

The Formation and Interaction of Intercontinental Social Structures from 1500 to 1650 — Take China, Spain, and Latin America as Examples

Xiran Wang

*University of Birmingham, Birmingham, UK
momozi_0914@qq.com*

Abstract. The period from 1500 to 1650 marked the onset of the Age of Discovery, when the global trade network took initial shape, large-scale colonial ventures unfolded, and cross-cultural exchanges intensified. Through case studies of China, Spain, and Latin America, this study explores that unique era. It conducts a systematic review of academic literature on social formations in these global regions, examining their fundamental characteristics, variations, generative conditions, and interregional relationships. Prior regional isolations were broken by the era, creating chances for more extensive social interactions outside of local boundaries. Even as commodity economies grew during China's Ming-Qing transition, autocratic governance turned inward for regime stability. Spain reshaped its class structure and economic structure by consolidating its colonies abroad and attracting wealth. As a colony of Europe, Latin America was completely subjugated and displayed glaring signs of colonial subordination. The essay summarizes the opinions of academics regarding these formations, draws attention to differences through comparative analysis, and investigates how political structures, economic theories, and cultural legacies influenced their development. It captures discussions on their societal connections while delving deeper into interregional ties through colonialism and trade. Finally, the study identifies specific social structures of the period, provides information about common and different civilizational paths during transitions, improves understanding of social pluralism, and provides insights into the emerging global order of early globalization—its origins in intercontinental ties and contributions to contemporary global social history.

Keywords: Transcontinental social structure, early globalization, China, Spain, Latin America

1. Introduction

A significant transition from regional isolation to global connectivity occurred between 1500 and 1650 [1,2]. China, Spain, and Latin America—regions selected for their roles in early globalization—illuminate the dynamics of this era. Ming China, with its demand for silver, connected Pacific trade networks, rerouting American bullion to Eurasia; Latin America, home of the Inca and Aztec civilizations, became a center of transatlantic extraction and cultural fusion; and Spain led Iberian

exploration and American colonization [3-5]. Prior to this, China's autocratic monarchy, Spain's feudal system, and Latin America's indigenous societies evolved independently [6]. The Age of Discovery ended this isolation, fostering interactions among their structures and modeling the modern global social system, while revealing political, economic, religious, and social logics across cultures [7]. Scholarship details Iberian colonialism in the Americas Sino-Spanish Manila trade, and Europe-China comparisons on inequality or colonization, plus Europe-Americas wage trends. However, few integrate all three to examine social structures in the silver economy, overlooking how exchanges drove uneven modernization. This study fills that gap by addressing: How did political, economic, religious, and social structures in these regions interact from 1500 to 1650, shaping global patterns? The thesis proceeds as follows: First, analyze regional characteristics in politics, economy, social structure, and unique factors; second, compare differences, similarities, and relationships; third, revisit debates like China's delayed capitalism and Latin America's racial-cultural identity; finally, summarize formation patterns and underscore cross-continental interactions' role in the modern system.

2. Literature review

2.1. The social structure of China from 1500 to 1650

The politics of China during that period was characterized by the middle and late Ming Dynasty and the transition to a new dynasty, with the core feature revolving around autocratic monarchy and centralization of power. Although the system of prime ministers was abolished, the chief grand secretaries of the cabinet still held similar rights to those of prime ministers [8]. The administrative and supervisory systems of the central government gradually became corrupt, and the interference of the eunuch system in state affairs led to political chaos [9]. Peasant uprisings and the rise of the Later Jin also worsened the country's decline [10]. The rulers were constrained by financial issues and corruption, and found it difficult to change the current situation. After the fall of the Ming Dynasty, national politics remained fragmented and chaotic.

The economy of China from 1500 to 1650 showed signs of both prosperity and crisis. With the arrival of the Age of Discovery, drought-resistant and high-yielding American crops were introduced to China, significantly relieving the food shortages caused by population growth [11]. The folk handicraft industry also experienced notable growth. The silk weaving industry in the Jiangnan region was the first to break free from official control, leading to the emergence of numerous private workshops. Their products were sold widely both domestically and internationally, marking the early stages of capitalism [12]. However, this period also saw economic struggles. In response to war, the Ming government continuously raised taxes, which led to many farmers going bankrupt and fleeing, and land consolidation problems became severe [13]. Social unrest in the early 17th century further impacted the economy. Private handicraft workshops shut down, and overseas trade slowed due to wars and maritime bans [14].

With the prosperity of the commodity economy, the status of the merchant class was significantly boosted during this period. Economic growth led to the rise of large merchant groups, who accumulated substantial wealth through trade [15]. Businesspeople gained recognition from the public and government through public welfare activities or bribery, gradually gaining influence over policies [15]. However, the increase in merchants' status was not a fundamental change. The government consistently adhered to the core national policy of suppressing business, and in response to the financial crisis, it continued to impose additional business taxes [16]. Furthermore, during this

time, the status of merchants still depended on their alliances with officials and did not develop into an independent social class.

The Inflow of silver and the maritime ban policy also Influenced China's social characteristics during that period. Spanish colonists discovered large silver mines in the Americas. Chinese silk and porcelain were exchanged for silver through trade and entered China, allowing the Ming Dynasty to quickly establish a stable monetary system [17]. Changes in the maritime ban policy played a regulatory role in social development. When the maritime ban was tightened, overseas trade continued through smuggling [14]. This enabled merchants to expand their business capital through legal or semi-legal channels, providing more opportunities for upward social mobility.

2.2. The social structure of Spain from 1500 to 1650

Between 1500 and 1650, Spain's political core concentrated on strengthening royal power and centralization. By the mid-16th century, because its ruling territories included European and American colonies [4], the monarchy faced the challenge of governing a multi-ethnic population. To improve control, the central government sent officials directly to local authorities to assume some administrative duties previously held by local nobles [18]. By the first half of the 17th century, royal authority had become the dominant force in national politics, significantly weakening the power of local nobles. However, overseas wars and a fiscal system heavily reliant on American silver drained national finances. The king was compelled to raise taxes to support his rule, which led to several major rebellions [19].

The Spanish economy at that time exhibited signs of superficial prosperity and internal instability. With the colonization of the Americas and the silver mining, Spain became the world's leading holder of silver [20]. However, the heavy influx of silver directly sparked a price revolution, causing prices in Spain to rise sharply and disrupting the local economic stability [20]. Additionally, unlike the business classes in other European nations, the wealth of Spanish merchants heavily depended on the colonial trade monopoly granted by the royal family. Merchants often bought noble titles or lent money to the royal family [21]. This prevented the commercial class from forming an independent group and kept them under the control of the monarchy and the traditional nobility.

During this period, Spain's social structure was a mix of feudal hierarchy and colonial blocs. The nobility and clergy controlled key resources through their privileges, while farmers and urban commoners bore the main burden of social life. The privileges of the noble class covered critical areas such as politics, economy, and law. They enjoyed permanent tax exemptions, held important positions at the central, local, and colonial levels, and also had judicial immunity [22]. However, the lives of farmers and ordinary people were marked by poverty and exploitation. Farmers were required to hand over most of their harvest to landlords; otherwise, they would have to pay high rent [23]. Handicraftsmen were impacted by the price revolution and lost both their colonial and domestic markets at the same time.

The social characteristics of Spain from 1500 to 1650 resulted from political shifts, economic structures, and religious privileges. The Inquisition played a key role in this period. It not only targeted Jewish merchants and artisans through trials, exile, and even burning at the stake [24], but also manipulated the beliefs of common people by controlling education, censoring books, and using other methods, causing people to lose the idea of pursuing social change [25].

2.3. The social structure of Latin America from 1500 to 1650

The core of the political system in Latin America during this period was colonial autocratic rule. Previously, the independent political systems of indigenous civilizations were destroyed [26]. Colonists took land from the indigenous people through laws and also supported the original tribal leaders as agents to strengthen control over indigenous groups [27]. Politics also experienced internal conflicts and external resistance. There was a power struggle between the royal family and colonial officials. Although resistance by the indigenous people always ended in failure, it never completely stopped [28].

The economic core of Latin America is the predatory economy that serves Europe, with mining and plantation economies being the most significant. Mining not only directly influences the economic flow but also indirectly boosts the development and prosperity of local supporting industries, such as handicrafts [29]. The plantation economy is an important complement to mining. In core mining regions like Mexico and Peru, plantations mainly focus on grain cultivation, primarily supplying miners and urban residents [30]. Large plantations, meanwhile, grow cash crops using cheap labor and generate substantial income through overseas trade [30].

The social structure in Latin America at that time was a hierarchical system divided by race. The top tier consisted of white people from Europe, followed by those born in Latin America. The middle class included individuals of mixed race. Among them, the descendants of European white men and indigenous women held the highest status, followed by those of European white men and black women, and finally, those of indigenous people and black people. The lowest level of society was made up of indigenous people and black slaves [31]. Indigenous people were not allowed to marry white people and could not even leave their communities freely. Black slaves had no personal freedom at all. Their owners could buy, sell, beat, or even kill them at will [32].

The characteristics of Latin American society from 1500 to 1650 also led the clash of different cultures. To solidify their control, the colonists aimed to destroy the beliefs of the indigenous people and forcibly spread Catholicism. Spanish and Portuguese were also established as official languages, and the colonists forced the indigenous people to adopt European clothing. [33] However, these changes did not fully erase Latin American culture; instead, they resulted in cultural blending.

3. Discussion

3.1. Differences, similarities, and correlations

As examining the social structures of China, Spain, and Latin America during the Age of Discovery from 1500 to 1650, clear differences emerge in their politics, economies, and cultures, shaped by unique historical pressures. In politics, China grappled with autocratic local dynasties where social conflicts centered on central corruption and local uprisings. Spain navigated a cross-territorial autocratic monarchy, with main tensions between the central government and nobility vying for power. Latin America faced foreign colonial autocracy, its contradictions rooted in colonial rule clashing with indigenous resistance. China's economy focused on private crafts and agriculture, with trade tailored to local demands. Local economic imbalances were caused by Spain's colonial exploitation, and the royal family controlled trade. The mining and plantations of Latin America supplied Europe with food and the trade was also typified by one-way flows of raw materials. Culturally, China had a maritime embargo that was not influenced by any external force on the customs. Inquisition in Spain repressed ideas and fixed culture in inelastic forms. Latin America was forced to make the Western culture embrace integration.

These differences and commonalities are summarized in Table 1 below and important elements reduced to short terms to facilitate easy comparison as the discussion that follows discusses the implications in more extensive terms.

Table 1. Comparative overview of social elements in China, Spain, and Latin America (1500-1650)

Aspect	Differences			Similarities			Correlations		
	Politics	Economy	Culture	Rule	Silver	Class	Unrest	Silver Flow	Discovery Impact
China	Autocratic dynasties, corruption, uprisings	Agriculture, crafts, local trade	Maritime ban, no external force	Autocratic monarchy	Stable currency system	Merchants seek official nod	Peasant revolts	Traded for monetary support	American crops ease shortages
Spain	Cross-territorial monarchy, central-nobility fights	Exploitation imbalance, royal control	Inquisition suppression, solidification	Centralized monarchy	Price revolution	Merchants buy titles	Tax-triggered rebels	Funds domestic/colonial rule	Enables colonization
Latin America	Colonial autocracy, rule vs. resistance	Mining/plantations, raw exports	Western promotion, integration	Colonial autocracy	Mining core	Race-based strata	Indigenous pushback	Mined and dominated	Shared historical context

In terms of the similarities, each of the three regions experienced an autocratic rule, which is China, as a monarchy, Spain, centralized, and Latin America, as a colony, which allowed establishing a top-down control with different backgrounds. They all became excessively reliant on silver: Spain began a price revolution by inflows, China had systematized and made a stable currency, and Latin America had made silver mining its bread and butter. Class solidification also tied them and Spanish merchants gained titles in the nobility, Chinese merchants demanded titles in the government and Latin American layers of people according to their race. The universal tensions that existed in authority were highlighted in internal conflicts and led to unrest in all regions such as insurrections by peasants in China, rebellion by tax-driven rebels in Spain, and insurrections by natives in Latin America.

These patterns indicate the relationships that held these societies together besides the similarities. Spain controlled miners of silver in America and the flow of silver in China strengthened its monetary system as well as financing the Spanish domestic finances and colonial control of Latin America, establishing a triangular silver cycle of the regions [34, 35]. This web was reinforced in the Age of Discovery, which armed the conquests of Spain in Latin America and transported American crops to China to prevent food shortages. This shared turning point fueled social changes in all three countries, fusing local roots with global tides in ways that have been remembered throughout history [36].

3.2. Dispute

Although scholars have closely studied the social histories of China, Spain, and Latin America from 1500 to 1650, some big disagreements remain. The main fights are about why capitalism grew slowly in China and how cultural identity formed during racial mixing in Latin America.

Scholars argue over China's slow capitalism. They split into two camps: inside reasons or outside ones. One group blames local problems: rules that favored farming over business, and Confucian ideas that blocked trade growth and new tech [37, 38]. The other group focuses on world links and big theories. They say Europe's lead came from stealing American gold and goods through colonies, which sped up capitalism [39]. These different views show how home habits and global trades shaped money paths. They push experts to mix both ideas for better history lessons.

Talks also heat up about cultural identity in Latin America's race blends. Some say it came from forced colonial rules, like Spain's push of Catholicism to control cultures [40]. But others stress local fights and joins. They point out how native people hid beliefs in church ways, and African slaves held onto old customs to save their roots—ways to fight back and fit in [41]. These fights show the tug between bossy top rules and people's own choices in making new mixed groups. They help us see colonialism's long shadows today.

These arguments have implications far beyond the pages of a book. They offer practical advice today. The China fight helps leaders run countries. It demonstrates mixing farm traditions with business energy can spark growth without losing culture—like today's green tech pushes in growing places. The Latin ideas help blend different groups. They call for plans that honor fights and mixes, like school lessons that weave local and new ways to build strong ties in many-kinds-of-people lands.

4. Conclusion

This paper looks at how societies in China, Spain, and Latin America formed and connected between 1500 and 1650. This was the start of the Age of Discovery, when the world began linking up through trade and colonies. Studying this time matters because it shows how early global ties created today's unequal world. Silver from the Americas flowed to Spain, then to China, changing lives everywhere and starting patterns of rich and poor nations.

The main points cover the key features of each place. In China, strong kings ruled, but corruption and farm revolts caused chaos. The economy grew with new crops from America and small factories for silk, but taxes and sea bans held it back. Merchants got richer but stayed low in status. Spain built a powerful king-led system over Europe and colonies, but silver floods caused high prices and money troubles. Nobles kept control, and merchants bought titles to fit in. Latin America became Spain's colony, with politics run by outsiders. Its economy focused on mines and big farms for Europe, using forced work. Society split by skin color: whites on top, mixed people in the middle, and natives or slaves at the bottom. Culture mixed too—Catholic faith pushed on old ways, but locals kept some traditions.

Comparing them shows differences: China turned inward with farms, Spain grabbed wealth abroad, and Latin America fed the empire. But all had strict rule from the top, relied on silver, and had fixed classes that sparked fights like uprisings. Links, like silver trade routes, tied them together, bringing changes like new foods to China.

These ideas matter today. They help people understand why some places thrive while others stagnate, and how mixing cultures builds strong groups. For leaders, it means blending old ways with new business for fair growth, and teaching history to unite diverse people.

However, this work still has some shortcomings. It focuses too much on big events and skips women's roles or nature's impact. It also lacks hard numbers on trade. Next steps could add old records for exact silver paths or stories from native voices. The lesson from this time is that global connections can unite as well as divide—people should choose wisely to fix old harms.

References

- [1] O'Rourke, K. H., & Williamson, J. G. (2002). After Columbus: explaining Europe's overseas trade boom, 1500–1800. *The Journal of Economic History*, 62(2), 417-456.
- [2] Yun-Casalilla, B. (2019). The Luso-Spanish Composite Global Empire, 1598–1640. In *Iberian World Empires and the Globalization of Europe 1415–1668* (pp. 323-376). Singapore: Springer Nature Singapore.
- [3] Cao, Z. (2018). Centralization and decentralization of power structure: A theory of ruling risks and empirical evidence from Chinese history. *Chinese journal of sociology*, 4(4), 506-564.
- [4] Deagan, K. (2003). Colonial origins and colonial transformations in Spanish America. *Historical Archaeology*, 37(4), 3-13.
- [5] Murdock, G. P. (1934). The organization of Inca society. *The Scientific Monthly*, 38(3), 231-239.
- [6] Giraldez, A. (2015). The age of trade: The Manila galleons and the dawn of the global economy. Rowman & Littlefield.
- [7] Wallerstein, I. (1993). The Modern World System. *Social Theory: The Multicultural and Classic Readings*, 427.
- [8] Ch'ien, M. (2019). The Ming Dynasty. In *Merits and Demerits of Political Systems in Dynastic China* (pp. 81-111). Berlin, Heidelberg: Springer Berlin Heidelberg.
- [9] Zheng, J., Xiao, L., Fang, X., Hao, Z., Ge, Q., & Li, B. (2014). How climate change impacted the collapse of the Ming dynasty. *Climatic change*, 127(2), 169-182.
- [10] Dardess, J. W. (1972). The late Ming rebellions: peasants and problems of interpretation.
- [11] Zhengnan. (2019). American crops into China: discourse on influences of corn, sweet potato, and potato. *Senri Ethnological Studies*, 100, 99-114.
- [12] Xiaoxiaosheng, L. (2021). The Ming Dynasty. *Empire of Silver: A New Monetary History of China*, 117.
- [13] Cháo, M. (2009). *Ming Dynasty*.
- [14] Siu, Y. (2022). Maritime exclusion policy in Ming China and Chosŏn Korea, 1368-1450: dynastic authority, national security, and trade (Doctoral dissertation, University of Oxford).
- [15] Schottenhammer, A. (2010). Brokers and “Guild”(huiguan 會館) Organizations in China's Maritime Trade with her Eastern Neighbours during the Ming and Qing Dynasties. *Crossroads*, 1(2), 99-150.
- [16] Jinmin, F. A. N. (2007). The social background of the emergence of regional merchant groups in the Ming Dynasty. *Frontiers of History in China*, 2(3), 345-378.
- [17] Чжан, III. (2020). Chinese monetary system during the renaissance: silver standard and globalization in Ming dynasty. *Россия и Азия*, (3), 70-90.
- [18] Moreno, A. M. (2012). Local government in Spain. *Local Government in the Member States of the European Union: a comparative legal perspective*, 599-638.
- [19] Seidman, M. (2000). Agrarian collectives during the Spanish revolution and civil war. *European History Quarterly*, 30(2), 209-235.
- [20] Forsyth, P. J., & Nicholas, S. J. (1983). The decline of Spanish industry and the price revolution: a neoclassical analysis. *Journal of European Economic History*, 12(3), 601.
- [21] Amelang, J. S. (1982). The Purchase of Nobility in Castile 1552-1700: A Comment. *Journal of European Economic History*, 11(1), 219.
- [22] Ruiz, T. F. (2014). *Spanish Society, 1400-1600*. Routledge.
- [23] Nicolini, E., & Ramos-Palencia, F. Inequality in Spain during the Early Modern Period, 1500-1800. Notes and results. In *Inequality in rural Europe: (Late Middle Ages–18th century)* (pp. 25-43).
- [24] Harrison, G. B. (1995). A shrinking world within?: Jews, Muslims, Conversos, and the Spanish Inquisition, ca 1480-1512. *Parergon*, 12(2), 41-60.
- [25] Nešković, S., & Marčeta, D. (2015). The Spanish Inquisition as a Means of Influencing the Common Sense of Citizens. *Balkan Journal of Philosophy*, 7(2), 177-186.
- [26] Strobel, C. (2019). Conquest and colonization. In *The Routledge handbook to the history and society of the Americas* (pp. 75-83). Routledge.
- [27] Hancock, J. F. (2022). Spanish Conquest and Colonization of the Americas. In *World Agriculture Before and After 1492: Legacy of the Columbian Exchange* (pp. 51-61). Cham: Springer International Publishing.
- [28] Isaac, B. L. (1983). The Aztec "Flowery War": A Geopolitical Explanation. *Journal of Anthropological Research*, 39(4), 415-432.
- [29] Chaudhuri, K. N. (1994). Precious metals and mining in the New World: 1500–1800. *European Review*, 2(4), 261–270. doi: 10.1017/S1062798700001186
- [30] Petley, C. (2018, January 11). Plantations in the Atlantic World. Obo. <https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/display/document/obo-9780199730414/obo-9780199730414-0165.xml>

- [31] McCaa, R., Schwartz, S. B., & Grubessich, A. (1979). Race and class in colonial Latin America: a critique. *Comparative studies in Society and History*, 21(3), 421-433.
- [32] Quijano, A. (2000). Coloniality of power and Eurocentrism in Latin America. *International sociology*, 15(2), 215-232.
- [33] Poska, A. M. (2017). Spanish Colonization to 1650. Obo. <https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/display/document/obo-9780199730414/obo-9780199730414-0017.xml>
- [34] Von Glahn, R. (2020). The changing significance of Latin American Silver in the Chinese economy, 16th–19th centuries. *Revista de Historia Económica-Journal of Iberian and Latin American Economic History*, 38(3), 553-585.
- [35] Flynn, D. O., & Giraldez, A. (2013). Latin American Silver and the Early Globalization of World Trade. In *National Identities and Socio-Political Changes in Latin America* (pp. 140-159). Routledge.
- [36] Mancall, P. C. (1998). The age of discovery. *Reviews in American History*, 26(1), 26-53.
- [37] Zhang, Q. F., & Donaldson, J. A. (2008). The rise of agrarian capitalism with Chinese characteristics: Agricultural modernization, agribusiness and collective land rights. *The China Journal*, (60), 25-47.
- [38] Zurndorfer, H. T. (2004, June). Confusing Confucianism with capitalism: culture as impediment and/or stimulus to Chinese economic development. In *Third Conference of the Global History Development Network*, Konstanz, Germany.
- [39] APPEL, T. N. (2017). Why was there no capitalism in early modern China? *Revista de Economía Política*, 37(1), 167–188. <https://doi.org/10.1590/0101-31572016v37n01a09>
- [40] Yun-Casalilla, B. (2022). Early modern Iberian empires, global history and the history of early globalization. *Journal of Global History*, 17(3), 539–561. doi: 10.1017/S1740022822000122
- [41] Stavenhagen, R. (2002). Indigenous peoples and the state in Latin America: An ongoing debate. In *Multiculturalism in Latin America: Indigenous rights, diversity and democracy* (pp. 24-44). London: Palgrave Macmillan UK.