

Food as a Negotiation Site: English India Company's Food Supply in Canton, 1730-1840



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 This research explores how daily food provisions for English India Company's (EIC) employees in Canton during the 18th and 19th centuries could reflect Sino-Anglo relationship. On the one hand, Chinese authorities tried to use food supply to control foreigners. On the other hand, EIC employees managed to establish their food culture by finding alternative food supplies and introducing English food and food culture to China.

Comprador System

The East India Company's provisions were generally provided by the figure of 'Comprador' (买办), who were Chinese merchants licensed by Chinese authorities. Chinese authorities could cut down Compradors' service to force foreign traders to comply with them.

Alternative Food Supply

Foreign traders could circumvent the comprador system. Some foreigners took part in this provision trade and provided foodstuffs unavailable in Chinese market. In the early 19th c, foreigners could buy imported European food and drink (cheese, champagne, hams...) from public auctions in China.



Introducing European Food to China

Craving for home food pushed foreigners to introduce European vegetables, cows, cuisines and serving manners to China. These actions shaped the local agricultural landscape to adapt to their needs, which left significant impact on Chinese agriculture.



Conflicts and Collaboration on Food Cultivation

The EIC had their own kitchen garden to supply European vegetables for officers to consume. These vegetables were cultivated by Chinese gardeners with their horticultural knowledge and skills. It was under this collaboration that this garden could supply exotic vegetables. However, how to grow a certain vegetable could trigger conflicts between them.

Conclusion

Although under regulations and control from Chinese authorities, English people managed to introduce English food culture to China. Common Chinese people also actively involved into the process of the formation of foreigners' eating and drinking experiences in Canton. It was under the constant interactions, negotiations and conflicts that this food supply system was established and changed over time



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Main sources:
India Office Record, British Library
The Canton Register