

# **Food as A Negotiation Site: EIC Food Supply in Canton, 1730-1840**

## **Abstract**

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### **Introduction**

Daily food provisions in Canton during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries were crucial for survival of British and other foreigners in the trading port of Canton in China. British merchants had to cope with these restrictions from both Chinese authorities and the local environment. However, thanks to the trade, they managed to establish their food culture by finding alternative food supplies and introducing English food and food culture to China. This paper explores English East India Company (EIC) employees' endeavours in procuring food and drink and their interactions, communications and conflicts between Chinese during these processes.

### **Comprador System**

The East India Company's provisions were generally provided by the figure of 'Comprador' (买办), who was licensed by Chinese authorities. Compradors were not only in charge of daily food supplies for foreigners in Canton and Macao, but also for homeward ships. The position of Comprador was so important that once it was cut down or hindered, it could bring great loss to foreign traders. This regulation forced EIC officers to follow Chinese orders, otherwise their provision would be cut down or impeded.

### **Alternative Food Supply**

The comprador system was not seamless. Some European companies circumvented Chinese compradors and bought provisions secretly from foreigners. They imported foodstuffs unavailable in Chinese market, such as cheese and wine. Moreover, Canton as an area with diverse geographical features, provided an environment for different groups of Chinese people to manage business for a growing foreign trade. Dan people(疍民) produced and sold foodstuffs

to foreigners. Their living environment, the open water, made it hard to be controlled by the local authorities.

### **Introduction of English Food to China**

Compradors and other food providers ensured foreigners could have steady and diverse food supplies during their stay in Canton. However, craving for British food pushed them to introduce European vegetables, livestock, 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. One of the most important endeavors towards preserving an English diet was breeding cows. Supplying cows with other provisions like wheat flour and alcohol for foreign companies after ship-measurement was established as a part of welcome ceremony of Chinese officers since early 1740s.

### **Collaboration and Conflicts in Food Cultivation**

The English East India Company had their own kitchen garden to supply European vegetables for officers to consume. However, these vegetables were cultivated by Chinese gardeners with their horticultural knowledge and skills. China was different from most countries they visited, it had developed a sophisticated horticultural system that admired by Europeans. Local Chinese gardeners good care of these European vegetables. Conflicts could be triggered by the different opinions on vegetable cultivations.

### **Conclusion**

Although under regulations and control from Chinese authorities, they managed to introduce English food culture to China. At the same time, they adapted to certain Chinese food and food culture, whether passively or actively. This paper reveals the food agency of EIC employees and their multiple means to fulfil their demand. Common Chinese people were also actively involved into the process of the formation of foreigners' eating and drinking practices

in Canton. It was under this constant interactions, negotiations and conflicts that this food supply system was established and changed over time.