



MARITIME FOOD TRANSPORT

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THE ORIGINS OF THE GROWTH OF WEST-EUROPEAN TEA-TRADE IN THE 18TH CENTURY

by
Karel Degryse

The tea-trade was one of the fastest growing sectors of the food- and drug-trade in the 18th century. That is remarkable because that commerce certainly was not one of the easiest. Tea-trade in those days meant trading with China, a mysterious country as remote from Western Europe as possible and with a very xenophobic population and a closed civilisation.¹

So the first problem to tackle was the great distance. The sailing-vessels had to cross the Atlantic Ocean from the North to the South, to round the Cape of Good Hope, and to cross the Indian Ocean from the Cape to Strait Sunda and the China Sea from the Strait to the coast of South China. The ships normally left Europe around January and reached China in the summer. About four months were needed in the Chinese harbours to complete their cargo. The homeward voyage was started around January of the following year, and when everything went all right the *Cbinamen* – as those vessels were named – arrived in the European harbours during the summer. It was impossible for sailing-vessels to deviate much from this tight scheme as it was imposed by the prevailing winds. Especially the Monsoon, that turns from a south-west to a north-east wind in October, played an important part in this schedule. So in the 18th century a normal voyage to China and back took no less than 20 months. Nevertheless the problem of the distance was not as insurmountable as it looked like. The European mariners quickly familiarized themselves with the long sea-route to China, and it did not take long in the 18th century before a voyage to China became a mere routine with limited maritime risks.²

¹ L. Dermigny, *La Chine et l'Occident: le commerce à Canton au XVIIIe siècle (1719-1833)*. Paris 1964, 3 Vols.; K.N. Chaudhuri, *The trading world of Asia and the English East India Company (1660-1760)*. Cambridge 1978, pp. 385-410.

² Dermigny, op. cit., Vol. I, pp. 244-73; K. Degryse, *De maritieme organisatie van de Oostendse Chinabandel (1718-1735)*, (Mededelingen van de Marine Academie XXIV). Antwerpen 1976-77, pp. 19-57.

The second problem was the fact that China was a self-sufficient and closed society, which was not very keen on contacts with the rest of the world and where trade was not very much appreciated. During the largest part of the 17th century there was only some limited commerce with Macao, a Portuguese trading-post on the south-coast of China, and the Chinese junks also visited Dutch Batavia and Spanish Manila to do some trading. There was also a semi-clandestine trade through the island of Formosa, where the Dutch had a factory – "Zelandia" – from 1624 to 1662.³ But the first western nation to make direct trading contacts with China was England. From 1670 ships of the English East-India Company were sent to Formosa and Amoy. Those islands were not under supervision of the Chinese emperor, but were fallen into the hands of a rebellious warlord – Coxinga – who had expelled the Dutch from Formosa in 1662. Already in 1680 the emperor took Amoy and in 1683 he reconquered Formosa, but the trading of the English was not forbidden and even legalised in 1684. In that year the Chinese emperor proclaimed the China Sea and the South China ports open to foreign commerce. So the first European nation to benefit from this liberalization was England. From 1685 on the East-India Company regularly dispatched ships to Amoy, later to Canton, that brought back silk, tea and porcelain.⁴

In 1698 the French entered into competition with the English, when the "Compagnie de Chine" and the "Compagnie de la Mer du Sud" also sent ships directly to China. Many of the French vessels sailed to China by way of Cape Horn and the coast of Peru, but those circumnavigations took three or four years and turned out to be too long and too costly. The French also were above all interested in Chinese silk. Their interest in tea was very limited. So when in 1716 the import of foreign silk into France was forbidden by the French government, the French lost much of their interest in the China-trade. Consequently the French commerce with China was not a real rival for the English.⁵

At the beginning the China-trade was not primarily a tea-trade. Chinese silk was then more important than tea. During the decade 1699-1709 the English East-India ships merely imported 646,000 pounds of tea from China.⁶

³ J.E. Wills Jr., *Pepper, guns and parleys. The Dutch East-India Co and China (1622-1681)*. Cambridge/Mass. 1974.

⁴ H. Morse, *The Chronicles of the East India Company trading to China (1635-1834)*. Oxford 1926, vol. I, pp. 41-65.

⁵ Dermigny, op. cit., vol. I, p. 400; vol. II, p. 521.

⁶ R. Wissett, *A Compendium of East Indian Affairs, political and commercial, collected and arranged for the use of the court of directors*. London 1802, p. 104. The English pounds are converted into Ostend pounds of 465,1 gram.

The silver carried by those vessels to buy Chinese products, was then mostly spent on silk and only in the second place on tea and on some china ware. China ware – or porcelain – was never as important as silk or tea, it always came only in the third place. The China-ships, however, needed this commodity because it was heavy and it perfectly could be used as ballast. Those *Chinamen*, that for the rest were loaded with tea and silk – merchandise with a low specific gravity – could not be put in a good sailing position without a considerable amount of porcelain stowed in chests at the bottom of the ships' holds. Moreover, china ware did not smell, and therefore could not spoil the aroma of the tea. Porcelain was in many ways a perfect kind of ballast and there was also some handsome profit to make on it, but the gain made on it in Europe was not as high as that on tea or silk.⁷

We have already stressed the importance of silk as the main merchandise during the first years of the English China-trade. This situation, however, drastically changed when in 1720 the English government prohibited the import of woven, foreign silk, in order to protect its own textile industry. The East-India Company was then obliged to focus all its attention on tea. The decade before 1720, however, had already seen an important rise in the import of Chinese tea. Between 1709 and 1718 the English East-India ships had imported 2,362,000 pounds of tea, three or four times as much as during the previous decade. The main reason for this was that the consumption and the popularity of tea was clearly growing in England.⁸

At exactly the same moment when the East-India Company was obliged to increase its tea-import further in order to compensate for the prohibition of the silk-import, a new competitor arrived on the tea-market. In 1718 the *Prince Eugene*, a ship from Ostend in the Austrian Netherlands, appeared in Canton. It was the first of 25 Ostend ships which were sent to China during the following decade.⁹ The first 14 Ostend vessels that sailed to China between 1718 and 1723 were private expeditions, financed by merchant-bankers from Antwerp, Ghent and also some foreign investors. In 1722 they received their charter from the Austrian emperor. The Ostend Company, as the new company was called, also concentrated much of its energy on the

⁷ K. Degryse, De Oostendse Chinahandel (1718-1735), *Belgisch tijdschrift voor filologie en geschiedenis* LII (1974), pp. 318-9.

⁸ On the import of woven silk see Chaudhuri, op. cit., p. 546; on the import of tea see Wissett, op. cit., p. 104 and E.B. Schumpeter, *English overseas trade statistics (1697-1808)*, Oxford 1960, p. 60.

⁹ On the China-trade from Ostend see Degryse, De Oostendse Chinahandel, op. cit., pp. 306-47 and Degryse, De maritieme organisatie, op. cit., pp. 19-57. For a more general history of the Ostend Company see M. Huisman, *La Belgique commerciale sous l'empereur Charles VI. La compagnie d'Ostende*, Brussels 1902.

China-trade and would send eleven ships to Canton during its very short existence. The company indeed did not last very long, as its charter was already suspended for seven years in 1727, and in 1731 its commercial activities were definitively prohibited by the second treaty of Vienna. The reason why the Austrian emperor withdrew his charter was that he sacrificed the company to his own dynastic interests. England, France, and Holland promised in the treaty of Vienna that they would have no objections against the future succession of the Austrian emperor, Charles VI, by his daughter Maria-Theresia. In return those nations demanded the abolition of the Ostend Company, which had turned out to be a strong competitor in the Asian trade.

It was especially in the tea-trade that the Ostend Company and its precursors played an important part. During the first period of the Ostend China-trade silk was also an important merchandise. More than 50% of the silver imported into China was then used to buy silk products, against 30% to 40% for tea and the rest for porcelain. This proportion quickly changed once the company was established. The company spent only 35% of its silver on silk, against 56% on tea and 8% on porcelain. This shift had nothing to do with an official impediment of the silk-import by the Austrian government, but resulted from the fact that tea yielded the best profit. The Ostend Company made a gross benefit on its tea of more than 400%, against only 71% on its silk. During the decade 1719-1728 the East-India ships from Ostend imported 7,048,000 pounds of Chinese tea.¹⁰ During the same years the English East-India Company imported about the same amount of tea: 7,052,000 pounds.¹¹ The total quantity of tea brought into western Europe in that period came to 16,870,000 pounds. 42% of it was imported by the Ostenders, another 42% by the English, 3% by the French and 13% by the Dutch. The Dutch tea mentioned here was not directly imported from China, but was carried by Chinese merchants in their junks from Canton to Batavia, where the tea was bought by the Dutch East-India Company and sent to Holland. This tea was normally of poor quality as it was only packed in baskets. The English and Ostenders were used to pack their Chinese tea in wooden chests, covered

¹⁰ See the abundant quantitative information concerning the Ostend China-trade in Degryse, *De Oostendse Chinahandel*.

¹¹ Schumpeter, *op. cit.*, p. 60. We used these figures from the Customs Ledgers and not those from the Company archives, published by Chaudhuri, *op. cit.*, p. 538. The figures from the Company records seem us to be less reliable as they are strikingly lower than the figures from the Customs Ledgers, especially for the period 1699-1718.

with lead on the inside, which was much better for the preservation of the quality.¹²

Anyway, it is clear that Ostend and London were the leaders of the tea-market during that decade. It is also obvious that the English East-India Company was not very happy with the arrival of such a strong competitor. So the reason why the English company decided to increase its acquisitions of tea during the early 1720s was not only that the import of silk was then prohibited by the government, but also that the English directors wanted to ruin the Ostenders that way. Between 1721 and 1724 the English Chinamen imported no less than 4,713,000 pounds of tea.¹³ To explain those large imports the English directors argued literally in 1721: "We give this order thus large, that the Ostenders may be disappointed of tea ... Cost what it will we must try to make these interlopers sick of their voyages for tea."¹⁴ Indeed, in 1721 tea prices in Ostend fell to the low level of 30 stuivers a pound, but during the following years the prices recovered and reached again 50 stuivers a pound. The reason for this recovery was that the Ostenders discovered that the demand for tea was not only growing in England, but also on the Continent. That is why the Ostenders succeeded easily in finding a new market for their tea: they sold it especially to Dutch merchants who redistributed the tea over the rest of the Continent. Only a limited amount of the Ostend tea was smuggled into England.¹⁵

The English East-India Company, which had glutted the English market with tea between 1721 and 1724, decided in 1724 to cut down the import of tea, as its warehouses were still full. In the period 1725-1728 the English company merely imported 1,464,000 pounds of tea. The Ostend Company, however, could permit itself to enlarge its imports in the same years. Between 1725 and 1729 the Ostenders imported 3,623,000 pounds of tea

¹² On the total European import of tea in 1719-1728, converted into Ostend pounds of 465,1 gram, see Degryse, *De Oostendse Chinahandel*, pp. 319-20. On the poor quality of the Dutch tea imported from Batavia see J. De Hullu, *Over den Chinaschen handel der Oostindische Compagnie in de eerste dertig jaar van de 18e eeuw*, *Bijdragen voor land-, taal- en volkenkunde van Nederlandsch Indië* LXXXIII (1917), pp. 56-7.

¹³ Wissett, *op. cit.*, p. 104; Schumpeter, *op. cit.*, p. 60.

¹⁴ Morse, *op. cit.*, vol. I, p. 162.

¹⁵ For a long time it has been assumed that most of the tea imported into Ostend was later smuggled into England, as it was the only large tea-drinking nation. However, some English espionage-reports - as well as the correspondence of the Ostend directors - have shown that only a small amount of the Ostend tea was smuggled into England: in the best years only 20% to 25%. The rest, generally 70% to 80% of the Ostend tea, was exported into Holland, from where it was redistributed over the rest of Europe (See Degryse, *De Oostendse Chinahandel*, pp. 334-40).

from China, and they even succeeded in selling it at still higher prices. In 1728 and 1729 tea was sold in Ostend at 80 stuivers a pound. Most of it was again bought by Dutch merchants.¹⁶ It is clear that the Ostend Company was the leader of the new and growing Continental tea-market in those years. The excellent financial results of the company were of course the consequence of this leading position. It now also becomes very obvious why the rivaling companies wanted to prohibit the commercial activities of the Ostend Company at any price, a fact in which they succeeded eventually as we have already seen.

Once the charter of the Ostend Company was suspended in 1727, its rivals tried in their turn to benefit as much as possible from the growing demand for tea in Europe. The Dutch East-India Company started a direct trade with Canton and imported large quantities of tea.¹⁷ The English and even the French increased their imports. New East-India companies were established in Denmark and Sweden. Between 1729 and 1732 no less than 14,697,000 pounds of tea were imported into Europe by the Dutch, the English, and the French. This enormous amount clearly surpassed the European demand and prices everywhere fell down to the level of 40 or even 30 stuivers a pound.¹⁸ The low prices resulted in limited gain for the companies involved, but they also contributed to the further propagation of the tea-consumption: less wealthy parts of the population could now permit themselves to drink the new exotic beverage.

So I think that it is now very clear that the 1720s and early 1730s played a decisive part in the history of the Chinese tea-trade to Europe, and in the propagation of the consumption of tea. It is also obvious how important the tea-trade from the Ostenders has been in this evolution. The Ostenders were on the one hand large importers of tea: they were as important as the English in the period 1719-1728 and they were then by far the largest tea-importers on the Continent. On the other hand they also incited the rivaling companies to buy more and more tea. The English East-India Company initially wanted to ruin the Ostenders that way, but later on the Scandinavian, Dutch, and French companies clearly modelled their China-trade on that of the Ostend Company, because of the large profits made by the Ostenders on their Chinese tea.

¹⁶ Schumpeter, *op. cit.*, p. 60; Degryse, *De Oostendse Chinahandel*, pp. 320, 329-31.

¹⁷ K. Glamann, *Dutch-Asiatic Trade (1620-1740)*. Copenhagen, The Hague 1958, pp. 230ff.

¹⁸ Degryse, *De Oostendse Chinahandel*, pp. 320, 330-1.

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