

Shaping Fashion: Asia, Europe and the Trade in Indian Cottons, c. 1300-1800: A Well-Worn Tale Reconsidered*

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In the past several decades, few topics have received more attention than the interaction of Asia and Europe, a relationship that has extended over millennia. Global historians are re-evaluating these contacts, rethinking relations between East and West, recasting a historical narrative that was first formalized by Europeans with the professionalization of the academy in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This dynamic exercise challenges many assumptions, like the periodization of history.² Underlying much of the history of western industrialization and modernization was the implicit premise of Asian backwardness as a counterpoint to Western exceptionalism, articulated by theorists from Adam Smith to Karl Marx and their heirs in the academy. In this context, it is not surprising that many histories of the Indian cotton trade were contextualized by later western industrialization, with Indian products and trade cast as stand-ins before the principal actors arrived on the world stage.³ The histories of European and Asian

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1. William A. Green 'Periodizing World History' *History & Theory* 34:2 (1995); Janet L Abu-Lughod, *Before European Hegemony: the World System A.D. 1250-1350* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1989); William H McNeill, 'The Changing Shape of World History' *History & Theory* 34:2 (1995); Andre Gunder Frank, *ReOrient: Global Economy in the Asian Age* (Berkeley, 1998). See, for example, Martin Lewis and Karen Wigen, *The Myth of Continents: a Critique of Metageography* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1997).

2. In his introduction of a major reassessment of Africa's role in England industrialization process Joseph E. Inikori remarks that, 'England's industrialization is presented as something so unique that current industrializing nations have nothing to learn from it. One of the objects of this study is to show that, in fact, England's industrialization process share important common elements with the ones that have occurred in the non-Western World since World War II.' *Africans and the Industrial Revolution in England: A Study in International Trade and Economic Development* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2002) p. 1.

interactions, and the history of the Indian cotton trade, are more complex and more interesting than would be supposed from this trope.

This paper will rethink the well-worn tale of East/West commerce. First, I will sketch the parameters of this mercantile venture over centuries. Next I will suggest the early impact of the direct contact between Europe and the Indian subcontinent, refocusing the chronology to give a fuller picture of Indian/European interactions - in this regard, material evidence plays an important part. The role of Asian commodities in the genesis of the fashion system in Europe has been largely unexamined and will be introduced here, a preliminary study of a broader work. I define the fashion system as a self-perpetuating, dynamic force — urban in origin, diverse in expression — where the economic and cultural stimuli to demand were generated. Self-definition and group coherence are both at the heart of fashion, a complex phenomenon that channelled material desires; it reflected, as well, collective communities defined by age, social rank, religion, ethnicity, or other cultural attributes. Fashion systems arose in societies with flourishing economies and great metropolitan trading centres, from classical Rome to Ming China; directing demand, the expressions of this phenomenon varied, as did its longevity, until its most recent iteration in the West.⁴ In this long chronology in world history, Indian cottons played a uniquely important role as an agent of new consumer tastes. Overall, Asian textiles generated a crucial stimulus to market appetites for goods with generally standardized forms. Indeed, what Maxine Berg calls the ‘global trade ... in fashion and luxury,’ demands a rethinking of categories and a

3. A history of fashion in the Roman Empire has not yet been attempted; however, there is every evidence that fashions changed and evolved, with influences circulating in many directions, from the elites down the social scale, but also from the border regions to the heart of Rome. Personal communication. Professor Brent Shaw, Professor of Classics and Andrew Fleming West Professor of Classics, Princeton University, August 2005. Grant Parker, ‘*Ex Oriente Luxuria*: Indian Commodities and Roman Experience’ *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 45:1 (2002). See also, Craig Clunas, *Superfluous Things: Material Culture and Social Status in Early Modern China* (Cambridge, Polity Press, 1991).

questioning of causation.⁵ The long eighteenth century was a pivotal period, marked by new levels of consumerism and new complexities in the market. But to understand this era we must first turn to the patterns of East / West trade which evolved before and after 1500.

2. Cotton, Consumers and International Markets Before 1500

Janet Abu-Lughod brilliantly describes interlocking systems of trade in 1300, stretching from the East China Sea to the coast of East Africa and the far reaches of Europe. Along ocean and land-based routes, merchants and sailors, caravan porters and travellers carried cargos of raw materials and manufactures, along with information and ideas.⁶ The locus of trade was not the kingdom or principality prominent in national histories, but the great port or metropolis whose vast markets drew necessities and luxuries from near and far. What has been called ‘an archipelago of cities,’⁷ were the points of entry; the cities stood as oases of urban dynamism, where merchants congregated, where work was relatively plentiful for the labouring classes and where the middle ranks found opportunities. Here, too, was demand, an appetite for goods not locally produced. These cities anchored trade routes, attracting and dispersing goods from far afield.⁸

4. Gilles Lipovetsky, *The Empire of Fashion: Dressing Modern Democracy* (Princeton, 1994) p. 15; Peter N. Stearns, *Consumerism in World History: The Global Transformation of Desire* (New York, 2001) p. I, 1-3; Maxine Berg, ‘In Pursuit of Luxury: Global History and British Consumer Goods in the Eighteenth Century’ *Past and Present* (forthcoming) and ‘New commodities, luxuries and their consumers in eighteenth-century England’ in Maxine Berg and Helen Clifford, eds., *Consumers and luxury: Consumer culture in Europe 1650-1850* (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1999).

5. K. N. Chaudhuri, ‘Trade as a Cultural Phenomenon’ in Jens Christian V. Johansen, et al, eds., *Clashes of Cultures: Essays in Honour of Niels Steensgaard* (Odense, 1992) p. 210.

6. Abu-Lughod, *Before European Hegemony*, p. 13. The phrase was coined by Richard Haëpke and also adopted by Fernand Braudel.

7. As George Spencer observes of Asia, ‘It is likely that inhabitants of some coastal settlements in Southeast Asia had better contacts and more interests in common with other such settlements in India

Cotton textiles were among the most ubiquitous manufactured goods traded across these networks, more varied in quality than silk and usually less costly, but with a range of qualities. Well before European ships appeared off the coast of India, printed cottons from the subcontinent found global markets in a commercial system perhaps unparalleled in world history. The material riches travelling along these channels were of Indian manufacture, feeding consumer needs in distant regions of the world and gradually transforming economies and material culture. We may never discover all its complex aspects, but surviving records confirm its broad sweep. Indian cottons were sold in classical Rome and centuries later in medieval Old Cairo. Cairo was an important re-export point from the eleventh century onward and in the same period, merchants from Coromandel carried cottons eastward to Indonesian and Chinese markets.⁹ The significance of this commerce is immense, both in terms of the cultural conversation which took place, albeit at a great distance, as well as the wealth created.¹⁰ Utility alone did not drive this commerce, rather, cultural attributes integral to the cotton textiles themselves appealed to rich and poor, male and female. At this stage I would not employ the term 'fashion' to the process of selection and valuation of Indian cottons in Southeast Asia. I

or south China than they had with their own hinterlands...' George Spencer, *The Politics of Expansion: the Chola Conquest of Sri Lanka and Sri Vijaya* (Madras, New Era Press, 1983) quoted in Abu-Lughod, *Before European Hegemony*, p. 269. See also, Goody's discussion of the extensive trade which tied West Africa and western India before the arrival of Europeans. Goody, *East in the West*, pp. 83-85. See also, Chaudhuri, 'Trade as a Cultural Phenomenon', pp. 214-215.

8. Parker, 'Ex Oriente Luxuria.' p. 48 and note 10; Michael Loewe, 'Spices and Silk: Aspects of World Trade in the First Seven Centuries of the Christian Era' *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 1971, pp. 166-179; S. D. Goitein, 'From the Mediterranean to India: Documents on the Trade to India, South Arabia, and East Africa from the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries' *Speculum: A Journal of Mediaeval Studies* 29:2 (1954) and *A Mediterranean Society: The Jewish Communities of the Arab World as Portrayed in the Documents of the Cairo Geniza, Vol. IV, Daily Life* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1983) p. 170; Abu-Lughod, *Before European Hegemony*, pp. 269-272.

9. John Guy, *Woven Cargo: Indian Textiles in the East* (London, Thames & Hudson, 1998) p. 10. See also Ruth Barnes, *Indian Block-Printed Textiles in Egypt: The Newberry Collection in the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford*, vol. 1 (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1997).

know too little of their urban culture to make such a claim, though some historians have traced broad-ranging parallels in societal development between Southeast Asia and Western Europe.¹¹ Yet it is very evident that desire, not necessity, directed Southeast Asian customers, and doubtless others too. In whatever context demand was shaped, whether to sustain customary cultural forms or feeding powerful new consumer forces, it is essential to acknowledge the importance of culture in the markets served.¹² It is also instructive to compare and assess the materials that formed the substance of this trade.

At the western edge of the Indian trade nexus, Cairo served as an entrepôt for areas of Europe, as well as the Mediterranean and Middle East. Textiles decay more rapidly than most other physical elements, leaving too few traces of their use. However, when they survive from centuries past they put life and breath into human endeavours long past. The Newberry Collection at the Ashmolean Museum represents dramatic testimony of the trade through the Middle East. The collection is composed of approximately twelve hundred fragments of cottons, dyed and block-printed, found during excavations outside Fustat, Old Cairo. Carbon dated and catalogued by Ruth Barnes, these textiles span the period from antiquity to the medieval era and are of ‘outstanding historical importance’. These are rare finds, the stuff of everyday use, the foundation of the Indian cotton trade, illustrating that, ‘in the eleventh and twelfth century Cairo was the hub in the wheel of the maritime trade between India, Arabia, and eastern Africa on the one hand, and the Mediterranean on the other.’¹³ In this region, cotton clothed the poor as well as wealthier tradesman or merchant, serving as wraps, pants, bedding, curtains and cushions,

10. Victor Lieberman, ‘Transcending East-West Dichotomies: State and Culture Formation in Six Ostensibly Disparate Areas’ *Modern Asian Studies* 31 (1997).

11. For further details on the range of cottons produced for disparate markets see, Mattiebelle Gittinger, *Master Dyers to the World: Technique and Trade in Early Indian Dyed Cotton Textiles* (Washington, D. C., The Textile Museum, 1982) pp. 16-19.

12. Barnes, *Indian Textiles in Egypt*, pp. 80, 104.

bought in city districts known for cotton wares.¹⁴ Flowered, plainly dyed, with patterned stripes or borders, the coarse and medium quality Indian cottons served practical and aesthetic functions.¹⁵

The random survival of these artefacts in such numbers speaks to the vigour of this trade and to volumes of goods routinely transported to Old Cairo. Termed by Barnes ‘the foremost surviving examples of the pre-European Indian fabric,’ these commodities ‘catered both for the luxury market and for general distribution and common consumption.’¹⁶ Taste, as a stimulus to consumer desire, as a sign of a fashion system, was surely well in place by the fourteenth century in trading cities such as Cairo. The selection, variety and qualities evident in the remnants suggest the characteristics of factory-made products of a later era. The reception and uses to which Indian cottons were put varied from region to region; the symbolic, aesthetic and cultural significance of these goods also varied with each market. Yet, Indian manufacturers sometimes served different regions with similar patterned fabrics, the fabrics to be interpreted by different cultures. Barnes carbon dated two cotton fabrics of very similar design featuring iconic geese imagery - one from Old Cairo and the other from an Indonesian site - both were dated to 1400, produced to serve consumers thousands of miles apart: in Cairo the fabrics was cut for decorative household use, in Indonesia kept whole and in tact for ceremonial purposes.¹⁷ Both fabrics, in different ways, contributed to these societies.

3. European Contact, Indian Commodities and New Patterns of World Trade: The Advent of the Fashion System in Europe

13. S. D. Goitein, *A Mediterranean Society: The Jewish Communities of the Arab World as Portrayed in the Documents of the Cairo Geniza*, Vol. IV, *Daily Life* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1983) pp. 170, 332-3.

14. Barnes, *Indian Textiles in Egypt*, p. 1.

15. Barnes, *Indian Textiles in Egypt*, p. 1. See also, Ruth Barnes, ‘Indian Trade Textiles’ *Hali: The International Magazine of Antique Carpet and Textile Art*, July 1996, Issue 87.

16. Personal communication, Ruth Barnes, July 2004. See also, Gittinger, *Master Dyers*, p. 52.

When the early voyagers returned to Lisbon they carried Indian textiles, though initial quantities were small. But the attention paid these goods and the esteem accorded them was immediate and important. In Lisbon, as early as 1508, church vestments and accessories were being made of fabrics from Calicut and Cambay.¹⁸ Such fabrics were quickly integrated into the institutional hierarchy of this society; for example, statues of female saints from this era were decorated in painted facsimiles of Indian cloth. At the same time, the Portuguese channelled much of their low quality cottons east to the Levant (in direct competition with established merchants) and west to the Atlantic coast of Africa and the colonial settlements of Brazil. In addition, Lisbon-based merchants cultivated new European markets, carrying exotics as far as England's south coast in the early sixteenth century.¹⁹ In the 1540s, vessels termed 'Portuguese spice ships' came into port at Southampton and Plymouth, en route to Antwerp.²⁰ At the same time, Southampton probate inventories from the 1550s show merchants with calico stocks, as well as household furnishings of Indian cotton. Southampton's affluent merchant and middling classes decorated their homes with the newest East Indian textiles or offered these goods for sale. Cushions, cupboard cloths, curtains and yards of coarse and fine calicoes are evident from at least the 1550s, with some goods described as old in 1566.²¹ Greater attention is typically given to the craze for calicoes as dress goods from the 1660s, and to the large cargos of imported fabrics carried to Europe by Dutch and English vessels. But the early, steady penetration of painted and printed Indian cottons into northern European markets is worthy of note, as this traffic laid the groundwork for new wants and needs in some of the most economically dynamic regions of

17. Guy, *Woven Cargo*, p. 9.

18. See, for example, Thomas Beaumont James, *The Port Book of Southampton 1509-10* vol. II, pp. 279-81, for commentaries on cargoes.

19. Wolf, *Jewish History*, p. 77.

20. Roberts and Parker, *Southampton Probate Inventories*, vol I, pp 65-70; 150-2; 159-62; 165-7; vol. II, pp 244-52; 346B7; 358-9. T. S. Willan, ed., *A Tudor Book of Rates* (Manchester, 1962) p. 38.

Europe. Indian calicos became more and more widely known in sixteenth-century England. The Tudor Book of Rates, for example, summarizes dutiable commodities for the second half of the century and includes calicos under the category of ‘Linnen cloth’ goods traded through English ports.²² The enhanced use of household textiles represents an important step in augmented consumerism, as Lorna Weatherill proved in her quantitative study of later English probate records.²² The pattern of purchase and use of Indian fabrics within the home attests to the wider distribution of Indian textiles, both in the Iberian context and by their competitors.²³

Among the most interesting Portuguese artefacts from the early trade are the distinctive embroidered bed covers and decorative household textiles goods which circulated to colonial regions where, ‘by the 1580s no wealthy household of the Iberian overseas colonies would be without the finest [cotton] clothes for furnishings ... or the fine muslins.’²⁴ Elite metropolitan houses were similarly decorated. The first examples of the Indo-Portuguese style blended imagery of the European newcomers with distinct local iconography, a style that lasted only briefly. Imitation began almost immediately in embroidered works. Thus, the *domestic* material culture of Europe was in transition long before the largest cargos of Indian cottons arrived at Dutch and English ports and long before European artisans began to try to *print* copies of these designs in a systematic way. But artisans also worked on painted facsimiles, on coarse canvas, long before skills at colour-fast printing on cloth developed in Europe. Buying goods for the home was the first and most important entry point for Asian textiles, a significant stage for plays of fashion.

21. Lorna Weatherill, *Consumer Behaviour and Material Culture in Britain, 1660-1760* (London, 1988) Table 4.4, p. 88.

22. Guy notes that by the late sixteenth century, ‘painted cottons (*pintados*) and embroidered silks in Western taste and adapted to European domestic needs were in wide circulation as wall hangings and bed covers.’ John Guy, *Woven Cargo*, p. 9. See also, Kristof Glamann, *Dutch-Asiatic Trade, 1620-1740* 2nd edition, (Copenhagen, 1981) pp. 133-4.

23. Boyijian, *Portuguese Trade*, p. 141.

4. Conclusion

The cotton trade exemplifies critical features in the relationship between East and West. First, the trade inaugurated profound changes in Europe, in the economy, in industry and in the material culture of elite and common consumers. Twenty-five years ago Joan Thirsk called on historians to recognize the proliferation of small niceties, English-made, many intended to employ the poor. As the poor were employed, they were also better dressed, their houses better equipped.²⁵ Thirsk highlighted the expanding manufacture of cheap necessities and niceties: buttons, buckles, ribbons, lace, combs and pins. But if we seek to understand the birth of this consumer society, we must look as well to Asia's influence. Imports like cotton were imbued with powerfully attractive floral designs in a wide range of qualities, making these goods accessible to non-elites, as well as elites, unmatched in substance by European manufactures. Over generations Europeans struggled to replicate Asia's skills; but their ultimate success should not overshadow the source of this inspiration. The arrival in northwest Europe of one of the most important global consumer commodities was critical to Western economic and cultural development and essential for the genesis of early modern consumerism and the fashion system.

Asian goods are celebrated as sources of imitation for later British industries, as the epitome of popular luxuries.²⁶ However, in the eighteenth-century, at the same time as *chinoiserie* dominated styles, and as European artisan struggled to replicate the range and quality of Asian goods, Asia was being characterized by Europeans as the unchanging 'other', antithetical to

24. Joan Thirsk, *Economic Policy and Projects: The Development of a Consumer Society in Early Modern England* (Oxford, 1978) pp. 15-6.

25. Berg, 'In Pursuit of Luxury'; see also Lemire, *Fashion's Favourite* and A. P. Wadsworth and Julia de Lacy Mann, *The Cotton Trade and Industrial Lancashire 1600-1780* (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1931) pp. 111-24.

fashion. The claim that ‘the East is not subject to fashion’ was made in letters and in verse, an assertion that gained credence over the eighteenth century and beyond. Commentators were well aware of the rage for all things Oriental, aware of struggles to match Asian techniques, aware too of the ship loads of merchandise yearly imported from the East. Yet, when authors employed geographic metaphors for fashion and novelty they spoke of France, the Low Countries or Italy, along with the England.²⁷ Prasannan Parthasarathi recently observed a similar obscurantism in representations of Asian technology in the late eighteenth-century; where once references to India’s superior products were commonplace, especially in writings by British manufacturers, by the late eighteenth century references to Indian technological expertise had disappeared.²⁸ These misrepresentations of Asia and its role in Europe’s social and economic transformation distort the historical trajectory of this process.

Fashion was a critical contextual and cultural agent in these changes and deserves more intensive scrutiny and a comparative evaluation across time and place. The fashion catalyst has been evident in developed urbanized societies in many periods and in many parts of the world. However, the genesis of a fashion system in Europe awaited the era which followed direct trade with Asia and the social and commercial reverberations this entailed.²⁹ The impact of Asian

26. Examples of such verse which consider the origins and practice of fashion include: *The Phantastick age: Or, The Anatomy of England’s vanity, In wearing the fashions Of several Nations, With good exhortations, Against transmutations.* ... (1640); *Fashion: An epistolary Satire To a Friend*, (London, 1742). There is a voluminous literature on Asian trade, much of it arising from efforts to prohibit imports of Indian cottons. See Lemire, *Fashion’s Favourite*, chapter 1; Natalie Rothstein, ‘The Calico Campaign of 1719-21’ *East London Papers* (July, 1969).

27. Prasannan Parthasarathi, ‘The Sources of Wealth in Late Eighteenth-Century Britain: John Kennedy, Adam Smith and the British Cotton Industry’ unpublished paper presented at the Anglo-American Conference, London, July 2004.

28. Consumerism itself is being redefined from China to East Africa. See, for example, Craig Clunas, *Superfluous Things: Material Culture and Social Status in Early Modern China* (Cambridge, 1991) and ‘Modernity Global and Local: Consumption and the Rise of the West’ *American Historical Review* 104:5

manufactures was inseparable from the rise of the Western fashion system and integral to the shaping of popular consumerism. Indian cottons exemplified these changes most dramatically. Indeed, one of the critical elements in the industrialization process was the existence and persistence of long-established markets for Indian cottons, markets cultivated over centuries. Only when British manufacturers could *equal* the quality of Indian goods was their place better secured in more of the international markets for cottons. Many authors have emphasized the importance of Asian products as a stimulus to imitative Western technology, leading to industrialization. This, indeed, represents a tremendous event in human history.³⁰ However, the iconic history of British industrial triumph should not obscure the productive genesis of Indian manufacturers. By privileging the capacities of European technology to *copy* Asian wares, using new technologies, have we under-valued the profoundly important roles of the Asian artisans, craftspeople and traders? Over the long span of history, it must be acknowledged that Indian cottons were the first global consumer commodity. Indian textiles were among the first widely dispersed products that sustained greater decency for labouring families and sparked a taste for fashionable expenditures, large and small, in world markets. In the early modern era, they reshaped the economic and cultural context of Europe, propelling new technologies and the advance of the fashion system, exceptional phenomena in the functioning of a consumer society. The later industrial transformation of the cotton industry, and the tremendous importance of export markets for Britain after 1800, suggest the significance of established international markets for cotton. Thus, in shaping markets and serving fashion, Indian cottons prepared global consumer markets for the modern industrial age.

(1999); Jeremy Prestholdt, 'On the Global Repercussions of East African Consumerism' *American Historical Review* 109:3 (2004).

29. For an illustration of the debates generated by new global and comparative perspectives see, Prasannan Parthasarathi, 'Review Article: The Great Divergence' *Past and Present*, No. 176, August 2002.