacca, Kedah and Ujung Salang, were the “perhaps not more than the shadows of the 17th Century shipping magnates of Masulipatnam and Surat”.¹⁵ Like the Bugis in the Archipelago, they filled the lower niches in the trade system as the high points were increasingly occupied by Europeans.

The failure to sell cloth in the previous quantities was explained by a chorus of Dutch merchants as based purely on the impoverishment of the former buyers. “The Javanese”, one noted, “having become poor and indigent as a result of the endless wars and upheavals, have been forced to resort, more than they otherwise would, to weaving their cloths themselves, not only for their own use, but to sell to those in other places.”¹⁶ Another Dutch account stressed in 1693 that “the Javanese and most eastern people” had been wealthy enough in earlier times to buy Indian textiles for their daily use, but the recent impoverishment had meant that these “have become limited to the use of the wealthy”.¹⁷ Since only the VOC supplied the most expensive Gujarati silk patolas at prices much higher than before, these became ritual heirlooms in parts of eastern Indonesia.

For local cloth production, therefore, the late seventeenth century is one of important new beginnings. The origins of Javanese batik are not well understood, though the earliest written mention of the word is in a Dutch document of the 1660s. Production certainly expanded at the end of the

¹⁵ Bhaswati Bhattacharya, ‘The Chulia Merchants of Southern Coromandel in the Eighteenth Century: A Case for Continuity’, in *Commerce and Culture in the Bay of Bengal*, p. 304 and pp. 285-305 *passim*.

¹⁶ VOC letter home of 1684, and other sources cited in Reid, *Age of Commerce II*: 301-2.

¹⁷ VOC letter home of 8 Dec 1693, in *Generale Missiven van Gouverneurs-Generaal en Raden aan Heren XVII der Verenigde Oostindische Compagnie*, ed. W. Ph. Coolhaas, Vol. V (1686-1697) (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1975), p. 639.

seventeenth century, and in consequence new production techniques such as the *canting* should probably be ascribed to this period, possibly a process of hybridisation with techniques brought from China, where wax-resist dyeing of batik type has a longer confirmed history. For the first time we find Javanese cloth appearing in the markets of South Sumatra to replace the Indian.¹⁸ Similarly South Sulawesi checked cloth, especially that produced in otherwise dry and unproductive Selayar, expanded to supply the markets of eastern Indonesia. This became one of the key items of trade of the Bugis sailors who travelled as far as the Peninsula and Cambodia with it.

Highly local domestic production, which had continued throughout the boom in Indian cloth, also expanded to fill the market sector. Alfons van der Kraan, portraying the scene in Java just before the transformation wrought by industrial production in the early nineteenth century, could rightly say that Javanese “satisfied by far the greater of their cotton cloth requirements through a domestic textile industry, an industry which involved cotton growing, spinning, weaving and dyeing.”¹⁹

This pattern was however of low labour efficiency in international terms. Although the backstroom and the spinning wheel did spread widely throughout Southeast Asia, the system remained of a pattern designed to absorb the time of household women, and not in most cases to produce competitively for the market. In eighteenth century Java it was believed to take a woman a month to spin a pound of cotton thread. Weaving was also slow on a backstrap loom, and the narrowness of the cloth that could be produced on it meant that two had to be sewn together to produce the same results as the Indian s produced on a wood-frame loom.²⁰

¹⁸ Barbara Andaya, ‘The cloth trade in Jambi and Palembang Society during the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries,’ *Indonesia* 48 (1989), pp. 38-40.

¹⁹ Alfons van der Kraan, *Contest for the Java Cotton Trade, 1811-40: An Episode in Anglo-Dutch Rivalry*, Center for Southeast Asian Studies, University of Hull, 1998), p.4.

²⁰ Reid, *Age of Commerce* I: 93-4.

A second commercial upturn in Southeast Asia, 1790-1840

The ANU Economic History Project sought to develop a long-term time series for key Southeast Asian exports, which might help to compensate for the paucity of internal data to measure upturns and downturns in the wider economy. These showed the exports of sugar (from Java, the Philippines and Thailand) taking off from about 1780, pepper (chiefly Sumatra) from about 1790, and coffee (Sumatra, Java, Peninsula) from 1800, after a century of negligible growth. Overall the returns to Southeast Asia from these three crops would have totalled about 1.2m. Spanish dollars in the 1780s, doubling to \$2.3m in the early 1800s, and then soaring up to \$6.7m in the 1820s and \$22m in the 1840s.²¹ While almost half the last-mentioned figure was the product of the Dutch-controlled cultivation system in Java, the remainder was spread widely around the islands. The pepper and most of the coffee were smallholder crops outside colonial control, most of it shipped off by private American, French, Indian and Chinese vessels rather than those of the former colonial monopolists.

This rapid growth in exports was in excess of anything since the early seventeenth century, and would not be exceeded until the late 20th century. We are entitled therefore to see it as a markedly expansionary period, resulting from freeing up of trade, collapse of company monopolies, smallholder expansion of pepper and coffee. One of the effects was a marked increase in demand for imports, of which cotton cloth was again the single biggest item. Table 1 shows that the amounts of Indian cotton cloth shipped to Southeast Asia from Madras alone in 1828-9 surpassed even the peak levels of Dutch imports to Batavia from the whole of India. In terms of value the increase was even greater. Aceh

²¹ David Bulbeck, Anthony Reid, Lay-Cheng Tan and Yiqi Wu, *Southeast Asian Exports since the 14th Century: Cloves, Pepper, Coffee and Sugar* (Singapore: ISEAS for ECHOSEA 1998).

also increased in importance as a destination for Indian cloth after 1766.²² We are entitled to deduce from that Table 1 (even with appropriate scepticism about the estimates of the final column) that the long slump in Indian exports to Southeast Asia ended around 1760, and those exports reached unprecedented levels in the booming 1820s.

This however was a difficult period for the Indian cloth industry, seemingly suffering the problems of long-term monopolistic supply arrangements, whereby the producers were closely tied to the Company buyers from whom they expected advances before producing. They were not well equipped to expand rapidly to fill a rapid rise in Southeast Asian demand, and the British seemed much more inclined to debate the “protection” of Indian peasant producers than to stimulate more capital-intensive production methods.²³ The monopolistic approach of the East India Company ensured that Indian production remained relatively stagnant at a time when revolutionary changes were affecting the technology of cotton spinning and weaving.

It is worth quoting here the searing attack of an ardent free-market advocate, John Crawford, on the monopolies of the East India Company. As British Resident of Singapore in the 1820s Crawford had witnessed that “the most remarkable example we have of the success of free trade is exhibited in the little settlement of Singapore, a barren islet”. He pointed out that in 1818, less than ten years after the establishment of this base for free trade, its exports had reached £1,387,201, more than the value of all the East India Company’s exports from Britain to India and China combined.²⁴ Crawford was absolutely convinced that the reason India’s trade and production had stagnated in comparison with Europe, the America’s and China was that,

²² Wright, *East Indian Economic Problems*, p. 249.

²³ Wright, *East Indian Economic Problems*, pp.192-223.

²⁴ John Crawford, *A View of the Present State and Future Prospects of the Free Trade and Colonization of India*, 2nd ed. (London, James Ridgeway, 1829), p.6.

For a full century at least, reason, common sense, and the principles of science, have been alike set at defiance to serve the purposes of a party; set at defiance, as experience has amply attested, for the virtual purpose of obstructing the commerce of England, and arresting the progress of improvement in India...We were told, in a tone of oracular authority, and on the alleged experience of two centuries, that the trade between Great Britain and India was wholly incapable of extension; that we could furnish nothing new that the Hindoos wanted, nor the Hindoos produce any thing new which we required....in short that the Indians, hating change of every description, were enamoured of monopoly and all its consequences.²⁵

Crawford's onslaught on monopoly is fatally marred to contemporary ears by a racist tendency to attribute some of the failures of Indian production to "the slovenliness and ignorance of a semi-barbarous people", because he wants to make the case for allowing European enterprise to galvanise the market in India.²⁶ Yet he was persuasive in asking how Indian agricultural production could be improved as long as it was extracted from poor peasants without capital as a tax to the Company of "from 50 to 60, and even 70 per cent. of the gross produce of the soil."²⁷ He produced impressive evidence of how the production of cotton, sugar, tobacco, pepper and iron had stagnated, grown uncompetitive, and declined in India as a result of the monopolies, at a time when more productive crop types and methods were introduced to the West Indies, Southeast Asia and the Americas enabling them to far surpass India in everything. And his argument for admitting European enterprise was racist incidentally rather than in essence. He spends much space arguing that Indian prejudice and opposition to change had been outrageously exaggerated by the upholders of monopoly.²⁸ He

²⁵ *Ibid.*, pp.1-2.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 58-101.

pointed to the saner and more productive interaction of conquering Muslims in India and Manchus in China, who were not foolish enough to think as the English Company did that if they allowed their entrepreneurs to follow the conquest they would end up dispossessing the locals, provoking them into rebellion, or worst of all, civilising them. The Company's parliamentary defenders argued, he said, that,

If we govern them well, these Indians will become wise and enlightened—rebel against us, expel us the country, and establish a native government. By way of corollary to these ominous and terrible objections, it is directly or indirectly insinuated that the East India Company is the fittest of all human instruments for governing the Indians...from all which it necessarily follows, that there is no governing India unless the administration monopolizes its commerce.²⁹

In the case of manufactured cotton cloth Crawford may be considered a visionary. He was outraged that nothing had been done to improve cotton production in India for three hundred years, while the United States, Brazil and Egypt had all soared ahead, reducing East India Company production to a mere 7% of British imports.³⁰ As he saw it the export of manufactured cloth was “nearly altogether in the hands of the private trader, and so it advances from year to year,” with the Company's role so lethargic as to be swiftly rendered irrelevant. Nevertheless the booming exports of 1828 had still produced only enough manufactured cloth to provide three-tenths of a yard for every inhabitant of India, two tenths for those of Southeast Asia, Persia and Arabia, and one tenth for those of China. He looked forward to a trade which would clothe the peoples of Asia with cheap British cloth to everybody's benefit.³¹

²⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 40-3.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 24-5.

³¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 6-8.

Expansion of British cloth from 1810

Following the invention of Samuel Crompton's mule in 1779, the labour input needed to produce high-quality yarn from raw cotton in the British factories had dropped to less than a hundredth of the older manual system by 1795. Between 1780 and 1810, British cotton cloth and yarn exports expanded more than fifty-fold in value, to nearly £19 million p.a., while the ever-cheaper prices at which this cloth was sold meant that the quantities exported had increased more than 200-fold. The exports went initially overwhelmingly to Europe, but from 1806, when Napoleon launched his Continental system to exclude British trade, new markets began to be sought in the Americas, Africa and Asia.³²

British manufactured cloth was relatively slow to reach Southeast Asia. The British ports of Penang (from 1786) and Bencoolen were established importers of Indian cottons, but this trade was in the hands of India-based merchants, both British country traders and Chulias, who did not hasten to shift their purchasing from Indian to British suppliers. The East India Company's exports to Asia were initially concentrated on India itself. The Company's agents in Penang as late as 1806 believed that British woollens had more potential than cottons, since they were valued by upland peoples in Burma and Siam while the cotton market was well served by India. In a memo reviewing Penang's role in the selling British manufactures, however, the Governor of Penang did point out that British chintzes "of a pattern suited to the Malays....of a dark ground and large figured pattern" would sell well in Penang, to the visiting Malay, Bugis and Acehnese vessels.³³

Nevertheless the first substantial consignment of British chintzes to Penang in 1810, still much less than the quantities of woollens at a mere 1,300 pieces, was considered to exceed the demand. The patterns and

³² Van der Kraan, *Contest for the Java Cotton Trade*, pp.8-10

³³ Cited in Wright, *East Indian Economic Problems*, p.224.

colours were still not such as would satisfy Indonesians accustomed to the fine Indian cloths. Moreover, as Raffles pointed out the following year, “the vend of the British chintzes to the eastward is materially checked from the circumstances of several of their principal colours yielding on first washing”.³⁴ The British conquest of Java a few months later raised expectations for sales, but nevertheless the quantities of “Indian calicoes printed in England” sent out in the first two East India Company ships destined for Java were small, and sold poorly. Those intended to be of “Bugis” pattern were “too narrow for sarongs and not fit for any other part of the native dress”.³⁵

No doubt it was the monopolistic habits of the Company itself that limited the success of this trade. Even John Crawfurd, later the great upholder of free trade and the role of Chinese intermediaries in it, became involved in his role as Resident at the court of Jogjakarta in a scheme which foisted British cloth on Javanese landholders. Some of the poor farmers expected to pay for this cloth fled the district rather than face the pressure from the government and Chinese hierarchy through which the cloth was “sold”.³⁶

Raffles fortunately did not favour a Company monopoly of trade in Java, and it would have been impossible to impose anywhere else. It was independent traders at both ends of the trade system who created the effective trade in British cloth to Southeast Asia, once the Java trade was declared open in 1814. Merchants based in Batavia, and China traders returning to Britain through Southeast Asia, carried the desired patterns to Britain, while the cotton traders of London followed up by sending their own agents to the east to collect details of the demand. In 1815 some Java-based merchants made direct contact with the

³⁴ Raffles report to Governor-General from Malacca, 10 February 1811, cited *ibid.* p. 226.

³⁵ Report from Batavia February 1813, cited *ibid.*, p.229.

³⁶ Wright, *East Indian Economic Problems*, pp.231-3.

Lancashire manufacturers, while in 1819 some of those manufacturers themselves sent agents to Java. Between 1814 and 1819 Semarang's imports of British cloth to supply central Java leapt from 1000 to 15,000 pieces. Crawford could write in 1820 that "The consequence of the influx of British goods has already been the entire superseding of all the finer Indian cloths formerly consumed. The only Indian cotton goods now imported are a few coarse cloths, blue and white,...in which the labour of manufacture bears but a small proportion to the raw material."³⁷

Because of its larger exposure to western trade than the rest of Southeast Asia, Java was the first to succumb in this way to European manufactured cloth. The return of Java to Dutch rule in 1816 initially did nothing to slow the flow of British cloth. By 1823 Britain controlled the Java market for imported cloth, supplying 97% of the total imports of cotton cloth, in excess of 1.3 million dollars in value.³⁸ About half of this amount was brightly coloured chintzes in floral patterns already made popular by the Indian trade. "The favourite colours are red and green, and next to these yellow and brown. In short, the colours should be as bright as possible, and the pattern should occupy as much as possible of the ground."³⁹ These were worn as coats or gowns (*baju*), whereas for the sarung covering the lower body, "none of our manufactures are exactly suitable". Almost half the British import was therefore of white cambrics, which the Javanese used as the cloth on which to draw their wonderful wax-resist (*batik*) patterns.⁴⁰ From this point on, the primary role of the Javanese textile industry became the production of batik from European manufactured cloth.

³⁷ John Crawford, *History of the Indian Archipelago* (Edinburgh, Constable, 1820), Vol. III, pp.502-3.

³⁸ Van der Kraan, *Contest for the Cotton Trade*, p. 13, and see Table 3.

³⁹ Crawford, *History*, III: 503.

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, III: 504.

Table 2. Value of European and Indian Cloth exports from Singapore to Southeast Asia (Malay Archipelago, Siam and Cochin-China), in Spanish dollars

year	European	Indian	Total	%age European
1828-9	244,776	616,510	861,286	28.4
1835-6	562,957	457,583	1,020,540	55.2
1840-1	618,114	234,333	852,447	72.5
1843-4	530,723	156,995	687,718	77.2
1845-6	895,307	234,996	1,130,303	79.2
1848-9	666,082	103,189	769,271	86.6
1855-6	1,031,265	114,783	1,146,048	90.0
1865-6	4,015,535	107,660	4,123,195	97.4

Elsewhere in Southeast Asia the victory of European cloth was slower coming. Singapore was relatively receptive to European cloth by comparison even with Penang, which continued older connections with the Coromandel producers for much longer. Not until 1846 did Penang establish a direct import of British cloth, and its needs for the Sumatra trade were until then met from Singapore.⁴¹ Nevertheless even Singapore's cloth imports were more than 70% Indian as late as 1828 (Table 2). The bulk of these were exported to the Archipelago by small Bugis and Malay vessels which would formerly have had to pick up their Indian cloth supplies at Dutch ports, or Aceh, Riau or Kedah. In 1828-9 these vessels took \$109,077 worth of Indian cloth from Singapore to Borneo, \$65,351 to Celebes and \$96,678 to Sumatra, all far in excess of the amounts of British cloth. Even to Java, which received the bulk of its imports of British cloth directly from Europe, Singapore exported through

⁴¹ Wong Lin Ken, p.81.

these small vessels only \$22,686 of European cloth but \$157,151 of Indian cloth.⁴²

Thereafter the change was very rapid, as Table 2 shows. By 1835-6 Singapore's European cloth exports had more than doubled to constitute 55% of the cloth traded, while the Indian cloth trade declined inexorably, constituting less than 30% in 1840-1, 15% in 1848-9 and 2.6% in 1865-6. Even the Archipelago destinations which had been most committed to the familiar Indian cloths were all (except Java) importing larger quantities of European cloth from Singapore by 1841-2. The rapid expansion in the consumption of British cloth in different markets is apparent from Table 3.

Table 3: Growth of European cloth exports through Singapore to Selected Southeast Asian Markets (in thousand Spanish dollars value)⁴³

Year ⁴⁴	Dutch Indies ⁴⁵	Sumatra ⁴⁶	Borneo	Celebes	Peninsula	Siam	Vietnam
1823	(1,386)						
1828	29 (2,037)	20	3.8	3.8	10	86	0.6
1835	35 (2,455)	157	9	9	15	58	0.9
1840	8 (5,197)	272	51	51	60	107	19
1844	33	220	87	87	46	126	19
1848	63	173	107	58	52	169	36
1855	24	262	236	168	99	315	254
1862						362	687
1865	524	927	328	171	121	1,072	859

⁴² Wong Lin Ken, p.259.

⁴³ Calculated from tables in Wong Lin Ken, 'The Trade of Singapore', pp.259-65. Figures in brackets calculated from tables in Van der Kraan, *Contest*.

⁴⁴ The accounting years for Straits Settlements were in fact 1828-9, 1835-6, etc

⁴⁵ In an attempt to cover the ports subject to Dutch differential tariffs, I have combined here the entries in the British record for Java, Neighbouring Isles, and Rhio [Riau Archipelago]. In the years before 1844 Singapore cloth exports to Java were very low, as European cloth was generally shipped directly to Batavia. The figures in brackets are those for total imports into Java (from van der Kraan), converted on the basis that 2.5 guilders are one Spanish dollar.

⁴⁶ This is the combination of the Singapore export category Sumatra with the categories Penang and Malacca (combined after 1847). The bulk of the cloth sent to Penang was for the northern Sumatra trade in this period, though provision of the tin-mining frontiers of Phuket and Perak is also a factor in the 1860s.. Singapore exports to Malacca were very modest, and some of it was also destined for Sumatra.

Java was the exception for reasons that have been made clear by Alfons van der Kraan. In the early years after the British occupation, European ships continued to take British cloth directly to Java, leaving Singapore only as the resort for Malay and Bugis vessels bringing in Indian cloth. When the dimensions of the 3.3 million guilder (\$1.3m) import trade in British cloth became clear to Dutch policy-makers in 1823, they decided to develop a textile industry that would cut the British out of the Java trade. This was done by stimulating the textile industry of the Belgian sector of what was then the United Kingdom of the Netherlands (with Belgium), and imposing severe duties against foreign textile imports in violation of the 1824 Anglo-Dutch Treaty. Since the free port of Singapore was seen as particularly threatening to Dutch control of commerce, British goods coming in from Singapore had to pay 10% additional duty above the discrimination already practiced on direct imports. By these means the British share of European cotton goods imported into Java was cut down from 96% in 1823 to 30% in 1829 while the Belgian industry grew rapidly to take the lion's share.⁴⁷

British dismay over this development was one of the reasons why Britain changed its policy over the United Netherlands, and allowed what it had formerly opposed, the secession of the pro-French southern Netherlands from the Union in 1830. With the loss of its industrial base, Holland could no longer keep out British manufactures, which again dominated the market in 1833 with 97% of Java imports.⁴⁸ The Netherlands resolved to build its own industry producing textiles for the Java market, and to entrust the matter to the state trading company, NHM, which also had the monopoly of shipping the products of the Cultivation system in Java to the Netherlands.

⁴⁷ Van der Kraan, *Contest*, pp.13-24; Wong Lin Ken, pp.40-42.

⁴⁸ Van der Kraan, *Contest*, pp 24-25.

This time relations with Britain were deemed too important to continue to flaunt the 1824 Treaty, which had specified that the Netherlands should charge tariffs on British ships no more than twice those on Dutch ships. In 1835 a tariff of 12.5% was for the first time imposed on Dutch manufactures, so that 25% could be charged on British. But at the same time the Government signed a secret arrangement with the NHM to give the proceeds of the 12.5% duty back to the Company, which would use it to encourage and subsidize the infant Dutch textile industry. By these means the Netherlands again moved ahead of Britain in supplying the Java market in 1836, and By 1840 it was providing 68% of the cloth imports, against Britain's 30%. The market for European cloth had then expanded to nearly 13 million guilders or \$5m.⁴⁹ This made Java the largest foreign cloth market in Southeast Asia, and ensured that the great majority of Javanese were dressed in cloths of European manufacture. Meanwhile, Singapore was constrained by much more draconian tariffs of 70% as a source of European goods, which explains why its supplies of cloth to Java continued to be almost entirely Indian in origin.⁵⁰

The Mainland states of Southeast Asia had also imported Indian cloth since the Age of Commerce, and similarly seen some diminution of the flow in the 'long 18th century'. Francis Light estimated the consumption of Indian textiles in Siam in 1789 at only \$60-80,000 a year, mostly reaching the Chaophraya valley and the capital after portages across the Peninsula from ports such as Tenasserim, Junkceylon (Phuket) and Kedah.⁵¹ This certainly picked up during the commercial upturn described above, since by 1821 Penang alone was sending over

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, pp.52-53.

⁵⁰ Wong Lin Ken, pp.46-49.

⁵¹ 'A brief account of the several countries surrounding Prince of Wales's Island with their production. Received from Francis Light,' 1789, in H.P. Clodd, *Malaya's First British Pioneer: The Life of Francis Light* (London: Luzac & Co, 1948), as App. II, p.156.

\$200,000 worth of Indian cloth to Siam by these Peninsula routes as well as by sea.⁵² In the 1820s Singapore took over the trade by sea, as the Bangkok-based Chinese junks journeyed no further than Singapore for their supplies of cloth and other articles of import. In 1828-9 the \$174,507 worth of textiles shipped from Singapore to Siam had a slightly larger share of Indian than European cloths, but thereafter the European cloth expanded rapidly (Table 3) while the Indian share faltered to be less than 10% by 1841.⁵³ The million dollars worth of British cloth exported by this route in 1865 represented the bulk of Siam's cloth imports, though the Chulias and Penang supplied a declining trickle across the more arduous Peninsula routes. Singapore constituted 43% of Siam's import trade in 1857 and 60% in 1866, and most of the remainder was with China.⁵⁴ Lancashire had by then come to supply most of Siam's clothing needs, albeit to a lesser extent than Java.

Vietnam before the French conquest was much less inclined to succumb to cloth from the west, manufactured or not. Its model of dress was China, and Chinese silks had dominated its textile exports for centuries. Vietnam opened its southern ports to western trade in 1821, but as with the Siamese case, it was Vietnamese 'topes' and Chinese junks that almost exclusively operated the trade from Singapore. The import trade was not seen as a means to clothe the poor, as elsewhere, but to provide the needs of the elite and the state. Hence British woollens were at first of greater interest than cottons for the traders and the royal mission sent to Singapore in 1825, notably as protective clothing for the army.⁵⁵ Indian cloth imports were nil in most years, while the import of European cloth rose only to \$157,784 in 1857-8, the last year before French intervention in the south. That intervention, which had taken over

⁵² Wong Lin Ken, p. 135.

⁵³ *Ibid.* p.264.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p.152.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, pp.154-8.

the southern provinces around Saigon by 1867, enormously boosted the import of European cloth manufactures from Singapore. These were worth \$682,532 in 1862-3 and \$858,628 in 1865-66.⁵⁶ Though a five-fold increase over the 1850s, this still represented a significantly lower rate of consumption than in Siam or the Archipelago.

Much work remains to be done on the impact of this revolution in consumption patterns in southeast Asia, as in other parts of the world. In transformed within a generation the indigenous textile industry from a subsistence cottage industry to provide the poor, to a craft production for elite consumption and for special occasions. The cheapness of the new cloths ensured that the everyday clothing of Southeast Asia came to be produced in the factories of Lancashire.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p.263.