

# The Flow of Turtle Soup from the Caribbean via Europe to Canton, and Its Modern American Fate

**Abstract:** This article traces a transnational history of turtle soup through the flow of species, tastes, culinary techniques, and food technology across three continents over more than three centuries. It shows how the species, nested in the Caribbean, turned from a source of flesh for transatlantic seamen in the seventeenth century to a status dish for upper-class Europeans in the eighteenth century. The pleasure of eating turtle soup was underpinned by exotic references to “the West India Way” and national labels such as “the English fashion.” Such notions circulated via printed media across a variety of genres, constructing tastes that only a minority could afford; the less privileged consumed “mock turtle soup,” made with calf’s head at best. Around the same

time, turtle soup in “the English fashion” was reproduced in Asia along with the trading activities and colonial endeavors of the British Empire. Into the second half of the nineteenth century, with the invention of canned food, the once upper-class dish became widely popularized in the United States. The disastrous result was that the sea turtle hunt evolved from occasional seizure to outright massacre, which did not come to a halt until the 1970s, when the practices were outlawed.

**Keywords:** turtle soup, Canton, England, United States, taste, smell

IN 1850, AUSTRIAN voyager Ida Pfeiffer published a popular travelogue of her recent around-the-world journey, charting her course from Vienna to Rio de Janeiro, Macao to Hong Kong, Singapore to Ceylon, across the Indian subcontinent, and through Persia and Asia Minor back to Europe. This dense tome—totaling more than 300 pages—carefully documents her adventures in and between these far-flung destinations, offering a privileged view into distant lands through commentary on a range of topics such as architecture and design, the appearances and habits of local residents, and the staging of feasts and public festivals. Pfeiffer found herself astonished by European extravagances in south China. Having arrived in Canton during July 1847, only a few years after the First Opium War, she took careful note of local practices, vividly describing the quotidian lives of European expatriates in south China, including daily breakfast and dinner regimes:

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.

The dinner is composed of *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, with a brown verrucous outside; the edible part is white and tender, 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. (Pfeiffer preface 1850, pub. 1852?: 96)

Pfeiffer’s commentary reveals that Chinese cooks employed by Europeans in Canton in those years were able to cook dishes “after the English fashion,” at least “English” enough to be so endorsed by a European. It also suggests that the curry cooked on that occasion was not of the “English” style, although “curry” could only be “English” because the very word and idea of a curry was imposed by the British on India’s food culture (Collingham 2006: 115–25; Maroney 2011: 125). While it would be no less interesting to explore what non-English curry would have been like, how a full English breakfast might have been cooked, or why Chinese fruits looked so unappealing to

an Austrian in those days, I focus here on the global narrative of the “English fashioned” turtle soup. I will show how the appearance of turtle soup on an English dining table in nineteenth-century south China resulted from culinary flows and transformations in taste across time and space. This circulation traces shifts in culinary cultures and discourses on edibility across three continents, over a period of more than three centuries. Today, most Europeans and Americans would perhaps find turtle soup exotic and objectionable. But three hundred years ago this was not the case. Europeans, and the English especially, were keen on turtle soup; and the Chinese found this English dish to be tolerably edible. A historical examination of the subject, with specific attention to class, status, and the politics of taste, will be helpful in dismantling the East–West dichotomy in culinary cultures.

While “turtle soup” may have once seemed too trivial a subject for meaningful discussion, recent studies of this peculiar dish can serve as a useful entry point into questions concerning cuisine, class, and modernity. In the introduction to the edited volume *Dining on Turtles* (2007), Diane Kirkby, Tanja Luckins, and Barbara Santich spotlight a turtle feast that was enjoyed by a group of Royal Society gentlemen in London in 1783. They remind their readers that dining on turtle could be an elaborate ritual of prestige and taste which “required systems of trade and communication, transport, monetary exchange and knowledge of cooking techniques that came together at that historical moment to create that particular experience” (Kirkby and Luckins 2007: 3). While none of the essays collected in this volume takes up turtle soup specifically, other scholars describe how turtle soup was tied to forms of cultural identity. In “The Politics of the Turtle Feast,” historian India Mandelkern (2013) shows how senses of English national identity became attached to and detached from the dish. “From calipash to calipee,” she writes, “the green sea turtle was without doubt the most expensive, status-laden, and morally contested feat of eighteenth-century English cuisine” (para. 1). While my approach supports Mandelkern’s argument with further documentation, it also extends the discussion both spatially and chronologically, by tracing the flow of turtle soup between Europe, nineteenth-century China, and twentieth-century America.

My use of the term “flow” here is intended to tie together a number of themes that will be familiar to food scholars, namely cuisine, class, and identity. The geographic mobility of foodways—in this case, the flow of turtle from the Caribbean to Europe and the flow of turtle soup recipes from England to south China—resulted from the movement of people between West and East. An upward mobility of culinary forms and changes in regional identity accompanied these migrations.

As I show below, cooks used the technique of dressing the turtle the “West India Way” in order to prepare turtle soup “after the English fashion.” In time, a downward mobility of these culinary forms ensued; this article of haute cuisine became imaginable for the middle class with the rise of print media and the popularization of domestic and medical science; and it became feasible with the development of food science. Information flow enhances imagination, if not consumption, right away.

Much like curry (Maroney 2011), turtle soup was an Empire food: both dishes supposedly originated from the Indies, turtle soup from the West Indies and curry from the East Indies; both eventually acquired an English identity; and both were consumed as class markers by members of the East India Company alongside other European dishes and indigenous foods. Overseas expatriates upheld turtle soup’s national identity and class connotations, although the classed English identity borne by both curry and turtle soup might have had little significance to an Indian or a Chinese cook, just as long as they knew how to make them to satisfy their masters. But did the curry and turtle soup after the English fashion taste good to an Indian or a Chinese cook? We hardly know. While issues of cuisine, identity, and class are widely engaged by food scholars, the challenge for the food historian lays in determining how to recover senses of taste, smell, and warmth from centuries past. With the increasing availability of searchable digitized source materials, we might find it easier to answer some of these questions than ever before.<sup>1</sup>

## From the Caribbean to Europe

Recipes for turtle soup called for the use of the green sea turtle (*chelonian mydas*), a species active in tropical and subtropical oceans. Green turtles have long been part of the diets of indigenous peoples in the Caribbean (Goucher 2014: 18–19), and it is likely that the coastal Miskito taught the English to appreciate this marine giant (Parsons 2000: 569). Many scholars have shown how the story of turtle soup can be traced back to the Age of Exploration. C. Anne Wilson (1974) notes that turtle soup was an important invention along with the European “discovery” of the New World. Transatlantic seamen found the green turtle they seized in the tropical waters of the Caribbean (“West India”) to be a valuable source of edible flesh. Given the gigantic size of the turtle, seamen would have a significant quantity of meat to consume throughout their voyage, as long as the creature could be kept alive. When shipwrecks occurred, the company of a green turtle meant that dozen of humans would have something to eat, increasing their chances of survival (Wilson 1974).

Geographer James J. Parsons notes that while turtle was enjoyed by the West Indian white aristocracy in the seventeenth

and eighteenth centuries, it was also a food of the enslaved in the West Indian colonies, alongside Newfoundland's salt cod. But the Europeans who first came into contact with the green turtle held different opinions on this new resource. Whereas the Spanish and Portuguese seemed for the most part uninterested in turtle despite their early encounters with it, the late-arriving English were most outspoken in their praise of this sea creature's virtues. The Dutch seemed to have been rather indifferent to turtle, possibly due to their close associations with the Malays who avoided the meat. As rivalry between Spain and England intensified, Spanish disdain for what the English considered to be one of the finest foods heightened. The French were interested in the creature but they found the supply was limited; most of the best turtling grounds were under English control (Parsons 2000: 569–70). This probably explains why, among the many seafaring Europeans, it was the English who adored turtle soup the most, and why, as I will show below, turtle soup was made “English” rather than “Spanish” or “French.”

The Royal Family and the English aristocracy, including members of the Royal Society, were some of the first Europeans to taste this Caribbean reptile at home. Mandelkern notes that although a turtle was reportedly delivered to and enjoyed by the Royal Family in 1728, the elevation of turtle to haute cuisine did not happen until the early 1750s with the wide circulation of Richard Walter's account of Baron George Anson's voyage to the Caribbean. In 1754, Lord Anson presented the gentlemen of both White's Chocolate House and the Royal Society's dining club with sea turtle. From that point onward turtle feasts became an object of quasi-patriotic luxury and excitement for communal consumption among London elites (Mandelkern 2013: para. 12).

For the vast majority who had neither the experience of transcontinental voyages nor the status to access turtle in Europe, turtle-eating could only be imagined by reading journals and travelogues. One of the earliest accounts of turtle-eating on a sea voyage can be found in Thomas Trapham's *A Discourse of the State of Health in the Island of Jamaica*, published in 1679, which describes the sea turtle as “a strange as well as useful creature, vastly answering necessity in living through its quantity of convenient food, as well as gratifying the curious palate with extraordinary delicacy, exceeding that of marrow and fatness in any other creature I know of” (Trapham 1679: 61). Jean-Baptiste Labat, a French Jesuit priest who lived and traveled in the Caribbean between 1694 and 1705, described local culinary practices including a marinade for roasted turtle made of lemon, chili, cloves, pepper, and salt (Goucher 2014: 32–33). Combining Old World with New World spices, this Spanish-created pickling marinade produced in the Caribbean

Creole kitchen might well be the culinary prototype of the technique for “dressing a turtle the West India Way.” Meanwhile, accounts of turtle-eating in fiction entertained a new generation of readers. The 1719 edition of the legendary *Robinson Crusoe* narrates how seamen relied on turtle eggs for survival after a shipwreck. In a later edition this particular plot was elaborated with a note to teach readers how to cook turtle soup (Defoe 1815: 268–69).

The increasing number of West India voyages together with the first taste of sea turtle among the elites coincided with the massive publication of cookery books in Europe and the United States. “Dressing a turtle the West India Way” became a must-have item in reputable cookery books published in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. For instance, the bestselling *The Art of Cookery Made Plain and Easy*, compiled by “Mrs. Glasse” (Hannah Glasse), contains many turtle-related entries after its first publication in 1747. In her careful comparison of the different editions, C. Anne Wilson finds that the technique for “Dressing turtle the West India Way,” which first appears in its fourth (1751) edition, is a prelude to making turtle soup; whereas the method for making “mock turtle soup” is introduced seven years later in the sixth (1758) edition (Wilson 1974: 225). By 1805, when a subsequent US edition came out, the popularity of the book was declining. Revised and abridged from previous editions, the US version keeps the entries of “Dressing a turtle the West India Way.” For current readers to appreciate how this dish might possibly be cooked in places as far away as nineteenth-century Canton, a full citation of the recipe is needed here. Contemporary readers are probably stunned by such lengthy accounts and may find it hard to follow, should they ever want to. This is, however, a mirror of the writing style of eighteenth-century cookery book authors who published their works under the name “Mrs. So & So”:

To dress a Turtle the West India Way

Take the turtle out of the water the night before you dress it, and lay it on its back, in the morning cut its head off, and hang it up by its hind-fins for it to bleed till the blood is all out, then cut the callapee, which is the belly, round, and raise it up; cut as much meat to it as you can, throw it into spring-water with a little salt, cut the fins off, and scald them with the head; take off all the scales, cut all the white meat out, and throw it into the spring-water and salt, the guts and lungs must be cut out, wash the lungs very clean from the blood, then take the guts and maw and slit them open, wash them very clean, and put them on to boil in a large pot of water, and boil them till they are tender, then take off the inside skin, and cut them in pieces of two or three inches long; have ready a good veal broth made as follows: take one large, or two small knuckles of veal, and put them on in three gallons of water, let it boil, skim it well, season with turnips, onions, carrots, and cellery [*sic*], and a good large bundle of sweet herbs, boil it till it is half wasted, then strain it off. Take the fins, and put them in a stew-pan, cover them with

veal broth, season with an onion chopped fine, all sorts of sweet herbs chopped very fine, half an ounce of cloves and mace, half a nutmeg beat very fine, stew it very gently till tender; then take the fins out, and put in a pint of Madeira wine, and stew it for fifteen minutes, beat up the whites of six eggs with the juice of two lemons; put the liquor in and boil it up, run it through a flannel bag. Make it hot, wash the fins very clean, and put them in. Take a piece of butter and put at the bottom of a stew-pan, put your white meat in and sweat it gently till it is almost tender. Take the lungs and heart, and cover them with veal broth, with an onion, herbs, and spice, as for the fins, stew them till tender, take out the lungs strain the liquor off, thicken it, and put in a bottle of Madeira wine, season with Cayenne pepper, and salt pretty high; put in the lungs, and white meat stew them up gently for fifteen minutes, have some force-meat balls made out of the white part instead of veal, as for Scotch collops, if any eggs, scald them; if not, take twelve hard yolks of eggs, made into egg-balls; have your calapash or deep shell done round the edges with paste, season it in the inside with Cayenne pepper and salt, and a little Madeira wine, bake it half an hour, then put in the lungs and white meat, force meat, and eggs, over, and bake it half an hour. Take the bones, and three quarts of veal broth, seasoned with an onion, a bundle of sweet herbs, two blades of mace, stew it an hour, strain it through a sieve, thicken it with flour and butter, put in half a pint of Madeira wine, stew it half an hour, season with Cayenne pepper and salt to your liking: this is the soup. Take the callapee, run your knife between the meat and shell, and fill it full of force-meat, season it all over with sweet herbs chopped fine, a shalot [*sic*] chopped, Cayenne pepper and salt, and a little Madeira wine, put a paste round the edge, and bake it an hour and a half. Take the guts and maw, put them in a stew-pan, with a little broth, a bundle of sweet herbs, two blades of mace beat fine, thicken with a little butter rolled in flour, stew them gently for half an hour, season with Cayenne pepper and salt, beat up the yolks of two eggs in half a pint of cream, put it in, and keep stirring it one way till it boils up; then dish them up as follows:

Calapee.

Fricasee. Soup. Fins.

Callapash.

The fins eat fine when cold put by in the liquor. (Glasse 1805: 227–29)

We may question the practicality of these cookery books. In the making of turtle soup in those days, the most difficult part was probably securing a whole turtle, fresh enough to be processed. The Royal Society club's minutes, as noted by Mandelkern, record their failure to obtain a suitable turtle, as it happened "to die as the ship came up the Channel" (Mandelkern 2013: paras. 14–15). Like journals and travelogues, cookery books helped enrich the culinary imagination among the literate class rather than serving as a practical guide. Jack Goody (1982) suggests that if cuisine is dichotomized into "high" and "low" in daily discourse as well as in analytical terms, higher cuisine often incorporates and transforms what, from the national point of view, is the regional food of peasants and the cooking of exotic foreigners. He remarks that "in terms of class and cuisine, the higher in the hierarchy, the wider the contacts, the broader the view" (Goody 1982: 105). To local residents in the Caribbean green turtle was part of their regular diets and a cheap item easily available in daily markets (Phillippo 1876: 19). In Europe, the

green turtle became a species remote and exotic enough to be incorporated into high cuisine. We do not know how European seamen cooked sea turtle given their limited ingredients and utensils on voyage, and yet the English cookery book successfully transforms the casual cooking into an attractive foreign dish by adding the label "West India Way." Such a broad geographical connotation is vague, yet also exotic and remote enough to vault this dish into European high cuisine.

## A Status Marker

Turtle soup gradually became a status marker in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The label "West India" was subsequently replaced by that of the "English fashion." Those who had the chance to taste it would have been proud of sharing such experiences with others. Meanwhile, the dish became more accessible to the middle class. The "civic banquets" held by London mayors provided one occasion for wider exposure. Before the eighteenth century turtle soup was unknown at such "civic banquets," and the favorite dish was an eel preparation (Anon. 1844: 344; Timbs 1859: 31; Pennell 1897–98: 439). By the mid-nineteenth century, sea turtle, with its large quantity of flesh, fully replaced eels to become the star of the event. One American visitor, invited to a Mansion-House "civic banquet" by the mayor of London in the early 1860s, gave a detailed and sarcastic description of what he observed:

[T]he soup, of course, on this occasion, was turtle, of which, in accordance with immemorial custom, each guest was allowed two platefuls, in spite of the other wise immitigable law of table-decorum. Indeed, judging from the proceedings of the gentlemen near me, I surmised that there was no practical limit, except the appetite of the guests and the capacity of the soup-tureens . . . . It is one of those orthodox customs which people follow for half a century without knowing why, to drink a sip of rum-punch, in a very small tumbler, after the soup. (Hawthorne 1863: 207)

Turtle soup remained a status marker among the European and American upper and middle classes until at least the first decade of the twentieth century. The presence of turtle soup on menus frequently denoted the quality of taverns in London. The London Tavern, which often appeared in Charles Dickens's novels, was "famous for its turtle soup, the turtles being kept alive in large tanks, and as many as two tons were seen swimming in the vat at one time" (Matz 1922: 69). Reportedly "the usual allowance at what is called a Turtle-Dinner, is 6lb. live weight per head. At the Spanish Dinner, at the City of London Tavern, in 1808 four hundred guests attended, and 2,500 lb. of turtle were consumed," and "for the Banquet at Guildhall, on Lord Mayor's Day, November 9th, 250 tureens of turtle are provided" (Timbs 1859: 31). Any customer who

had a turtle and did not want to dress it at their own home could send it to the Albion, the London Tavern, or Birch; sufficient soup would be sent back for three or four parties (ibid.: 32). Another tavern, situated on No. 129 Leadenhall Street in London, was especially famous for its turtle and hence named “The Ship and Turtle.” A 1905 travel handbook boasts how “The Ship and Turtle” showed “live turtles on view in the aquarium” (Baedeker 1905: 20), much like we find at many seafood restaurants in Hong Kong and in many other parts of south China today. A business traveler to London, the son of an Edinburgh landlord, saw nothing comparable to his beloved Edinburgh. He found the food in London badly cooked and the service at dinner even worse. Yet he did not find it so difficult to fall into the English habit of hearty eating. He enjoyed the turtle soup in London so much that he “ate seven plates of calipee, besides about three of the fins” (Constable 1874: 507).

Turtle soup after the “English fashion” eventually spread to the Continent. Visiting the Tuileries Gardens in Paris in 1816, a Welsh spectator saw Louis XVIII and found him “more like a Turtle than anything else” and showed “external evidence of his great affection for Turtle soup” (Adeane and Grenfell 1907: 304). This is almost certainly a mockery of the French monarch by a liberal in the post-Revolutionary days when the after-effect of the Reign of Terror could still be felt throughout France. Although turtle was clearly an English dish for the French (Parsons 2000: 570), it seems that the French tried to outshine the English by inventing their own recipes. In the tenth (1829) edition of an English translation of a French cookery book, the author claims that “*La Tortue*” is a “receipt most carefully revised” whereas the “Mock Turtle” is after the “English Fashion” (Ude 1829: 56–61).

Across the Atlantic a similar craze set in on the East Coast. A caterer in Salem near Boston published an advertisement in November 1820 in a local paper stating that “the subscriber will issue from his house in Chesnut-street [*sic*], on Tuesday and Wednesday next, at from 12 to 1 o’ clock, SOUP made from a superior fat Turtle, weighing over 200 wt. His old customers and the public will be supplied as usual at 50 cts per quart” (Brooks 1886: 151). An essay describing the streets of New York notes:

Along Broadway, as well as in many of the streets that branch from it in the lower part of the city, various characteristic trade-signs are to be seen. . . .

Affixed to the door-posts of restaurants, shells of the green turtle are often used as signs, with the inscription on them, in gilt letters, “Turtle soup and steaks every day.” Indeed, the living turtle itself may fairly be reckoned among the signs, large ones being frequently exposed on the door-steps or floors of restaurants, with slips of paper on their

heaving bosoms announcing that they are to be served up at some stated time. (Shanly 1870: 530)

And like his London counterparts, the New York mayor’s reception in 1836 featured this dinner-table: “turtle soup, turbot, grouse (this is the first day for shooting them), and a great variety of pine-apples and peaches, were among the varieties, and the wines were capital” (Tuckerman 1889: 220).

In the nineteenth century the very term “turtle soup” became synonymous with deliciousness in English literature. The dish became so prevalent that many used it as a point of comparison to describe other lesser known culinary items. For instance, various authors used turtle soup as an analogy to help English readers imagine what the Chinese bird’s nest soup was like (China Imperial Maritime Customs 1884: 136; Robertson-Scott 1900: 104; Ball 1900: 73). A Swedish tourist who visited the United States in the 1860s wrote how gumbo was a delicacy that was cooked to perfection only in New Orleans, and used turtle soup to help the reader understand why gumbo was worth seeking out: “the crown of all the savory and remarkable soups in the world—a regular elixir of life of the substantial kind. He who has once eaten gumbo may look down disdainfully upon the most genuine turtle soup” (Anon. 1853: 672).

## From Real to Mock, and then Canned

To appeal to a rising middle class, cookery books published in the nineteenth century introduced a more feasible and economical way for readers to have a taste of turtle soup. The method of making a “Mock Turtle” was probably introduced in view of such demands. In this case, turtle is substituted by a large calf’s head with the skin on (Glasse 1805: 227–31). Calf’s head soup could not have been a new invention in the nineteenth century, but the new practice of calling calf’s head “mock turtle” must have resulted from the increasing popularity of turtle soup. It is said that “mock-turtle soup was known to our ancestors long before they made acquaintance with real turtle. The medieval gourmands delighted in calf’s-head broth, whose thick and lubricous liquor was loaded with strips of the gelatinous viand” (Jeaffreson 1875: 317).

The 1860s edition of Mary Randolph’s *The Virginia Housewife Or, Methodical Cook* (1st edition 1824, US) converts Hannah Glasse’s recipe for turtle soup into plain language and introduces the methods for making turtle soup and mock turtle (calf’s head) soup under the category “soup.” Randolph suggests that “if you have curry powder, it will give a higher flavour to both soup and turtle, than spice,” and reminds her

readers making mock turtle soup with calf's head that they should "take the eyes out carefully" as "the eyes are a great delicacy" (Randolph 1860: 22). The suggested addition of curry powder is noteworthy; by this time, curry powder had gradually moved out of East India Company circles and become more fully incorporated into English cuisine (Maroney 2011: 129–30).

Other cookery publications continued to build on or modify Hannah Glasse's and Mary Randolph's works.<sup>2</sup> Mock turtle soup appears more frequently in the mid- and late nineteenth-century cookery books, likely because it was much more affordable to the middle-class families who wanted to upgrade their "little dinners" with "elegance and economy," as suggested by the title of Mary Hooper's book—*Little Dinners: How to Serve Them with Elegance and Economy*. The cookery book writers of this later period offer even cheaper alternatives. Mrs. Margaret Dods recommends that "a cheaper and very excellent Mock Turtle Soup may be made of calf's feet and cow-heels gently stewed" (Dods 1826: 84). Mary Hooper states that it would be "expensive if the calf's head had to be bought to make it, but if made from the liquor in which calf's head has been boiled will be moderate" (Hooper 1874: 125). A. G. Payne introduces an alternative way of making mock turtle soup from pig's head, although "the difficulty is to get rid of the fat" which makes the soup always "have a slightly greasy taste, but is still very excellent" (Payne 1882: 220–21).<sup>3</sup>

Further popularization of turtle soup was made possible with advancements in food science and technology. The canning industry, greatly expanded in the mid-nineteenth century, turned this communal-kitchen-made dish into a factory-mass-produced profitable commodity. Here again, the printing presses blew the trumpet before such products were widely available. Isabella Beeton's *The Book of Household Management* states that "when live turtle is dear, many cooks use the tinned turtle, which is killed when caught, and preserved by being put in hermetically-sealed canisters, and so sent over to England" (Beeton 1861: 100). Beeton's approach, echoing her late nineteenth-century contemporaries, represents a shift in language, paving the way for a new genre of "home economics," "household management," and "domestic science" encyclopedias. Thus Beeton's recommendation of using tinned turtle is supported by a careful discussion of the cost of green turtle and a scientific description of the creature illustrated with a diagram. She writes: "the price of live turtle ranges from 8d. to 2s. per lb., according to supply and demand. . . . The cost of a tin, containing 2 quarts, or 4 lbs., is about 2 pounds, and for a small one, containing the green fat, 7s. 6d. From these about 6 quarts of good soup may be made" (Beeton 1861: 100). Numbers after numbers. Recipes with costs and ingredients

calculated as accurately as possible. That is what modern home economics was coming to be about.

The substantial boom of the turtle-canning industry commenced about ten years later. According to the *Bulletin of the United States Fish Commission*, the canning of green turtle in the United States first began in 1869 on the coast of Texas at the beef-packing plants located on Aransas Bay. Later a small factory was established at Fulton on the same bay, using about 1,000 turtles annually, weighing 250,000 pounds, and preparing 40,000 two-pound cans of turtle meat and 800 two- and three-pound cans of turtle soup (Bowers 1899: 539).<sup>4</sup> In the late nineteenth century, newly invented manufactured food usually made its first appearance at international exhibitions and expositions. At the "Great International Fisheries Exhibition," held in London in 1883, one exhibitor offered samples of sun-dried and preserved calipash, calipee and fins, canned and bottled calipash and calipee, turtle green fat, canned and bottled turtle soup (Anon. 1883, Great Britain—Division XXVI—Corridor to Fish Market: 68). Similar items were found at the "International Health Exhibition," held in London the next year, under the category of "prepared animal substances used as food in a preserved form" (Anon. 1884: 14). By then turtle soup, thick or clear, genuine or mock (or "invalid"), was mass produced, canned, branded, and advertised; and consumers were warned to "Beware of Imitations"! Canned food is credited for saving armies from starvation. The late nineteenth-century *Handbook of Subsistence Stores*, published by the Secretary of War for use by the United States Army, teaches soldiers how to make mock-turtle soup out of canned calves' head soup stock (Anon. 1896: 162). By the turn of the twentieth century, one did not have to go to a mansion-house or a London tavern to enjoy a bowl of turtle soup. It could easily be homemade with canned products at affordable prices.

### Turtle Soup among Expatriates

With the above discussion one may find it easier to place the opening narrative—Ida Pfeiffer's account of the quotidian lives of Europeans in nineteenth-century Canton—in a broader context. One has to bear in mind that the scenario took place in 1847, five or six years after the defeat of the Qing government by the British in the First Opium War, which put an end to the "Canton Trade" era and marked the beginning of the "Treaty Port" days.<sup>5</sup> By then the British had already possessed Hong Kong as one of its colonies and expanded its China trade to other newly founded ports, notably Shanghai. Whereas Hong Kong and Shanghai were still too new to be occupied by capable Chinese personnel to serve the foreigners well, Canton (the only port at which Sino-foreign trade was permitted between

1757 and 1842), had nurtured enough interpreters, cooks, and servants with necessary techniques and language skills to cater to foreigners. Elsewhere I have demonstrated that some European cookery knowledge might have been passed on to Chinese cooks in Canton early in the late eighteenth century. For instance, when a Chinese hong merchant entertained the East India Company (EIC) guests with two consecutive dinners in his country house in the suburb of Canton in 1769, his Chinese cooks managed to dress and serve the first fêtes “à la mode Anglaise [sic]” (Ching 2012: 100–1). We may assume that the Cantonese cooks who worked for Chinese hong merchants and foreign expatriates in those days would have learned Western cooking techniques from their masters or foreign counterparts. The dominating presence of the EIC staff also made the “Western” predominantly English. Nonetheless, it is quite unlikely that the above-mentioned “à la mode Anglaise” would include turtle soup after the English fashion. It probably refers to some “English” recipes invented by Chinese cooks.

It is clear though that Canton had the spices and other ingredients for necessary seasoning. With reference to the 1805 edition of *The Art of Cookery Made Plain and Easy*, we know that turtle needs to be seasoned with all sorts of spices including cloves, mace, nutmeg, and Cayenne pepper, as well as Madeira wine. According to *The Chinese Commercial Guide* compiled by Samuel Wells Williams, these spices had been imported into China from Southeast Asia for a long time via the Asiatic junk trade. Cloves, mace, and nutmeg are described in the *Guide* as follows:

**Cloves** 丁香 *ting hiáng*, or 子丁香 *tsz' ting hiáng*

These are the unopened flowers of a large tree (*Caryophyllus aromaticus*) . . . grows in the Moluccas Islands, and is cultivated in Amboyna, Sumatra, Cayenne, and Mauritius. . . . The Chinese use them sparingly for food, and consume a portion in distilling oil. The annual importation seldom reaches 3000 piculs.

**Mace** 豆蔻花 *tau kau hwá* or 玉葉花 *yuh kwo hwá*

This is the reticulated arillus of the nutmeg, *Myristica moschata*, whose properties it has in a less degree. . . . Mace has nearly disappeared from this market within the last few years.

**Nutmegs** 玉葉 *yuh kwo* 荳蔻 *tau kau*

. . . . These are the nuts of the *Myristica moschata*, a native of the Banda Isles, and cultivated at Singapore and other places. (Williams 1863: 85, 95, 98)

Equally important was Madeira wine.<sup>6</sup> It was likely added in order to eliminate the fishy smell of the sea creature. Although Madeira wine was not regularly imported into China, it was still sometimes possible to obtain some for preparing turtle soup in

Canton. European and American merchants who traded in Canton usually brought with them some Western spirits as gifts for Chinese hong merchants and mandarins. Bryant Parrott Tilden from Boston, Massachusetts, who traveled to Canton a number of times from 1815 to 1837 and made his fortune there, gave marvelous accounts of the “Chopstick dinner” offered by Canton hong merchants in his private journals. He notes that at the end of the seven-hour-long dinner, two courses “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”; he then laments that “a peculiar Chinese wine [was] brought in silver vessels, and drunk warm, same as tea. It’s [sic] name is See-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 [sic] and Madeira wines” (Tilden 7, journal vol. 2, Ship Canton, Third Voyage of B. P. T. to China, 1818–19: 48). On a previous occasion, he notices that “the choicest of wines are brought to Canton by the British Company ships, particularly Madeira and Port, for the purposes of ripening, and we americans usually have several . . . [writing unclear] for the same purposes” (Tilden 8, journal vol. 1, Ship Canton, First Voyage to Canton, Isaac Hinckley Master & Bryant P. Tilden Supercargo, 1815–16: 79–80).

The trickiest part was still perhaps the turtle. It is hard to imagine that a Caribbean sea turtle could have been transported all the way to Canton. The turtle that Ida Pfeiffer mentions might have come from a dried product from the Indian Ocean or the South Seas. It could also have been a native species, cooked in the “English fashion.” The Chinese did, and still do, cook turtle soup in their own way, and Chinese-styled turtle soup was no less favored by some nineteenth-century Europeans. Mrs. Gray, an English woman who resided in Canton for fourteen months between the years 1877 and 1878, wrote to her mother describing the dinner she had in a Chinese restaurant not far from the Anglo-French Concession on Shameen Island located in the west end of Canton. She had “turtle soup with pieces of fat turtle floating in it, taken by porcelain spoon” (Gray 1880: 89). The author reminded her reader of the presence of the porcelain spoon, because to most nineteenth-century Westerners eating soup with a Chinese utensil was a fancy experience. Porcelain spoons were considered “unfounded,” as they easily “filled the sleeves of our jackets” while bailing out soup (Tilden 7, journal vol. 2, Ship Canton, Third Voyage of B. P. T. to China, 1818–19: 44). The Chinese porcelain spoon suggests that the turtle soup recorded by Mrs. Gray was probably cooked in the Chinese style (or more specifically in the Cantonese style), and “turtle” might well be a Chinese

softshell turtle (*Pelodiscus sinensis*) that could be cooked in a variety of ways by the Chinese according to the recipes recorded by a Chinese scholar in the late eighteenth century (Yuan 1796: 3, 7–8). After all, its medical values have long been appreciated in the Chinese *Compendium of Materia Medica* (*Bencao Gangmu*), compiled in the late sixteenth century.

It is worth noting that enjoyment of turtle soup after the English fashion somewhere in the Far East perhaps indicated a delayed transmission of culture, a typical phenomenon in expatriate societies. Comparable scenarios can be found in other European expatriates' accounts of their Creole-style meals prepared by local or enslaved cooks. The wife of the governor of Jamaica described in her diary in 1802 an estate dinner in Jamaica at 6 p.m. included the first course which "was entirely of fish. . . . The second course was of turtle, mutton, beef, turkey, goose, ducks, chickens, capons, hams, tongue, crab patties, &c. &c. &c. The third course was composed of sweets and fruits of all kinds" (Goucher 2014: 80). Excessive eating had already been ridiculed in England and America by the 1830s, and turtle soup consumption became a target of attack (Anon. 1832: 315). Yet the Europeans in Canton and other colonial port cities in the 1840s were still enjoying elaborate breakfasts and dinners in which turtle soup was included. In a similar manner, the fact that their dinner hour started as early as 4 p.m. indicated that their lifestyles were attuned to a different rhythm. Whereas in late eighteenth-century England dinner was eaten somewhere between 3 and 5 p.m., the business day in the 1850s was fixed to run from 9 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. and thus the time for dinner fell between 7 and 8 p.m. (Strong 2002: 291–92). The English expatriates in mid-nineteenth-century Canton must have had the leisure to stick to the old habits, and to pursue the classy practice of consuming genuine, not mock, turtle soup. Like their East India Company counterparts in India, these Europeans in Canton constructed themselves as an aristocracy on a foreign land by maintaining an outdated lifestyle, notwithstanding their origin as low-class traders back in their home society.<sup>7</sup>

These European sojourners, however, were probably witnessing the last days of their constructed aristocracy in Asia. By the end of the nineteenth century this luxurious lifestyle could no longer be sustained, at least by British expatriates in Hong Kong. J. Dyer Ball, an interpreter working in the Hong Kong government and compiler of *The English Chinese Cookery Book* (1890), attempted to render the English recipes "in such a clear and simple style as to be readily understood by the average Chinese cook." The expectation was that with this book "the foreign resident can thus order any Dish, by showing to his Cook the Chinese translation of the English

Recipe, and get what he wants, provided the Cook closely follows the instructions given." Yet there was no entry for turtle soup among the more than twenty types of soup listed in Ball's cookery book (Ball 1890: 1–16). Instead, more practical and economical recipes such as those of ox tail soup, vermicelli soup, egg soup, pea soup, "Soup in Haste," and "Cheap Soup" were offered. As a member of the British Hong Kong civil services, Ball was addressing a new generation of expatriates who could not afford a lifestyle pursued by the East India Company pioneers stationed in Canton only half a century earlier.

Turtle soup after the "English fashion" might have been one of the "Western" dishes that Chinese cooks working in treaty ports were able to prepare, but it would not have been consumed by the majority of Chinese people. The few exceptions would be the Chinese expatriates serving in the diplomatic services. Wu Tingfang (better known in Hong Kong as "Ng Choy"), who served in the Qing government as ministers to the United States, Spain, and Peru from 1896 to 1902, and from 1907 to 1909, once remarked that birds' nest soup was far superior to turtle soup, claiming that he had the expert opinion of an American chemist who analyzed it (Wu 1914: 197). Born in Malacca in the Straits Settlement, Wu received his elementary education at the Anglican St. Paul's College in Hong Kong. He then studied law in the UK and was called to the bar at Lincoln's Inn. He was the first Chinese appointed to the Hong Kong Legislative Council in 1880. Yet all of these "English experiences" did nothing to whet his appetite for this "English cuisine." Representing the Chinese government, Wu's public statements—including those on food—were bound to be nationalistic.

On the contrary, Zhang Deyi, the Chinese minister appointed to Britain, Italy, and Belgium in 1901, offered a more private and positive view of turtle soup in his personal journals. Zhang was among the more than 800 guests invited to the banquet held by London mayors for celebrating the King's coronation in 1902. Impressed by the extravagance, Zhang recorded the event in full detail. He said that, with the exception of turtle soup (which was hot), all dishes served at the dinner were cold. Zhang paid attention to figures too. He noted that on such occasion 35 turtles were killed for preparing 300 quarts of soup, and 120 cooks were hired to prepare both a formal dinner for the 800 official guests and snacks for more than 2,000 spectators. A total of 15,000 British pounds were spent as a result, which equated to 120,000 Chinese treasury standard taels. Zhang also found that birds' nest had recently become fashionable among some big spenders in London. A plate of soup with a few spoonfuls of birds' nest would cost 7 shillings and 6 pence,



whereas turtle soup sold for only 5 shillings. Zhang did not say whether he liked the English food or not, but the fact that turtle soup was the only hot food probably made it one of his few favorites in Britain. In 1905, at dinner in a private club in the suburbs of London, he found all dishes unattractive except the turtle soup (Zhang n.d.: n.p.).<sup>8</sup> Dishes like cold meat and salad are categorized as “raw and cold” by the Chinese and are said to cause indigestion among many Chinese. Whether Zhang Deyi had the same concern is unknown. What is quite clear is that European expatriates in Canton found turtle soup “after the English fashion” to be a supreme treat, but Chinese expatriates in London found the same dish tolerably edible, and most likely because it was served hot.

## The End of the Flow

Turtle soup remained a fairly popular item in English cookery books well into the twentieth century, but the tone and writing style was quite different from their earlier counterparts. The 1904 edition of *“Queen” Cookery Books* (London) says humbly that turtle soup, “made from the fresh turtle, is hardly likely to come within the ken of readers of this little book, but it is quite possible in these days to make a soup from the ‘sun-dried’ or preserved turtle that will meet with much favour” (Beaty-Pownall 1904: 82). Fancy names such as “Turtle Soup *A La Madame Begue*” were still included in a cookery book published in Los Angeles in 1922, but the instruction was only eight lines long, much shorter than the one in *The Art of Cookery Made Plain and Easy* published almost two centuries earlier (Board of Directors for the benefit of the Castelar Crèche 1922: 43). By then, dressing a turtle “after the West India way” was no longer a gimmick, nor was making it in the “English fashion.” Postwar development and Americanization of the dish entailed that sea turtle was first overconsumed and later outlawed. When tourism flourished in Florida in the 1960s, green turtles that nested on the Pacific coast of Mexico and on the east coast of Florida were turned into soup, steak, and even hamburger to satisfy the appetite of the gourmards. It was finally in the 1970s, when green turtle was classified legally as an endangered species by treaties such as the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES, adopted March 1973), that large-scale harvesting was gradually restricted (Davidson 2001; Rieser 2012).

My tracing of the flow of turtle soup is intended to rejoin the main theme of this special issue by attempting to rescue taste from the nation. Hitherto the *taste*—as status marker—that turtle soup used to represent has been analyzed by extracting the meaning of “English fashion” against the wider

background of an increasingly nationalized Europe and of an expanding British trading and colonial empire in Asia. At home the agents were members of the Royal Family, Royal Society, and London Mayors, with print media, notably cookery books, helping to create and magnify “Englishness.” Abroad there were the East India Company expatriates and other private traders who needed to exploit “Englishness” for the construction of their aristocracy overseas. Nonetheless, the *taste*—as gustatory perception—of the soup has proven to be hard to recover from history. Forty years of restrictions are long enough to cause amnesia—many Europeans and Americans have already forgotten that their forerunners had a more than two-hundred-year history of eating turtle soup! Maybe it was the seasoning—that is, cloves, mace, nutmeg, and the Madeira wine—which helps at least to recover the smell, if not the taste, of turtle soup.<sup>9</sup> The spread of these smells and flavors was part of the history of European expansion in Caribbean and Asia. It is perhaps with these smells and flavors in mind that the Austrian travel writer Ida Pfeiffer believed that the turtle soup she ate in Canton was after the “English fashion,” although none of these ingredients had in fact originated in England. ©

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## NOTES

1. The writing of this article was made possible through the availability of digitized source materials, notably Making of America (MoA), the Internet Archive, Google Books, and the Chinese Database of Essential Historical Texts (Zhongguo Jiben Guji Ku) for Chinese studies covering an extended period from the age of antiquity to the early twentieth century. All of these databases are equipped with simple keyword search functions that provide

researchers with some basic facts for developing significant discussion on an ostensibly trivial subject.

2. Other English cookery books also include entries for both “turtle soup” and “mock turtle soup.” See, for instance, Dalgairns (1830: 4–6, 36–38) and Webster (1847: 51–54).
3. See also Dods (1826: 83–85), Hooper (1874: 125–26), and Payne (1882: 220–21). Other examples include Beecher (1850: 59), Carter (1851: 66), Williamson (1862: 7–9), and Davies (1885: viii, 2).
4. According to Bowers (1899: 539), in view of the increasing scarcity of green turtle on the Texas coast, the cannery was closed in 1896.
5. For a thorough study of the Canton Trade era, see Van Dyke (2005).
6. For a description of the production of Madeira wine and its European demand in the Far East, see Biddle (1900: 108–30).
7. The lives of European and American traders in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Canton were highly comparable to those of East India Company cadets in India. See the description in Collingham (2006: 108–14) and Ching and Liu (2004).
8. Zhang Deyi, *Hanghai Shuqi* (Exotics on Voyages), *ba shuqi* (the eighth account), vols. 3, 8, and 16. The original is a manuscript without pagination.
9. The author would like to thank Jeffrey M. Pilcher, who reminded her how turtle soup might have *smelled* with Madeira wine as part of the seasoning and thus the importance of rescuing smell from history.

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