

Smoke and Mirrors: Tracing the Influence of the Opium Trade in the Dutch East India Company through Letters and Cargo Logs

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Introduction

Tracing commodities and their impact on local and global history enables researchers to study the dynamics in social, cultural, and economic relations between different parts of the world [1]. This short paper presents a case study of the Dutch East India Company's (VOC) opium trade by tracing the appearances of the commodity opium in the digital version of two datasets, the *General Missives (GM)*,¹ and the *Bookkeeper-General Batavia (BKB)*.²

The commodity list of the VOC's inter-continental and intra-Asia trade includes a wide range of different items such as spices, silk, tea, coffee, metals, porcelain, grain, livestock, and opium. Here, we focus on the opium trade for the following reasons:

- 1) Its lucrateness has strong connections to Dutch colonialism in Asia. By turning opium into a cash crop and importing large quantities of it into the Indonesian archipelago, the VOC made it an item exclusive to its intra-Asian trade [2];
- 2) It plays a part in the development of global capitalism, as within the VOC's context, opium not only is a main commodity but also serves as "money" sometimes [2];
- 3) It could reflect internal tensions in the VOC's organisational structure that might be a contributing factor in the Company's decay in the eighteenth century as the appealing profits from trading opium caused continuous smuggling and corruption among the VOC's employees [3].

In this paper, we investigate the extent to which we can trace the importance of opium to the VOC quantitatively. Our hypothesis is that analysing the mentions of opium and other commodities in the *GM* and the *BKB* will show that the interest in opium grew disproportionately over time as compared to other commodities. By highlighting time periods and data points that deviate from general trends in the VOC trade, we can aid scholars in identifying turning points in overall VOC trade. Our research question is thus: to what extent can we identify changes in opium importance to the VOC through the *GM* and the *BKB*?

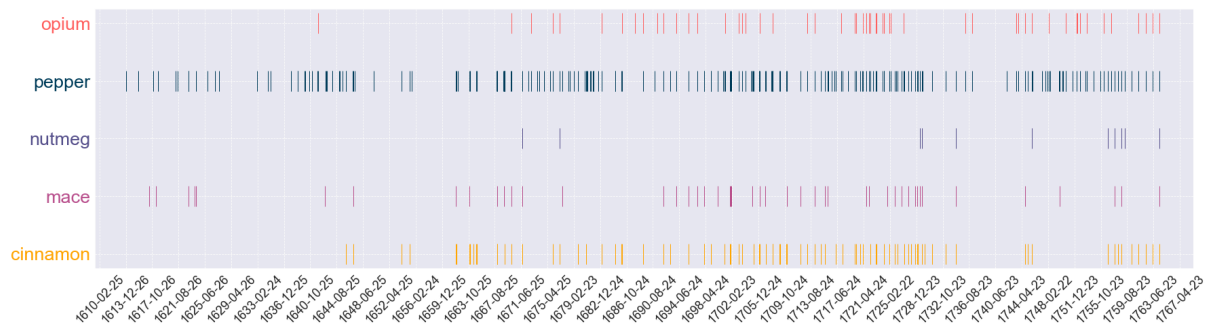
¹ Yearly letters from Asia to the board of directors of the VOC detailing the activities and the events that occurred in the Asian regions where the Company was active. Available via:

<https://resources.huygens.knaw.nl/vocgeneralemissiven/index.html.en>

² Product volume and prices on VOC ships as recorded by the accountant-general of the VOC and his clerks in the eighteenth-century Batavia. Available via:

<https://resources.huygens.knaw.nl/boekhoudergeneraalbatavia/index.html.en>

Figure 1: Appearances of opium in the GM over time compared to the most common spices.



Tracing Opium

To trace the appearances of opium in the VOC documents over time, we first turn to the *GM* letters corpus. We use a pre-processed version which was annotated with dates, authors and places.³ We use the GLOBALISE thesaurus of commodities⁴ to explore the connections between opium and other commodities. For every commodity, we extract its Dutch name (e.g. 'opium') and synonyms (e.g. 'amphioen') and search for them in the *GM* using string matching to create a timeline of appearances for each commodity. We visualise opium alongside the VOC's most commonly traded spices pepper, nutmeg, mace, and cinnamon.

Figure 1 illustrates that opium was rarely mentioned in the *GM* before the middle of the seventeenth century but it started to appear frequently after the middle of the seventeenth century, especially during the 1720s. This could mean that during this period the importance of opium as a commodity in VOC trade was rapidly rising, or the trade volume of opium was increasing. To understand the dynamics in Figure 1, we turn to historical literature to find possible explanations from the qualitative aspect. According to these arguments, after the middle of the seventeenth century, the VOC imported large quantities of opium to the Indonesian archipelago and as a result, the total consumption of opium in the archipelago grew at an incredibly fast rate [4].

While analysing the appearances of opium in the *GM* brings some insights, it only provides one piece of trade information: there might be false negatives (a commodity is traded but not mentioned in a letter) and false positives (a commodity is mentioned but not traded). We therefore also look at the VOC cargo logs from the *BKB* dataset.⁵ Figure 2 shows the distribution of VOC ships per year that had opium, nutmeg, mace, pepper or cinnamon on their cargo lists in the eighteenth century. Here we see that the opium trade was relatively stable as compared to the spices.

However, from how often a product was traded alone, we cannot assess its importance to the company. Figure 3 shows how unstable the value of opium was (during 1769-1787), compared to pepper and cinnamon. The dramatic instability of the opium value in the period 1769-1787 might reflect the fierce competition between the EIC (the British East India Company) and the VOC over the opium trade during the second half of the eighteenth century. The EIC created a monopoly on the procurement and sale of opium in Bengal during the second half of the eighteenth and the early years of the nineteenth

³ <https://github.com/CLARIAH/wp6-missieven>

⁴ <https://hdl.handle.net/10622/YAWDOV>

⁵ https://bgb.resources.huygens.knaw.nl/cargo_results

century [5], although the Dutch had an advantage over the sale of Bengal opium in large parts of the Indonesian archipelago. Disagreements with the English over the purchase of opium and the Fourth Anglo-Dutch War (1780–1784) resulted in the import reduction of opium at Batavia in the period 1776 and 1785 [6].

Figure 2: Number of times a commodity was listed as cargo per year according to BKB

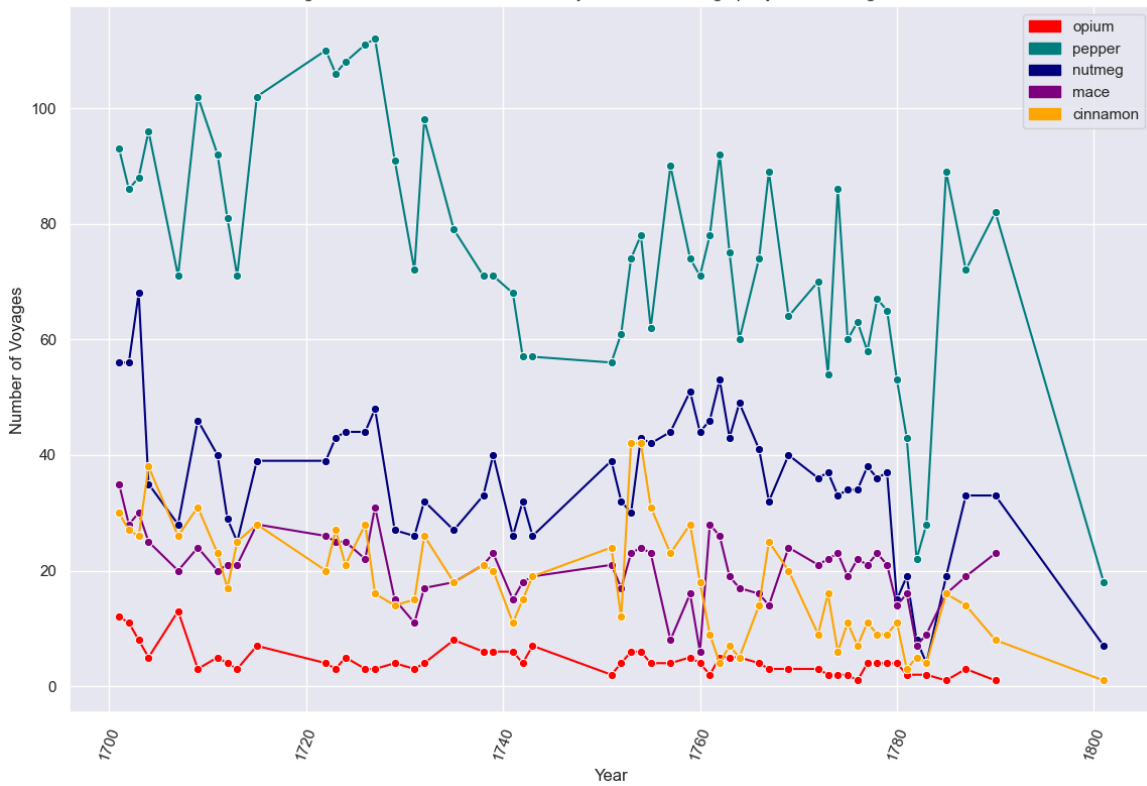
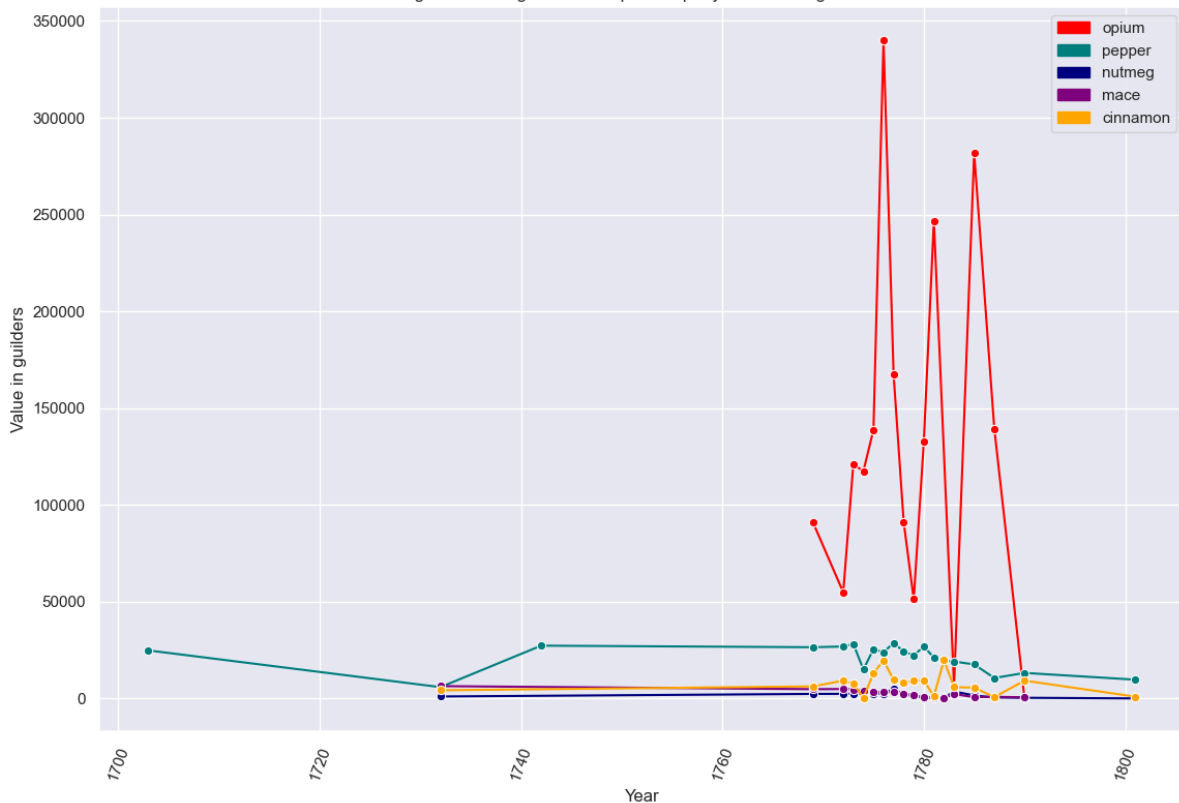


Figure 3: Average value of a product per year according to BKB



Discussion & Future Work

In this short paper, we traced the importance of opium to the VOC quantitatively through its mentions in the VOC's *GM* and *BKB*. We find that the letters show a sharp increase in mention of opium after the 1720s, the number of VOC ships carrying opium as cargo each year was relatively stable, but the price of opium for which it was traded varied greatly. Trends can be linked to known fluctuations for example caused by trade disagreements. The answer to our research question is that data-driven methods can uncover opium trade patterns, but close reading is needed to contextualise them. Note here that there are gaps in the data: we do not have trade prices for each cargo item individually; sometimes only a bulk price was present in the records and the time spans of the datasets do not overlap completely (the *GM* run from 1610 to 1767, the *BKB* from 1701 to 1801). Still, a multifaceted analysis of such datasets can point to salient points in time that can guide scholars to investigate particular slices of the dataset in a more qualitative manner.

Our code is available at: <https://github.com/trifecta-project/DHB2024>

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Author Contributions

Author contributions (by author initials) are listed according to the Contributor Roles Taxonomy (CRediT).⁶ Conceptualization: JZ, Data curation: JZ, VP, Formal Analysis: JZ, VP, Funding acquisition: ME, Methodology: JZ, ME, VP, Project administration: ME, Software: VP, JZ, ME, Supervision: ME, JL, Visualization: VP, ME, JZ, Writing (original draft): JZ, Writing (review and editing): JZ, ME, VP

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