

Chinese Merchant-Adventurers and Sugar Masters in Hawaii: 1802-1852

GENERAL BACKGROUND

Soon after Hawaii had been discovered by the Western world in 1778, American and British trading ships began plying between the American Northwest and South China, stopping at various ports in the Hawaiian Islands to replenish their supplies of food and water. The crews soon included both Hawaiians and Chinese. On leaving Hawaii, some of the ships left part of their crew behind for a variety of reasons, ranging from illness of a crewman to simple desertion. Chinese were certainly among the early foreign residents to make their homes in Hawaii, and it is a Chinese who is credited with the first attempt at the manufacture of sugar from the native Hawaii sugar cane in 1802.¹

Sugar cane was common to South China, where it had been cultivated and manufactured into sugar for centuries. The plant had become established in Hawaii, carried by the Polynesians in their outward migrations from the South Pacific.² The men from South China arriving in Hawaii recognized sugar cane, and it is logical to assume that some of them saw the possibility of commercial sugar production in Hawaii.

It is these early Chinese in Hawaii whose story is told here. Much has been written about Chinese as contract laborers in Hawaii, arriving first in 1852, but little is known about the earlier Chinese who began to settle in the Sandwich Islands a few years after Cook's discovery in 1778. Mention of them by traders, sailing captains, or other foreign residents in Hawaii has been fragmentary. Outside of some business records, there are no known journals or letters written by the Chinese themselves who lived here in the sixty-four years between 1778 and 1852.

These papers will attempt to trace the lives of those early Chinese, most of them knowledgeable in sugar production, the *tong see* (sugar masters) who established successful plantations on the islands of Maui and Hawaii, and their Honolulu-based countrymen who developed more diversified interests in sugar, shipping, and mercantile operations on various islands. These early

The introduction to the early Chinese in Hawaii was primarily compiled by Wai-Jane Char, with additions by the editors.

Chinese are a fascinating group. They were among those initiating the sugar industry in Hawaii, with the consent and often the cooperation of the King and other Hawaiian chiefs; they participated in business ventures with Anglo-American associates in the rapidly growing economy of mid-century Hawaii; and they married Hawaiians and founded families with many important and well-respected descendants.

Although they left no records themselves, sufficient material is available from other sources to identify many of these Chinese as to what their names were, whom they married, and the families they established. Chinese names have been verified by their characters or ideographs wherever possible and are included in the Glossaries.

Chinese certainly passed through Hawaii as early as 1788. In this year, some forty-five carpenters under the direction of Captain John Meares of the *Felice* were taken to Nootka Sound on Vancouver Island to build a 40-ton schooner, the *North West America*.³ The vessels then returned to Hawaii. Captain Meares wrote that Kamehameha wanted two of the workmen who helped build the *North West America* to remain in Hawaii to build such a ship for him.⁴ This was refused, but a carpenter did build a small platform for a swivel gun on one of Kamehameha's canoes. Some of the Chinese may have jumped ship and remained in Hawaii.

Additional Chinese may have left their ships during the sandalwood trading. Hawaii was well known to the Chinese as a result of this trade, and they had named the Hawaiian archipelago *Tan Heung Shan*, "Sandalwood Mountain."⁵

John Papa Ii commented about these early Chinese:

In the vicinity of the custom house at the beach was a house for the first Chinese ever seen here. There were two or three of them, and they prepared food for the captains of the ship which took sandalwood to China. Because the faces of these people were unusual and their speech—which is not commonly heard—strange, a great number of persons went to look at them.⁶

The first reference to the Chinese presence in the Islands was that of Edward Bell who in 1794 recorded in the log of the *Chatham*, one of the ships with Vancouver's expedition of that year, that the foreigners seen then with Kamehameha I at Kealahakua Bay, Hawaii were "John Young [Englishman], Isaac Davis, Mr. Boid, 1 Chinaman, and 7 other whites."⁷ There is no record as to who that "1 Chinaman" was, or to what happened to him.

The early Chinese sugar venture of 1802 (when a Chinese arrived on a sandalwood trader, made sugar on the island of Lanai, but returned to China the next year) was followed by English and Americans who tried to produce sugar commercially. John Wilkinson was one of them. He had had experience with sugar cane in the West Indies and established a sugar cane plantation in Manoa Valley. It was abandoned after his death in 1827, as there was no one else then who knew how to convert cane into sugar.⁸ The South China sugar manufacturers soon filled this gap with the establishment of the Hungtai sugar works at Wailuku, Maui in 1828. They were acquainted with the art of sugar making and, as late as 1841, were selling sugar in their Honolulu store on Merchant Street.⁹

When William French (1765-1861), American sandalwood trader and businessman, undertook sugar cultivation and production in Waimea, Kauai in 1835, he employed Chinese workmen and recruited additional "sugar men" from China.¹⁰ As a trader who had spent some time in Canton, China between 1820 and 1825, he was familiar with the capabilities of the Chinese in sugar production. Several letters between Ladd & Co. and their manager on Kauai contain information on French's "Chinese Sugar works."¹¹

Among the early manual workers and laborers were Chinese carpenters. Prefabricated houses and buildings were being put up, some of which came from China.¹² In February, 1829, William French was admonished by the missionary group "not to let his China carpenters work on Sundays."¹³

Another businessman, Stephen Reynolds, was a close observer of life in Hawaii during the early nineteenth century. He kept a set of diaries with many lively entries, some of which referred to his Chinese contemporaries. As a self-trained lawyer, he served as witness to many of their transactions. Reynolds also noted when the Chinese in Honolulu celebrated Chinese New Year on February 17, 1844, "At 11 A.M. they had a collation." The next day "Chinamen all went to Pearl River [Pearl Harbor] near Mr. Bishop's to celebrate New Year." (The word Chinamen was not used in a derogatory sense, rather just as one called a man from Rome, Roman.) In 1843, J. J. Jarves had written, "Among the aliens in the Islands were about forty Chinese." Thus, there were enough Chinese in Honolulu then to have celebrated a Chinese New Year together.¹⁴

These early Chinese in Hawaii came mainly from the Pearl River delta area of South China, which included the port cities, Canton, Macao, and Hong Kong. These ports are all in the province of Kwangtung, whose residents are called Cantonese by Westerners. They include the Punti, Hakka, and Tiuchow or Hoklo dialectal groups. Emigration of Chinese nationals from China was officially banned until 1860, but the administrative arm of Peking did not reach as far south as Kwangtung province on the matter of emigration.¹⁵ As in any seaport town, men with the spirit of adventure were readily recruitable as seamen.

The Chinese in Hawaii were welcomed by many but caricatured by others. Olmsted, a Yale professor of science traveling on a whaler in 1841, wrote:

Among the foreigners resident in Honolulu, are several Chinese, the singularity of whose costume cannot fail of attracting one's attention. It consists of a large frock with ample sleeves, reaching down about midway between the waist and the knee. For the lower dress, they wear a pair of pantaloons made very full, and these together with peaked shoes having thick, wooden soles, complete their costumes. Their black hair is braid in a tail, a yard long, which usually hangs down the back and vibrates from side to side, like a pendulum, as they walk through the streets; a loss of these tails, which many of them coil up around their heads, would be regarded as a great disgrace.¹⁶

From Professor Olmsted's viewpoint, the Chinese were odd on the Hawaiian scene, but other visitors saw them in a different light. Samuel Hill, another mid-century traveler to Hawaii, reported:

Chinese were seen as contributing to the part-Hawaiian group. The natives took kindly to the Chinese who appeared to learn the language with great facility. They made good husbands and fathers and in many cases had large families. Many intermarried with

natives and today in regions all over the islands, especially in rural places, are many descendants of Chinese-Hawaiian parentage.¹⁷

Hill further observed that they flowed easily into the life of island ports as well as into rural Hawaiian life. The few Chinese who were early arrivals proved adaptable. They had some education and skill. On the whole, Hawaiians and white traders were friendly toward them. Chinese lived in the early Hawaiian villages and made their accommodations to the new way of life.¹⁸ Those who married Hawaiians did not face hostility from others in the community. On the other hand, there was no well-knit Chinese community to impose the social mores of the Old Country. Chinese sugar masters and merchants, conscientious and industrious, were welcome in this frontier situation, able to mix with Hawaiians and white men of the business community as well as the wider society.¹⁹

The Chinese adopted Hawaiian and Western ideas of legal rights for their wives and families, as evidenced in the June 9, 1846 will of a Chinese, Aiin (Chee In), who left property to his children with the admonition that his Hawaiian-born Chinese sons remain in Hawaii and be loyal to the King.²⁰

The earliest Chinese-Hawaiian marriages took place before it was necessary for the Chinese men first to become naturalized. It was not until the Alien Law of 1838 that the Hawaiian government asked that before a foreigner married a Hawaiian woman, he was to take the oath of allegiance and become naturalized as an Hawaiian citizen.²¹ The earliest record found of a Chinese naturalization was that of "Apana, Pake o Kina," recorded as of October, 1839.²² Missionaries who performed marriages soon added the requirement that Chinese be converted to Christianity and show they were "truly assured of conversion."²³

Marriage was not the only reason for naturalization. The Hawaiian Kingdom Home Office publicized a "Notice" in the *Polynesian* on August 21, 1847 asking all foreigners (not only Chinese) in a copartnership, doing mercantile or other business, or holding leasehold interest to obtain a "Certificate of Nationality." By December 1852, the reports of the Minister of the Interior showed a total of 54 had been naturalized.

By the 1850s, the merchants among the Chinese in Hawaii were well accepted. On June 27, 1861 Chinese sugar masters and merchants were seen at a *soirée dansante* given by the British Consul-General at the Court House in Honolulu to honor Lady Franklin, widow of Sir John Franklin, Arctic explorer. *The Pacific Commercial Advertiser* reported:

We noticed a striking and characteristic feature of our polyglot society—the presence of our leading Chinese merchants, than whom His Majesty does not possess more faithful and devoted subjects, as honored guests. Among the most distinguished and well known of these gentlemen were Messrs. Ahee, Chunghoon, Asing, and Atak.²⁴

Hawaii's population in 1779 was estimated at 400,000 by Captain Cook, a figure thought by some to have been inflated. In 1823, missionaries estimated the total as 142,000. The first Hawaii Kingdom census was in 1832, giving a total of 130,313; 1836 census, 108,579; 1850, 84,165, of whom 1962 persons were foreigners, including an estimated hundred or so Chinese.

In Honolulu itself, the *Polynesian* of October 30, 1852 reported that there were thirty-seven Chinese in business and thirty-four laborers and servants, out of a total of 863 foreigners in the city. Since twenty Chinese domestics, besides 180 agricultural laborers, had arrived on January 2, 1852 from China, some of those counted in October were new arrivals.²⁵

In all, the number of Chinese who had lived in Hawaii before the 1852 arrivals was possibly a hundred. Gavan Daws, in discussing French demands in Honolulu in 1849, gave the relative importance of the Chinese:

There were more Chinese than French in the islands, doing six times the amount of business without complaining that they suffered because Chinese was not an official language of the Hawaiian government. . . .

Daws further said:

The Honolulu business community was dominated by white men. If any second group was worth mentioning it was . . . the Chinese.²⁶

CHINESE NAMES IN HAWAII

Because of the difficulty of transliterating Chinese names into English, the Chinese in Hawaii sometimes seem like the invisible property men of a Chinese opera, coming and going without clear identity.

The problem of transliteration or romanization of Chinese words has several aspects.²⁷ First, the Chinese written language uses "characters" or "ideograms" while English, which the Hawaiians also adopted, uses alphabetical "letters." A Chinese writing his name in Chinese does not produce a symbol which can be sounded out. It becomes necessary, therefore, to assign alphabetic letters to the sounds of Chinese names. It is this process which has led to the multiple forms of spelling of names for Chinese in Hawaii, as different recorders fitted different English letters to the same sounds.

The second aspect of the problem is the fact that Chinese names are in the reverse order from Western names. *Wong* is the family name of *Wong Tai-hoon*; *Tang* is the family name of *Tang Hung-sin*. Even if a researcher has the luck to find a Chinese calligraphic signature, he may not find a complete signature. Many used only a single portion of their two-part given names and entirely omitted their surnames. If they did sign in full, a careless clerk, not knowing Chinese calligraphy, may have copied the signature and left out essential parts or embellished the characters with extra and meaningless curlicues. In some cases, Chinese assumed their business name as their personal name, as in the signature of Hungtai on a land claim to the British Commission of 1843.²⁸ Hungtai was a name made up of the names of the merchants Chun *Hung* and *Atai* (full name unknown).

Hungtai
泰 恒

The third aspect of the problem is that when only a single portion of the two-part given name, "first name," of a Chinese person is used, the Chinese often prefaced it with the syllable *ah*, written *ah* or *a* to make the monosyllabic name sound less abrupt and less formal. This prefix is used by family and friends in the same way the phonetic suffixes *-ie* or *-y* are used in names like Johnnie or Kathy.

There were considerable differences in the transliteration of Chinese names. For example, Wong Tai-hoon became Tyhune, spelled phonetically by a Britisher, perhaps; whereas Tang Hung-sin of Hilo became Akina, spelled as an Hawaiian would say the name.

The Hilo sugar boiler Tang Hung-sin is a good example of the problems of romanization. When this man arrived in Hawaii and gave his name, both the Hawaiian and the English-speaking foreigners assumed that *Sin*, the last-sounded part of his name, was his last or family name. He may have given it with the phonetic prefix *ah* before his given name—Tang Ahsin. As the Hawaiian language has no letter *s*, a similar letter was used and the name became Ahkin. But Hawaiian words do not end in consonants and so a grace letter was added, making the name Ahkina or Akina. Happily, the man named Tang Hung-sin was literate and signed documents with his full Chinese name. He also used both Akina and Ahsin as signatures as late as 1867.²⁹ In this case, we can accurately identify Tang Hung-sin, Ahsin, and Akina as one and the same person.

It has taken extensive examination of records to equate Chinese names with either their Anglicized or Hawaiianized forms in the islands. Important sources are documents of conveyance, wills and probates of wills, and land claims such as those under the British Commission in the year 1843 and those following the Great Mahele. The records of the British Commission contain information on the Chinese in Hawaii in the early 1840s. There were nine claims by Chinese, some to ownership and some to leases. These 1843 signatures are among the earliest Chinese signatures that have been found. Chinese making claims were: Ahmow, Aiying, Ahpong, Aiin, Akina, Asam, Aiung, Tyhune, and Hungtai.

NOTES

¹ L. L. Torbert, "Chinese in Sugar," P, Jan. 31, 1852.

² Robert C. Suggs, *The Island Civilizations of Polynesia* (New York, 1960), pp. 23, 82, 84.

³ Loraine E. Kuck, "The First Chinese to See Hawaii," PP, December, 1946, pp. 33-35.

⁴ John Meares, *Voyages Made in the Years 1788 and 1789, from China to the North West Coast of America* (London, 1790), p. 338; HHS Reprint I, Bruce Cartwright, Jr., ed., pp. 24, 25.

⁵ Theodore Morgan, *Hawaii: A Century of Economic Change (1778-1860)* (Cambridge, 1948), pp. 58, 61-62.

⁶ John Papa Ii, *Fragments of Hawaiian History: 1818-1832*, trans. by Mary K. Pukui (Honolulu, 1959), p. 94.

⁷ "Log of the *Chatham*," *Honolulu Mercury*, II (December, 1929): 86.

⁸ "Hawaiian Maritime History," HAA, 1890, p. 69; "Letter by Tatler," *Sandwich Island Mirror & Gazette*, April 15, 1840.

⁹ P, June 6, 1840, May 29, 1841, *passim*.

¹⁰ Ralph S. Kuykendall, *The Hawaiian Kingdom, 1778-1854* (Honolulu, 1938), p. 175.

¹¹ "Hooper Letters," Hawaiian Collection, Sinclair Library, University of Hawaii.

¹² Charles E. Peterson, "Pioneer Prefabs in Honolulu," HJH, 5 (1971), pp. 33, 34.

¹³ Stephen Reynolds' Journals (Ms., 9 vols., originals in Peabody Museum, microfilm, HMCS). Subsequent references to this journal will be within the text. The authors thank the Peabody Museum of Salem, Mass. for permission to use and quote this journal.

¹⁴ James J. Jarves, "The Sandwich or Hawaiian Islands," *Merchants Magazine*, IX (August, 1843), p. 123.

¹⁵ Harley F. MacNair, *Chinese Abroad* (Shanghai, 1924), pp. 1-2.

¹⁶ Francis A. Olmsted, *Incidents of a Whaling Voyage* (reprint, Rutland, Vt., 1969), pp. 212-213.

The wearing of queues had been imposed upon Chinese by Manchu rulers of the Ch'ing dynasty (1644-1912). As late as the early 1900s, before the founding of the Republic in 1912, Overseas Chinese returning to China were fearful of being caught without their queues and of possible capital punishment.

Another episode was described by Dr. Dwight Baldwin in a letter:

About two weeks since, we had quite an outcry in the evening. Two of Humphrey's sons had come, from the outside, intoxicated—they went into a Chinaman's store, & were soon fighting all the Chinamen in the establishment, 3 or 4. They nearly killed one by beating—but the thing which the *Pakes* [Chinese for "uncle," Hawaiian for "Chinese"] wailed most bitterly about, was, they cut off the long braided cue of one of them which they said to me was all the same, in China, as cutting off the head. (D. Baldwin to daughter Abbie, Jan. 7, 1853. A & B. Collection, Folder 136, HMCS.)

¹⁷ Samuel S. Hill, *Travels in the Sandwich and Society Islands* (London, 1856), pp. 305-317.

¹⁸ Doris Lorden (Glick), "The Chinese-Hawaiian Family," *American Journal of Sociology*, XV, no. 4 (Jan., 1935).

¹⁹ Harold W. Bradley, *The American Frontier in Hawaii: Pioneers 1789-1843* (Stanford, 1942), p. 82.

²⁰ Will of Aina, June 9, 1846, FO & Ex.

²¹ Maude Jones, "Naturalization of Orientals in Hawaii in 1900," HHS 40th Annual Report (1932), pp. 66-69.

²² Naturalization Book B. (AH).

²³ Hill, *Travels*, pp. 305-317.

²⁴ Alfons L. Korn, *Victorian Visitors* (Honolulu, 1958), pp. 156-157.

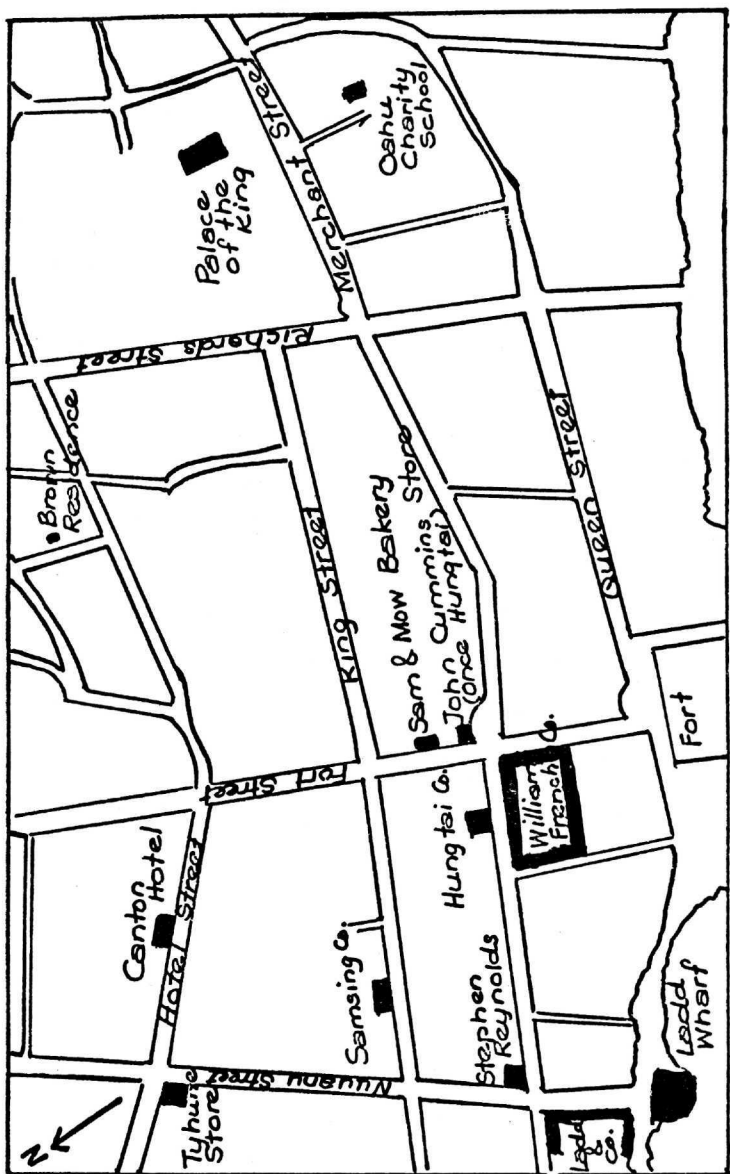
²⁵ *Report of the Bureau of Immigration to the Legislative Assembly of 1886*, pp. 5 and 266; see also P, Jan. 10, 1852.

²⁶ Alan Gavan Daws, "Honolulu: The First Century: Influences in the Development of the Town to 1876" (Ph.D. diss., University of Hawaii, 1966), pp. 373, 500.

²⁷ Lin Yutang, *Chinese-English Dictionary of Modern Usage* (Hong Kong, 1972), pp. xix-xxxi.

²⁸ The British Commission was formed during the brief take-over of the Hawaiian Islands by the British in 1843. One of the commission's duties was to register land claims of foreigners. Copies of these claims are in the Archives of Hawaii. See Kuykendall, *Hawaiian Kingdom, 1778-1854*, pp. 206-226.

²⁹ Claim 11, British Commission Records of 1843, FO & Ex; HBC, 23: 109-110.



Sketch Map of Honolulu
Early Nineteenth Century

Not Drawn to Scale