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Chopsticks or Cutlery?

How Canton Hong Merchants Entertained Foreign Guests in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries¹

May-bo Ching

Like what is happening in the conduct of Sino-foreign trade today, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries much business and social exchange between Hong merchants at Canton and their foreign counterparts happened at dining tables. Yet unlike the contemporary entrepreneurs who usually hold banquets in an impressive restaurant, old Hong merchants entertained their guests in their own luxurious residences, which were well staffed with experienced family cooks, decorated with stylish furniture and fine chinaware and, needless to say, sure to provide tasty food. To play host to their guests, Hong merchants offered dishes, wine, and dinner service in both Chinese and Western styles; and the result was a mixture of tastes and etiquettes served at the same table. In this paper, I ask some very straightforward questions: What food was served at the banquets hosted by Hong merchants, and how was the food presented? What kind of knowledge did the Chinese cooks and servants possess for entertaining foreign guests? What kind of impact might this material cultural exchange have had on Canton over the subsequent years? In answering these questions, this chapter uses firsthand accounts given by foreign residents from England and the United States in their diaries, letters, and travel journals.

Early Accounts

Engaged in a global trading network that tied the European, Southeast Asian, and Chinese worlds together, Hong merchants at Canton had long been good at entertaining their foreign patrons. Banquets given by Hong

merchants in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were chiefly for their English-speaking patrons. This “English experience,” as I will argue, had a long-term impact on Cantonese cuisine, and should be understood against the wider context of the Canton Trade era (1759–1839), in which the British and Canton merchants were the major actors. The historical sequence is well known: Compared to the Portuguese and Spaniards, the British and the French were latecomers in the Asian waters; even later were the Swedish and the Americans.² But it was the British who dominated China Trade from the early eighteenth century to the mid-nineteenth century. Excluded from Japan and insular Southeast Asia, the English East India Company (EIC, founded in 1600) concentrated more on Europe-China trade. The prohibition of junk trade and the Open Door Policy towards foreigners launched by the Qing government between 1684 and 1757 gave exclusive privileges of trade in China to these latecomers, notably the chartered companies, to trade at Canton and a few other ports.³ In 1759, the imperial court explicitly decreed that Canton was the only port to be open to foreign commerce, and thereafter commenced the Canton Trade era, which came to a halt in 1842 with the rise of other treaty ports after China was defeated in the First Opium War.

During this period, the British and other Westerners were confined to a restricted area in Canton and resided in the factories (large warehouses with offices and accommodation attached) rented out to them by Hong merchants for the duration of the trading season, i.e., from August to March each year. To these Westerners, who spoke very little Chinese and whose activities in the city were highly restricted, life in Canton could be extremely dull. Outdoor activities were welcome diversions, including an occasional visit to the temple located in Honam (Henan Island) on the southern bank of the Pearl River, and to the *fa-tee* nurseries, flower markets that were located three miles upstream from the foreign factories. Thanks to Hong merchants, Western sojourners were also able to get some fresh air by visiting the merchants’ country villas and private gardens.

It is thus no wonder that the British provide early accounts about how Hong merchants received their foreign guests. William Hickey, who traveled to the East as an EIC cadet in 1769, recorded in his memoirs descriptions of the banquets given by Pankeequa. This Pankeequa refers to Puankhequa I (Pan Qiguan 潘啟官), the principal Hong merchant at the time, whose Chinese name was Pan Wenyuan 潘文巖 (alias Zhencheng 振承, 1714–88)⁴. When William Hickey went from Whampoa to Canton in September 1769,

he was invited to two occasions at the country house of Puankhequa I. Hickey recalled that:

These fêtes were given on the 1st and 2nd October, the first of them being a dinner, dressed and served *à la mode Anglaise* [sic], the Chinamen on that occasion using, and awkwardly enough, knives and forks, and in every respect conforming to the European fashion. The best wines of all sorts were amply supplied [...].

The second day, on the contrary every thing was Chinese, all the European guests eating, or endeavouring to eat, with chopsticks, no knives or forks being at table. The entertainment was splendid, the victuals supremely good, the Chinese loving high dishes and keeping the best of cooks.⁵

Hickey's account is one of the earliest I have come across that describes how a Hong merchant would have offered both knives and forks as well as chopsticks to his foreign guests. Behind these spectacular receptions was no doubt the wealth of Hong merchants. On the first day, Puankhequa I even tried to amuse his guests by showing them a Chinese drama in which an English character was introduced. However, like the pastry *à l'Anglaise*, this English character was not appreciated by a true Englishman:

In the evening a play was performed, the subject warlike, where most capital fighting was exhibited, with better dancing and music than I could have expected. In one of the scenes an English naval officer, in full uniform and fierce cocked hat, was introduced, who strutted across the stage, saying "Maskee can do! God damn!" whereon a loud and universal laugh ensued, the Chinese quite in an ecstasy, crying out "Truly have muchee like Englishman."⁶

The banquets were a place where the Chinese and English could communicate by observing each others' cultural manners and even poke a bit of fun at each other while maintaining a sense of respect, as this "universal laugh" implies.

In eighteenth- and nineteenth-century China, the only comparable individual who could afford similar functions was probably the emperor or high-ranking officials. The banquet given by Soo-ta-jin (Su Leng'e 蘇楞額, the minister of works) in Tianjin in the name of Emperor Jiaqing for receiving Lord Amherst's embassy on August 13, 1816, serves as a case for comparison. George Thomas Staunton, the second commissioner of the embassy, was perhaps preoccupied by whether to kowtow; during the earlier British Embassy of George Macartney in 1793, the refusal to kowtow had hurt its

diplomatic effect. In 1816, the British refused again. About the banquet, Staunton observed roughly that “the dinner was served up in courses, brought in upon neat wooden trays, exactly covering the tables, and repeated four or five times.” Clarke Abel, the chief medical officer, described the banquet in greater detail as follows:

A crowd of servants immediately entered, bringing trays containing part of the feast, which they placed on the tables. Four courses were served: the first consisting of soup, said to be composed of mares’ milk and blood; the second, of sixteen dishes of fruits and dried meats; the third, of eight basins of stewed sharks’ fins, birds’ nests, harts’ sinews, and other viands used by the Chinese for their supposed aphrodisiac virtues; and the fourth, of twelve bowls of different kinds of meat cut into small pieces, and floating in gravy.

As Abel describes it, the menu comes very close to the Manchu Han Chinese feast that became popular among high-ranking officials by the 1830s. For example, we know of a Manchu Han-Chinese feast served in Chengdu, Sichuan Province, in 1838. It consisted of sixteen dishes of fruits and dried meats, eight big dishes of pricey items including sharks’ fins and birds’ nest, eight hot dishes, two head dishes (one of these being a roasted pig), and two dim sum dishes. Altogether, the banquet included thirty-six dishes, and was comparable to Su’s banquet in the number and choice of major dishes.⁷

Regarding eating utensils, Staunton claimed that they “were enabled to use the chopsticks in the absence of the knife and fork.” However, Abel offered a different account of the same dinner. He recorded that “in addition to the usual Chinese table apparatus of chop-sticks and porcelain spoons,” they “were supplied with four pronged silver forks, curved like a scymetar [scimitar].”⁸ Staunton’s account also gives us the impression that different courses came one after another. However, unlike Hong merchants’ receptions, dinner dressed *à la mode Anglaise* did not seem to be what the Chinese cooks working in north China would have supplied.

Very little about this particular banquet can be extracted from Chinese official sources except that it was considered “a repast conferred” from the Qing government’s point of view, as also noted by Staunton. Chinese records expressed chiefly the Qing emperor’s anger against the “barbarian tributary” for the reluctance to comply with the prostrations.⁹ The British mission ended up a failure, but exchanges between Hong merchants and their foreign trading partners over the banquet table went on.

Courses and Table Etiquette

In the nineteenth century, there was a boom in the writing and publication of travel journals by European and American writers, who offer further details regarding banquets given by Hong merchants. Added to the list of Britons were the American merchants and captains who took part in China Trade since the 1780s.¹⁰ Hitherto unpublished, the journal of Bryant Parrot Tilden, the son of Captain Joseph Tilden of Boston, contains a marvelous account of the “chopstick dinner” offered by Hong merchants at Canton. Between 1815 and 1819, Bryant Parrott Tilden traveled to Canton a number of times and made his fortune there. In December 1818, Tilden was invited to a chopstick dinner by Puankhequa II (Pan Youdu 潘有度, alias Zhixiang 致祥, 1755–1820),¹¹ who succeeded his father, Puankhequa I, as the principal Hong merchant. Puankhequa II resided in Honam. Tilden recorded in his journal the circumstances leading to the reception:

I have had much pleasant intercourse with the venerated Paunkequa and this time have had considerable business with him, making purchases of silks, and teas. He lately did me a signal honor by giving a genuine Chinese *chopstick* dinner at his Honam residence leaving to me the choosing of any *seven* or *nine* or American guests for him to invite. The custom here the same as I believe it to be in some other countries, is to have on such occasions, always an odd number of persons at table. I accordingly named such gentlemen as I knew would make a pleasant party from among my friends who were not residents at Canton, which was according to (with) his particular request.

The persons invited were my friend Captain Haskell, Mr. Dorr, Mr. Welsh, Captain Townsend, and his young son and Mr. Jenks (all three from Providence, RI). Also, having first explained to Puankhequa, an accomplished Italian translator and gentlemen, Signor Martucci, who is a commercial agent of the great Mr. Paiha of Egypt, and who, merchant like, employs agents with large amounts of friends both here and in various parts of India.

The good old gentleman wrote the names of each guest in Chinese characters, and then *particularly* inquired who they were and counted their number to be sure that it was an *odd* one.

I shall minutely record the whole order and circumstances as they occurred concerning this sort of dinner entertainment, it being quite different from any other heretofore described—more so (also) because such chop stick dinners are but seldom given by the Hong merchants to foreigners.¹²

Deeply impressed by such an occasion, Tilden first noted down the preparation work done by Puankhequa II:

Early in the forenoon of the appointed day previous to which I had apprised my friends of the coming ceremony, Puankhequa called in style at my rooms attended by a few servants. Knowing who were to be the guests, he had brought red paper chops or billets of invitation for each individual, signed with his Chinese and English chop, or stamped name for me to direct them. These were then dispatched by the servants with chin' chin' compliments to be delivered from their masters particularly and separately to each of the invited gentlemen, at same time giving notice that boats would be in readiness to convey them from his Hong over to Honam at one o'clock.¹³

Then came the day when the grand dinner was finally served. Tilden carefully noted many details, as follows:

[Some time after three o'clock] Dinner having been announced, our host led the way for us to a cool hall, and pointed out our respective seats at a round table.

I was honored by being placed on his right, and Signor Martucci on his left hand, and William opposite.

At first, there was only elegant cut English glass-gilt and silver cups and goblets, wine decanters, ivory and ebony and slender chop sticks—substitutes for forks and no knives, also queer shaped Chinese silver spoons.

The customary ceremony of a chin' chin' glass of wine all round, in respectful serious manner having been observed, each guest showing the bottom of his emptied glass or goblet by requisition of Paunkeiqua: on came a splendid service of china ware fancy color painted, and gilt tureens, and large bowls filled with soups and stewed messes, together with the same style of smaller bowls—but no plates. Paunkeiqua discussed the merits and qualities of each dish or mess—and then politely requested us to follow his example and help ourselves, and now began the fun by exposing our awkwardness—we barbarians—having only chop sticks and the spout-like spoons to do it with.

We tried a while under the teaching of our amused host but without success. Captain Haskell excepted, who had learned to eat with chop sticks among the chinamen [*sic*] at Whampoa.

In attempting to bait out soup with the unfounded spoons, some of us filled the sleeves of our jackets which fortunately had been substituted for our dress cloth coats.

But Puankhequa II would not allow his guest to be embarrassed, and cutlery was always ready for their convenience. Tilden continued to note in his journal: “Finally, seeing our distress, the old gentleman ordered plates and English knives, forks, and spoons. These treacherous chop sticks are round at one end, and square at the others and we untutored barbarians ignorantly made use of either.”¹⁴ Having struggled with the dinner service, the foreign guests finally got to enjoy the meal. The journal continues:

Twenty separate courses were served during three hours in as many different services of all sorts of elegant china ware.

The messes consisted of the celebrated Bird nest soups, gelatinous food, a variety of stewed hashes, made of chopped meats small birds—cock’s combs, etc, etc. some fish, and all sorts of vegetables, and pickles, of which latter the Chinese are very fond. Ginger and pepper are plentifully used, in most of their cooking.

Not a joint of solid meat, or a whole bird of any kind, were seen on table.

We conversed freely between each change of courses, trimmed with all sorts of fancy cut vegetable and fruit pick nicks, and partook of a chin chin glass of the choicest Madeira wine, or tea all round.¹⁵

Madeira wine refers to a wine produced on the Madeira Islands, an archipelago claimed by Portugal and located in the Atlantic Ocean about 310 miles (500 km) off the coast of Africa. The wine was famous for its robust taste that matured during long voyages across the sea. Madeira was a standard port of call for ships heading to the New World or East Indies since its discovery in the fifteenth century. It is said that by the sixteenth century a well-established wine industry already existed on Madeira. Into the eighteenth century, Madeira wine’s popularity extended from the American colonies and Brazil in the New World to Great Britain, Russia, and northern Africa.¹⁶ It must have been one of the favorite gift items presented by European and American traders to the Canton Hong merchants in the eighteenth and the first half of the nineteenth centuries. Likewise, other Western spirits such as beer (卑酒, 大卑, 啤酒), brandy (罷囉地酒), claret (紅酒), and port wine (砵酒) must have been known to the Hong merchants and those Chinese who were involved in the Sino-foreign trade. Cantonese transliterations of these terms appear in the *Vocabulary of the Canton Dialect* compiled by Robert Morrison as early as 1828.¹⁷

Tilden continues by recording his observations about the table service of the occasion. The journal continues:

Natural and ornamental artificial flowers in small jars and vases were on the table placed to suit the taste of the servants at each change of courses.

Our noble host discovered and amplified in true epicurean style at each change, of messes, and then desired us to keep ourselves without further ceremony.

Between the courses the large table being entirely cleared.¹⁸

Much exchange was conducted over the dinner table. Puankhequa II asked his guests about the various countries that they had visited and the routes that they had taken as servants brought to the table more courses and wine of both Chinese and Western types. Tilden noted:

To finish off our sumptuous chop stick dinner, two courses more consisting of delicate pastry, cakes, and delicious fruits and sweetmeats, were brought on by way of dessert, with the choicest of red and white European wines.

Also a peculiar Chinese wine brought in silver vessels, and drunk warm, same as tea. Its name is Su-hing, and the flavour is not unlike that of toasted cheese. This luxury is in use only among the higher classes of mandarins, but we barbarians preferred the more cool French and Madeira wines.¹⁹

The dinner was so elaborate that it lasted for almost seven hours. Tilden did not miss the last bit of the courses and recorded that: "The ample round table being cleared for the last time at about eight and nine o' clock, sweet scented jasmine, orange, and other flowers were profusely strewed over it to admire, and play with...."²⁰

Tilden's account indicates that it was common practice at a Hong merchant's dinner party to have courses served one after another, which is still common practice at formal Cantonese banquets today.²¹ What is worth noting is that the order of these courses followed apparently that of a Western dinner. In a similar manner, Henry Charles Sirr, a barrister-at-law of Lincoln's Inn who visited Hong Kong, Canton, and Fujian in the late 1840s, noted that at a feast of an upper-class Chinese, different courses of dishes placed in porcelain of different types and shapes came one after another. Like Tilden, Sirr listed in detail the dishes of the banquet that he had attended. It is again tempting for us to classify the dishes he listed according to a

three-course menu: (1) Entrée: “salted and highly seasoned meats, of various descriptions, pounded shrimps, and other fish, moulded into the shapes of various animals, a stew of sharks’ fins, a kind of soup made from fresh water tortoise”; (2) Main course: “variously dressed poultry of every description, cut into small pieces, in the forms of animals and birds; birds’ nest soup” and “water-fowl, salted, dried and smoked fattened mandarin duck, rice bird”; and (3) Desert: “pastry and sweetmeats, all being placed in bowls; the contents of these basins were formed into the shapes of animals, birds, beasts, fishes, and flowers, colored to represent nature in a very correct manner.”²²

Similar descriptions are found in William Hunter’s *The Fan Kwae at Canton* and Water William Mundy’s *Canton and the Bogue*. Staying in Canton for a long time before the treaty days, William Hunter was a frequent guest of Canton Hong merchants. Invited by “Pwankeiqua” (probably Puankhequa III, i.e., Pan Zhengwei 潘正煒, the nephew of Puankhequa II), Hunter enjoyed “the chopstick dinner prepared by his choice cooks.” Hunter recorded in his published journal that the dinner was “served with such delicacies as birds’ nest soup, with plover’s eggs and Beche-de-Mar, curiously prepared sharks’ fins and roasted snails”; and stated that “these forming but a very small proportion of the number of courses, which ended with pastry of different sorts.”²³

At a Chinese dinner in 1874, Walter William Mundy noted that “as soon as one course was finished, a fresh one immediately took its place”; “the dinner commenced with birds’ nest soup, which is a white soup, and very glutinous; then came sharks’ fins, which you dip first of all in various sauces on the table; then plovers’ eggs; then chickens done up in different ways; claws of crayfish, and every sort of vegetable done up in as many kinds of sauces; pastry *a l’Anglaise*, which I found very difficult to get down; other kinds of sweets, and stewed pears; the whole winding up with a dessert, consisting chiefly of crystallized fruits.”²⁴

Changes in courses not only showed the affluence of Hong merchants but also offered them a chance to show off their collection of first-rate porcelain. The above-mentioned Henry Charles Sirr noticed that food was placed “in bowls, instead of dishes, but these bowls are arranged on the dinner-table with due attention to order and effect, the largest being placed in the centre; the surrounding bowls corresponding with each other accurately in size, pattern, and shape.” While the chinaware for serving the first course was antique white porcelain (a small bowl containing boiled rice and an empty bowl being placed before each guest to eat his food from), colored porcelain

and white porcelain with a four-clawed dragon design on its the milky background were used in the second and third courses respectively.²⁵ John Reeves (1774–1856), a tea inspector of the British East India Company, also noticed that “the Squire” (said to be Puankhequa’s brother) was “famed for his plants and his China ware.” “He had as large a collection of China ware, which he has an opportunity of displaying to great effect at a Chop-stick dinner, [...]”²⁶

High-quality chinaware was not the only dinner service the Canton Hong merchants could provide. English cutlery was also easily available in their residences. At these dinner parties, ivory and ebony chopsticks, sometimes tipped with silver, were placed for each foreign guest, probably not for convenience but for making a bit of fun of them. As Charles T. Downing remembered, “At each unsuccessful attempt, the hearty laugh goes round, and the worthy host usually joins in the merriment caused by jokes which he cannot understand.”²⁷ However, as Walter William Mundy noted, “But in case [the foreigners] fail to manage these satisfactorily, a sort of small pitchfork was also provided to help [them] out of the difficulty.”²⁸ As mentioned, when Puankhequa II saw Bryant Parrott Tilden’s distress about using chopsticks, he “ordered plates and English knives, forks, and spoons.” In addition to Chinese chopsticks and English cutlery, Tilden noted that “elegant cut English glasses, gilt and silver cups or goblets, wine in decanters” were also placed on the dining table at Puankhequa’s residence. In another case that Henry Charles Sirr describes, foreign guests were supplied with a knife in addition to chopsticks, and the handles of the knives “were richly carved, and composed either of jade-stone, ivory, sandal wood, or chased silver.”²⁹ The easy availability of English knives, forks, and spoons at Hong merchants’ residences was not surprising, as Canton was one of the best manufacturers of silver for export at that time.³⁰

What is also worth noting is the practice of cleaning tables entirely between courses. In addition to Tilden’s account, Walter William Mundy’s journal draws our attention to another sanitary routine that he noticed at the Hong merchants’ dinner table: “Beside each of us was placed a damp cloth to wipe away the perspiration from our faces; and this was changed once or twice during the evening.”³¹ In addition, in many other parts of China, the placing of a large number of dishes on the table at once and the presence of leftovers is a sign of the generosity of the hosts. This holds true today. After a formal dinner served in a high-quality Cantonese restaurant today, all tables are cleared and cleaned after the last course is finished. A pot of flowers is then

placed on the table to indicate the completion of the feast. It is not unreasonable to relate this modern Cantonese routine with the practices of Hong merchants' residences conducted in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

À la mode Anglaise

It is interesting to note that the phrase *à la mode Anglaise* or *à l'Anglaise*—meaning “in the English fashion”—appears twice in the passages cited above. The message is still revealing: The chefs of the Canton Hong merchants were trying to make a kind of pastry in accordance with an English style as they perceived or imagined it to be. It was not impossible for these chefs in Canton to secure knowledge of cooking Western cuisine. Some Chinese did have experience of taking part in Western feasts. When, in 1836, the new Hoppo (customs superintendent) informed the British merchants that he proposed to call on them, he was entertained by the British with a “true English breakfast” in the state dining room. But the Hoppo obviously found the “barbarous feast” unattractive. Charles T. Downing witnessed the episode and must have found it hilarious. He noted that:

Along the centre of the spacious apartment a table was placed, spread with a snow-white cloth, and covered with dishes of the greatest delicacies in season. Blancmanges, jellies, and fruits, were abundantly supplied, in addition to the more substantial viands; and, in fact, every thing necessary to form a first-rate breakfast after the English fashion.

The old man eyed the good things upon the table, and, as he had the whole of them to himself, no one presuming to take a seat, he whispered to his attendants to fetch them for him. As each dish was brought successively, and held up to his eye, he examined it very carefully all around as an object of great curiosity, and then languishingly shook his head, as a sign for it to be taken away. Thus he proceeded for a considerable time, until he had looked at every thing on the table, without finding a single article suitable to his delicate stomach.

....[The Hoppo] quietly proceeded with his examination of the exotic dainties, and when the table had been entirely ransacked, he shook his head once more in sign of disapproval, and then called for a cup of tea. The Fan-quis could not bear this; but the greater number left the room, leaving the prejudiced old Tartar to drink his national beverage by himself.³²

William Hunter's record of a letter by a Chinese speaking of a “Fankwae” dinner also hints that some ordinary Chinese people did experience Western

meals in Canton in the nineteenth century. According to Hunter's lampoon of the Chinese cooks, those dishes "in the English style" failed to entice his palate:

Judge now what tastes people possess who sit at table and swallow bowls of a fluid, in their outlandish tongue called Soo-pe [soup], and next devour the flesh of fish, served in a manner as near as may be to resemble the living fish itself. Dishes of half-raw meat are then placed at various angles of the table; these float in gravy, while from them pieces are cut with sword-like instruments and placed before the guests [...]. There followed a dish that set fire to our throats, called in the barbarous language of one by my side Ka-Le [curry], accompanied with rice which of itself was alone grateful to my taste. Then a green and white substance, the smell of which was overpowering. This I was informed was a compound of sour buffalo milk, baked in the sun, under whose influence it is allowed to remain until it becomes filled with insects, yet, the greener and more lively it is, with the more relish is it eaten. This is called Che-Sze [cheese], and is accompanied by the drinking of a muddy red fluid which foams up over the tops of the drinking cups, soils one's clothes, and is named Pe-Urh [beer]—think of that!³³

Other records also suggest that Chinese chefs not only possessed the knowledge of cooking Western food but also became probably very good cooks of Western fare. European and American sojourners in Canton usually hired Chinese cooks and servants to take care of their daily lives. Ida Preiffer was an Austrian woman who traveled to the East in the late 1840s and spent considerable time at Canton. Her observations are revealing:

The following is a tolerably correct account of the mode of life pursued by the Europeans settled here. As soon as they are up, and have drunk a cup of tea in their bed room, they take a cold bath. A little after 9 o'clock, they breakfast upon fried fish or cutlets, cold roast meat, boiled eggs, tea, and bread and butter. Every one then proceeds to his business until dinner-time, which is generally 4 o'clock.

It is worth noting that dinner in late eighteenth-century England was eaten somewhere between 3:00 and 5:00 p.m. By the 1820s and 1830s, the timing of dinner was changing to match the new daily routine. The business day in the 1850s was fixed to run from 9:00 am to 5:30 p.m., so the time for dinner fell between 7:00 and 8:00 p.m. The English expatriates in mid-nineteenth century Canton must have had the leisure to stick to the old practice, just as Puankequa II's chopstick dinner that started as early as 3:00.³⁴

Preiffer then turned to a detailed description of the content of the dinner:

The dinner is composed turtle-soup, curry, roast meat, hashes, and pastry. *All the dishes, with the exception of the curry, are prepared after the English fashion, although the cooks are Chinese* [my italics]. For dessert there is cheese, with fruit; such as pine-apples, long-yen, mangoes and lytchi. The Chinese affirm that the latter is the finest fruit in the whole world. It is about the size of a nut, and the kernel black. Long-yen is somewhat smaller, but is also white and tender, though the taste is rather watery. Neither of these fruits struck me as very good. I do not think the pine-apples are so sweet, or possessed of that aromatic fragrance which distinguishes those raised in our European greenhouses, although they are much larger.

Portuguese wines and English beer are the usual drinks—ice, broken into small pieces, and covered up with a cloth, is offered with each. The ice is rather a costly article, as it has to be brought from North America. In the evening, tea is served.³⁵

Furthermore, given the dependence of foreigners on their Chinese servants, it is no wonder that the English-speaking employers had to learn some Cantonese in order to communicate with their Cantonese chefs and compradors. Consider the following account from Samuel Wells Williams's *Easy Lessons in Chinese*, published in Macao in 1842:

Ask the comprador what he is going to get for dinner to-day; there are four guests coming here to dine.

He says he has provided crab soup, boiled groupa, shell-fish, a roast pig, cutlet chicken, mutton chop, baked potatoes, greens and eggs, hashed turnips, onions with beefsteak, sweet potatoes, orange tarts, suet pudding, custards, cheese, biscuit, fruit of two or three kinds, wines and beer.

Tell him these will be enough.³⁶

For the purpose of instructing about the native tongue, Williams translates this passage into Chinese, and each Chinese character is transliterated according to Cantonese pronunciation. This allows us to identify a few peculiar Cantonese terms specifically invented for translating English food or cooking terminology. They are: “*kat lit*” (吉烈) for “cutlet”; “*tát*” (嗒) for “tart,” and “*pò'tin*” (布顛) for “pudding”. Among these terms the character 嗒 is obviously an invented Cantonese character by adding the radical 口 (*kou* in *Hanyu Pinyin*, meaning “mouth”) to a proper Han-Chinese character to denote a novelty. It is important to note that these terms are still being used today, and the food or dishes they stand for are still Cantonese versions of food presented *à la mode Anglaise*.

Beyond Canton

The practice of entertaining foreign guests with a grand dinner party seemed to decline a few years prior to the outbreak of the First Opium War and on the subsequent collapse of the Canton Trade System. Bryant Parrott Tilden was sensitive enough to feel the change in the air. He noted in a journal that he kept during his fifth voyage to China (1833–34):

As partly before remarked, strangers do not now receive such friendly invitations from the Hong merchants, as they did some fifteen years ago. The old social conversation, and intercourse, with occasional invitations to their interesting dinner entertainments have nearly ceased, and they but seldom see us except on business; all which unfortunate state of affairs, is altogether in consequence of the frequent misunderstandings between the British and the Chinese authorities, and whenever troubles are abroad, we poor fanquis suffer all alike. Even we quiet trading Americans—though estimated as No. 1 first chop fanquis customers, are nevertheless treated “all same same” as Englishmen.³⁷

Nonetheless, if we follow the tracks of the Cantonese Hong merchants and their successors, we may realize that the uniquely Cantonese-style banquet, by then a blending of Western and Chinese tastes, appeared in newly emerged Cantonese dominated cities or ports such as Hong Kong and in San Francisco’s Chinatown.

A typical banquet held in San Francisco’s Chinatown took place in January 1868, when a new Chinese theatre, funded by Chinese capital and for Chinese dramatic companies, was inaugurated on Jackson Street.³⁸ According to the *Daily Alta California*, “as a prelude to the opening of the theatre, a grand banquet was served to one hundred invited guests at the Hang Heong Low Restaurant, No. 808 Dupont Street.” “The list of guests are [sic] made up from attachés of each of the different papers of San Francisco, the entire bench, prominent members of the bar, the army, navy, Legislature, Board of Supervisors, foreign consuls, merchants and others.” Because of the presence of American guests, the menu of the banquet seemed to be a combination of Chinese and Western services. The *Daily Alta California* reports:

The dinner was served in the same rooms in which the “Colfax Dinner” and the “Burlingame and Van Valkenburg Dinner” took place, and the bill of fare was so near a duplicate of the last that it will hardly be necessary to repeat it. Suffice it then to say that it comprised, as was intended

to comprise, seven courses each, consisting of about 20 dishes, or say 130 to 140 dishes in all, exclusive of tables at the outset, and fruits of all kinds now obtainable in the markets. Claret, Champagne and brandy of the costliest brands, cigars, cigarettes and Chinese liquors were served in profusion with every course, and the lavish hospitality of the Trustees manifested in every detail of the feast was remarkable.

From this description, then, we can infer that in San Francisco the host of a Cantonese banquet dinner provided both Chinese and Western spirits, echoing the practices in the pre-treaty era of Canton. The following description of the San Francisco feast might further remind us of those hosted by Puankhequa II:

We could not, if we had space, describe a tenth part of the various dishes set before the guests. From bird-nest soup to water chestnuts and chicken tit-bits fried in batter, nothing whatever usually set before guests at such an entertainment was omitted, and everything appeared to be of the finest quality. Chopsticks of ivory were provided for the guests, but knives and forks were also set on for those who could not swing the food with the sticks.³⁹

By the late nineteenth century, Cantonese merchants all over the world must have been accustomed to offering standard and elaborate banquets to entertain foreign guests. When the Duke and Duchess of Connaught visited Hong Kong in 1890, the Chinese community of the colony was “desirous of testifying their good wishes towards the Royal Visitors” with an entertainment that consisted of a Chinese dinner and a dramatic performance. What is particularly worth citing is the full menu included in a current account of the event. It runs:

Menu

- | | |
|--|--|
| 1. Birds' Nest soup | 12. Larded Quail |
| 2. Stewed Shell-fish | 13. Sliced Teal |
| 3. Cassia Mushrooms | 14. Peking Mushrooms |
| 4. Crab & Sharks' Fins | 15. Roast Pheasant (<i>À L'Anglaise</i>) |
| 5. Roast Beef (<i>À L'Anglaise</i>) | 16. Winter Mushrooms |
| 6. Roast Chicken and Hams | 17. Roast Fowl & Ham |
| 7. Pigeons' Eggs | 18. Bêche-de-mer |
| 8. "Promotions" (Boiled Quail, & c.) | 19. Sliced Pigeon |
| 9. Fried Marine Delicacies | 20. Snipe (<i>À L'Anglaise</i>) |
| 10. Roast Turkey & Ham (<i>À L'Anglaise</i>) | 21. Macaroni (<i>À La Peking</i>) |
| 11. Fish Gills | |

Table Dishes

Cold Sausages, Prawns, Preserved Eggs
Liver, &c., &c., &c.

Fruits

Preserved Apples, Citrons, Tietsin Pears, Pomegranates,
Carambolas, Greengages, Pine-apples
&c., &c., &c.

Pastry

Sweet Lotus Soup, Almond Rice Custard
&c., &c., &c.

Champagne (Krug), Claret, Orange wine, Rice Wine,
Rose Dew, "Optimus" Wine, Pear Wine⁴⁰

Doesn't this menu astonish us in its suggestion of the extent to which the banquets given by the Canton Hong merchants more than a century ago influenced the subsequent practice?

Concluding Remarks

More research has to be done before more solid conclusions can be drawn about the possible connection between the table etiquette promoted by Hong merchants and the later Cantonese cuisine tradition. We are certain that until very recently many standard dining practices that are central to Cantonese lives were unknown in most parts of China. These practices include serving dishes course by course, completely clearing the table between courses, changing dinner services (such as plates and dishes) between courses, and distributing food to individuals' plates.⁴¹ Furthermore, food terms such as 嚙 (tart), 戟 (cake) and 批 (pie) have become so much a part of the Cantonese vernacular that people have almost forgotten their probable English origins. If it is true that the Hong merchants were the pioneers in blending Cantonese and European cuisines and dining etiquette, the next question we have to address is how these practices were popularized and became part of the Cantonese food culture. One of the keys to this question will be the

knowledge and activities of the region's cooks and servants. All in all, the stories of the Canton Hong merchants remind us that "fusion" cuisine is not a new invention, and that their homemade global recipes should be considered a crucial part of the "pre-history" of twentieth-century Cantonese cuisine.

57. Murray A. Rubinstein, *The Origins of the Anglo-American Missionary Enterprise in China, 1807–1848* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1996).
58. Downs, 292.
59. Davids, *American Diplomatic and Public Papers*, Vol. 1, Documents 48–51.
60. Hunter, 146–7.
61. Forbes, 152–3, 155.

Chapter 5

1. This article is an outcome of the research project entitled “Jindai Sheng-Gang-Ao Dazhong Wenhua yu Dushi Bianqian” [Popular Culture and Urban Transformation of Modern Canton, Hong Kong, and Macau], granted by the Ministry of Education, PRC, for the Centre for Historical Anthropology, Sun Yat-sen University (Project No. 2009JJD770032). The author would like to thank the two anonymous reviewers for their comments and suggestions.
2. In 1664, the French made their first organized attempts to enter the trade of the Indian Ocean with the foundation of the French East India Company. They maintained a low profile for the greater part of the seventeenth century. See Lakshmi Subramanian, ed., *The French East India Company and the Trade of the Indian Ocean* (New Delhi, India: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, 1999), “Introduction.” The Swedish came even later. The 1732 departure of the *Fredericus R.S.*, the first vessel staffed and armed by the newly established Swedish East India Company, marks the beginning of regular relations between Sweden and India and more particularly China. See Paul Hallberg and Christian Koninckx, eds., *A Passage to China: Colin Campbell's Diary of the First Swedish East India Company Expedition to Canton, 1732–33* (Göteborg, Royal Society of Arts and Sciences, 1996).
3. Weng Eang Cheong, *The Hong Merchants of Canton: Chinese Merchants in Sino-Western Trade* (London: Curzon Press, 1997), 9–11. For a thorough discussion of the Canton Trade System, see Paul A. Van Dyke, *The Canton Trade: Life and Enterprise on the China Coast, 1700–1845* (Hong Kong University Press, 2005).
4. For a short biography of Puankhequa I and Puankhequa II, see Ch'en Kuotung Anthony, “Pan Youdu (Pan Qiguan er shi): Yiwei chenggong de yanghang shangren” [Pan Youdu (Puankhequa II): A Successful Hong Merchant], in his *Dongya Haiyu Yiqian nian* [A Thousand-Year History of the East Asian Waters] (Taipei: Caituan Faren Cao Yonghe Wenjiao Jijinhui, Yuanliu Chuban Shiye Gufen Youxian Gongsì, 2005), 419–65.
5. William Hickey, *Memoirs of William Hickey 1749–1775*, ed. Alfred Spencer (London, Hurst & Blackett, Ltd., Paternoster House, E.C., 1913), Vol. 1, 223–4.
6. ———, 224.
7. See Zhao Rongguang, *Man-Han Quanxi Yuanliu Kaoshu* (Beijing: Kunlun chubanshe, 2003), 135–6.
8. For Staunton's account, see George Thomas Staunton, *Notes of Proceedings and Occurrences during the British Embassy to Peking in 1816* (1824 by Havant Press; London: Routledge, 2000), 49–50. For Abel's account, see Clarke Abel, *Narrative*

- of a Journey in the Interior of China, and of a Voyage to and from that Country, in the Years 1816 and 1817; containing an account of the most interesting transactions of Lord Amherst's Embassy to the Court of Peking, and Observations on the Countries which is visited* (London: Printed for Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme, and Brown, Paternoster-Bow, 1818), 84.
9. See, for example, Gugong Bowuyuan, ed., *Qingdai Waijiao Shiliao* [Jiaqing chao] (Beijing: Gugong Bowuyuan, 1932), Vol. V.
 10. For a groundbreaking study of the American traders in Canton in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, see Jacques M. Downs, *The Golden Ghetto: The American Commercial Community at Canton and the Shaping of American China Policy, 1784–1844* (Bethlehem, PA: Leigh University Press; London: Associated University Press, 1997).
 11. In this essay, the major reference I use to identify the Hong merchants is Liang Jiabin, *Guangdong shisanhang kao* (1937; Guangzhou: Guangdong Renmin Chubanshe, 1999).
 12. Tilden 7 (Ship Canton, Third Voyage of BPT to China, 1818–1819), 39–40; in the manuscript, collection of the Philips Library, Peabody Essex Museum, Salem, Massachusetts. Throughout the journal, spellings and punctuations are not strictly consistent. In most cases Puankehequa is spelled “Paunkeiqua.” The italics indicate Tilden’s own emphasis.
 13. ———, 40–1.
 14. ———, 43–4.
 15. ———, 45.
 16. For a brief history of Madeira wine, see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Madeira_wine (accessed June 26, 2009).
 17. Robert Morrison, *Vocabulary of the Canton Dialect* [廣東省土話字彙] (Macao: Printed at the Honorable East India Company’s Press, 1828).
 18. Tilden 7, 45–6.
 19. ———, 48.
 20. ———, 48–9.
 21. However, whether this practice should be considered “Western” needs more documentation. Harvey Levenstein suggests “serving *à la Russe* had swept the dining table of the British and French elites in the 1850s and 1860s and became fashionable in the United States in the 1870s. Instead of placing a goodly number of dishes on the table at once, with the host carving and serving them while guests helped themselves from other dishes placed around the table, a butler carved and served each course at a sideboard, arranging it attractively on individual plates or platters from which servants would then serve the guests.” See Harvey Levenstein, *Revolution at the Table: The Transformation of the American Diet* (New York and Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1988), 16.
 22. Henry Charles Sirr, *China and the Chinese: Their Religion, Character, Customs, and Manufactures* (London: Wm. S. Orr & Co., 1844), 155–8.

23. William Hunter, *The Fan Kwae at Canton: Before Treaty Days 1825–1844* (London 1882), 40. Hunter noted that the best quality of birds' nests was brought from Java and that this "whimsical luxury" was worth 4,000 Spanish dollars per picul of 133 1/3 pounds.
24. Walter William Mundy, *Canton and the Bogue: The Narrative of an Eventful Six Months in China* (London, Samuel Tinsley, 1875), 152, 154.
25. Sirr, 155, 157.
26. John Reeves's letter to Joseph Banks (27 December 1812) from Canton, *Banks Correspondence*, manuscript, collection of the British Library.
27. Charles T. Downing, *The Fan-Qui or Foreigner in China*. 3 vols. (London: Henry Colburn, Publisher, 1840), Vol. 3, 119.
28. Mundy, 152.
29. Sirr, 156.
30. See Neville John Irons, *Silver & Carving of the Old China Trade* (London: House of Fans, 1983).
31. Mundy, 152–3.
32. Charles T. Downing, *The Fan-Qui or Foreigner in China*, Vol. 3, 82–6. Downing happened to be in Canton on the day when the new Hoppo was installed in his office, and had the opportunity of seeing him attending the feast.
33. William Hunter, *Bits of Old China* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, & Co., 1885) 38–9.
34. See Roy Strong, *Feast: A History of Grand Eating* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2002), 291–2. One of my reviewers suggests that in pre-electricity times, dinner had to be started earlier so that good food could be seen in proper daylight. But Puankhequa II's chopstick dinner did not end until 9:00 or 10:00 p.m. One can imagine that a luxurious residence such as his must have been equipped with enough lanterns and candles to light up the later courses.
35. Ida Preiffer, *A Woman's Journey Round the World* (London, 1850), 96
36. Samuel Wells Williams, *Easy Lessons in Chinese* [拾綴大成] (Macau: Xiangshan Shuyuan, 1842), 96.
37. Tilden 7, 109.
38. For more details about this Chinese theatre, see May-bo Ching, "A Preliminary study of the theatres built by Cantonese merchants in the late Qing," *Frontiers of History in China*, 5.2 (2010).
39. "Inauguration of the New Chinese Theatre 'Hing Chuen Yuen'; Grand Banquet at the Hang Heong Low Restaurant," *Daily Alta California* (January 28, 1868).
40. *The Visit of the Royal Highness: The Duke & Duchess of Connaught to Hong Kong*, May 21, 1890 (Government Records Service, PRO, Hong Kong).
41. In Gansu Province, as a consequence of the outbreak of SARS in 2003, there was a promotion of "food distribution practice" (*fencan zhi*) that looks so atypical that the *People's Daily* (Overseas edition) pays a brief tribute to it. See the illustrated report of *People's Daily* (Overseas edition), June 14, 2003.