Chinese contract labour in the Pacific Islands during the nineteenth century

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Abstract

This paper tells the stories of Chinese contract labour in the Pacific Islands from late in the eighteenth century, when John Meares first took Chinese tradesmen to Vancouver Island to establish a fur station, to the end of the nineteenth century. The sugar industry in Hawai'i used Chinese labour throughout the second half of the nineteenth century, as did the Peruvian guano mines on the Chincha Islands, 1854–1880, where conditions were extremely bad. Stewart's cotton plantation on Tahiti employed Chinese contract labour, 1865–1872, and the German colony of New Guinea, 1891–1903. Only two of these schemes (in Peru and Tahiti) led to permanent Chinese settlement, although contract labour in the early twentieth century also produced Chinese communities in Nauru and Western Samoa.

Keywords

Chinese contract labour; contract labour, Pacific; contract labour, nineteenth century

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Captain James Cook had reported the abundance of furs on the northwest coast of North America, but the fur trade there did not begin until 1785 (Quimby 1948: 247), following an act passed by the British Parliament on the other side of the world. The Commutation Act of 1784 lowered the duty on tea from 112% to 12%, halving the price overnight and consequently raising the demand for tea in Britain and its colonies (Willmott 1995: 131; Zhuang 1993: 127). While the British East India Company began to trade in opium in a big way, 'free traders' scurried all over the Pacific in search of valuable goods to trade for tea at Canton. Sandalwood was one such good.[1] Furs were another.

The Chinese that Captain Meares brought to Nootka were mostly carpenters and blacksmiths, who, with some assistance from local labour, built a two-storey fortified house and a forty-ton ship named *North West America* to trade along the coast, the first ship built in western Canada (Meares 1791: 41). We do not know the terms of their contracts, but they stayed only a year. Nor is there any record of what happened to them after that, whether they returned to Canton or went elsewhere. The following year, 1789, another forty-five Chinese came to Nootka on an American ship, and a further twenty-nine came with a Captain James Colnett on the *Argonaut*, comprising seven carpenters, five blacksmiths, five masons, four tailors, four cobblers, three seamen and a cook. It is evident from this list that these early contract workers were not simple labourers but skilled tradesmen. None of them, however, stayed very long at Nootka; the last group was captured by the Spanish soon after they arrived and transported to Mexico, where some settled and others returned briefly to Nootka.

The next Pacific site of Chinese contract labour was in the Hawaiian Islands. When Captain Cook visited them (then the Sandwich Islands) in 1778, he found sugarcane growing wild 'without culture almost everywhere', but no one had the technology to render sugar from it. In fact, a quarter of a century passed before the sugar industry began in Hawai'i, when a Chinese arrived at Lanai in 1802 aboard a sandalwood ship (Torbert 1852: 149). He stayed for a year, extracting sugar from the native cane. This man brought with him a stone mill and boilers from China, so he must have had prior knowledge of Hawai'i 's wild sugarcane—but whence? Speculation among historians includes

Chinese merchants were Cantonese at the time. Consequently, Hokkien labourers could see no future commercial opportunities beyond their contracts (Glick 1975: 138). As Professor Wang Gungwu has taught us, Huagong (Chinese labourers) without Huashang (Chinese merchants) are unlikely to produce a Huaqiao (sojourner) community (Wang 1989: 33ff.). When Chinese contract labour resumed in 1864, all the workers came via Hong Kong and were Cantonese (Glick 1975: 138).[4]

The sugar industry continued to contract Chinese labour until the end of the nineteenth century—altogether 56,720 between 1852 and 1899, according to Doug Munro (1990: xliii). '[By] the early 1880s, about half the 10,000 plantation workers were Chinese,' writes Colin Newbury (1980a: 12–13), but the anti-Chinese prejudice that Pember Reeves expressed was also evident among Americans, and by the turn of the century Chinese workers had been replaced by Japanese, Koreans, Portuguese and Filipinos (ibid.). Hawaiian, Japanese, German and Portuguese labour had already been used on some plantations since 1876, when the sugar industry suddenly blossomed because the Reciprocity Treaty allowed unrefined sugar into the USA duty-free (Liu 1984: 196) but Chinese contract labour predominated until about 1890. So-called 'penal contracts' were abrogated in 1900 by the annexation of Hawai'i to the USA, which did not allow indenture (ibid.: 204). During the 1890s, free labour had gradually replaced contract labour in any case (ibid.: 202). Nevertheless, as Andrew Lind pointed out, 'Merely to accept employment in a land several thousand miles from home and kin and among people of alien language and culture left the recruited laborers in almost complete dependence upon the plantation system' (Lind 1938: 216). The next story certainly demonstrates that point.

This story is a horrendous one: the transport of Chinese contract labour to the Chincha Islands off Peru to dig guano. It is told by the remarkable English adventurer, Augustus Lindley, who joined the Taiping rebels in China and wrote a unique inside account of that great rebellion, which the British forces eventually helped suppress. Before that, in the early 1850s, he had shipped out of Sydney on 'the good ship *Colonist* . . . on her way to obtain a cargo of guano' in the Chinchas (Lindley, 1869–74: 155).

on Koror in the Palau group (Willson, Moore & Munro 1990: 79)[5] and in the Marquesas (Oliver 1975: 209, 214). Douglas Oliver states that during their brief existence, the Marquesan plantations used Chinese indentured labour, but I have found no other sources to corroborate this.[6]

One of the most successful to capitalise on this opportunity was an Irish entrepreneur by the name of William Stewart, who had previously blotted his copybook in Australia with attempted tax evasion.[7] He had hastily left Sydney to avoid arrest and ended up in Papeete, where he managed to gain permission from the French authorities to establish a plantation at Atimaono on Tahiti-nui and to import a thousand Chinese workers on contract (Newbury 1980b: 170). Altogether, 1,018 arrived on three separate ships in 1865 (Vognin 1995: 142–3; 1994: 238).[8]

Stewart's workers, recruited by an agent in Hong Kong, were almost all Hakka (Coppenrath 1967: 32), most of them from Huiyang Prefecture (Moench 1963: 14).[9] They had signed contracts to work twelve hours a day for seven years in return for food, housing, medical services, some clothing and a daily wage of 78 centimes (Newbury 1980b: 170; Langdon 1979: 188).

Stewart did very well for the first few years, annually exporting as much as 700,000 pounds of raw cotton to England, and there seemed few problems on the plantation itself. In 1869, however, the price of cotton suddenly fell with the recovery of American exports following the end of the Civil War (Langdon 1979: 193). At the same time, Stewart experienced a number of conflicts with local authorities and relatives, which created major problems at Atimaono. One Chinese, Chim Soo Kung, was guillotined for being involved in a scuffle in which several workers were seriously injured and one died (Coppenrath 1967: 31). Because he had taken the rap for his fellow workers, he was considered a martyr by a later generation, and his body was moved to an imposing tomb in the Chinese cemetery, where he is remembered with an annual ceremony on All Saints Day (Vognin 1995: 144).[10]

The indenture system was suspended in French Polynesia in 1872 (Newbury 1980b: 173). Stewart went bankrupt the following year and died soon after (Langdon 1979: 190–5), whereupon the plantation reverted to bush, the buildings disintegrated, and most of the Chinese workers returned to China when their contracts expired (Vognin 1995: 145). Those remaining

Thus began another sad and eventually tragic story of mistreated Chinese labour. In 1887 the company began to import Chinese labour from Singapore and Sumatra, with 397 'experienced tobacco coolies' (mainly Chinese) from Central Sumatra in 1891 (Biskup 1970: 86). The fact that most of them were ill or unfit through opium-addiction led some Germans to believe that Dutch tobacco interests in Java had sabotaged the plan, but the harsh treatment they received from the Germans produced a shocking mortality rate among the Chinese, some sources claiming as high as fifty per cent (e.g. Willson, Moore & Munro 1990: 89).[12] Furthermore, they were subject to brutal corporal punishment: five strokes of the rattan cane for the smallest misdemeanour and ten strokes for attempting to escape, which many tried to do despite the unlikelihood of success (Biskup 1970: 91).

As a result of these dreadful conditions, the Straits Settlements government discouraged labour recruitment in Singapore as early as 1891, and when an account of the gruesome flogging of ten Chinese was published in the *Straits Times* in January 1903 (Song 1923: 345)[13] the Germans abandoned Singapore and turned to Hong Kong and Swatow (Shantou). The Governor of German New Guinea then exempted Chinese from corporal punishment by placing them under the same legal regime as the Europeans, who paid fines for minor offences (Biskup 1970: 97), and the German consul in Swatow made special rules to cover recruitment in that port (Chen 1984: 57). These changes did not solve the problem, however, and in 1906 there were only 38 Chinese labourers in mainland New Guinea (Wu 1982: 19).[14] By that time, a resident Chinese community of traders and tradesmen had emerged.

In the early 1880s, the discovery of valuable metal ores in French New Caledonia (nickel, iron and chrome) created a sudden demand for labour that could not be filled by the convict labour the colony had relied on up to that time. The mining company Société le Nickel contracted 165 Chinese labourers from Macao in 1884, but they soon returned to China and the experiment was not repeated because of 'unhappy results' (Angleviel & Mouilleseaux 1993: 9). I have been unable to discover what this phrase meant or anything more about this brief migration.[15]

it achieved independence in 1968, although now almost all are clerks and skilled tradesmen rather than labourers (interviews). Also, hundreds of Chinese women are contracted to Fijian garment factories today (Ali 2002: 96). But these are quite different stories, ones that require research before we can speculate on whether Pember Reeves and Persia Crawford Campbell would have denounced them as 'sinister', 'unattractive' or 'repulsive'.

Notes

An earlier version of this paper was presented at the International Conference on Quong Tart and His Times held in Sydney, 1–4 July 2004. A related paper on Quong Tart's association with Fiji by Bessie Ng Kumlin Ali (Ali 2004) was read at the same conference.

1 Many of the traders seeking sandalwood in the Pacific Islands at the end of the eighteenth and the first half of the nineteenth centuries carried Chinese cooks and carpenters, at first recruited in Amoy (Xiamen) and later Canton and Hong Kong. Some also had Chinese blacksmiths to make trading goods such as tomahawks (Willmott 1995: 132). The search for furs after 1784 also brought Europeans to New Zealand in 1792 (about the same time as the whalers arrived), where the fur seal was decimated in two short decades, 1792–1810 (Owens 1981: 31).

2 Thanks to Peggy Kai's research, we know both the Chinese and Hawaiian names of these six 'sugar masters', so we know that they are Cantonese (Kai 1974). All six married Hawaiian women, and the fact that they had Hawaiian names suggests that they settled there. One of them, Akina, was also known as Tang Ahsin, Akin, or Ahkina ('Chinese Merchant-Adventurers' 1974: 8).

3 This also included twenty 'boys' who were recruited as house servants on similar five-year contracts.

4 A few of the Chinese 'free migrants' to Hawai'i in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were Hakka, but the vast majority were Cantonese 'punti' (Kastens 1978: 61).

5 'In 1867 Captain Alfred Tetens established a cotton plantation at Koror in the Palau group on behalf of J.C. Godeffroy und Sohn of Samoa, importing 22 Chinese labourers . . . [who] were repatriated the following year [to Hong Kong]' (Willson, Moore & Munro 1990: 79).

14 Chen Hansheng reports that altogether 3,500 Chinese went to work in German New Guinea between 1900 and 1914 (Chen 1984: 57) but most sources indicate that indentured labour was down to a trickle by 1903. According to Chen, the Chinese government moved to end German labour recruitment in Swatow in 1908 on the grounds that the contracts for a hundred workers included a clause tying the workers to fraudulent loans (ibid., cf. Willson, Moore & Munro 1990: 92).

15 Chen Hansheng states that 450 Chinese were brought to New Caledonia from Leizhou in 1902 (Chen 1984: 52) but I have found no corroboration of this statement, nor does Chen provide any reference for it. I suspect that the Chinese he is referring to were Vietnamese, as French writers at that time often referred to people from French Indochina as 'Chinois'.

16 Some Chinese may have been contracted in the first decade of the twentieth century to work for the German phosphate company on Angaur in the Caroline Islands, but objections to German brutality against Chinese workers in Samoa caused the Guangdong government to ban further recruitment in 1908 (Willson, Moore & Munro 1990: 92; cf. Chen 1984: 57). Before 1930 some Chinese labour was also contracted to Makatea in French Polynesia by the *Compagnie Française des Phosphates de l'Océanie*, although most of its labourers were Japanese and Vietnamese (Newbury 1972: 185–6).

17 Figures in Chen Hansheng add up to about 6,100 Chinese recruits between 1907 and 1924 (Chen 1984: 59–61).

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