

Retracing the Spice Road: How Southeast Asia Shaped Europe's Tastes

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Introduction

Sketching a Story

Dr Hallam Stevens presented a talk on "Retracing the Spice Road: How Southeast Asia Shaped Europe's Tastes". Spice, he posited, was one of the main factors that connected and influenced Europe, and how it saw itself in the world. Spice connected Europe to the East through monetary, trade and economic relationships.

Dr Stevens detailed how spices from the Far East, as it was then known, influenced European taste and culture. He explored how Europeans discovered spices, the effects spices had on Europeans, the rise and the declining popularity of spices in Europe and, finally, how spice played a part in Raffles's plan for Singapore.

Dr Stevens defined spices, not only for how they taste and smell, but also as rare and exotic objects. While today we have luxury goods such as sports cars and designer fashion, the Medieval Europeans were conspicuously consuming spices, which were associated with wealth. He suggested that the term "spice" is a Europe-centric one, where Europe was at the centre and spices came from the Far East – places which were themselves considered exotic.

A Brief History of Spice

From the Beginning

The spice trade can be traced back to China since 2,700 BCE. China controlled a vast network of Asian spice traders in cinnamon, cloves, black pepper and many other spices. This stretched southwards into Vietnam and farther south into Southeast Asia, Java and the Maluku Islands, before rounding up to India. It then connected to Arab trading routes that were coming from the Middle East, and later bridged into Europe. The Arab world and China dominated the spice trade for the longest amount of time.

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Europeans entered the spice trade much later and their first significant attempt was perhaps Portugal's Vasco De Gama sailing to the Port Calicut in May 1498. With four ships and 170 sailors, he arrived with nothing that the Indians wanted in trade. The ruler of Calicut, however, knew of De Gama's intent and sent him back to Portugal with black pepper and a letter to the Portuguese king, noting that he was interested in gold, silver, coral and scarlet cloth. This was the real start of European participation in the spice trade.

Europeans only came to dominate the spice trade after many centuries. Even at the height of European power, they only controlled 10% of the spice trade in southern India. It was only in the 17th century that they dominated the spice routes by subjugating the lands and people of Southeast Asia.

Conspicuous Consumption of Spices by Medieval Europeans

Dr Stevens provided examples of the extent to which Europe was consuming spices in the Medieval period. In the fiscal year of 1424/1425, the Talbot family of Shropshire in England consumed approximately 7.5kg of pepper, 6.5kg of ginger, 1.5kg of saffron and 6.5kg of other spices. At a wedding banquet in Italy in the 15th century, there were reports that those in attendance consumed about 80kg of cinnamon, 35kg of nutmeg, 40kg of cloves and 175kg of black pepper over just several days.

These spices were not cheap. The Talbot family was reported to spend a monthly amount on spice that equalled what they spent on beef and pork combined. The Earl of Oxford's account, from 1341 to 1342, showed that a pound of pepper cost the same as about a whole pig. Spices were truly luxury items that only the rich could afford.

More than just Flavouring

The Effects of Spices on Europeans

The effects of Southeast Asian spices on Europe were myriad, such as the copious amount of spice used in Medieval European dishes. For example, a recipe in a 15th-century English cookbook listed eight spices to be used in just one dish.

Wealth Effect

The other effect was on European culture, where the showiness of a dish signified the wealth of a person. Wealthy European Medievalists had a disdain for simplicity in their food and wanted elaborate dishes, often with trickery and artifice involved. Examples of such include disguising veal as fish, and an orange-glazed suckling pig with a rooster seated on top of it dressed up as a knight. Hosts would entertain their guests with these elaborate displays.

Medicinal Effect

Another effect was how Medieval Europeans used spices for medicinal purposes. Spices were seen to be health regulators and even drugs. Similar to today's traditional Chinese medicines, spices were thought to have heating and drying properties. If one was a "cold" person, he or she could add spices that had "hot" and "dry" properties to change the nature of a dish. This helped to maintain "balance" in one's body.

Not only could these spices be consumed in food, their fragrance was also thought to be important medically and they could even be used in a prescribed perfume. One prescription

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against the corrupt air of the plague, from 1348 in Catalonia, was a perfume made from frankincense, camphor, storax, dried rose petal, myrtle and Macassar sandalwood. As with traditional medicine, the exoticness of spice allowed it to also be prescribed as an aphrodisiac or as cure for impotence.

Moral Effect

The ostentation and exoticness of spice led some Medieval Europeans to look upon spices with disdain. Adding spice to food made it tastier, which encouraged people to eat excessively. As gluttony was considered a cardinal sin within the Medieval Catholic church, spice was thought to be “dangerous” as it could lead one into excessive, and therefore sinful, kinds of behaviours.

The spice trade was also linked to the corrupting influence of money and luxury. It was associated with greedy merchants who were dealing with money, and was hence subjected to moral censure.

The Fall of Spice Popularity

From the 17th century, as Europe came to dominate the spice trade by subjugating the peoples of the Orient, they brought huge quantities of spice into their homes. This, however, drove the cost of spice down by 1650, as most historians would agree.

There were stories of the Dutch East India Company burning spices on their ships in order to artificially maintain the prices at a high value so that they could continue to make a profit. By 1822, the East India Company’s warehouses were reported to have a million pounds of nutmeg and 200,000 pounds of mace in stock.

Dr Stevens cited a lecture by the late John Munro, who was teaching on the subject of “The Economic History of Later Medieval and Early Modern Europe” at the University of Toronto. Munro, an economic historian, attempted to estimate the prices of pepper, cinnamon, ginger and silk by relating it to the wages of an average tradesman (see Figure 2).

	301 CE	1200 CE	1500 CE	1750 CE	1875 CE
Pepper	2500	13.9	2.6	n/a	0.1
Cinnamon	5000	3	8.3	n/a	1.6
Ginger	n/a	8.6	3.15	5.25	1.4
Silk	240	22.7	n/a	n/a	n/a

[Figure 2] *Spices in Decline*, from John Munro’s lecture “The Economic History of Later Medieval and Early Modern Europe”
(Note: Figures are estimates)

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In the time of the Roman Empire in Europe, the cost of pepper was equivalent to an incredible 2,500 days of work for an ordinary workman. By the Middle Ages, it decreased to 2 weeks of work for an average tradesman, although this was still substantial. This figure dropped drastically towards the 1500s, and by the 19th century, the cost of pepper was just a fraction of a day's wage.

The effect of this decline on the popularity of spice resulted in it no longer being a luxury item or a good indicator of one's wealth. As spices were brought into Europe via the Silk Road, whether over land or over sea, they could take up to a year to reach Europe. This required them to be dried or powdered. Thus, after 400 years of dried spices, fresh food became the new desired taste in the 17th century and the trend was to have simple dishes with the freshest ingredients.

This led to the French – described by Dr Stevens as always being the arbiter of taste – to take it upon themselves to deride the people, who continued with their lavish display of spice in their food. One of the ways in which the French expressed this was through the idea of *le goût naturel*, the natural taste. They preferred to let the natural flavours of vegetables in particular, but also meat, shine through. The freshness of food was the new marker of wealth as only the rich could have access to gardens where such produce was grown. With the rise of French cuisine, the delicate and subtle flavours had much to do with the rejection of spices in Europe and especially in France.

Singapore: A Spice Island?

Although spice had long since lost its prominence in the 19th century, Sir Stamford Raffles envisioned Singapore to be a spice island. Dr Stevens posited that Raffles was encouraged by evidence of the many centuries of Malay agricultural cultivation around what was then called Forbidden Hill, which later became Government Hill in Raffles's time.

A keen naturalist, Raffles started a botanical and experimental garden on Government Hill soon after he arrived in Singapore. Central to his vision of what Singapore could become was the idea of economic botany.

Raffles also saw cultivation or agriculture as part of his civilising mission. By cultivating the land, he could also civilise the people. His vision of Singapore as a spice island, however, was not supported by the East India Company.

Nevertheless, spices continued to be of significant interest despite declining prices, especially after 1835. Other than Raffles, familiar names such as Dr Thomas Oxley and Captain William G. Scott were also interested in cultivating spices in Singapore. Several of Singapore's roads are now named after them.

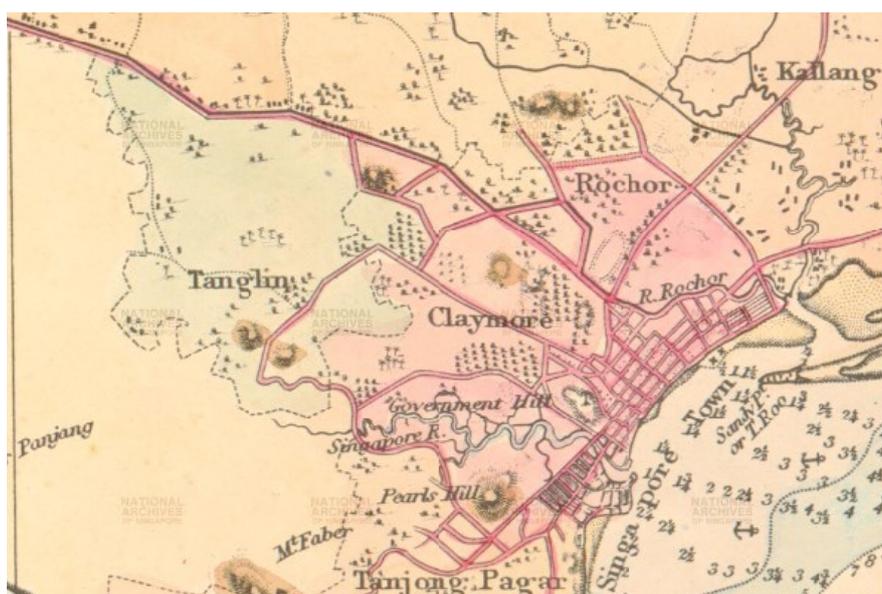
The spice plantations in Singapore, however, did not succeed. Cloves turned out to be unsuitable as they would not fruit, instead becoming ornamental trees. Nutmeg was struck down by the "nutmeg canker", due to beetles that were eating the bark of the trees.

To make matters worse, spice prices continued to drop between 1840 and 1860. European spice planters in Singapore even used free labour in the form of Indian convicts, but could not turn a profit.

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Figure 3 shows that large areas in Singapore were cleared at the time, especially for nutmeg plantations. This has been termed a “nutmeg mania” by some historians. In fact, the Singapore colony had to issue a law forbidding medical practitioners from owning spice plantations. The reason was because Dr William Montgomerie, a senior surgeon in Singapore, had become so obsessed with his nutmeg plantation that he was neglecting his medical duties.



[Figure 3] Detail from Samuel Congalton and J. T. Thomson, *Survey of Straits of Singapore*, 1848. Urban Redevelopment Authority Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore

The colonial Europeans' obsession with spice still held even after the popularity of spices in Europe itself had fallen drastically. Dr Stevens suggested that the symbolic importance of spice made these planters persist with this nutmeg mania beyond what was sensible or rational.

Conclusion

Dr Stevens concluded the lecture with a summary of the global story of spice, which covered its economic story, its status as an exotic object, its role in food history, and how it affected people's tastes, culture and, ultimately, the fate of nations.

Although the effect of spice is not as powerful as it once was in the past, its effect is a long-lasting one that still impacts us today.

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About the Speaker

Dr Hallam Stevens was born in the United Kingdom, grew up in Australia and pursued his education mostly in the United States. After studying physics and the history of physics as an undergraduate, he pursued an MPhil in the history and philosophy of science at Cambridge University. He obtained his PhD from the Department of History of Science at Harvard in 2010 and moved to Singapore in 2011. His first book, published in November 2013, is titled *Life Out of Sequence: A Data-Driven History of Bioinformatics* (University of Chicago Press). He has also co-edited (with Sarah S. Richardson) a volume of essays under the title *Postgenomics: Approaches to Biology after the Genome* (Duke University Press, 2015). He is presently an Associate Professor with the School of Humanities and the School of Biological Sciences at Nanyang Technological University.

About HistoriaSG

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