

THE SCRUTABLE CHINESE

by Jason B. Alter

The ESL practitioner may tend to ignore or be unaware of cultural nuances attendant to lexical items. What stereotypes are said to describe the Chinese, for example? Let us examine the very few words that have originated in the Chinese language, of whatever dialect. Virtually all of these borrowed words or expressions have a negative or derogatory if not a pejorative connotation. One might allege that cross-cultural antipathy, or even prejudice, is engendered through the linguistic coloration of these words.

Specifically, the following are examples that may bear out the above thesis.

1. shanghai

With the "s" in lower-case, this is a verb and means to abduct a person for duty on shipboard. There is no /æ/ sound in Mandarin, so the "a" in "shang-" may have to be treated in the pronunciation class. With a capital "S", of course, Shanghai is said to be the most populous city in the world. This brings up the issue of how accurate one should be to the native-speaker's pronunciation of foreign place-names.

2. kowtow

Literally, "to touch the head to the ground," this indicated obeisance to the emperor and other superiors. In English, "kowtow" had a toadying, subservient flavor. As a teaching item, "kowtow" may give rise to: "pow-wow," "bow-wow," "kau-kau," "lau-lau," "How now, brown cow?," and "Now,now."

3. typhoon

(Cf. Greek typon, violent wind.) Literally, "big wind" in Chinese, these storms are not to be found on anyone's popularity list. One might discuss whether typhoons and hurricanes are isoglosses.

4. cumshaw

Largely used among the military, this is derived from the Chinese word "to thank." In English, it relates to the "squeeze", or an under-the-table blandishment.

5. hubba hubba

(I have Ms. Shirley Lum to thank for bringing this one to my attention.) This English interjection of approbation is purported

to stem from the Chinese expression: "Hau, ba!" "Hau" literally means "good" or "ok"? and the "ba" particle has a hortatory tint.

6. coolie

(Cf. Urdu *kuli* and Tamil *kuli*, hire, hireling.) Literally "bitter strength" in Chinese, this nomenclature is held in disdain in English and borders on an epithet.

7. gung ho

Something like "to work together" in Chinese. In English, colloquially speaking, a gung ho person would fall in the category of "eager beaver." Once again, this is not a laudatory term.

8. ketchup

Literally, "pickled-fish brine," this is not at all derogatory, but neutral. One might discuss "ketchup," "catsup vs. cat's up," and "catchup vs. catch up".

9. chop suey

Literally, "mixed bits," this expression is sometimes used in English to refer to Chinese food in general. In Hawaii, "He's chop suey" refers to a person of heterogeneous racial ancestry.

10. chinso, nankeen, shantung

More or less neutral terms for material; the latter two from place names, and the other alluding to skin hue.

11. tycoon

Literally, "great prince". (Cf. Japanese, *taikun*.) Not accusatory in the true sense.

I don't include *pidgin*, which is said to be the representation of "business" as pronounced by a Chinese speaker of English. Mention, though, should be made of *pizza*, said to be derived from *bing-dx*, a flat, doughy, Chinese snack. (Thanks to Dr. Yao Shen for this example.)

Most of us have only a peripheral acquaintanceship with the Chinese people and their culture. It may well be the case that we are deluded, repelled, or at the very least misled about China by the surface representations of the paucity of words in English that originated in the Chinese tongue. Regrettably, among these words, none is especially charismatic. One could then theorize that these words could arouse or nurture antipathetic proclivities toward the Chinese in the English speaker's psyche.