

# Cross-cultural trade in world history

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PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE  
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge CB2 1RP, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK <http://www.cup.cam.ac.uk>  
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA <http://www.cup.org>  
10 Stamford Road, Oakleigh, Melbourne 3166, Australia

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First published 1984

Reprinted 1985, 1986 (twice), 1994, 1996, 1998

Typeset in Palatino

*A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library*

*Library of Congress Cataloguing-in-Publication Data is available*

ISBN 0-521-26931-8 paperback

Transferred to digital printing 2002

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# 1

## Trade diasporas and cross-cultural trade

Trade and exchange across cultural lines have played a crucial role in human history, being perhaps the most important external stimuli to change, leaving aside the unmeasurable and less-benign influence of military conquest. External stimulation, in turn, has been the most important single source of change and development in art, science, and technology. Perhaps this goes without saying, since no human group could invent by itself more than a small part of its cultural and technical heritage. Take as simple an example as the manufacture of this book. The English language is derived from one of those that came into Western Europe with German immigrants, combined with elements of Latin, originally imposed by imperial conquerors from the south, plus other borrowings. The alphabet came from the Phoenicians. The page numbers are "Arabic," which actually means that the Europeans learned about them from the Arabs, who had borrowed them in turn from the Indians, who invented positional notation in the first place. A few years ago, a book like this would have been printed with movable type, which would have given it a possible Chinese heritage as well.

On the negative side, cross-cultural trade and communication pose special problems. People with a different way of life are strangers by definition; their ways seem unpredictable, and the unpredictable is probably dangerous as well. Communication itself is difficult. Even after an appropriate medium comes into existence, like a second language in common, understanding is hard to come by. Strangers may appear not to be hostile, but they are still not to be trusted in the same full sense that neighbors and kinfolk can be trusted. These problems in cross-cultural understanding in general have meant that cross-trade has almost always been carried out through special institutional arrangements to help guarantee the mutual security of the two sides.

### *Trade diasporas*

The earliest phases of cross-cultural trade are lost beyond any possibility of historical reconstruction. Even the recent customs of people with the

least-developed technologies, like the Stone Age hunting and gathering peoples whose way of life was relatively untouched by outsiders till a century or so ago – even these “primitive” ways are not necessarily a good guide to the distant past. But it is possible to imagine that the earliest cross-cultural trade took place during random encounters of hunting bands, or that it was mixed with phases of warfare. One can also imagine that the earliest trade between different communities took place at the border between them. Linguistic evidence suggests that this was the case in ancient Greece, and later on, Hermes was both the god of trade and the god of the boundary stones separating one city from another.<sup>1</sup> But this early phase of boundary markets ended for the Greek cities by the eighth century B.C. If similar institutions existed elsewhere in the ancient world, they disappeared with the earliest phases of urbanization. Early urban markets tended to appear near the heart of the city, not on the outskirts, presumably because the traders wanted to have the best possible access to potential customers.

Whatever the earliest forms of cross-cultural trade, the most common institutional form after the coming of city life was the trade settlement. Commercial specialists would remove themselves physically from their home community and go to live as aliens in another town, usually not a fringe town, but a town important in the life of the host community. There, the stranger merchants could settle down and learn the language, the customs, and the commercial ways of their hosts. They could then serve as cross-cultural brokers, helping and encouraging trade between the host society and people of their own origin who moved along the trade routes. At this stage, a distinction appeared between the merchants who moved and settled and those who continued to move back and forth. What might have begun as a single settlement soon became more complex. The merchants who might have begun with a single settlement abroad tended to set up a whole series of trade settlements in alien towns. The result was an interrelated net of commercial communities forming a trade network, or trade diaspora – a term that comes from the Greek word for scattering, as in the sowing of grain.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Norman O. Brown, *Hermes the Thief: The Evolution of a Myth*, 2nd ed. (New York, 1969), pp. 38–46; Jean-Christophe Agnew, “The Threshold of Exchange: Speculations on the Market,” *Radical History Review*, 21:99–118 (1979), pp. 101–3.

<sup>2</sup> The term “trading diaspora” originated with the anthropologist Abner Cohen, who defined it as “a nation of socially interdependent, but spatially dispersed communities,” in “Cultural Strategies in the Organization of Trading Diasporas,” in Claude Meillassoux (ed.), *The Development of Indigenous Trade and Markets in West Africa* (London, 1971), p. 267. Other anthropologists tend to use “trade networks,” with less attempt at such a precise definition. See Lloyd A. Fallers (ed.), *Immigrants and Associations* (The Hague, 1967); Karl A. Yambert, “Alien Traders and Ruling Elites: The Overseas Chinese in Southeast Asia and the Indians in East Africa,” *Ethnic Groups*, 3:173–98 (1981).



Trade communities of merchants living among aliens in associated networks are to be found on every continent and back through time to the very beginning of urban life. They are, as we shall see, one of the most widespread of all human institutions over a very long run of time, yet limited to the long period of human history that began with the invention of agriculture and ended with the coming of the industrial age. Some of the best evidence of how they worked comes from Africa between the seventeenth century and the nineteenth, but other examples are as various and familiar as the chains of Phoenician and Greek trading towns that spread westward from the Levant or the Aegean coasts. Or, some two thousand years later, merchants from Cologne on the Rhine settled along the trade routes leading down the Rhine and then eastward along the coast of the North Sea and the Baltic, laying the foundations for what was to become the Hanseatic League of independent trading towns.

Some trade diasporas moved overland or followed inland water courses. Among the most familiar are the North American routes up the Great Lakes, pioneered by the French-Canadian *coureurs de bois*, whose pursuit of the fur trade among the Indians carried them to the Mississippi and beyond. Archaeological evidence suggests the probable existence of trade diasporas in the Middle East as early as 3500 B.C. By 2000 B.C., clay tablets covered with cuneiform inscriptions give detailed evidence about the commercial operations of an Assyrian trade settlement in Cappadocia in Asia Minor.

These networks were organized in many different ways, some so informally that the individual settlements were linked by little more than the solidarity of a common culture. Others, like the great European trading firms of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, were formally organized, chartered by European states, granted certain monopoly rights, empowered to govern as well as trade, and to use their own military and naval forces.

### *Life histories: trade diasporas over time*

In the search for testable hypotheses about the way people have conducted cross-cultural trade through time, one immediately striking generalization is that trade diasporas tend to work themselves out of business. They began because cultural differences created a need for mediation, but centuries or even decades of mediation reduced cross-cultural differences and hence the need for cross-cultural brokers. Where at first, trade at a distance required a kinsman or at least a trusted fellow-countryman to act as agent, with time, a variety of other agents came to be available. In the longest run of time, Western commercial culture became

the common culture of commerce throughout the world in an era of multinational corporations.

But, under the cover of this first and largest generalization, individual trade diasporas worked themselves out of business in quite different ways. Some withdrew to their cultural homeland, leaving people of their host society to carry on in their former role. This pattern was typical of the trade diasporas that sprang up in the European Middle Ages. Formal commercial settlements abroad tended to be withdrawn by the end of the sixteenth century. The Hanseatic League, for example, gave up its special trade enclave in London, called the "Steelyard." Calais, in northern France, was an English possession until the middle of that century. It had served as the principal point for the distribution of English raw wool to the Continent, but it then returned to French control. The English Company of Merchant Adventurers, the main outlet for English woolen cloth sold abroad, originally had its headquarters in Antwerp rather than in England, but Antwerp lost its special status in the 1550s, as English cloth began to be sold through a greater number of Continental cities. Indeed, the institutions of the "factory system," the semipublic establishment of separate premises for foreign merchants or factors, which had first evolved in medieval Flanders, began to disappear in Europe in the sixteenth century, just as it began to reappear as a common way of dealing with European trade with Asia and Africa.<sup>3</sup> Within Europe, international trade came to depend much more on local commission agents, rather than having each merchant house maintain agents of its own nationality in a foreign city. Tudor London, for example, had a large group of resident Italian merchants at the beginning of the century, but they gradually decreased in numbers even as Anglo-Italian trade increased. It was simply cheaper by this time to use the services of commission agents.<sup>4</sup>

Other trade diasporas, however, left a legacy in the form of cultural minorities in foreign lands, even though these minorities no longer devoted themselves to long-distance trade. The beginnings of Chinese settlement in Southeast Asia go back to trade diasporas that started to operate in the first centuries A.D., though they were later supplemented by contract laborers and other kinds of immigration. In the twentieth century, these overseas Chinese no longer ran a trade diaspora, though they kept much of their commercial tradition and still tend to dominate wholesale and retail trade. This is one of several instances where cultural minorities left over from a trade diaspora were able to use their original

<sup>3</sup> Kristof Glamann, "European Trade, 1500-1750," in Carlo M. Cipolla (ed.), *The Fontana Economic History of Europe*, 6 vols. (London, 1974), 2:514.

<sup>4</sup> M. E. Bratchel, "Italian Merchant Organization and Business Relationships in Early Tudor London," *Journal of European Economic History*, 7:5-32 (1978), pp. 6, 29.

commercial bent, and their community solidarity, to establish a partial monopoly over the commercial life of the host society.

Indian trading communities in Tanzania, Kenya, and Uganda had a similar experience. Their commercial importance dates only from the nineteenth century, but they dominated the retail trade of all three colonies till the coming of independence. Although the Indians in Uganda were largely driven out, those who remained in Tanzania, and especially in Kenya, have been able to move from retail trade into many other sectors of the economy, as the Chinese in Southeast Asia began to do a century or so earlier.

### *Merchants and their hosts*

One of the most striking variables in the comparative study of trade diasporas is the wide range of possible relationships between the trade community and the host society. In some circumstances, rulers of the host society treated the traders as a pariah caste, to be exploited or robbed at will, whose presence was tolerated only because it was useful. With many local variations, this was often the situation of Jewish merchants in medieval Europe. Other merchants sought successfully to establish themselves as autonomous, self-governing communities, often by a self-conscious pacifism and neutrality toward all political struggles. The Jahaanke in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century West Africa are a successful example of such a policy. At the extreme end of this spectrum were the European trading-post empires in Asia from the sixteenth century through the eighteenth. They not only sought to have trade enclaves under their own military control; they also tried to use coercion to control Asian trade and to shift the terms of trade in their favor. Toward the end of the eighteenth century, they had used force so effectively that at least the British East India Company in India and the Dutch East India Company on Java had stopped being militarized trade diasporas and became true territorial empires that were to be the nucleus of the British *raj* in India and the Netherlands East Indies, respectively.

Whatever the balance of power between the traders and their hosts, the relationship was necessarily asymmetrical. The traders were specialists in a single kind of economic enterprise, whereas the host society was a *whole* society, with many occupations, class stratification, and political divisions between the rulers and the ruled.

The occupation of merchant was also somewhat special in the outlook of many societies. Professional traders were necessarily a minority in preindustrial societies, where the vast majority of the people were needed to work the land. Since they were not, in any very obvious way, a productive class, they tended to earn the suspicion of others who either

worked the land or carried out some other, apparently necessary function like political rule or intercession with the gods. Some such sentiment as this may well lie behind the fact that commerce was often a low-status occupation in societies as distant from one another as ancient Greece and Tokugawa Japan. The unpopularity of merchants as a class could easily be reinforced, if they were simultaneously people of great wealth as well as low status. And merchants in long-distance trade had obvious and unusual opportunities to make extraordinary profits at extraordinary risk.

If people tend to be suspicious of merchants, they are even more suspicious of foreigners; yet some societies actually encouraged foreign merchants. Where commerce was regarded as such an unpleasant occupation, it was seen as better left to foreigners; and this was a common attitude in some circles in ancient Greece, even though the role of Greek merchants through history has been extremely important. In much the same way, the Christian Europeans of the Middle Ages preferred to leave moneylending to the Jews. In any case, long-distance trade required *someone* to go abroad and become a foreigner. Envy and suspicion of foreigners, as such, could easily reinforce the envy and suspicion of merchants.

Norman O. Brown has worked out some of these relationships for classical antiquity by tracing the myth of the god Hermes through its various literary manifestations.<sup>5</sup> The earliest Hermes was god of the boundary stones, but he gradually became the god of the merchants, the professional boundary crossers. At the same time, he was not quite as respectable as the other gods – a messenger, but also a trickster and a thief, a marginal god for people who were marginal to Greek society. Plato himself disliked trade, which, like other professions based on a search for profit, was hardly compatible with a life of virtue, as he understood it.

In the Christian Middle Ages, the theme recurs at the upper end of the intellectual spectrum in Thomas Aquinas's suspicion that merchants may well have a hard time attaining salvation because of the temptation to sin inherent in their occupation. At the lower end, many merchants carried a thief's thumb as a talisman; Saint Nicholas was the patron saint of thieves and merchants alike.

### *Merchant settlements and their relations with one another*

Relations between the individual nodes of a trade diaspora are a second important variable, and the range of variation is extremely wide. Some-

<sup>5</sup> Brown, *Hermes the Thief*, esp. pp. 82–7. See also Agnew, "The Threshold of Exchange," pp. 100–5.

times the scattered settlements of the same culture had no formal ties of any kind. They were united only by the solidarity that could be built on the sentimental ties of a common religion, language, or distant kinship. At the other extreme were trade diasporas that were founded as political entities, with each node under central control. The Estado da India, the sixteenth-century Portuguese empire in Asia, is one example, where the Viceroy in Goa ruled over the subordinate bases like Mozambique in East Africa, Melaka near the present-day Singapore, and Macao in southern China.

To a degree, relations between nodes varied with relations between the host society and the merchants in a single node. That is, where the host society dominated, the merchants were unlikely to develop formal political relations with other merchant communities. At the same time, where the merchants controlled a settlement and its neighborhood, it was at least possible – indeed likely – that they could have political relationships of some sort with other, equivalent settlements.

But many other variations were also possible. Sentimental ties might be strong, even where political ties were weak. Greek trading settlements sometimes grew into independent city-states, though they looked with respect to the metropolis – literally the “mother city” – with which they might or might not have continued religious and political ties. In some cases, the parent could disappear from the system. This happened with the original Phoenician homeland of Levantine trading cities like Tyre and Sidon. They first fell to foreign conquest and were later assimilated into the greater Hellenistic world created by the successors of Alexander the Great after the fourth century B.C. This left the Phoenician colonies in the western Mediterranean on their own, though Carthage came in time to take the place of the original mother cities.

The Hanseatic League of northern German cities illustrates another kind of relationship between the points of a trade diaspora. That network began with merchants from Cologne, who spread outward in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries – first to Bremen and Hamburg to the west of the Jutland peninsula, then to Lübeck farther east, and a string of port towns along the south shore of the Baltic. The towns of the league reached a peak of wealth and influence in the fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries, when trade reached from London and Bruges in the west, north to Bergen in Norway, and east as far as Novgorod, deep inside Russia. In spite of the economic strength of the league, each settlement was independent of the rest. When, with the passage of time, Cologne dropped from the picture, Lübeck became the chief Hanse city, but it was not a capital in any effective political sense. The Hanse was a league of independent cities, never a sovereign state. It fought wars,

but each war was fought by an alliance created for that occasion, with nothing more than informal pressure to force any city to participate.

At the opposite organizational extreme were the tightly controlled trade diasporas of the chartered European trading companies in eastern seas. Here the European metropolis was at once a political capital and the management center of a trading firm, in contrast to the thousands of independent Hanseatic firms operating out of dozens of independent cities.

The full range of possibilities along this spectrum was still more complex. Settlements along a trade diaspora were specialized cities or parts of cities. They therefore partook of the set of wider relationships governing cities in general. Urban theory recognizes that cities are not merely dense concentrations of people, though they are that too; they are also concentrations of people doing different things, and their urban character derives more from that variety of activity than it does from sheer numbers.<sup>6</sup>

At an early stage in human material life, hunting and gathering peoples had to spread out across the landscape in order to survive. Even with early agriculture, concentration in villages and hamlets was limited by peoples' need to get to the fields. More specialized functions, however, could be carried out almost anywhere, but they tended to be carried out at a central place. It may have begun with a temple to serve the gods, which would also attract crowds. Crowds would have drawn merchants and retail traders. The temple, the crowds, and the traders would all be a source of attraction for political rulers, courts, and tax gatherers. The order of appearance is not significant. The point is that specialized functions tended to cluster, forming urban settlements where many different things took place. Having these things take place was, in turn, essential to the continuing life of the whole society of which the cities formed a part. But a city was related to its hinterland in a one-sided way. It alone tended to perform the rarest and most specialized functions, whereas villages and smaller centers did fewer things – and much the same range of things, like tending herds or raising crops.

Even among cities, some were more multifunctional than others. Cities were therefore related to one another in much the same way each individual city was related to its own hinterland. Cities that did more things had an advantage over others that did fewer, just as the smaller cities had an advantage over the countryside. The most multifunctional cities, and they alone, performed some functions that were essential for the whole society. As a result, with or without the political framework

<sup>6</sup> Eric Lampard, "Historical Aspects of Urbanization," in P. M. Hauser and Leo F. Schnore (eds.), *The Study of Urbanization* (New York, 1965).

of the state, cities came to constitute an urban network arranged in a hierarchy of multifunctionality.

In this rudimentary form, the model is simple, but it has important implications for the changing relationships between cities through time, and these implications extend to relationships between settlements of a trade diaspora. The model suggests two theoretical hypotheses: first, that the functional dependency of the less multifunctional cities on the more multifunctional can be the basis for economic and political dependency as well; and second, that the more technically proficient a society, the greater its range of multifunctionality. Hence, the passage of time, which tends in human societies to bring with it a more complex technology, will also increase the potential dependence of the places low in the hierarchy on those higher up.

The use of the term "dependence" suggests a possible relationship to a body of recent theory and empirical research sometimes called dependency theory. It has been extensively developed by scholars like André Gunder Frank, Arghiri Emmanuel, and Immanuel Wallerstein, among others.<sup>7</sup> Scholars of the dependency school, however, are concerned mainly with relations between the developed, capitalist countries and the less-developed countries in recent centuries. As neo-Marxists, they have been concerned with relations between the "center" and the "periphery" of a world dominated by capitalism. My hypotheses about relations between cities are quite different. These relations are not governed by particular economic systems set in specific chronological eras. Nor are they always a dominant force in "making" historical change. They are only one influence on the course of history, among many. They are derived mainly from some of the geographical concepts known somewhat loosely as "central-place theory," or as location theory in economics.<sup>8</sup>

Relations of potential dependency among cities can cause two different kinds of conflict. One kind involves cities at different levels in the hierarchy of multifunctionality. The second has to do with rivalry between

<sup>7</sup> The literature of the dependency school is large and diverse. As a sample see Charles K. Wilber (ed.), *The Political Economy of Development and Underdevelopment*, 2nd ed. (New York, 1979); Arghiri Emmanuel, *Unequal Exchange: A Study of the Imperialism of Trade* (New York, 1972); Immanuel Wallerstein, *The Modern World-System*, multivol. (New York, 1974-).

<sup>8</sup> The theoretical groundwork began to be laid in the 1930s in Germany, notably in the work of Walter Christaller, translated as *Central Places in Southern Germany* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1966), and of August Lösch, translated as *The Economics of Location* (New Haven, Conn., 1954). The pioneering application to historical analysis is the work of G. William Skinner, "Marketing and Social Structure in Rural China," *Journal of Asian Studies*, 24:3-43 (1964), followed by G. William Skinner (ed.), *The City in Late Imperial China* (Stanford, Calif., 1977). Historical application to trade and trade routes is found in Allen M. Howard, "The Relevance of Spatial Analysis for African Economic History: The Sierra Leone-Guinea System," *Journal of African History*, 17:365-88 (1975).

cities at the same level. These tensions can be conveniently illustrated from North American history in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The highest point on the hierarchy of multifunctionality was London, and London continued to dominate in economic matters even after American independence. Lower down were the main ports of entry on the East Coast, which were both dependent on London and rivals of one another for influence over their common hinterland. Montreal had the special advantage of the Saint Lawrence valley as a natural water route to the Great Lakes. In response, New York built the Erie Canal; Baltimore built the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad; other port towns around to New Orleans responded in their own ways, or were simply left behind.

Sometimes these rivalries were dominant over the resentment of London they all shared – but sometimes not. In the events leading to the American Revolution, port towns from Charleston to Boston joined in opposing London with a solidarity based on their common status as colonial towns. Montreal, however, remained loyal, in part at least because of its special hold on the Saint Lawrence route and the fur trade of the West, though it also had a history of earlier rivalries with the cities to the south. Similar rivalries turn up later in time and farther into the interior. Frontier resentment of the metropolis was chronic in circumstances as diverse as the Whiskey Rebellion or rural, populist resentment against the banks, the railways, and “the East” in general. Other rivalries, like that between Chicago and New Orleans, had a place in the more complex patterns that went into the American Civil War, though in that case it was a minor theme.

This simple conflict model is useful to help point up recurring themes, but actuality was, as always, much more complex. Even as a model, it requires qualification, first of all because the hierarchy of multifunctionality is not the same in all spheres of life. With American independence, for example, London dropped out of the political hierarchy, but it remained at the top of the economic hierarchy for some decades. The hierarchy of religious functions was again different – and different for each different religion. Take the example of Islam, beginning with a small village in the Moroccan Atlas Mountains. The religious life of villagers was partly self-sufficient in that they could pray to God in their own way, but other religious needs had to be met elsewhere. Among the higher centers would be other villages inhabited by the *shorfa*, or descendants of Muhammad. These men were necessary, in the local version of Islam, for certain judicial and religious functions that only they could perform. Beyond the *shorfa* villages were local holy towns and pilgrimage centers, like Moulay Idris. Still further up the urban hierarchy was Fez, a Moroccan center of religious knowledge and education. At a greater distance, Cairo served as the intellectual center for