

English Loan Words of Chinese Origin

by
Zuo, Zhicheng

It is commonly known that every language has loan words, and English, perhaps, has the most of all. English has been greatly developed and enriched by progressing through the three stages of Old English or Anglo-Saxon, Middle English, and Modern English. In the course of its development, English has absorbed a vast number of words of foreign origin, and the result of this assimilation is that, as any linguists have written, loan words account for seventy per cent of the words in an English dictionary. Fifty per cent of these loan words are of French or Latin origin, and the rest come from such other languages as Italian, Greek, German, and Spanish. It is not only from Indo-European languages, however, that English has absorbed words to enlarge its vocabulary; English has also absorbed words from Asian languages, including many words from Chinese.

China, which represents one of the earliest civilizations in the world, has a recorded history of about 3600 years. In the course of their long history, the Chinese have created a language and culture of unparalleled richness, expressiveness, and beauty. With increasing contacts, especially trade contacts with Western countries, many Chinese words have been introduced into English, of which native English speakers may remain largely unaware. Here are some loan words of Chinese origin that are familiar to native speakers. Unless otherwise indicated, the pronunciation and origin of each word are quoted from The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, 3rd ed., 1992:

- Typhoon

Probably alteration of Chinese (Cantonese) toi fung: Mandarin tai, great + Mandarin feng, wind. Perhaps few words better illustrate the polyglot background of English than typhoon, with its Chinese, Arabic, East Indian, and Greek background. The Greek word typhon, meaning "whirlwind, typhoon," was

borrowed into Arabic (as was many a Greek word during the Middle Ages, when Arabic learning both preserved the classical heritage and expanded upon it, passing it on to Europe). Tufan, the Arabic version of the Greek word, passed into languages spoken in India, where Arabic-speaking Moslem invaders had settled in the 11th century. Thus the descendant of the Arabic word, passing into English (first recorded in 1588) through an Indian language and appearing in English in forms such as touffon and tufan, originally referred specifically to a severe storm in India. China, another great empire, gave us yet another word for a storm, in this case the hurricane that occurred in the waters around China. This Chinese word in its Cantonese form, toi funt, was similar to our Arabic borrowing and is first recorded in English guise as tuffoon in 1699. The various forms coalesced and finally became typhoon.

The Chinese source means a hurricane, especially a tropical cyclone of the China seas. In the early fifteenth century, China's emperor of the Ming Dynasty, Cheng Zu, sent an ocean fleet, under Zheng He, to engage in trade with foreign countries. The fleet made seven westward voyages reaching as far as Java, Borneo, Sumatra, Ceylon, India, and East Africa. Because the Chinese word "typhoon" was spread by Zheng He, whose voyages were widely spoken of by sailors and navigators, it was later introduced into English at the end of the seventeenth century.

- Kaolin "French, from Chinese (Mandarin) gao ling, an area of Jiangxi province." A fine white clay used in the manufacture of porcelain for which China is world famous. "Kaolin" in Chinese means high hill, the name of the mountain in China which yielded the first kaolin sent to Europe.
- Litchi "Chinese (Mandarin) li zhi." The fruit of a Chinese sapindaceous tree, consisting of a thin, brittle shell enclosing a sweet, jelly-like pulp and a single seed. The fruit and its name were introduced into Europe in the early sixteenth century. Litchi is both nutritious and delicious; therefore, both Chinese and foreigners like it very much. There is, moreover, a historical anecdote

connected with this fruit:

China's capital in the Tang Dynasty (618 - 907 AD) was Changan, which is now the location of the city of Xi'an, the capital of Shaangxi Province in the Northwest, where litchi cannot grow. The ninth emperor of the Tang Dynasty, however, Xuan Zong (712 - 756 AD) had an extraordinarily favored concubine called Yang Yuhuan, who had a special liking for litchi. In order to cater to her enjoyment, the emperor would send for the fruit in the south, hundreds of miles distant from Changan. From post to post, the riders and steeds relayed to speed the delicate fruit along its way. When Yang Yuhuan, waiting on the city wall, saw the horse and rider arrive in a cloud of dust, she beamed with joy. The fruit, which spoils easily, was still fresh when she got it; on the other hand, many horses had died from exhaustion. This anecdote, which presents a vivid picture of the extravagant and dissipated life of the emperor and his court, easily allows us to imagine how tempting and delicious the fruit is.

- Kowtow "from Chinese (Mandarin) kou tou, a kowtow: kou, to knock + tou, head." It is very interesting that we can find the word kowtow widely carried in English dictionaries. This term means to knock the forehead on the ground while kneeling as an act of reverence, worship, apology; to act in an obsequious manner and show servile deference. In old China, when the masses of ordinary people came to officials and officers, they had to kneel first and then knock their foreheads on the ground to show their respect. Even foreign envoys had to kowtow to the Chinese emperors. The same thing happened to the foreign merchants and religious missionaries. Here are two examples of the word kowtow:

He was quick and alert. No matter where he worked, he always kowtowed to his superiors.

Small as the temple was, people from all directions went there and kowtowed to the deities enshrined and worshipped in it.

- Yamen "Chinese (Mandarin) yamen: ya, magistracy (from ya, tooth, flag with a serrated edge) + men, gate." When foreign merchants or missionaries

visited a yamen, which has become an English word that means the residence of office of any officials under the imperial system prior to 1912, they had to kowtow to the officials. Thus both kowtow and yamen were absorbed into English.

- Yen "from Chin (Cant) in, opium + yan, craving. An impelling craving for opium or some other narcotic" (Webster's Third International Dictionary) In the late eighteenth century and early nineteenth century, the British grew opium in the colony India and exported it to China, despite the fact that the Indian land would have been better employed in growing grain to relieve famine. The British opium was exported to China, and it plunged China and the Chinese people into a great catastrophe. Many Chinese were poisoned and weakened by the disastrous habit of smoking opium. Meanwhile, China's silver flowed to Britain like water. The British saw that when the Chinese had an urge to smoke opium, they bumped their heads against walls if their urge could not be satisfied. Many heavy smokers sold their lands and houses—even their children—to buy opium to satisfy their addictions. The Chinese called this addiction yen. Perhaps the British, saw the English word addiction as not so powerful as the Chinese word yen, so they took away both the Chinese silver and the word yen.

Later, the British launched the Opium War, in which China was defeated, and from then on, China became a semi-feudal, semi-colonial country until 1949. The word yen is now widely used in both written and spoken English, as in the following examples taken from Webster's Third International Dictionary:

"strong desire or propensity: I have a yen to see the world.

"urge: Whatever you have a yen to do—ride, swim or fish."

Some further examples of English words of Chinese origin are these:

- Sampan "Chinese (Mandarin) san ban: san, three + ban, board." Any of various small boats of China, as one propelled by a single scull over the stern

and provided with a roofing of mats."

- Kaoliang (gaoliang) "also kaoliang or kow-liang fr. kao, high, tall + liang, grain" (Webster's Third International Dictionary). One of the varieties of grain sorghums used for food. Its stalks are used for fodder, thatching, and fuel.
- Ginseng "Chinese (Mandarin) ren shen: ren, man + shen, ginseng (perhaps from the forked shape of the root." A plant yielding an aromatic root that has a sweetish taste suggestive of licorice, which is used extensively used in medicine by the Chinese.
- Gung ho "motto of certain US marine forces in Asia during World War II, from Chinese (Mandarin) gonghe, to work together (short for gongyehzuoshe, Chinese Industrial Cooperative Society): gong, work + he, together." Work together; make concerted efforts.
- Longan "new Latin longanum, specific epithet, from Chinese (Mandarin) long yan: long, dragon + yan, eye." The small, one-seeded, greenish-brown, pleasant-tasting fruit of a large evergreen native to China and allied to the litchi.
- Mahjong or mahjongg "Chinese (Mandarin) ma jiang: ma, spotted + jiang, main piece in Chinese chess." A game of Chinese origin for four persons played with 136 or 144 domino-like pieces of tiles marked in suits, counters, and dice.
- Taoism "from Chinese (Mandarin) dao, way." A religious system considered to be founded on the doctrines of Lao-tzu in the 6th century BC and ranked with Confucianism and Buddhism as one of the three religions of China.
- Confucius 551-478 BC, Chinese philosopher and teacher of principles of conduct. His highest standards of conduct were treating others as you wish to be treated, loyalty, intelligence, and the fullest development of the individual in the five chief relationships of life: ruler and subject, parent and child, elder and younger siblings, husband and wife, friend and friend.

The sounds of the Chinese loan words are very close to those of the Chinese words proper because they come from the Beijing dialect. The sounds of some loan words, however, are different from those of the Chinese words proper. That is because they are not from the standard Chinese but from local Chinese dialects such as the Guangdong dialect or the south Fujian dialect. The loan word tea is perhaps the most striking example.

- Tea "Probably Dutch thee, from Malay teh, from Chinese (Amoy) te." In the Beijing dialect, tea is called cha. Xiamen (Amoy) was one of the earliest ports open to the outside world in ancient China. In the seventeenth century, foreign ships came crowding there, many of them for the purpose of carrying Chinese tea leaves. In Xiamen local dialect cha (tea) is uttered dei, and thence it spread to Malaya where it was pronounced tei and given a spelling ray. Later it was loaned into English and given the sound ti and the spelling tea.

We can cite some other loan words from China's local dialects:

- Loquat "Chinese (Cantonese) lo kwat: lo, kind of tree + kwet, an orange. 1. A small evergreen tree . . . native to China and Japan, having fragrant white flowers and pear-shaped yellow fruit with large seeds. 2. The edible fruit of this plant."
- Bok choy "Chinese (Mandarin) bai cai: bai, white + cai, vegetable. A Chinese vegetable (Brassica rapa var. Chinensis) in the mustard family, having a leafy head similar to that of the common cabbage."
- Cumshaw "Pidgin English, from Chinese (Amoy) gamsia, an expression of thanks. A tip, a gratuity."
- Chow "possibly from Chinese (Cantonese) zab, food, miscellany, from Chinese (Mandarin) za, mixed, food, victuals."
- Amoy "after Amoy (Xiamen), the dialect of Chinese spoken in and around the city of Xiamen in Fujian province in southeast China."

- Canton porcelain “after Canton (Guangzhou), China, porcelain having a blue or white underglaze, decorated in the enameling workshops of Canton (now Guangzhou) and exported from China during the 18th and early 19th centuries. Also called Chinese export porcelain.”

It's very likely that Chinese beginners of English do not realize that these words originated from Chinese. In its development, Chinese has also absorbed countless words and terms—especially the terms of science and technology—from English and other languages. Although it is not a chief contributor in comparison with French and Latin, Chinese has made some important contributions to the development of English.

Works Cited

The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language. 3rd. ed. Boston: Houghton, 1992.

Webster's Third New International Dictionary. Springfield, MA: Merriam-Webster, 1961.