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Phonetic Borrowing of Chinese Loanwords in English:

A Historical and Linguistic Perspective

Introduction

Language borrowing happens everywhere, especially in languages connected through trade and cultural exchange. As Edward Sapir put it, ‘The simplest kind of influence one language can exert on another is the “borrowing” of words.’ When people need to communicate, it’s only natural to borrow words from other cultures to fill gaps in their own vocabulary. In fact, over 80% of English vocabulary comes from loanwords, including some from Chinese. But why has English, as an Indo-European language, adopted Chinese words? And how exactly does this borrowing take place?

There are usually four ways that loanwords make their way into a language: phonetic translation, semantic translation, a mix of phonetic and semantic translation, or a combination of both. In this presentaion, we'll focus mainly on phonetic loanwords.

Chinese loanwords have been showing up in English for over a thousand years. According to OED, the word ‘silk’ made its way into Old English around 888 A.D. though Latin and Greek. This happened because of the indirect silk trade with China, which led to these loanwords coming into the language.

A similar story applies to the word ‘tea.’ The Dutch played a significant role in selling tea to various countries in Europe, quickly spreading this Eastern beverage. As a result, the term ‘tea’ was introduced to England by the Dutch. In the Southern Min dialect, tea is pronounced ‘te,” and the Dutch, along with the German, French, and Spanish, adopted this pronunciation. However, English went with ‘ti,’ a change influenced by a process called vowel raising. This is why we see a slight difference in how the word is pronounced across languages. In the 18th century, the British began importing large quantities of tea directly from China, which led them to adopt many Chinese tea-related terms, especially those from Fujian.

For example:

武夷 was phonetically translated as /bəʊˈhiː/ based on southern Min¹ ‘bu i’;

白毫 was translated as /'pi:kou/ based on Min 'pik ho';

立山小種 was translated as /,ləpsæŋ 'su:ʃɒŋ/ based on Min 'lip san sio tsioŋ';

烏龍 was translated as oolong /'u:,lɒŋ/ based on Min 'ɔ liɒŋ.'

These terms were all phonetically translated from the Southern Min dialect, which explains why their pronunciations are quite different from Mandarin. The British borrowed these words directly from Min pronunciation, not from Mandarin.

Not only has Fujian's tea culture deeply influenced the Britain, Guangdong's culture has also been exported. As a result of the isolationist policies of the Qing Dynasty, the government only set Thirteen Factories conducting maritime trade in Guangdong. Therefore, Chinese loanwords of this period were mainly influenced by Cantonese.

For example:

餛飩 was phonetically translated as /'wɒntən/ based on Cantonese 'uən tʰən';

點心 was phonetically translated as /,dɪm 'sɒm/ based on Cantonese 'tim sɐm';

白菜 was phonetically translated as /,bɔk 'tʃɔi/ based on Cantonese 'pak tsʰɔi'

旗袍 was phonetically translated as /tʃɒŋ'sæm/ based on Cantonese 'tsʰæŋ sam'.

Britain's first diplomacy with China in order to expand more of the Chinese market, and they gained many new concepts on this trip in 1792. One member, Sir John Barrow wrote *Travels in China* (1804) about the trip. One of the Chinese loanwords in his book is 'koo-too,' Chinese is 叩頭 which means a Chinese ritual of touching the ground with the forehead in the act of prostrating oneself. In OED, 'kowitz' had replaced koo-too, while kowitz pronounce as /kaʊ'taʊ/, it is real distant pronunciation from Mandarin 'kʰou tʰou.' Why did this change occur? What was the original pronunciation of this one?

The British emissaries met with Emperor Qianlong, and at that time the main language of the court had Beijing official language and Nanking official language², but Emperor Qianlong learnt Nanking dialect as a child, so the pronunciation of 'koo-too' was most likely close to Nanking dialect 'kʰu tʰu', and now the pronunciation of kowitz is based on Cantonese 'kʰəu tʰəu'. It has been said above that Britain had the most contact with

Guangdong during this period, and the evolution of Chinese loanwords has naturally been influenced by Cantonese.

As globalization continues to expand and China's influence grows stronger, we've seen an influx of new Chinese loanwords entering mainstream English through *pinyin*. A great example is China's famous liquor, which used to be translated as 'Chinese distilled spirits.' But in 2021, it was officially renamed 'Chinese Baijiu' in the Customs Tariff. Another recent case is the hit game *Black Myth: Wukong*. Instead of translating *Wukong* as 'Monkey King,' the creators chose to keep the original *pinyin*, 'Wukong.' Using these loanwords reflects China's increasing cultural influence and highlights its uniqueness.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the integration of Chinese loanwords into English can be roughly divided into three phases:

Phrase one **Pre-contact with China**: during this period, words like *tea* and *silk* began entering English indirectly through trade routes with intermediary countries.

Phrase two **Early and Prolonged Contact**: As contact with China and deepened over time, especially during maritime trade, Chinese loanwords entered English primarily through various regional dialects. For instance, *Bohea* was borrowed based on the Southern Min pronunciation, while *wanton* came from Cantonese. Additionally, due to Guangdong's dominance in Qing Dynasty foreign trade, Cantonese significantly influenced loanwords. For example, the term *kowtow*, originally derived from Nanjing dialect, later became standardized in English through the Cantonese pronunciation.

Phrase three Today, many Chinese loanwords enter English directly through *pinyin*. For instance, *Baijiu* in Customs Tariff and *Wukong* from the game *Black Myth: Wukong* retain their original Chinese phonetics, and as globalization advances and China's international status rises, more words are expected to enter the English language through phonetic translation in the future.

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