Rivalry for trade in tea and textiles. The English and Dutch East India Companies, 1700-1800

During the late seventeenth century, the arrival of tea and cotton textiles from Asia fundamentally altered European consumer culture. Tea and Indian textiles gave aspiring consumers a sense of a civilized and luxurious way of life at an affordable price. Tea gave rise to new forms of sociability, while its stimulating effects in combination with sugar provided the working man with energy. The introduction of beautifully coloured Indian cotton textiles caused a Calico Craze as European consumers rushed to the most desirable Indian textiles, which for the first time in history brought fashion within the reach of more modest consumers. The consumption of these two commodities was very disturbing for mercantilist government, who feared a drain of silver to Asia, loss of work for European manufacturers and the destabilizing effect on society of popular consumption. European authorities and producers often strongly reacted in order to set limits to the consumption and trade of tea and Indian textiles through high taxation and bans. The main suppliers of tea and Indian textiles were the Dutch East India Company (VOC) and the English East India Company (EIC), who were not only caught in a rivalry for trade in tea and textiles, but also had to respond to what consumers and their home states wanted from them. Only by delving deep into the varieties of tea and textiles both companies brought back to Europe can we understand how both tea and textiles became popular with consumers, despite hostility from European governments, elites and manufacturers.

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