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Poisoned Bread:
The Esing Bakery Incident of 1857 and Racism in Colonial Hong Kong

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It was a wet and cold morning in Hong Kong on January 15, 1857. In Hong Kong harbour, alongside his family and servants, Cheong Alum (1827–1900), a 30-year old man, was aboard the *Shamrock*, a steamer bound for Macao, having boarded around eight that morning. Though he had come from humble beginnings, Cheong could certainly be proud of what he had achieved. Cheong, a native of Xiangshan, Guangdong province, neighbouring Macao, was his father's eldest son, by all accounts an intelligent youth.¹ Poverty compelled him to leave school and to move to Macao at the age of 13. There, he helped a relative do business with foreigners, learning to trade with the burgeoning European population in China. Cheong was not long in Macao, however, as he left for Hong Kong at the age of 18 and there rose through various positions to become chief comprador of a British company. Eventually, he set up his own trading company and became a wealthy man.² He went on to open the Esing bakery and bread shop

¹ Kate Lowe and Eugene McLaughlin, "'Caution! The Bread Is Poisoned': The Hong Kong Mass Poisoning of January 1857," *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 43, no. 2 (2015): 199, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03086534.2014.974904>.

² A comprador was a local general agent employed by Europeans. He kept money, paid bills, hired servants, and was often stereotyped as slyly stealing his master's money. See Christopher Munn, "Hong Kong, 1841-1870: All the Servants in Prison and Nobody to Take Care of the House," in *Masters, Servants, and Magistrates in Britain and the Empire, 1562-1955*, ed. Douglas Hay and Paul Craven (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 373.

(Figure 1), the most important in Hong Kong, supplying upwards of four hundred families with bread.³ In a sad twist of fate, in 1857, Cheong found himself at the centre of a public health scandal.

Figure 1: Shop of the Chinese baker, Esing (Alum), at Victoria, Hong-Kong. *The Illustrated London News*, 28 March 1857.

As the *Shamrock* made its way across the harbour in mid-January 1857, Cheong may have been worried about the future. Owing to the recent hostilities between the Chinese and the British, his grandmother back in Xiangshan reported that she had seen a notice posted by Chinese officials around the end of last November ordering all people in Hong Kong to return or be seized and punished as traitors. Two weeks later, she had been visited by a group of soldiers demanding Cheong Alum's return from Hong Kong. She had asked Cheong's father to send the whole family back, but not Cheong himself, as there was a reward of \$5,000 out for him, and a threat that his shop would be set on fire, due to him supplying bread to the British. So, Cheong

³ "Papers Connected with Confinement of Chinese Prisoners at Hong Kong," *19th Century House of Commons Sessional Papers* Volume Page: XLIII.169 Volume: 43 Paper Number: 155 (January 1, 1857): 186.

was determined to stay and protect his shop. Indeed, Cheong had not planned on going to Macao today but had agreed to come along on the boat at his wife's behest and return home soon after.

Putting this out of his mind for a moment, he turned back around to his household, and particularly his eldest child, who was feeling ill and had vomited. "What do you think caused it?" he asked his servant in Cantonese. She shrugged, frowning: "Bad weather, perhaps?"⁴ Cheong thought for a moment and suspected the wind as well as the fact his son had been awakened early in the morning. Whatever the cause, Cheong sat down to eat some of the small loaves of bread from his bakery he had brought along with him, cutting it up and sharing it with his family and servants. It was with shock that he saw everyone then become sick, vomiting, just like his son.

Cheong at first thought it was the motion of the boat, but quickly his suspicion turned to the bread. He quickly sent a servant to ask the captain if the foreigners had been sick from eating the bread too. With dismay, he learned that indeed they had, and quickly told his family that it was clear something had been done to his bread and that they had to all return to Hong Kong. When the ship arrived in Macao around one o'clock in the afternoon, Cheong quickly made his way to the captain, asking if he planned to leave for Hong Kong at two o'clock as planned. Unfortunately, the captain explained, he could not, as he had cargo to discharge and load for one Mr. Agabeg. It was then that Cheong offered \$50 and then \$100 to both the captain and Mr. Agabeg, to return to Hong Kong that night. While this was refused, the captain suggested that he wait for the steamer to return tomorrow, as it would be faster than taking a Chinese ship. Cheong asked that his family be allowed to stay in the cabin until then: after all, they were all sick. This was allowed. Meanwhile, his two children cried loudly, and Cheong sent a servant to buy some rice for them, which they all ate, after which he drifted off to sleep.

⁴ "Confinement of Chinese Prisoners," 195.

Unfortunately for him, Cheong did not wake up to a pleasant sight when he was roused from his sleep at seven o'clock in the evening. He saw Mr. Robinet, a merchant of Hong Kong, standing before him, and was grabbed from behind. "You are my prisoner, and must go with me," Mr. Robinet said. Cheong quickly asked: "Anybody have die Hong Kong side?" Robinet replied: "No; and you have poisoned the bread with arsenic."⁵ Cheong, a confused look on his face, asked what arsenic was. Upon hearing that it was rat poison, he further denied knowing what it was. As Robinet brought up a recent massacre of Europeans, Cheong further denied any involvement. Still, Cheong was soon handed into the custody of the Hong Kong Police, where he would remain until his trial. He would learn something worse than a nightmare: that hundreds of Europeans all throughout Hong Kong had been poisoned after eating bread from his bakery...

The story of the Esing Bakery incident reveals not only local tensions between European and Chinese inhabitants of Hong Kong, but also tensions between Hong Kong authorities and the British government and offers valuable insights into the peculiar Hong Kong legal system. At the forefront of this paper's analysis will be European-Chinese relations in colonial Hong Kong, particularly as it relates to governance and the legal system. Despite popular claims of the impartiality of British law and governance, poor racial relations, and fears of betrayal, still played a disproportionate role in Cheong Alum's treatment in the Esing Bakery case. None of this can be fully understood, however, without a strong understanding of the context of the trial: the Second Opium War, also known as the Arrow War, and subsequently the deep racial tension that existed in Hong Kong at the time. In this, Cheong Alum's experiences fit neatly into a broader portrait, allowing for one man's story to help us unpack his broader world.

⁵ "Confinement of Chinese Prisoners," 189.

The Arrow War

The Arrow War, best known as the Second Opium War, was a conflict lasting from late 1856 to late 1860 that saw the United Kingdom and its allies against the Qing dynasty. The outbreak of the war was caused by an international dispute concerning the merchant ship the *Arrow*. Though the *Arrow* was built by Chinese hands, had a Chinese owner, and was crewed almost entirely with Chinese, except for the captain, it was registered in Hong Kong and through this registration was permitted to fly the British flag and claim British protection.⁶ It entered Canton on October 3, 1856 and was subsequently held by Chinese authorities after a member of the Chinese gentry reported that he saw two pirates on board. These were two assistant navigators that the *Arrow* had recruited a few days earlier, and who the man claimed had plundered his ships a month before. The Chinese later reported that no British flag was flying and that no foreigner was on board the *Arrow* when they arrived, and thus they followed standard procedure when handling Chinese vessels, taking virtually the entire crew into custody, later leaving two behind at the request of the British captain.

When word of the incident reached the British consul in Canton, Harry Parkes (1828–1885), he immediately went to where the sailors were being held and demanded the officer on duty release them. A heated exchange of words followed, and his demand was refused, whereupon Parkes attempted to force himself through. Ultimately, Parkes would find himself physically assaulted, though not seriously. He then sent a recriminating letter to Chinese Commissioner Ye Mingchen (1807–1859), claiming, based on the captain's testimony, that the

⁶ J. Y. Wong, *Deadly Dreams: Opium and the Arrow War (1856–1860) in China*, 1st edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 43.

flag had been pulled down from the ship by Chinese officials, and insisting on a ‘public atonement’ by Ye for the insult dealt to him.⁷ Later investigations and independent Portuguese witness testimony would prove the claim of flag-pulling to be likely false and lend credence to theories that the *Arrow* had been engaged in illegal practices. In addition, it was found through a letter from Parkes to Sir John Bowring (1792–1872), Governor of Hong Kong, that the *Arrow*’s registration had expired on September 27th, and thus the *Arrow* had no right to fly the British flag anyhow.⁸ Despite this, Bowring held firm to his subordinate’s line that the *Arrow* had been flying the British flag. When the issue was first reported to London, news reports, interestingly, made no mention of claims that the British flag had been taken down, and thus insulted. Instead, they only made vague references to questions surrounding whether the *Arrow* was flying British colours at all, suggesting that the flag-pulling story had emerged later.

Still, Bowring used the incident to wage war against China. This was the culmination of Bowring’s longstanding mission to enter Canton, a mark of glory which had never been achieved by a British official, and permission for which had been repeatedly refused by authorities in London.⁹ He now hoped to use the incident to justify entering Canton. In subsequent correspondence with Ye, the *Arrow* was not even mentioned, all attention now turning to Canton itself. The government in London was only vaguely kept informed of these proceedings. Some Members of Parliament, such as former Prime Minister John Russell, openly complained that Bowring had refused a proposed arrangement by Ye that would settle the affair, which Parkes

⁷ Wong, 47.

⁸ Wong, 87.

⁹ Wong, 103.

had called ‘very proper,’ and that he seemed determined to aggravate a dispute that could have been peacefully settled.¹⁰

On the 27th of October, Bowring ordered the local Royal Navy ships to fire on Ye’s residence in Canton in another attempt to garner an official audience with the commissioner, after their demands for a public apology failed, while British residents of Canton fled to Hong Kong.¹¹ The next morning, in response, Ye ordered a general mobilization and began offering bounties on British heads. The war had begun in earnest, and fighting would continue for the next few years.

Unsurprisingly, the Arrow War prompted an atmosphere of fear in Hong Kong, particularly for the small European population, but for many Chinese migrants as well. The Chinese government began a campaign of terror against the colony, led from the counties neighbouring Hong Kong. However, many in the region were not inclined to participate in destroying a city that had improved their livelihoods, and the campaigns ultimately resulted in few casualties.¹² Still, this did not mean that there was no fear of attack. This campaign involved four types of actions: the stoppage of supplies, ordering Chinese inhabitants to abandon the colony, attacks of European property (often through arson) and attempts on European lives.¹³ As we will see, the bread poisoning incident fit neatly into the final category. Despite the relative weakness of the campaign as a whole, this palpable atmosphere of fear clouded the bread poisoning incident and played a clear role in how many in the colony viewed the incident: as a

¹⁰ Wong, 95.

¹¹ Wong, 96.

¹² Christopher Munn, *Anglo-China: Chinese People and British Rule in Hong Kong, 1841-1880* (Richmond: Curzon Press, 2001), 275.

¹³ Munn, 275.

nefarious plot, luckily foiled before it decimated the European population. This leads to an important theme to consider in the treatment and trial of Cheong Alum: before and during the outbreak of war, how did Europeans and Chinese in Hong Kong relate to each other, if at all?

European-Chinese Relations in Colonial Hong Kong

First and foremost, the state of European-Chinese relations in colonial Hong Kong was heavily influenced by the fact that the Chinese natives significantly outnumbered the Europeans in the colony. When the British acquired Hong Kong in 1841, it was a relatively small and isolated community of a few thousand at most. By the time of Cheong Alum and the Esing Bakery incident in 1857, the total population of the island had soared to roughly 75 thousand, drawn largely from immigration from neighbouring parts of southern China throughout the decade, which was in a state of rebellion and civil war.¹⁴ Besides the stability the colony offered, these Chinese immigrants were attracted by Hong Kong's foreign jurisdiction, making it a safe harbour for anyone who had fallen afoul of the Chinese authorities, and the colony's economic growth, as British military expeditions in the region stimulated local commerce.

Meanwhile, around 1500 of the island's inhabitants were European, forming a clear minority class that made up the colony's elite. However, the new settlement had never been intended for large-scale European settlement, being far too small, alongside an inhospitable climate. Instead, most English-speaking settlers in the colony planned to settle in Hong Kong temporarily, until they acquired enough money to move to a settlement colony like New Zealand. Working-class immigrants were rare, as they could not compete with Chinese labour, who had

¹⁴ Munn, 70.

the benefit of being not only adapted to the climate but also being cheaper to employ. Even among Europeans, there were social divides between this settler class and the working-class, as the former rarely included the latter in its social life.¹⁵

Even among this small elite community, there was a clear social hierarchy, with wealthy merchants, often associated with one of the two great merchant houses, at the top, and professionals like doctors and lawyers below them. The rest, shopkeepers, overseers, and police inspectors, often straddled the line between elite and common, “ever keen to differentiate themselves from their Chinese [counterparts].”¹⁶ This English-speaking community often attempted to recreate and ape a form of bourgeois English life, filled with servants, picnics, hunting trips, and imported goods, though nothing could fully remove the deathly specter of tropical disease that many unfortunate European immigrants experienced.

By and large, the only extended contact with Chinese people that most Europeans in Hong Kong had was with their domestic servants. Indeed, Christopher Munn describes their experiences with Chinese servants as being the source of their typically negative portrayals of ‘Chinese character’, associated with cheating and stealing.¹⁷ This could have arisen from the remarkable dependence on their servants that many, if not most, European settlers had on the large number of servants in their employ. Visitors to Hong Kong often commented on the large numbers of servants employed in European households, and it was an accepted fact of life that a

¹⁵ Munn, 56.

¹⁶ Munn, 58.

¹⁷ Munn, “All the Servants in Prison and Nobody to Take Care of the House,” 370.

middle-class European household in Hong Kong would employ many more servants than a similar household back home.¹⁸

As very few Europeans ever bothered to learn the local language, they were wholly dependent on their servants to run their households. These servants were not all docile sheep, either, and many understood their value. Munn relates one tale of how “Matilda Sharp’s servants waited until the eve of her sister’s wedding in 1865, when the household was busy with preparations, before deciding to go on strike to demand higher wages.”¹⁹

Still, despite these incidents of servants organizing, most relationships between Europeans and Chinese in Hong Kong had three things in common: First, they were unequal, with Europeans almost always in control or otherwise acting in a condescending or paternalistic manner. Further, they communicated with each other almost entirely in English, with only a few notable exceptions. Lastly, there often existed a mutual suspicion of the other, usually reflecting the hierarchical nature. For example, masters were suspicious that their servants were stealing from them behind closed doors, while servants feared being replaced.²⁰

One remarkable case involving European-Chinese relations in the context of servanthood that deserves special mention is the 1848 garrison poisoning incident. On the evening of July 9, 1848, twenty-five soldiers of the Royal Artillery stationed in the city suddenly took ill and were vomiting after eating their dinner.²¹ Poison was immediately suspected, and the specific poison

¹⁸ Munn, 372.

¹⁹ Munn, 376.

²⁰ Munn, *Anglo-China*, 66.

²¹ Munn, 86.

used was rumoured to be arsenic. The three Chinese cooks working at the garrison were immediately taken into custody and charged with administering poison with intent to kill.

However, the next few days would unravel the truth of the so-called poisoning. It was discovered that the cooks had indeed placed something into the food, but not poison. Instead, the cooks had been angered by a decision made two weeks before the incident to serve dinner at a later, more inconvenient time, thus forcing the cooks to prepare food and wash dishes later. This was done during the summer months, forcing them to work in the sweltering and wet heat. Thus, in an act of protest, the cooks placed a strong herbal emetic into the soldiers' stew.²² Ultimately, as the soldiers recovered quickly, the cooks were acquitted of the charge of poisoning.

This incident stands out as a case of suspected poisoning with some characteristics very similar to the Esing Bakery incident. Like the future bakery incident, the food preparation staff were all Chinese, whereas those consuming the food were largely, if not entirely European. Similarly, accusations of poison were quickly spread, and great anger was roused against the Chinese cooks. The poison initially suspected to have been used in the garrison incident, though it was proven to be something else, was arsenic. Could the poisoner in the Esing Bakery case have been inspired by this incident? Combined with the tensions of the Arrow War and these past fears of poison, it is not hard to see why Europeans could have rushed to conclusions.

Besides servanthood, the only major interaction the European colonial elite had with Chinese people in Hong Kong was in the realm of trade and commerce. This is where Cheong Alum can be situated, having risen through the social hierarchy to become a prosperous and property-owning merchant. His bakery and bread shop were the most important in Hong Kong, famed for using Western methods to produce bread. Further, Cheong was on rather good terms

²² Munn, 86.

with the colonial merchant class: he had business dealings with many of them and was trusted with government contracts, both British and American, on multiple occasions. Dr. William Maxwell Wood, surgeon for the U.S. Navy, called him “my gentlemanly friend, the grocer.”²³ As will be seen, it was argued at his trial that he was “one of the most integrated, prosperous, and well-respected Chinese businessmen in Hong Kong.”²⁴

Despite these civil, if not entirely harmonious relations, the Arrow War, and the general feeling that Hong Kong was under siege, created new tensions between the European and Chinese populations of the city, particularly as the former pushed for stronger restrictions on the Chinese inhabitants of the city. Newspapers spread rumours of Chinese plots and the impending invasion of the colony. An estimated 5,000 Chinese residents left the city in response to proclamations from China ordering them to return: many out of fear of repercussions for their families.

Throughout late 1856, European colonists urged Governor Bowring to do more to defend the city from Chinese attack. They succeeded in seeing the appointment of 70 additional police officers and other defensive measures, such as a military picket in the town centre.²⁵ New restrictions were also enforced on Chinese inhabitants of Hong Kong, particularly unpopular laws on overcrowded, unsafe and unsanitary tenements. Over-zealous enforcement of these and other laws led to the ‘Anstey Riots’ on 20 November, named after the Attorney General, which saw the military being deployed and all un-registered Chinese ordered to leave the colony.

²³ William Maxwell Wood, *Fankwei; or, The San Jacinto in the Seas of India, China, and Japan* (New York : Harper & Brothers, 1859), 490.

²⁴ Lowe and McLaughlin, ““Caution! The Bread Is Poisoned,”” 200.

²⁵ James William Norton-Kyshe, *History of the Laws and Courts of Hongkong*, vol. 1 (London; Hong Kong: T. Fisher Unwin; Noronha, 1898), 412.

Things went from bad to worse for the Chinese population when a notice was published on 16 December ordering all Chinese inhabitants to carry a pass and lantern if on the streets after 10 at night. Later, in the new year, police were authorized to “shoot to kill” from 8 pm to sunrise.²⁶ In conclusion, it is easy to see how the population of Hong Kong was in a state of racial tension between European and Chinese inhabitants at the time of the poisoning and how this impacted how the Esing Bakery poisoning was seen.

The Trial of Cheong Alum and the Hong Kong Legal System

The trial of Cheong Alum began on February 2nd at the Supreme Court of Hong Kong, the typical court for serious offences, and lasted until February 6th; at the time, it was the longest criminal trial in the history of the colony. Attorney General Thomas Chisholm Anstey (1816–1873) stood for the prosecution, while Cheong Alum retained the services of Dr. William Thomas Bridges (1820–1894). The charge brought against Cheong was that of “administering poison with intent to kill and murder James Carroll Dempster, Colonial Surgeon.”²⁷

Hong Kong’s legal system differed from England’s in several ways that are useful for understanding the trial, typically involving the court’s structure and procedures. This was likely due to the colony’s relatively small size. For one, Hong Kong made no use of grand juries for deciding whether charges would go to trial; the decision was vested in the Attorney General. Further, juries were composed of six men rather than twelve, and most importantly, were composed entirely of Europeans (though, this did not mean they understood English), meaning

²⁶ Lowe and McLaughlin, ““Caution! The Bread Is Poisoned,”” 194.

²⁷ Norton-Kyshe, *History of the Laws and Courts of Hongkong*, 1:416.

Chinese defendants were not truly tried by their ‘peers.’²⁸ Another crucial difference was that juries were not required to be unanimous, except on capital offences: 4-2 in favour was enough to convict.²⁹ These unique characteristics of the Hong Kong system would all show themselves in the case of Cheong Alum and are crucial to understand for proper analysis.

What is immediately striking upon reading the trial record (published in a local newspaper) is how the trial was framed both by the prosecution and the defence. The trial quickly took on a racial undertone that would last throughout the proceedings and was less about the facts of the poisoning than about Cheong Alum’s purported motives.

In his first statement, Anstey’s strategy was to position Cheong Alum as an agent of the Chinese government, thundering that if the prisoners were released, “the Chinese authorities would be encouraged to repeat their diabolical attempt” and that the Crown and British community with would “looked upon with contempt by the Chinese.”³⁰ The Attorney-General himself acknowledged the deficiencies in his evidence, declaring in his first statement that due to the nature of the crime the jury would have to “go entirely by circumstantial evidence, and they could infer far more than they would be required to do in other cases of direct proof.”³¹ He argued this was because there was no formal crime for attempting to poison an entire community, which was why Cheong and his fellow accused had only been charged of the attempted poisoning of the surgeon.

²⁸ Christopher Munn, “‘Giving Justice a Second Chance’: The Criminal Trial in Early British Hong Kong, 1841-1866,” *China Information* 12, no. 1-2 (July 1, 1997): 39, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0920203X9701200103>.

²⁹ Munn, 53.

³⁰ “Confinement of Chinese Prisoners,” 184-85.

³¹ “Confinement of Chinese Prisoners,” 184.

Anstey went on to portray Cheong's motives as being thoroughly influenced by his race, "prejudice against us barbarians, and the hope of reward from his Government and fellow-countrymen; and every one knew that a Chinaman was never at a loss for a witness."³² With such racially tinged language, it was clear that Anstey hoped to play off existing racial tensions in the community to win a conviction. As will be seen in the later days of the trial, such tactics were likely informed by his own opinions of the case: he had not wanted the case to go to trial at all, but Governor Bowring had insisted on upholding trial by jury.³³ The governor's decision may have been due in part to his flagging reputation, particularly back in Britain, as some, particularly in the opposition, questioned his actions which had done much to raise tensions with China. The first day proceeded with the testimonies of various witnesses, mostly describing how they had eaten the bread and had gotten sick soon after. One interesting testimony, however, was that of Mr. Drinker, a representative of a trading firm that often did business with Cheong and the bakery. He testified that he had seen a sign outside the shop in Chinese describing Cheong was leaving the colony and confronted Cheong, wishing to ensure that his contract would be fulfilled. It was then that Cheong brought him to the bakery to see that all his biscuit was being prepared. He further described how he was not planning on leaving and that the sign was placed to deceive the mandarins in the city, who were 'constantly troubling him,' in Cheong's words. Satisfied, Drinker encouraged Cheong to report his troubles to the police. Another interesting point was that the bread (both white and brown, and toast) and baking tools from the bakery had been analyzed by doctors; no trace of arsenic had been found on the baking tools, but only on the

³² "Confinement of Chinese Prisoners," 185.

³³ Lowe and McLaughlin, "'Caution! The Bread Is Poisoned,'" 204.

bread itself. It was estimated that the total arsenic used was around ten pounds.³⁴ Luckily, the poisoner had added far too much arsenic. Rather than killing any of its victims, the poison acted as its own emetic, causing victims to vomit it out. This suggests the poison had been added only at the end of the baking process. The day concluded with Cheong's statement being read; that which was adapted for the introduction of this paper.

The second day began with Anstey raising a concern to the judge about a juror, Mr. Bowra, being heard using strong language regarding Anstey's conduct towards the prisoner the night prior. This juror was subsequently warned by the judge to cease such language. The rest of the day was uneventful and saw various European merchants giving testimony, some of whom had known Cheong for upwards of fifteen years. They testified to the fact that Cheong Alum had sometimes dishonoured cheques, and that they had heard of a reward offered for his head by the mandarins. They also described the spread of the poisoned bread and demonstrated how popular the Esing bakery was among the European population. Crucially, this suggests that Cheong was telling the truth in his statement that he was under threat by the mandarins. After all, these Europeans would have no reason to lie and indeed harmed Alum's reputation by describing his practice of not honouring cheques. The day ended by hearing the testimony of Mr. Robinet, the Hong Kong merchant who had chartered a boat to Macao and arrested Cheong.

The third day proved more interesting and provides further evidence of clear racial tensions in the colony and in the justice system. Once the court opened for the day, the jury foreman rose and declared a shocking attempt had been made to bribe a juror, Mr. Sutton. Sutton went on to explain that he had been offered \$100 by a relative of Cheong to acquit Cheong

³⁴ "Confinement of Chinese Prisoners," 198.

Alum, with the same offer to any other interested juror.³⁵ Here, the court record describes how orders were given for the arrest of the bribing party, and further that all Chinese individuals were prevented from leaving the court. If it had been ambiguous before, this is striking proof of racial discrimination and stereotyping in the application of law in the Hong Kong legal system. It is clear that the trial judge saw all Chinese as possible suspects, a sign of potential racial prejudice, while apparently seeing nothing to fear from the European population of Hong Kong; surely, they could not possibly be involved in such a dastardly act. This emphasizes the us versus them mentality that existed among the European population. The court heard testimony from the Chinese man accused of offering bribes, who was subsequently sentenced to hard labour. The trial continued with the testimony of the various officers and staff of the Shamrock, who mainly testified that Cheong had indeed offered \$50 and then \$100 to return to Hong Kong that night, again suggesting that Cheong been telling the truth.

The fourth day saw Dr. Bridges, Cheong's defence attorney, make his case. Bridges' statement of defence is remarkable not only for its charismatic use of language but also for his careful undermining of many of the oddities of the Hong Kong legal system. Bridges questioned not only the plausibility of the charges against Cheong Alum but also Attorney General Anstey's behaviour. He questioned why "the preliminary examinations held in [the case were so different to the way they were generally held], and so much at variance with British law."³⁶ Bridges also pointed out that the Attorney-General had himself publicly opposed the trial, suggesting that it was far too lenient, although Cheong's guilt had not even been determined.

³⁵ "Confinement of Chinese Prisoners," 190.

³⁶ "Confinement of Chinese Prisoners," 192.

Bridges continued by describing how the testimony of the various European witnesses was of little relevance to Cheong's purported motives. He proceeded to argue for a very different version of Cheong Alum than the prosecution had presented. After the outbreak of the Arrow War, Cheong, Bridges noted, was "the only man amongst the Chinese community that kept his shop open and sold to foreigners."³⁷ Why would such a man, he questioned, who had openly defied the mandarins, so quickly turn on the very people who kept his business afloat, his European customers? Furthermore, turning towards racial tropes, arguing that "if a Chinaman ... [had] any affection at all, it [was] in the love he shows towards his father and children," if he knew there was poison, why would Cheong have poisoned his own children? Various Chinese witnesses testified to seeing Cheong give his children the bread. Why would he stay on the ship in Macao harbour instead of fleeing further inland? Bridges continued his defence of Cheong by pointing out that he had left behind various things that would have been of considerable help to him if he had indeed intended on leaving for Macao: the police had searched his business and discovered various deeds to land near Macao, and over \$1,200 in cash. As per further witness testimony from various merchants, Cheong had also signed various contracts for the provision of biscuit and had paid some of his bills (worth \$800) only a day earlier. Further, two of Cheong's workmen had managed to flee the colony while the employees were being arrested and had never been caught, suggesting that they had been the ones behind the evil deed. Overall, argued Bridges, Cheong Alum's behaviour and actions all suggested that he had no intention of remaining in Macao and escaping justice in Hong Kong, thus suggesting that he had not

³⁷ "Confinement of Chinese Prisoners," 193.

committed the crime. Instead, he was the victim of a terrible conspiracy, led either by Chinese authorities or by a commercial rival jealous of his monopoly on naval contracts.³⁸

The fifth day began with statements from Anstey and culminated with the verdict. Anstey delivered a statement that continued to be tinged with racial rhetoric, while also revealing more clearly his own personal views on the trial. He said it was “not hard to conceive why [...] in the present disturbed state of the colony, Asiatics should not be allowed the same privileges as Europeans,” arguing that the crime was likely ordered by the mandarins.³⁹ He now openly stated his desire that the trial had not occurred at all, declaring that the crime instead “deserved the fate of a drum-head court-martial.”⁴⁰ After offering a rebuttal to Bridges’ various statements on the evidence, again repeating that the jury would need to rely on less evidence than necessary, Anstey ended on an ominous note. He warned that unless the prisoners were convicted, “no longer is the life of a European safe in the colony.”⁴¹ After his statement, the record notes that the public stamped their feet in clear approval of his words, suggesting that his views were far from a minority among the European population. After the judge gave the jury their instructions, they retired for fifty long minutes.

Upon returning to court, the jury returned their verdict: not guilty, by a margin of 5 to 1. It is evident that their European neighbours were very unhappy with this verdict, as the record notes hisses from within the courtroom. Further, the verdict came as a great surprise to Anstey and the judge, with the record noting that they “looked at each other.” Shortly after Cheong and

³⁸ Lowe and McLaughlin, ““Caution! The Bread Is Poisoned,”” 200.

³⁹ “Confinement of Chinese Prisoners,” 197.

⁴⁰ “Confinement of Chinese Prisoners,” 197.

⁴¹ “Confinement of Chinese Prisoners,” 201.

his father were discharged, however, they were once again arrested for being “suspicious characters,” under a warrant issued by Governor Bowring.

Unsurprisingly, the verdict was met with frustration by the European population of Hong Kong, and Bowring’s detention of Cheong was likely to pre-empt any recriminations for the not guilty verdict. Shortly after the verdict, two petitions were filed with his office: one by Europeans, demanding that Cheong be expelled immediately, and another by the Chinese community, which agreed that Cheong ought to be expelled (they likely saw the writing on the wall), but insisted that he be allowed to settle his business affairs first.⁴² Cheong was released by order of the Colonial Office several months later, at the end of July 1857, and was forbidden from ever returning to Hong Kong. This had been carried out after Bowring spoke privately with the Chief Justice, who concluded the evidence laid before the jury did not warrant a conviction, and whose opinion Bowring had relayed to the Colonial Office.

Cheong would not be the only one expelled, however. Despite the finding of not guilty, for himself and for the dozens of his bakery workers arrested alongside him, virtually all met the same fate. Yet Governor Bowring did not stop there, and proceeded to deport hundreds of Chinese offenders, during the 1857 emergency, earning him condemnation back home in Britain and in the local colonial press.⁴³ These race-based deportations again make clear the racist system of governance in Hong Kong at the time, where Chinese residents could be deported with

⁴² Lowe and McLaughlin, ““Caution! The Bread Is Poisoned,”” 200.

⁴³ Munn, “Giving Justice a Second Chance,” 55; Jung-fang Tsai, *Hong Kong in Chinese History: Community and Social Unrest in the British Colony, 1842–1913*, Revised edition (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 53; Jung-fang Tsai, “From Antiforeignism to Popular Nationalism: Hong Kong between China and Britain, 1839–1911,” in *Prekarious Balance: Hong Kong Between China and Britain, 1842–1992*, ed. Ming K. Chan and John D. Young (Routledge, 1994), 14.

impunity. Despite this clear setback, Cheong did not stay cowed for long. According to a biographical note written after his death, after a brief stint in Macao, Cheong would end up moving to Vietnam where he continued trading, dying in 1900 at the age of 73, a well-respected merchant and pillar of the Chinese community.⁴⁴ Interestingly, this Chinese account of his life describes the poisoning incident as resulting from the carelessness of one of his workers dropping “odd things” in the flour and defends Cheong as running too large an operation to keep track of every worker.

The reaction to the case of Cheong Alum in Britain was considerably different from that in Hong Kong. Some people in England, opposition MPs included, did not believe the poisoning had even taken place or instead that it had been greatly exaggerated, used to drum up support for the then-unpopular Arrow War, which was also being doubted.⁴⁵ One MP quipped: “Call the whole College of Physicians, and ask whether they could poison 300 men with arsenic without any of them dying [...]”⁴⁶ This was contrafactual, as eventually three deaths would be attributed to the poisoning: one of which was Governor Bowring’s wife, who died in September 1858 of stomach ulcers.⁴⁷ Others suggested that rather than arsenic, the bread had simply gone bad, or had been accidentally mixed with building materials. This disbelief eventually dissipated once further detail emerged, especially once European scientists confirmed the presence of arsenic.⁴⁸

⁴⁴ Choi Chi-cheung, “Cheung Ah-Lum, A Biographical Note,” *Journal of the Hong Kong Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 24 (1984): 285.

⁴⁵ Lowe and McLaughlin, ““Caution! The Bread Is Poisoned,”” 203.

⁴⁶ Lowe and McLaughlin, 202–3.

⁴⁷ Lowe and McLaughlin, 197.

⁴⁸ J. Ivor Murray, “Note of the Result of an Analysis of a Portion of the Bread with Which A-Lum Was Accused of Poisoning the European Residents at Hong-Kong,” *Edinburgh Medical Journal* 4, no. 1 (July 1858): 13–16.

The anger back home about the treatment of the Chinese prisoners also resulted in a letter from the Colonial Secretary to Bowring inquiring on the conditions of their confinement. Bowring, while acknowledging the conditions were unsuitable, pointed to the overstretched resources of the police at the time. Interestingly, Dr. Bridges, Cheong's defence counsel, also defended the conditions, though he had been so vigorous in opposing them during his defence. He noted that at the time of the imprisonment, "the most kind to the Chinese loathed the whole race on account of the poisoning," again lending credence to the theory that the trial had been impacted deeply by local race-related concerns.⁴⁹

Despite the suspicion with which the Esing bakery poisoning, as well as the Arrow War, was treated, the government vigorously defended Bowring's actions, and the situation in China was a key issue in the election of that year, then called the "Chinese Election," which saw Lord Palmerston's government re-elected, going from a minority government to a majority.⁵⁰ The war would end in British victory in 1860, with the United Kingdom gaining many valuable concessions, including diplomatic recognition in Beijing, the opening of more Chinese ports to trade, and the legalization of opium.⁵¹ Overall, the story of Cheong Alum and the Esing Bakery incident reveals a colonial Hong Kong steeped in racial tensions between European and Chinese inhabitants, as seen in particular through their different treatment under law.

⁴⁹ "Despatch from Bowring to Sec. for Colonies, July 1857," *19th Century House of Commons Sessional Papers* Volume Page: XLIII.653 Volume: 43 Paper Number: 166 (January 1, 1858): 656.

⁵⁰ May Caroline Chan, "Canton, 1857," *Victorian Review* 36, no. 1 (2010): 33.

⁵¹ John Mark Carroll, *A Concise History of Hong Kong* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2007), 20.

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