

# Contemporary Chinese Cuisines in Canada Together With Some Culinary Aetiological Legends

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# Contemporary Chinese Cuisines in Canada Together With Some Culinary Aetiological Legends

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Food is an important element of life and is intimately related to the history and tradition of a people. Life celebrations, rituals and festivals are intertwined with the serving of different kinds of food. Eating habits, methods of cooking and food preparation, etiquette and manners of serving food, and beliefs about food, are all part of a food tradition.

Each ethnic group has its own distinctive food tradition and different style of cooking, which evolve over the years. The Chinese are known for their fondness of food. A common adage states that "The people regard food as heaven" (Min Yi Shi Wei Tien). This may indicate a preoccupation for food by the traditional Chinese in an agricultural society. For a Chinese, three meals are offered in honour of a person in his or her life: first, at one month old (a full moon); second, at the wedding and third, at the funeral. Food is closely linked with customs of the life cycle.

When the Chinese immigrated to Canada, they also brought along their food traditions. As most of the earlier immigrants were peasants, labourers, and artisans who came from the province of Guangdong, the style of cooking they brought here was "down-home" Cantonese cooking, the kind of cooking which is considered as having the "taste of village flavours" (Jia Xiang Wei). Those immigrants who were single or here as "married bachelors" (those who married but left their families in the old country) usually cooked their own food, using local ingredients and grocery items purchased from Chinatown stores. This gave rise to a popular misconception in North America that the "Chinese are naturally born cooks." As they led a frugal life with a meagre income, the meals they prepared were simple and poor. If they lived in a rooming house with communal cooking facilities, a better meal would be prepared with several friends. On some festive occasions such as the Chinese New Year, a sumptuous dinner would be served.

As there were not many womenfolk around in the earlier days of immigration, cooking at home was a rare occurrence, occurring only with those who were rich or who had a family here. However, with more families coming to Canada after the Second World War, there was also a corresponding increase in home cooking. A "normal Chinese meal" consists of a soup, with a few dishes of meats and vegetables served. Festive food is prepared for the occasion, rice cake and special dishes for the New Year, "Zhong-tse" (glutinous rice wrapped in bamboo leaves) for the 5th day of the 5th moon, sacrificial food for the Ching Ming festival, moon cake for the Mid-Autumn festival, and round sweet rice dumpling for the winter solstice. With the meals being served at home, members of the family have to observe some degree of table manners, such as the way they use chop sticks, how they address parents before eating, being careful to help the elderly with their food, taking their food from the side of the dish that faces them, and holding the bowl while eating. A Chinese family meal is essentially a communal affair. Individuals partake the food together and seldom serve one dish to one person. In taking food communally, they have to observe the niceties of politeness and ritual. Much "family teaching" to the young, concerning good manners and behaviour, is transmitted around the dinner table.

Chinese food became popular amongst the general Canadian public after the Second World War, partly because of a growing awareness of a greater variety of foods and partly because of a demand from Canadian servicemen who had travelled abroad and had experienced Asian food. These points, coupled with post World War II economic prosperity and a higher standard of living, created a favourable milieu for the growth of Chinese restaurants.

With a greater demand from the general public, Chinese restaurants prospered like "bamboo shoots after spring rain." Other than a few restaurants that serve "old village" food, many restaurants are now offering the "haute cuisine of China," exploiting and using different regional cooking styles and techniques. Drawing on their gastronomic tradition and enormous repertoire, these restaurants are creating many exotic and complex dishes that please the eye, and satisfy both palate and appetite.

### **1. Old Overseas Chinese Food (Lao Hua Chiao Cai)**

This is the food tradition that was brought over by the old immigrants. It is simple, practical, and is considered to have a "village flavour." There are only a few restaurants in some major Canadian Chinatowns that serve primarily the "Old Overseas Chinese Food."

According to interviews gathered from these restaurants' owners, some of the main dishes that are considered to have an "old immigrants' flavour" are the following:

- white cut chicken
- steamed minced pork with salted fish and pickled vegetables
- steamed minced pork with salted eggs, sausages or duck livers
- Pork with "mei cai" (a kind of vegetable)
- steamed chicken with "chong cai" (a kind of vegetable)
- Cantonese fried chicken
- sweet and sour pork
- steamed spare ribs with black bean sauce
- "tai za hui": a combination of different kind of meats and vegetables
- Cantonese barbecued duck
- Chicken with bitter melons
- sauteed squids with ginger and green onions
- braised vermicelli noodles
- steamed spare ribs with plum sauce
- braised beef with dried bamboo
- "old fire soup" (Lao Fo Tang)

## 2. Chinese-Canadian Food

The restaurants that serve "Americanized Chinese food" are commonly known as "Chop Suey Houses." The food is derived from traditional Cantonese cuisine with local ingredients and occasionally with the addition of Tomato Sauce, Ketchup and Worcestershire Sauce. Two different kinds of Chop Suey may be served: Canadian Chop Suey which consists of beef with garlic or bean sauce; and American Chop Suey which uses bean sprouts with different kinds of meats. One of the specialities of Canadian Chop Suey is "Montreal Honey Spare Ribs" which consists of deep fried spare ribs with sugar or honey.

According to popular oral tradition there seem to be three chief versions of the story concerning the origin of the Chop Suey:

- a) Li Hung-Zhang, a famous minister of the late Qing Court, visited the city of San Francisco. The Mayor of the city gave a sumptuous dinner in his honour. Many exotic dishes were served. But Li, plagued with an ulcer problem, did not seem to appreciate the food. An official went into the kitchen and asked the Chinese cook for advice. The cook suggested a different dish be offered. He simply used what was left over and made up a dish with a mixture of different kinds of meats and vegetables. It was offered to Li who enjoyed it tremendously. The Mayor and guests were impressed with the dish and thought it might be the food of nobles. Chop Suey then became popular in San Francisco.
- b) When Li Hung-Zhang visited New York Chinatown, a Chinese immigrant saw him and was very much impressed by his personality and popularity. He then named his restaurant "Li Hung-Zhang;" and his speciality was Chop Suey. As his restaurant prospered, so did his Chop Suey dishes. Thus the name of Li Hung-Zhang became linked with chop suey.
- c) A famous Qing Emperor, Qian Lung, disguised himself and went to visit the countryside. He arrived at a village food stall just when he was hungry. The stall was about to close and could not serve him an "elaborate meal." The cook simply made up a dish of what was left over and called it, "the great combination." The emperor liked it; and upon his return to the palace, he ordered his chefs to make the same dish. However, none of them could measure up to the quality of the village dish. In frustration, the emperor summoned the village cook to the palace and asked him how to prepare it. The cook finally confessed that it was only a Chop Suey consisting of different kinds of vegetables and meats.

As can be seen from these stories Chop Suey had respectable and honourable origins, being closely related to the famous minister and the emperor. Whether one believes these stories or not, Chop Suey dishes were and still are very popular in Canada today. Chop Suey houses are reputed to have grossed millions of dollars a year in North America. It is quite easy to prepare with local materials, it suits the tastes and the palates of the locals and, moreover, the price is reasonable. Like pizza and the hamburger, Chop Suey dishes can be taken out. They can be prepared by fast food chains, catering to office workers and tourists. Though it is "mass-produced," its quality can still be maintained.

Most dishes served at Chop Suey houses are variations of the following main categories:

- i) Chop Suey: Mixed vegetables with meats (chicken, pork, beef, shrimp, fish or abalone).
- ii) Chow Mein: Fried noodles with different kinds of meats and vegetables.
- iii) Fried Rice: Rice fried with different kinds of meats and greens.
- iv) Sweet and Sour: Pork, chicken or shrimp with sugar, tomato ketchup or other sauces.
- v) Spare Ribs: Sweet and sour, or dried garlic spare ribs.
- vi) Egg Fu Yung: Fried eggs with different kinds of meats, bean sprouts and vegetables.
- vii) Beef: Fried beef with broccoli, pepper, snow peas, tomatoes, bean sprouts or Chinese vegetables.
- viii) Soup: Wuntun soup (also known in some restaurants as Chinese Ravioli), and egg drop soup.
- ix) Egg Rolls: Minced pork, beef or shrimp with cabbage, bean sprouts and other kinds of vegetables.
- x) Sea Foods: Butterfly shrimp, crab with garlic sauce, sweet and sour fish balls, oysters with mixed vegetables and others.

### 3. Cantonese Food

Cantonese cuisine has a large and diverse repertoire and is known for its many ingredients, embellishments and colourful garnish. A good dish is measured by its flavour, colour, fragrance, taste, substance and texture. The methods of preparation and the techniques of cooking are varied, including stir-frying, steaming, red-stewing, deep-frying, shallow-frying, simmering, smoking, boiling, roasting, baking, grilling and broiling. Methods of cutting meats include slicing, chopping, shredding, dicing, grinding and carving; and vegetables and fruits are sometimes sculptured into various shapes resembling different animals and flowers.

There is an adage which says that for living, the best place to go is Hung Zhou; for dressing, Suzhou; for dying, Liu Zhou; and for dining, Guangzhou. Guangzhou, the provincial capital of Guangdong, has a sophisticated and rich tradition of culinary culture, and is well known for its great diversity of dishes. It is said that in Guangdong,

everything which walks with four feet can go into the cooking pot. This testifies to the utilization of many kinds of animals for food. Snakes, parrots, sparrows, raccoons, monkeys, civets, bears, cats and dogs are said to be included in the traditional repertoire of Cantonese cuisine. It appears to have few culinary taboos.

Cantonese cuisine is famous for its elaborate "Dim Sum" and clay-pot cooking. It is culinary exotica reflective of innovation, subtlety, variety, refinement, and the skilful blending of different flavours into a grand harmonious combination.

Different kinds of Cantonese medicinal wines are sometimes served with the meals, such as Tiger Bone wine, Snake wine and Sorghum wine; but a majority of customers in Canada today consume "Western drinks."

The majority of Chinese restaurants in Canada today serve Cantonese food. Some of their main dishes include:

- i) Soup: Shark's fin, bird's nest, abalone, crab meat, fish maw, scallops, sliced duck, and sweet corn.
- ii) Chicken: Roasted, steamed, boiled, shredded, braised or pan fried chicken with shallot, ginger, lemon or black bean sauce; and with celery or cashew nuts, almond, pineapple, mushroom or other seasonal vegetables. Some well-liked chicken dishes are: Cantonese crispy-skinned chicken, "Chicken in Three Tastes," baked chicken in rock salt, paper chicken and soya sauce chicken.
- iii) Duck: Braised, steamed, fried or barbecued duck with mixed vegetables, or taros, sour plum, lemon sauce, fish maw, bitter squash, ginger, mushroom and lemon sauce. Some well known duck dishes are: "Pei Pa Duck," Barbecued Duck, "Eight-Treasured Duck."
- iv) Beef: Braised, fried, or sauteed beef with different kinds of vegetables, in oyster sauce, black bean sauce, curried sauce, shrimp sauce, tomato sauce, and sweet and sour sauce. Some of the popular dishes are: Sliced beef in oyster sauce with "Chinese broccoli," braised beef with green pepper and black bean sauce.

- v) **Pork and Spare Ribs:** Roasted, steamed, fried, or deep-fried spare ribs; or sliced, minced, shredded pork with different kinds of vegetables and in different kinds of sauces such as plum sauce, black bean sauce, sweet and sour sauce. Some of the popular dishes are: Sweet and sour pork or spare ribs; Hong Kong spare ribs; sliced pork with three kinds of mushrooms; steamed minced pork with squid; and Cantonese barbecued pork.
- vi) **Sea Foods:** Steamed, deep fried, stewed, braised or pan fried rock cod, oyster, crab, prawns, cuttle fish, shrimp, fresh clams, scallops, sea-cucumber, and a great variety of fish with different kinds of sauces and vegetables. Some of the popular dishes are: Steamed whole rock cod; stewed oyster with ginger and green onion; lobster tail with black bean sauce; three kinds of seafood in the bird's nest; sea-cucumber with mushrooms; fried crabs with spring onions and ginger; shrimps fried with milk and egg-white; and fried prawns with snow peas.
- vii) **Hot Pot:** The food is baked in the clay pot. Some of the popular hot pot dishes are: "Singing chicken in the pot," "eight treasured and bean cake," "duck feet and mushrooms," "beef tripe with pepper and black bean," "fish ball with bean cake," "oyster with ginger," "braised brisket of beef," and "mixed meats with bean cake."
- viii) **Sizzling Platters:** These are foods served on hot iron plates. Some well liked dishes are: tender fillet beef, jumbo prawns, boneless chicken balls, mixed seafood and spiced beef.
- ix) **Vegetables:** The much ordered dishes are: the "Buddhist's Delight," crab meat with vegetables, quail eggs with green, braised meats with many kinds of vegetables, and prawns stuffed with fresh mushrooms.



- x) **Fried Rice and Noodles** Cantonese fried rice and noodles are well known, with mixtures of different kinds of meats and vegetables. A particularly well-liked dish is the "Yi Fu Mien," a kind of noodle soup with assorted meats and vegetables.

In addition, there is also an elaborate repertoire of vegetarian dishes called Zhai Cai, using mainly different kinds of vegetables, noodles, bean curd, fruit and flower seeds and spices to create all kinds of dishes; some of them are even made to resemble chicken, duck and fishes.

Because of popular demand and competition, many restaurants' chefs strive to present a wide diversity of exotic dishes, with fresh ideas learned from China, Hong Kong, Taiwan and Singapore. Some restaurants are known to serve only "Hong Kong Modern" dishes, attracting a well-to-do Hong Kong clientele.

With a greater demand for Chinese food from the Chinese themselves, specialized food shops have been set up to serve exclusively certain food items such as noodle soup, pastries and cakes, barbecued meats, and "Dim Sum." Some restaurants also offer congee (rice broth) with side orders of pig's feet, chicken feet, beef flank, squid, oyster, beef sinews, tripe and tongue, preserved eggs, salted vegetables, pork kidney and liver, and even Chinese "doughnuts" (Zha You Tiao: deep-fried dough sticks). The prosperity and proliferation of many Cantonese restaurants in many Canadian towns and cities indicates that Cantonese cuisine is by far the most popular, partly because of a greater demand for it, and partly because of its long established tradition in this country.

#### 4. Northern and Coastal Provincial Food

The Northern style of cooking consists of dishes from the provinces of Shandong, Honan, Hopei, Shanxi, and Shenxi. It emphasizes fresh natural flavours, with liberal use of garlic, spring onions, ginger, shallots and leeks. Cooking methods in general are explode-frying, steaming and baking. Northerners do not eat as much rice as southerners. Their staple foods are wheat, noodles and dumplings made of Kao Liang (sorghum), corn, millet and soy bean.

Some famous northern dishes are Peking duck, Mutton or Lamb Fire-pot, Mongolian barbecued beef, Jiao-zhi (stuffed dumpling), Chun Juan (spring roll), Sweet and Sour Carp, and "Lady Kuei Fei's Chicken."

Some informants noted that "Kuei Fei's Chicken" is also known as "Drunken Chicken." Kuei Fei was a beautiful consort of a Tang emperor, Li Lung-gi (685-762 A.D.). When the empire was attacked by a

rebel leader Ann Lu-san, she was blamed for the rebellion and for corrupting the emperor who paid more attention to her than to the country. She was strangled to death. An episode of an opera based on her life story was named "The Drunken Empress." Hence the "drunken chicken" is taken to mean "Kuei Fei's chicken."

Peking Duck is world famous. It is difficult to cook it "authentically" in Canada, as the duck is raised with forced feeding and slaughtered when it reaches the right degree of plumpness. However, with the skill and experience of a good chef, local ducks can be roasted to a bright golden brown with a high quality of crispness and tenderness. It is served with pancakes and Hai Xian sauce.

The coastal provinces of Jiangsu, Anhui and Zhejiang have distinctive culinary styles and flavours of their own. The culinary centre of the areas is Shanghai. Shao Hing wine and Dragon Well Tea (Lung Jing Cha) are well known. Some of the popular dishes are White Cut Pork, Lion's Heads, West Lake Vinegar Fish, One Fish with Two Flavours, Tung Po Pork, Beggar's Chicken, and a variety of Buddhist and Taoist dishes.

Tung Po Pork was said to be a favourite dish of a famous scholar of the Sung dynasty Su Tung-po (960-1279 A.D.). It is cooked with fresh pork belly, sugar, soy sauce, rice wine, scallions and ginger.

Beggar's Chicken is said to have been created by a beggar. He was so hungry that he stole a chicken from a neighbourhood. Having neither the pot nor the spices to cook the chicken, he wrapped it up with mud and grasses, and burned it in the fire. When it was done, the aroma of the chicken spread all over the neighbourhood. The people followed the scent and discovered the stolen chicken being eaten by the beggar. The people tasted it and liked it. They then cooked the chicken in accordance with the beggar's method. Over the years it became a tradition.

## 5. Western and Central Provincial Food

The provinces of Sichuan, Hunan, Guizhou and Yunan are in general classified together as representing the cooking styles of Western and Central China. The cuisine in these areas is characterized by its hot pepperiness in subtle combination with a great variety of spices. Red chilis, fagaru pepper, licorice root, different medicinal herbs, pickles and salt are extensively used.

Both Hunan and Sichuan dishes are now gaining popularity in Canada. Some popular Hunan dishes are: Hunan Hot Pot, Honey Glazed Ham, Tong An Chicken,\* Orange Chicken, Ta Qian Chicken,\* Bon Bon Chicken and Vagabond Ham.

Some favourite Sichuan dishes are: Double-cooked Pork, Salt-burned Chicken, Tea-smoked Duck, Kung Bao Chicken, Sweet and Sour Soup, Pork Steamed with Pickled Vegetables, Pork in Spicy Fish Sauce, Strange-flavoured Chicken and The Pock-marked Woman's Bean Cake.

The bean cake dish created by the pocked woman in Sichuan is well known. It is really a simple dish of bean cake, seasoned with chili, ginger, spring onion and minced pork. She was said to be the wife of a well-known chef who once lived at Cheng-tu a hundred years ago. She presented this dish to her husband who greatly appreciated it. She had pock marks on her face, and the dish was thus named after her. Though she was homely, her culinary art won the heart of the local people.

Another version of the story has it that the pock-marked woman operated a small bean cake stall in Cheng-tu countless centuries ago. She accidentally created this dish, her customers liked it and flocked to her store. She had pock marks on her face and the dish was named the Pock-marked Woman's Bean Cake.

The most famous wine produced in this region is Guizhou's "Mao Tai." It contains about 55% alcohol and is often served in banquets and parties. A salt merchant from the North is said to have invented it. One day he was passing through Northern Guizhou and was enchanted by the beauty of the place. He decided to settle down and began to distill Kao Liang (sorghum) with the water from the river nearby. Its alcoholic strength and taste steadily won many converts, and it became famous.

## 6. Chao Zhou and Fujian Food

Chao Zhou is also known as Teochew; its dialect is mutually intelligible to the people of Fujian. Both areas are known for their specialties in and varieties of seafood dishes.

Some of the main Teochew dishes are: Big Fish Balls à la Swatow, Drunken Crabs, Teochew Frog Legs, Braised Freshwater Eel with Bean Sauce, Steamed Black Cod, Stewed Abalone with Goose Feet, Teochew

\*Tong An refers to a district in Hunan province. General Zuo refers to Zuo Zong-tang, a famous general of the late Qing Dynasty. Ta Qian refers to Zhang Ta-qian, a well known contemporary Chinese painter.

Minced Brawn Rolls, Pig's Tripe Soup, Chicken with a Hundred Flowers, Swatow Fried Chicken, Guave Chicken, Stewed Jade Chicken, Teochew Soya Duck, Steamed Lemon Duck, Stewed Spare Ribs with Buddha Hands, Red-braised Pig Feet, Sha Cha Beef, Fried Oyster with Eggs, Steamed Winter Melons with Assorted Meats, Swatow Baked Lobster, Sauteed Prawn Balls, Deep Fried Crab and Clams, Bean Cake à la "Four Happinesses," and Stuffed "Gold Coin Mushrooms."

Well liked Fujian dishes include: Snow Flower Chicken, Braised Duck in Brown Sauce, Drunken Spare Ribs, Amoy Pork, Stewed Squids with Sweet and Sour Sauce, Braised Tea-eggs, Three Flavoured Swallows, Fuzhou Fish Balls, Pork Pickled in Wine, and Tai Ji Bright Prawns.

One of the famous Fujian dishes is called "A Buddhist Monk Jumps over the Walls." It consists of many kinds of meats, seafoods and vegetables, for example, duck, chicken, eggs, chicken livers, pork feet, pork tripe, lamb, ham, abalone, scallops, fish tongues, shark's fins, mushrooms, bamboo shoots, carrots, and fish maw with fennel, cinnamon, ginger, lard, shallots and chicken stock.

A story relates that a high-ranking Buddhist monk was on his way to the Shao Lin Temple in the province of Fujian. He arrived late and decided to stay in a small village's lodge overnight. Next door was a wealthy family's house in a large compound with high walls. The family was holding a party, with rich aromas and "enchanted fragrances" emanating from the food. The aroma was so strong that the monk could not control his temptation to eat. Forgetting all his years of Buddhist meditative training, he decided late in the night to jump over the wall and into the rich family's kitchen and try the food. The food became famous after this incident.

## 7. Chinese Food from Southeast Asia

Chinese food from Southeast Asia is a mixture of many culinary traditions including those of the Malay, Indonesian, Vietnamese, Burmese, Laotian, Cambodian, Filipino, Indian and Arab cultures.

In Canada today there are many Chinese-Malay, Chinese-Indonesian and Chinese-Vietnamese restaurants. Chinese cuisine that is mixed with the cooking of the Malay is known as "Nonya cooking." It uses different kinds of spices such as sambal, chili, lemon grass, cardamom, cumin, coriander, Laos, shrimp paste, tamarine, coconut milk, curry, brown sugar, "duan pandan," lengkuas, and nutmeg. The food in general is hot, spicy and piquant. Some of the common dishes are: curry chicken, beef, or pork; satay beef or pork, Roja (Malay salad), Malaysian Tandoori chicken, Chinese-Malaysian fried rice,

“soto ayam” (chicken soup), curry puff, chicken “lemak,” Sambal shrimp, and fish in tarmarine sauce.

The Vietnamese dishes that are cooked with “Chinese flavours” are: Vietnamese spring rolls, Vermicelli soup, shrimp supreme on sugar canes, shrimp croquette soup, soup “au crabe princesse,” steamed vegetables with coconut sauce, “Drunken Crab Royale Citron,” and hot pot chicken with rice pilaf. A mixture with both Chinese and French culinary elements is also evident in some Vietnamese dishes, as for example: “Frog Legs au beurre” with a dash of soya sauce; baked escargot with wine and Chinese spices; and Vietnamese crêpes stuffed with Chinese greens, bean sprouts, shrimp and barbecued pork.

### 8. Sinicized “Western Food”

As the Chinese themselves are dining out more often and are willing to try different kinds of food, a few Chinese restaurants are set up to serve exclusively sinicized Western food. It is primarily a combination of North American food seasoned with Chinese spices. For example, Filet mignon à la Chinoise, hamburger with soya sauce, Chinese fried rice with tossed salad, baked pepper pork chops with quail eggs, Portuguese chicken with Chinese vegetables, braised chicken cutlet with soya sauce, baked Waikiki chicken with lychee and pineapples, braised soya quails, mixed grill with sweet and sour sauce, “Garoupa à la Jornville” with a sprinkle of black beans, broiled New York steaks with soya sauce, and sizzling noodles with beef filet.

Sinicized Western food is a new experiment in Chinese culinary delights, combining Chinese cuisine with American and Canadian elements. It is partly influence by the “adapted Western food” currently served in Hong Kong, Taipei and Singapore, and partly due to the acquired tastes of some Chinese immigrants who had lived in various Western countries before coming to Canada. Unlike Chop Suey dishes which have a long history in North America, sinicized Western food has to undergo the test of time before one can see whether it will take root in Canada.

As can readily be seen, there is a wide ranging repertoire of Chinese food served in Canada. The popularity of Chinese food and the great number of Chinese restaurants indicate that there is a demand both from the Chinese community and the larger society.

The Chinese community today is not composed entirely of people from South China. There are Chinese from different parts of the world, and from different parts of China who speak different dialects

and have different food traditions. Hence, there is a demand for different regional styles of cooking, even from within the Chinese community itself.

Finally, Canadians have also started experimenting with different kinds of cooking; and some even try to cook “authentic Chinese food.” This search for authenticity results in many Chinese restaurants offering “genuine Chinese food” prepared by chefs from Hong Kong, Taiwan, Manila, Singapore and China. Dim sum, Sichuan and Hunan dishes are gaining ground. Whether or not they will become westernized, like Chop Suey, remains to be seen.

Canadian Museum of Civilization  
Hull, Quebec