

Quong Tart and early Chinese businesses in Fiji

Bessie Ng Kumlin Ali

Abstract

In examining the activities of the Chinese who settled in Fiji during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, this article throws light on why the Chinese were attracted to Fiji and how Chinese settlement occurred. It considers Quong Tart's interest in employing Chinese labourers to work in Fiji for a company he was hoping to establish in these islands. Other Chinese also had similar ideas. None of their proposals eventuated and Chinese labour did not come to Fiji in large numbers. Yet Fiji's economy was developed through Australian corporate capital dependent upon Indian indentured labour. That the Chinese presence in Fiji remained limited partially reflects three shaping factors: the attitude of the British Government towards the Chinese living and working in Fiji; the colonial government's perception of its responsibilities to the indigenous population arising out of the Deed of Cession (1874); and the influence of Australian colonies upon British policies in this matter. The intention of Quong Tart to establish a company employing Chinese labour is analysed. In this context, the activities of the Chinese companies and Chinese traders already in Fiji are illustrated through emphasis on some prominent Chinese in Fiji in the late nineteenth century.

Keywords

Chinese contract labour; Chinese migration; contract labour, nineteenth century; contract labour, Pacific; overseas Chinese.

CHINESE CONTACT WITH FIJI first occurred at the beginning of the nineteenth century when men working on board sailing ships trading in sandalwood and later bêche-de-mer entered Fiji. A very small number remained behind (Scarr 1984:78). Settlement began in the 1870s, a few years before Fiji became a British Crown Colony in 1874. The best known of the settlers was Moy Park Ling Houng Lee, not least because of his advertisement in the only regular newspaper at the time, the *Fiji Times*, but also because of the large number of his descendants still living in Fiji. He was a merchant, the forerunner of successful enterprises such as Jang Hing Loong (later Joong Hing Loong) with a branch in Kobe, Japan, Kwong Tiy, On Wah Chang, and in more recent times, Wahley's Butchery and Lees Trading. All of them were companies established by Chinese residents, who came, settled and laid the foundations for trade in Fiji.

There were others, too, who expressed their interest, made preliminary enquiries, but did not come to Fiji. Among these was Quong Tart, a prominent Australian Chinese citizen. In 1899, he wrote to the Governor of the Crown Colony of Fiji on behalf of the firm of Tiy Sang and Company of Sydney, wholesale fruiterers and commission agents, to enquire about the possibility of introducing Chinese agricultural labourers to Fiji. At the time, there were fewer than 100 Chinese in Fiji.¹ Yet already, three Chinese firms were established in the Colony: Houng Lee (1872), Zoing Chong (1894) and Kwong Sang.

Quong Tart sent his partner, Yee Wing, accompanied by Captain Calder, to meet with the Governor to discuss a proposal to introduce 500 labourers, in groups of 15 to 20, to grow bananas, rice, pepper, tobacco and other produce in Fiji. The Governor was receptive to the proposal, provided the company met certain conditions.²

Tiy Sang and Company was required to guarantee the wages of the men for several years, repatriate them on expiry of their contract, and terminate the contracts of any labourers found to be unsuitable, followed by immediate repatriation. The Governor also wanted to know what percentage of women would accompany the men. On this point, the Acting Colonial Secretary assured the Governor that according to the Native Commissioner, the absence of women was not a concern. He cited the example of a group of Chinese men who had come on ships trading in bêche-de-mer and had remained in Macuata,

on Vanua Levu, the second largest island in the Fiji group; they had adjusted well to living among Fijians and intermarried there.³ The Colonial Secretary, therefore, had no objections to single Chinese men entering the Colony and eventually marrying Fijian women, provided this was in 'controllable numbers'.

Another condition was the inclusion of interpreters among the labourers brought in. This was essential, as the Chinese could not communicate in English, and in instances where some of them breached the law, the authorities found it difficult to resolve the matter satisfactorily. In later years, the government appointed an interpreter from Hong Kong to assist in dealings with Chinese resident in Fiji.

On the issue of these Chinese labourers passing through the territorial waters of Queensland and New South Wales, the Governor was of the view that the poll tax at 'several hundred pounds' per person was 'very heavy'. He offered to write to the Governors of these two states, which he promptly did, to request exemption from the poll tax for the labourers being brought in by Tiy Sang and Company. He requested that these men be permitted to transit if they were issued with tickets on embarkation in China authorised by the Fiji Government. The Governors agreed to permit transit but asked for a guarantee of 100 pounds per head.⁴ This amount would, therefore, be in addition to a Fiji Government required guarantee of a return passage of 20 to 25 pounds per person, to be deposited in a local bank. New South Wales, however, would not waive a requirement for the ratio of one Chinese transported per every hundred tons of a ship's cargo.

The Acting Colonial Secretary suggested that Tiy Sang and Company charter a steamer to bring in the 500 men all at once as this would be less expensive than importing them in groups of 15–20 on ordinary passenger steamers. He left the decision to the company to make, on the presumption that they were the best judges of their own resources.

Quong Tart asked the Fiji Government for assistance in obtaining fertile land from Fijian landowners at a nominal rental for the first few years. Government's response was that it was Tiy Sang and Company's responsibility to send an agent to Fiji to identify suitable land. Government would help negotiate a lease with Fijians but had no jurisdiction over the amount of rental. Government itself had very little land except about 1000 acres in Nadi (Ba

Province) which it was willing to lease at a reasonable rental to Tiy Sang and Company provided the land was considered suitable for the company's purposes.

With regard to the class of men to be brought in, Quong Tart assured the government that his brother, Quong Len, acting as his agent, would strictly monitor the suitability of the recruits.⁵ The men would be young, 'reliable in all respects, able-bodied and free from disease of any kind'; they would be trained agricultural labourers. No opium addict or gambler would be recruited, but if 'a black sheep or two' did get in despite their best efforts, these would be expeditiously repatriated to China. Since government insisted that the company be held responsible for the behaviour of the men, he asked for a monopoly, so as to prevent what he described as 'faction fights'; but if he was to be responsible only for those his company brought in, then he would not insist on a monopoly.

Thinking ahead of his times, Quong Tart indicated that the workers would be encouraged to invest in the company, which would give them a stake in the venture and therefore ensure its success. These men would not be a burden on the Colony. With regard to Chinese immigrants, the Colonial Government always insisted that it would not admit anyone likely to be a burden on the colony. All immigrants, whether joining family members in their business, or employees or agricultural labourers, were admitted only if they had a minimum sum on entry into the Colony. This stipulation meant that at no stage, and even during the depression in the 1930s, did the government have to spend any money on the upkeep of Chinese (Burns, Watson & Peacock 1960:9, 125; Scarr 1983:123).

Quong Tart's application was accompanied by a testimonial, written in 1888, bearing the signatures of the Lieutenant Governor of New South Wales, members of the New South Wales Legislative Assembly, the Judiciary, Ministers of the Church of England and prominent Sydney merchants. Upon enquiring about the background of the firm, the government was informed that 'Tiy Sang is a firm of repute and standing with a good deal of money.'⁶

The tenor of the correspondence on both sides was civil. The Fiji Government did not appear averse to the introduction of Chinese agricultural labourers. Quong Tart indicated in his correspondence that if all negotiations

were successfully finalised he would accompany his partner, Yee Wing, to visit Fiji. I have not come across any reference to a visit by Quong Tart, but his firm, Tiy Sang, did establish a branch in Fiji, and Yee Wing became naturalised in Fiji on 27 April 1901, although as a partner of the firm of Kwong Sang, not Tiy Sang.⁷ There is a strong possibility of a commercial link between Tiy Sang and Kwong Sang, in that Quong Tart mentioned in his application that he had made arrangements with Kwong Sang, already established in Fiji, to supply groceries for the upkeep of the labourers.

The intended introduction of 500 men seems not to have occurred: the census for 1911 (when for the first time, Chinese were separately enumerated) gives a total of only 305 Chinese, consisting of 276 men and 29 women). Between 1900 and 1911, nonetheless, a small number of labourers may have come to Fiji, for otherwise Tiy Sang would not have been able to manage the substantial amount of land they leased in various parts of Fiji as well as be in a position to export bananas to Australia some years after Quong Tart's initial enquiry in 1899.

Further evidence that Tiy Sang was established in Fiji is that on 22 November 1902, Wong Jing, an associate of Tiy Sang and Company, became naturalised.⁸ Between 1905 and 1913, Tiy Sang expanded their initial holding of 100 acres [40 ha] of land to more than 1000 acres [400 ha] (Rolls 1996:438–9). In 1907, the company leased 100–150 acres of land in Sigatoka for six years, and 150 acres in Cuma for five years,⁹ and between 1909 and 1911 it leased various other small blocks of land in different parts of Fiji. Between 1911 and 1912, Tiy Sang regularly signed contracts with Fijian banana growers, to export bananas to Australia.¹⁰

I have dwelt at length on Quong Tart's application, for several reasons. He was the first Chinese to enquire about the introduction of a substantial number of Chinese agricultural labourers to Fiji, and although he himself may not have come to the colony to set up a branch of his firm, his partner, Yee Wing, did set up Tiy Sang and Company in Fiji. Moreover, Quong Tart epitomises Chinese commercial interest in Fiji and the expansion of Australian Chinese firms to Fiji primarily for agricultural purposes.

A second, perhaps the only other, application to introduce Chinese labourers on a large scale was made on 2 July 1901 by the Fiji law firm of JH

Garrick on behalf of Chung Wah Brothers of London and Melbourne, which traded between China and London and some Australian states. In this instance also, it was Captain Calder who accompanied the firm's representative to meet with the government. Chung Wah Brothers wanted to introduce 200 Chinese labourers to Fiji for a period of seven years, or not less than five years. The government's response to this request was the same as to Tiy Sang and Company, except that a guarantee from China Navigation Company for the full return passage of the men was acceptable, with 50 per cent of the total amount deposited in cash in a local bank in Fiji. As in the case of Tiy Sang, this proposal may not have materialised, and the whole venture may have lapsed, because I have found no subsequent references to Chung Wah Brothers.

Five years before Quong Tart's enquiry, Ming Ting had arrived in Fiji in 1894 to establish Zoing Chong and Company of Canton, which traded not only with Fiji but also with other islands in the Pacific. Zoing Chong exported to New Zealand and some Australian states. The company grew bananas, other fruit, rice and ginger, and traded in bêche-de-mer, copra, pearl shells and timber. It had a large banana plantation at Tamavua and several rice fields, and bought rice from small Indian farmers, which it milled in its rice factory in Suva. It also had a furniture factory and specialised in making picture frames. In addition, it imported Chinese and Japanese silks, other fabrics and fancy goods. As with other large Chinese firms, which were headed by family members, Ming Ting's assistant was his brother (*Cyclopedia* 1984:233–4).

Zoing Chong leased land in various parts of Fiji in 1897 and 1899. In 1905 Ming Ting bought land at Tamavua for 400 pounds,¹¹ and in 1907 he made another purchase of 500 acres, this time in Naitasiri.¹² This company continued to expand, leasing or buying land for several decades after the other Chinese firms had ceased operating in Fiji. Ming Ting was 'one of the largest property owners in the town, and bears a reputation as a highly successful man of business, whose word is his bond' (*Fiji Times*, 6 June 1912). He was the first Chinese municipal councillor.

His election in 1911 to the Suva Municipal Council—at the expense of a prominent European, WW Barker, who received 87 votes to Ming Ting's 148—provoked moves to disenfranchise Chinese and Indian residents of Suva who were registered to vote in municipal elections.¹³ One of the elected

members, lawyer Henry Scott, introduced a bill to amend the Municipal Institutions Ordinance of 1909 to make an education test compulsory for 'alien voters', that is, non-Europeans. This bill was endorsed by the Governor, but the Colonial Office in London refused to sanction it. Following Ming Ting's decision not to seek re-election to public office, it would be some thirty years before another Chinese became a municipal councillor: CL Cheng, the first resident Vice-Consul of the Republic of China, was appointed by the Governor to the Suva Town Board in 1946.

Another prominent early merchant was George Kwok Bew, proprietor of Wing Sang of Sydney, who was naturalised in Fiji in 1901.¹⁴ He was handling 7000 bunches of North Queensland bananas a week when he joined the Fiji trade in 1900 (Rolls 1996:91). Another Australian Chinese, Philip Gockchin, formed Wing On and Company in 1897. He, too, handled Queensland and Fiji bananas (ibid.). In 1901, James Lok of Wing On, Sydney, was naturalised in Fiji.¹⁵ In 1902, Wing Sang, Wing On and Wing Tiy amalgamated to form Sang On Tiy and Company. This firm had 350 acres under cultivation in Fiji and in the first season, were bringing 10,000 bunches of bananas a fortnight into Sydney (Rolls 1996:438–9).

Fiji's fledgling economy was based on agriculture and was heavily reliant on cheap manual labour. The paternalistic policy towards Fijians of the first governor, Sir Arthur Gordon, necessitated preservation of what he deemed to be their way of life. Since he refused to sanction the use of Fijian labour on European plantations, an alternative source of labour had to be found. Governor Gordon and his successors turned to British India. The first shipload of 463 Indian labourers recruited under the indenture system arrived in Fiji on 15 May 1879. Between 1879 and 1920, when this pernicious system was abolished as a result of agitation by Indian nationalists, a total of 60,553 Indian indentured labourers arrived in Fiji under what Hugh Tinker described as a 'new form of slavery' (Ali, A 2004:1).

In the intervening years, a number of European planters had made several requests to introduce Chinese labourers to work on their plantations, but this was refused on the grounds that Chinese labourers were uncooperative when it came to working for Europeans (as documented in Ali, BNK 2002: ch. 2,

nn.12–19). Indians were seen as more manageable. An attempt in 1894 to introduce 305 Japanese labourers ended in disaster. So many died of beriberi that the survivors were repatriated to Japan the following year (Gillion 1962:77).

Southern Chinese were considered ‘hardy’ and therefore suited to agriculture. The difficulty with Chinese labourers, however, aside from their uncooperative attitude towards Europeans, was that they gave up agriculture as soon as they could to go into trading, thereby posing a threat to Europeans who felt that this was their preserve. Throughout the history of Chinese settlement in Fiji, there were many attempts to deter Chinese traders from proliferating in Fiji, through the use of what Yee Hoy Shang, partner of Kwong Tiy, described in his memoirs as ‘indirect legislation’ (Yee nd:34; Greif 1977:40). Their success was at the expense of the European traders whose livelihood was already being affected by the arrival of free Indians from Gujarat to set up family businesses in Fiji.

Since Chinese immigrants were invariably male and single, they were able to move freely to trade in the remotest parts of Fiji. Large Chinese firms extended their businesses by appointing these men as resident managers of branches located throughout the length and breadth of the Fiji islands. The system was mutually beneficial: the employees benefited by earning a livelihood, and the large firms prospered because they were able to buy their stock in bulk and redistribute it for sale at their various branches. The importance of this interdependence is illustrated by the fact that government established the cooperative movement in 1949 to enable Fijians to go into business along similar lines to the Chinese firms (Ali, BNK 2002:120). The cooperative movement sounded the death knell for the large Chinese firms, which either wound up or went into other businesses. Those that diversified created a new niche for themselves in the manufacture of foods such as biscuits, soft drinks and confectionery. Others went into the bakery business, and by the 1930s they dominated this trade.

The large Chinese firms were the nucleus of the Chinese community. William Willmott uses the term ‘chain’ migration to describe the nature of Chinese immigration to Fiji, a process in which those resident in Fiji sponsored their relatives to join them as shop assistants or labourers (Willmott 1996:6).

And, according to Wang Gungwu, no man, no matter how enterprising, would have been able to set up in business without the sponsorship and assistance of an established firm (Wang 1991:192). Initially, the firms sponsored their own relatives to work for them, then they sponsored their employees' relatives, as they gained the means to pay the poll tax and bond. They also acted as bankers for their local resident managers and employees, sending remittances to China on their behalf, and in cases of death, conducting traditional funeral rites and organising cemetery visitations during Qing Ming and Chong Yang.

The proprietors of the large firms resided in Suva and socialised among themselves, and were thus placed in a position to assume leadership of the community. Their social bonds were further strengthened by their common origin, the province of Guangdong being their ancestral homeland. After the revolution led by Dr Sun Yat-Sen, the Fiji Chinese established the local branch of the Kuo Min Tang (KMT) in 1916, primarily to act as spokesman on issues affecting the Chinese community, but also to facilitate immigration and re-entry of those who had returned to China on extended family visits. By providing assistance and acting as spokesmen on matters affecting the social and economic life of all resident Chinese, whether rich or poor, and utilising the KMT as their organisation, responding to the needs and concerns of all Fiji Chinese, these leaders laid the foundation for a Chinese community in Fiji.

Notes

An earlier version of this paper was read at the International Conference on Quong Tart and His Times held at the Powerhouse Museum in Sydney, 1–4 July 2004.

¹ CSO 1877/1898 gives a total of 21 Chinese, comprising 18 males and 3 females; Sir John Bates Thurston, Governor of Fiji, in his dispatch to Lord Knutsford, Secretary of State for the Colonies, writing on 11 April 1888, said there were about 30 Chinese in Fiji.

² All references to Quong Tart's application to introduce Chinese labourers to Fiji are from CSO 4869/1899, 300/1900, 301/1900 and 573/1900.

³ Scarr 1984:78; CSO 4869/1899.

⁴ CSO 5704/1899, 573/1900.

- ⁵ In his application Quong Tart refers to his brother as his agent but does not give his name. Rolls (1996:241) says that Quong Len, younger brother of Quong Tart, acted as his shipper of tea and silks from Hong Kong. Quong Len is therefore probably the brother Quong Tart refers to.
- ⁶ CSO4869/1899
- ⁷ CSO 1690/1901.
- ⁸ CSO 5260/1902.
- ⁹ CSO 2439/1907.
- ¹⁰ CSO 8580/1901; 6661/1911; 2893/1912; 3169/1912; 3951/1912; 5373/1912.
- ¹¹ CSO 5054/1905.
- ¹² CSO 5511/1907.
- ¹³ Encl. No. IV in Fiji Despatch No.344, 16 December 1912; Ali, A 1974:48–54.
- ¹⁴ CSO 3152/1901.
- ¹⁵ CSO 3152/1901.

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