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THE CULTURAL AND LINGUISTIC INFLUENCE OF CHINESE ON ENGLISH VOCABULARY

Chinese loanwords in the English language constitute a distinct cultural and linguistic stratum that emerged under the influence of trade, socio-cultural, and philosophical contacts between the British Empire and China, particularly as a result of the activities of Chinese diasporic communities in the United States and Southeast Asia. As noted by Victor Mair [4], most of these borrowings did not arise from direct linguistic influence but from the transmission of cultural artefacts, culinary terms, household items, philosophical concepts and ritual practices. Chinese loanwords in English are relatively few in number but exhibit a high degree of symbolic density and cultural markedness.

One of the earliest and most widely recognised Chinese borrowings is **tea**. According to the Oxford English Dictionary [5], the word entered English through Southern Chinese dialects, particularly the Amoy form **te**, rather than the globally widespread Mandarin form **cha**. An early attestation from 1655: “**They drink a certain drink called Tee.**” – illustrates the path of its initial adaptation. In contemporary discourse, the word functions actively, which is confirmed by COCA: “**...the aroma of green tea filled the room...**” [9].

The most substantial group of Chinese loanwords is culinary vocabulary. Due to the popularisation of Chinese cuisine in the United States and the United Kingdom in the twentieth century [6], the English language incorporated such items as **tofu**, **soy**, **dim sum**, **wonton** and **chow mein**. These words display stable frequencies in COCA: “**...the restaurant serves traditional Cantonese dim sum every weekend...**” [9]; “**...a bowl of tofu and vegetables simmering in ginger broth...**” [9]. These items share a transcriptional form and exhibit minimal phonetic adaptation.

Another significant layer of borrowings is associated with seafaring, trade, and everyday realities of Southern China. Matthews [3] observes that such words as **rickshaw**, **junk**, **ginseng**, and **ketchup** entered English

through intensive port-city contacts. The example of **ketchup** is particularly illustrative of cultural reinterpretation. Originally denoting a fermented fish sauce (**ke-tsiap**), the word underwent semantic transformation in English and now refers to a tomato-based condiment: “**...a bottle of ketchup was placed in the center of the table...**” [9].

Philosophical and religious concepts of Chinese tradition have also played a significant role in enriching English vocabulary. According to Yule [8], terms such as **qi**, **tao**, **feng shui**, **kung fu**, and **yin-yang** function not only as lexical units but also as cultural symbols associated with harmony and spiritual practice. Their transcriptional shape results from the difficulty of conveying their meaning through a single English equivalent. The OED attests **feng shui** in the example: “**The house was arranged according to the principles of feng shui.**” Similar uses appear in COCA: “**...she hired a consultant to improve the feng shui of the workspace...**” [9].

Political and social loanwords likewise bear a distinctly Chinese imprint. Thøgersen and Petersen [7] show that **kowtow** derives from the ritual **kòutóu**, symbolising absolute submission. In modern English, the word has acquired a figurative meaning: “**...the senator won't kowtow to party pressure...**” [9]. Another example is **tycoon**, which entered English via Japanese mediation but ultimately originates from the Chinese **dà jūn** (“great ruler”). In COCA the word frequently appears in economic contexts: “**...the real estate tycoon announced a new investment plan...**” [9].

Cantonese-speaking communities in the United States facilitated the spread of such items as **chop suey**, **mahjong**, and **gung-ho** [2]. Corpus data confirm their active usage: “**...the women gathered every Friday night to play mahjong...**” [9]; “**...the coach was impressed by his gung-ho attitude...**” [9]. This demonstrates the crucial role of the Chinese diaspora in shaping the American variety of English.

A particularly noteworthy aspect is the morphological adaptation of Chinese loanwords in English. The structural disparity between Chinese (analytic) and English (fusional-analytic) grammar results in a generally low degree of morphological assimilation [1]. Most items such as **tofu**, **feng shui**, **yin-yang**, **kung fu**, **mahjong**, **dim sum** function as indeclinable nouns with opaque internal morphology, which hinders the formation of English affixed derivatives.

Nevertheless, some Chinese borrowings do undergo integration into the English morphological system through productive word-formation patterns. Thus, **wonton** and **tycoon** form the plural with the suffix **-s** (**wontons**, **tycoons**), while **dim sum** and **feng shui** remain morphologically inert, as confirmed by COCA: “**...two plates of dim sum...**”. In certain cases, derivational expansion occurs, as with **gung-ho**, which has produced forms such as **gung-ho-ism**. Such patterns indicate a degree of semantic

integration into the recipient language. Semantic-derivational assimilation is also evident in **ketchup**, which forms adjectival derivatives (**ketchupy**, **ketchup-based**) and participates actively in compounding.

A further tendency is the reanalysis of multiword borrowings (**kung fu**, **feng shui**, **chop suey**) as unified morphological units. In modern English they function as cohesive compounds, producing derivatives such as **feng shui consultant**, **kung-fu movie**, **mahjong table**. This confirms the ability of English to integrate foreign structures without substantially altering their formal composition.

In summary, Chinese loanwords in English constitute a culturally significant, though relatively small, lexical stratum reflecting historical contacts, cross-cultural interactions, and social transformations. Their morphological adaptation is selective, preserving the original form while integrating into productive English word-formation models. This process highlights the flexibility of the English morphological system and its capacity to incorporate culturally marked vocabulary without disrupting its own structural principles.

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