Spain, China, and Japan in Manila, 1571-1644

Tremml-Werner, Birgit

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Conclusion

The encounters between Spain, China, and Japan in Manila between 1571 and 1644 played an important role in shaping the political and economic development of all parties involved. Chinese demand for silver, Japanese interest in Chinese silk, and Spain's need to maintain a colony separated from the rest of its vast empire by thousands of miles, became the building blocks for Manila-centred triangular relations. Using micro studies as a base for such a broad topic enabled a nuanced view on the macro processes; embedding case studies into the bigger picture of cross-cultural trade and early modern state formation has simultaneously provided a contextualised view of seemingly minor events. In short, combining comparisons and connections has proven to be an efficient approach in dealing with complex questions without over-generalising. As such, it is not individually tailored for early modern Manila but applicable for various regions, periods, and topics. Many of the factors mentioned above help to explain why Manila was different. Unlike in other European-ruled port cities, there was no uniform group of merchants acting as intermediaries. The multiethnic environment created remarkably adaptive, mobile and flexible global actors. Against this background, high social mobility may be expected, but to what extent it actually existed still needs to be studied in further detail. In a future study, a systematic comparison with other port cities will hopefully provide us with new answers.

The Manila system mattered for the formation of cross-cultural trade between the Philippines, China, Japan, the Americas and eventually the Iberian Peninsula. The bridging of micro and macro histories, in order to grasp the essence of complex historical encounters, enabled the four main findings of this study, emphasising the validity of the chosen approach of comparison and connections.

My first finding stresses the lofty roles of politics, culture, and mentality for early modern trade and business relations. In other words, the case of Manila shows that economic developments can never be fully understood by exclusively focusing on strictly economic arguments and quantitative data. Although there is no denying that China's demand for silver was the driving force behind most commercial interaction, the actual exchange patterns were hardly ever solely determined by supply and demand. Hidden agendas of trade missions, bargaining traditions, politically or culturally motivated obedience or resistance to trade regulations became the real determining factors for success or failure of all operations. Despite the efforts of different central governments to regulate and control maritime
trade, non-state actors managed to circumvent state control through various loopholes and niches.

My second finding is that the dualism between the ‘local’ and the ‘central’ had a major impact on various processes in the South China Sea during the entire period. The examples range from illicit traders who could act as semi-integrated suppliers, to local authorities who simply acted as if they were a sovereign power. Connections can be traced between Fujianese fisher villages, Japanese ports, and Mexican towns, while exchange and collaboration occurred parallel to the central governments’ efforts to suppress them. Although extra-governmental groups hardly ever followed the official policies of the ruling elite, these and the allegedly peripheral regions turned into fundamental pillars of the system. While the lack of government support encouraged private Fujianese traders to create a mercantile network spanning from Japan via the Philippines to the Asian mainland, most Spanish merchants in Manila subjected themselves to the desire of their government to maintain a strong political position inside and outside of Europe. By the time Japan began to intensively participate in the Manila trade, its newly established military-aristocratic government was very much occupied with building its own stable state. That it eventually became the strongest of these three states becomes clear from the focus on comparisons and connections applied in this book.

My third finding is that diplomacy, with its manifold features such as language, communication, knowledge gathering, and representation, actually shaped foreign affairs. The ambivalent role of official and diplomatic exchange has always been underrepresented in studies of Manila’s role in world history. Even rather frequent encounters, however, did not automatically result in stable foreign relations. While official Sino-Spanish relations never reached any serious level, relations between Japan and the Castilian Empire switched between promising stages of mutual agreements to ignorance and aggression. For Japan, the intensified contacts with Spanish and Chinese officials positively stimulated the Bakufu’s state formation and economic restructuring. The Spanish Empire and Luzon, in particular, offered a welcome testing field for new forms of diplomatic contact and also at times as a target for aggressive geopolitical activities.

A local-central duality was also prominent in most diplomatic encounters. Whenever convenient, the Spaniards addressed or responded to non-sovereigns. Initially, Japan showed similar tendencies of pragmatism or diplomatic calculus, as I have indicated with the example of intermediary diplomacy, when localising its new position in international relations. What all three states had in common was a fear of displaying inferiority.
Ideological similarities, however, stood in sharp contrast to the crucial differences in the way they collected information, disseminated knowledge, or perceived others.

Successful negotiations were usually dominated by themes of mutual interest. Fighting piracy was clearly the most vivid example of a shared goal, with means and measures easy to agree on. The nature of negotiations offers a great deal of challenges such as the question of how to create legal space and trust, as well as the choice of cultural, mercantile, and political intermediaries in intercultural correspondence. In general, the impact of language and communication has been underestimated in previous research. Linguistic issues such as language proficiency, different writing styles, recording cultures, rhetoric, and terminology, had a much stronger impact on Manila than previously assumed. Risks of abusing interpretations and unstable transportation were just two of many obstacles that all parties involved had to face. At the same time we, as historians, have to be careful not to renarrate incorrect tales of constant misunderstanding and unwillingness to learn about or from the ‘other’.

The final finding features Manila’s ‘open zone’ character for multiethnic neighbourhoods. As a port city, Manila displayed a special environment, characterised by a hybrid social and juridical setting, despite ethnic segregation and thus only limited social integration. As a regulatory power, colonial Spain in theory controlled urban administration and social interaction. Imbalance of power between the different parties naturally encouraged compromises between various actors. Hence, despite legal discrimination Fujianese and Japanese nationals supported the colony. Still, Overseas Chinese seem to have adapted better to the situation, as the ever-growing number of settlers from China suggests. Neither social pressure nor any form of tribute kept them from returning or even permanently immigrating to the Philippines.

A historical study like this has to tackle questions of continuity and change of interconnectedness between the global and the local. While global flows and demands deterritorialised local spaces, they created new ones at the same time. Only by taking local history into account can global history truly reveal the multifaceted interdependence and imbrications between different world regions and their effects on shaping local and national histories. In doing so, we are incidentally reminded of the many shifts and disruptions that took place. The period between 1571 and 1644 was neither static nor displayed linear development. All dis-learning processes were rooted in the ambiguity of the triangular relations. Prominent examples are the events surrounding the Chinese uprisings and their violent
demise, the Dutch blockades, and the changing patterns of official contact with the Japanese. After each massacre, Fujianese traders came back, after each display of Japanese aggression the Spaniards (be they missionaries or colonial authorities) sought a revival of friendly relations and the local Japanese population would continue to sail to Manila after the official trade ban had been introduced. Yet, Manila’s locational advantage was certainly fragile and its other appeals were easily lost in times of friction or change.

In that respect, however, it remains unclear whether we should regard the 1640s as a turning point. Both from the point of view of Japanese and Chinese history there are strong arguments in favour of a 1640 caesura. But zooming in on Manila suggests the opposite. In passing, I have shown that, from a Spanish perspective, things were different. Intellectuals and government authorities suggested strengthening universal Catholicism, a prudent diplomacy with neighbouring countries and the relaxing of trade prohibitions between China and New Spain. Motivated by material and spiritual desires the Spaniards were back to where they had started 70 years earlier.