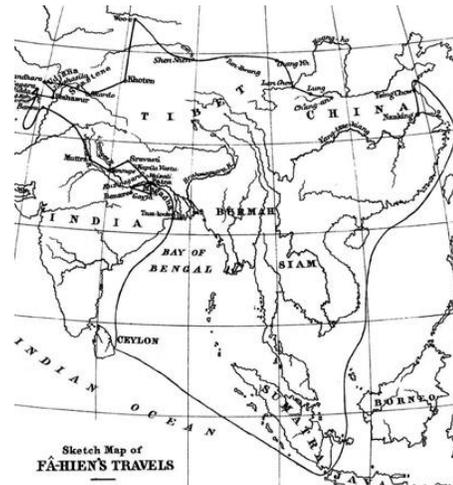


## CHINESE INFLUENCES

### Early Sino-Sri Lankan relations

Cultural relations between China and Sri Lanka through Buddhism are long-standing. The Chinese *bhiksu* (a Buddhist monk) Fa-Hsien, during his search for original Buddhist texts to correct ones that had deteriorated in China, travelled to Sri Lanka in 411 CE and spent two years living at the Abhayagiri Vihara in Anuradhapura, the earliest of the ancient capitals of Sri Lanka. Reference to Sri Lanka continue to come up throughout Chinese Buddhist writings. The *Pi-chiu-ni-chuan* written around the 6<sup>th</sup> century CE refers to Sinhala Buddhist nuns visiting China. Sri Lankan texts as old as the 9<sup>th</sup> century CE *Sahassavatthu-p-pakarana* (The Book of Amusing Stories), suggest this, and two 12<sup>th</sup> century CE Sinhala texts explicitly refer to China, as do subsequent Sinhala writings. The Chinese text, the *Overall Survey of the Ocean's Shores* of Ma Huan, around 1433, deals with Sri Lanka in a chapter titled Ying-yai Sheng-lan-chiao-chu.<sup>i</sup>

But it wasn't only through Buddhism that contacts were made between Sri Lanka and China. Fa-Hsien came to Sri Lanka aboard a merchant vessel, that presumably had made the trip, or other like it had made the trip, often before. Indeed, Pliny, the Roman historian (24-79 CE) records of the visit of an embassy from the Sinhala king Bhatika Abhaya, that the father of one of the Sinhala delegation – Pliny called him Rachius – had visited China during commercial activity, and had also welcomed representatives of China when they came to Sri Lanka, and that the exchange of goods happened on the bank of the river Taprobane. A Pali work written prior to the 10<sup>th</sup> century CE has a tale of a king who sends a servant to Anuradhapura to get Chinese silk from a Sinhala merchant. Chinese texts, like the T'ang Kuo Shih Pu of Li Chao, talk of ships from Sri Lanka visiting China each year during the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> centuries CE. Chinese records written between 405 CE and 762 CE describe Sinhala kings sending to Chinese emperors pearls, gems, gold and ivory. Sri Lanka is recorded as having sent things of medical value to China such as honey, amber and pepper.<sup>ii</sup>



### Chinese influence in Sri Lankan cuisine

Cumming, in *Two Happy Years in Ceylon*, describes Chinese residents in Ceylon preparing locally caught *beche-de-mer*/ sea cucumber and bird's nest soup.

*Through the very clear shallow water we could see many ugly fat slugs, about six inches in length, and were told that these are the far-famed beche-de-mer or trepang (holothurians), so greatly prized by the Chinese that a colony of Chinamen have settled in the north of the Isle, near Jaffna, on purpose to superintend the*

*fishing for these slugs and curing them. They are found all along the north-west coast, in water from one foot to eight fathoms in depth, and are systematically captured by native divers. They are partially cooked in iron pans over a slow fire, and are then dried in the sun and finally smoked over a fire of green wood...*

*In the hands of the Chinese cook they make excellent and most nutritious gelatinous soup; but they require careful preparation and very slow boiling, and they are not appreciated in Ceylon any more than another delicately gelatinous dainty, dear to the gourmet of China – namely, edible birds' nests, which are found in considerable quantities in the darkest recesses of large gloomy caves in the Central and Southern Provinces of Ceylon, both on the sea-coast and far inland, chiefly in the latter, in the Morowa Korle, whence they are collected by Chinamen, who have purchased from Government the exclusive right to this harvest.*

*The swift which builds these curious nests, is a small dark-grey bird. The proportion of isinglass in its nest is considerably less than that obtained in Java, Borneo, and elsewhere, so that although the birds are numerous on Ceylon, the value of the nests as an article of commerce is small, not exceeding 4000 rupees a year.<sup>iii</sup>*

But neither *beche-de-mer* nor bird's nest soup make into the repertoire of Sri Lankan cuisine. Chinese food in Sri Lanka continues to sit apart, identified clearly as Chinese and eaten for its exoticism/foreignness and not as an integrated part of the cuisine. No dishes of Chinese origin make it into the various editions of Hilda Deutrom's *Ceylon Daily News Cookery Book*, the foundation text of Sri Lankan Burgher cookery, nor into Chandra Dissanayake's *Ceylon Cookery*.<sup>iv</sup> When dishes do enter the cookery books, they are the cross-over dishes common in other Western cultures – fried rice, chop suey (the latter of course being a dish created in the United States and not a 'traditional' Chinese dish at all).<sup>v</sup> My mother recalls going to eat fried rice and spring roll at Chinese restaurants in Fort and Slave Island.

I suspect what this means is that for whatever reason, Chinese cuisine has always been an 'ethnic' cuisine for Sri Lankans, something eaten at a café or restaurant and not part of everyday cooking.

There is a culinary term convergence that I would love to be able to definitely say was not just coincidence. There are a great variety of traditional snack foods in China called *xiaochi* - small eats, implying that they are not seen as meals.<sup>vi</sup> The Sri Lankan term for hors d'oeuvre-like party food – vadai, patties, finger sandwiches – is *short eats*. I leave it at that.

### **Sri Lankan Christmas Cake**

The curiosity in all of this for me, though, is the appearance in the classic Sri Lankan Christmas cake of two particular ingredients that I have always understood as being of clear Chinese origin.

The first is chow chow preserve. Now, this is not chow chow pickle of the United States and Nova Scotia, nor the piccalilli of the UK and Australia, made of mainly green tomato, cabbage, chayote (choko/alligator pear), red tomatoes, onions, carrots, beans, asparagus, cauliflower and peas. This is chayote/choko preserve in which the only ingredients are said vegetable and sugar and water. Chow chow is the Hindu name for the chayote. But the chow chow preserves that were used by my grandmother in her Christmas cake were definitely made in China, as the labeling on the ceramic container in which they came testified. I cannot, however, find any clear reference to chayote/chow chow preserve in Chinese cuisine.

The second is preserved ginger, which again arrived for the Christmas cake in a ceramic container clearly showing its origin as a Chinese export. It doesn't seem though, on investigation, that preserving ginger is particularly Chinese, though there is an intriguing discussion of what Chinese ginger, and hence preserves, are made from at <http://www.jstor.org/pss/4102513>

## Tea

The one incontrovertible influence on Sri Lankan cuisine, and indeed its whole economy, of China is tea. In 1824 a tea plant was brought from China to Sri Lanka by the British and planted in the Royal Botanical Gardens in Peradeniya for non-commercial purposes. In 1867, James Taylor began the first Sri Lankan tea plantation at the Loolecondera estate Kandy in 1867. In 1873, the first shipment of Ceylon tea, a consignment of some 23 lb (10 kg), arrived in London. Tea has remained the non-alcoholic beverage of choice for all Sri Lankans since.

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<sup>i</sup> Weerasinghe 1995

<sup>ii</sup> Weerasinghe 1995

<sup>iii</sup> Cumming 1891

<sup>iv</sup> Deutrom 1985, Dissanayake 1984

<sup>v</sup> Peiris 2000, Cooking with Lloyd [ ]

<sup>vi</sup> Yan [ ]