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## CHINESE EMIGRANTS, INDENTURED WORKERS, AND CHRISTIANITY IN THE WEST INDIES, BRITISH GUIANA AND HAWAII\*

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*Jessie G. Lutz*

### ABSTRACT

Upon the abolition of the slave trade, sugar planters in the West Indies sought other means to fill their need for cheap labor. Indentured labor filled the gap during a few decades in the mid-nineteenth century as tens of thousands of Indian and Chinese workers migrated to the West Indies. Conditions on the voyage to the West Indies and on the sugar plantations were harsh so that the death rate was high. A few Christian missionaries in China helped recruit laborers for the British colonies, perhaps in hopes of mitigating the cruelty of the trade. In general, they favored Christian converts. Although most of the Indian laborers returned home upon completion of their period of indenture, many Chinese settled in the West Indies and Guyana (British Guiana). Christianity provided them with a sense of community and a degree of stability. Thus, the indentured labor system contributed to the spread of Christianity to the West Indies.

**Keywords:** emigration, sugar plantations, indentured labor, Christianity, Chinese, West Indies

### RESUMEN

Con la abolición de la esclavitud, la necesidad de trabajo para la industria azucarera dio origen al sistema de servidumbre por contrato. Entre 1850 y 1855 cientos de miles de indios y chinos fueron reclutados para trabajar en los campos de azúcar de las Indias Occidentales y Hawái. Los abusos en el reclutamiento eran rampantes; el trabajo duro y la muerte y las enfermedades debilitantes eran frecuentes. Para facilitar y regular el reclutamiento de chinos, los británicos instituyeron una agencia especial en Hong Kong entre 1852 y 1853. Un número de misioneros cristianos sirvieron como reclutadores. Entre éstos el más activo fue Wilhelm Lobscheid, quien no únicamente reclutó a siervos por contrato, sino que también asesoró en política a la agencia británica. Los misioneros cristianos ayudaron en la emigración de chinos conversos a la Guyana Británica y a Hawái. La misión Basel, que se concentró en la evangelización entre los Hakka, con frecuencia les ofreció refugio durante la rebelión Taiping y los feudos Hakka-cantoneses, y también ayudó a las familias cristianas en la emigración a la Guyana Británica.

y Hawai, donde se construyeron iglesias que sirvieron como centros religiosos, educacionales y sociales. Una vez terminados sus contratos, la mayoría de los siervos por contrato abandonaron las plantaciones de azúcar. La mayoría de los chinos nunca acumuló los fondos para regresar a su país, pero se movió a centros urbanos. El resultado fue el establecimiento de sociedades multiculturales y multirraciales y también el establecimiento de congregaciones cristianas tanto en las Indias Occidentales como en Hawai.

**Palabras clave:** emigración, plantaciones azucareras, servidumbre por contrato, cristiandad, chinos, Indias Occidentales

#### RÉSUMÉ

Après l'abolition de l'esclavage, le besoin de main d'oeuvre pour industrie du sucre dans les Caraïbes a donné naissance à un système de «contrats de servage». Ainsi, entre 1850 et 1855 des centaines de milliers d'indiens et de chinois ont été recrutés pour travailler sur les champs de canne à sucre aux Indes Occidentales et à Hawaï. Les abus dans le processus de recrutement étaient évidents: l'exploitation, les maladies graves, voire la mort étaient l'ordre du jour. Pour faciliter et réguler le recrutement de chinois, les anglais ont créé un organisme spécial à Hong Kong entre 1852 et 1853, par lequel des missionnaires chrétiens servaient de recruteurs. Parmi eux, le plus actif fut Wilhelm Lobscheid, qui a non seulement recruté des chinois par le biais du système de servage, mais aussi conseillé l'organisme britannique en matière de politique. Les missionnaires chrétiens ont aidé au processus d'emigration de chinois convertis vers la Guyane britannique et Hawaï. En effet, la mission Bassel, concentrée sur l'évangélisation parmi les Hakka, leur a aussi offert asile lors des rébellions Taiping et les luttes entre le peuple Hakka et le peuple cantonnais. De même, elle a aidé les familles chrétiennes à émigrer vers la Guyane et Hawaï, où elles ont bâti des églises qui ont servi de centres religieux, éducatifs et sociaux. Une fois les contrats terminés, la plupart des travailleurs engagés par contrat ont abandonné les champs de canne à sucre, mais peu d'entre eux avaient l'argent pour rentrer chez eux. En revanche, ils se sont installés dans les villes, ce qui a eu comme résultat l'établissement de sociétés multiculturelles et multiraciales, ainsi que la création de congrégations chrétiennes aux Indes Occidentales et à Hawaï.

**Mots-clés:** émigration, plantations de canne à sucre, «contrat de servage», chrétienté, chinois, Indes Occidentales

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**D**uring the height of the indentured labor system in the second half of the nineteenth century, tens of thousands of Chinese and Indians journeyed to the West Indies, British Guiana, and Hawaii to work on sugar plantations. Though most of the indentured workers were supplied by local agents on a commission basis, several Christian missionaries in China also participated in recruiting laborers. Wilhelm Lobschied of the Chinese Evangelist Society of England not only helped recruit workers, but he also advised the British officer in charge of regulating the system. Rudolf Lechler assisted Chinese Hakka Christians in migrating to Hawaii. Many of those Chinese workers who were Christian converts established Christian communities in their new home, especially after they had served out their indenture. China missionaries kept in touch with these Chinese Christian communities, sometimes sending them ministers and sometimes visiting them. Why did the missionaries participate in a labor policy with such a dubious reputation? Did their participation help mitigate the abuses of the system? What were the consequences for the culture and the racial composition of the population in the West Indies, Hawaii, and British Guiana? To answer these and other questions, it seems useful to explore further the involvement of Christian missionaries in the indentured worker system.

#### **A. Migrations during the Nineteenth Century**

The nineteenth century was actually an era of unprecedented movement of peoples, and the indentured labor system was only one aspect of it. Migrations were driven by hardship and desperation and also by hope and opportunity. Westerners, galvanized by Faustian ambition and expansionist dreams, ventured far afield. Expediting the movement at mid-century were the steam ship and the Suez Canal, both of which greatly shortened journeys from East to West and vice versa. Diversity characterized this migration of peoples. German, Irish, and Italian families came to America as free immigrants; some came for religious reasons, but most were drawn by the dreams of economic betterment. Traders circled the globe; they did so freely, but they had no intention of permanent residence abroad, and they were mostly married males with their families in the homeland. Tens of thousands of Christian missionaries journeyed overseas "to save" the heathens of Africa, China, India, Japan, and South America. They also played a minor role in the movement of Chinese, Indian, and African laborers overseas. Protestant evangelists were generally accompanied by their wives though of course, the Roman Catholic fathers were celibate. In India massive waves of migrants transferred to Bengal, Ceylon, Malaya, and Burma. In the

U.S., families moved westward to homestead in the central plains.

Despite the British abolition of her slave trade in 1807, other nationalities continued to transport African slaves to slave societies. Slavery was not abolished in Puerto Rico until 1873, a decade after it was abolished in the U. S., and it continued to be legal in Cuba until 1886. The Arab slave trade also survived in the Middle East and Africa.

Then came the discovery of tin in Malaysia and gold in Australia and California at mid-century and somewhat later in South Africa. Not only Westerners, but also Indians and Chinese succumbed to the lures of instant wealth. China was suffering from the malaise and dislocations characteristic of the end of a dynasty: civil war, banditry, pressure of population on the available arable land, administrative breakdown, and so forth. Emigration to Southeast Asia and other overseas destinations increased sharply. Until the discovery of gold in New South Wales and Victoria, only a few thousands of Chinese had migrated to Australia. But between 1854 and 1856 seventeen thousand Chinese males entered the gold fields, and thousands continued to come every year until the 1880s by which time the alluvial deposits had become exhausted.<sup>1</sup>

Male speculators abandoned all at home to try their luck. In China where the dictates of family and lineage overrode individual desires, a family or lineage might combine their resources to invest in sending a young male to the gold fields with the understanding that any return would be shared either through remittances or the emigrant's returning home to distribute his wealth. Or, an emigrant who had enjoyed some success might pay the passage for a kinsman to join him. Other migrants went on "credit tickets" as contract laborers. Speculators provided funds for passage with the proviso that the profits would be divided between the émigrés' family and the investor. Problems could arise from these arrangements. In one instance, a Christian known as Dr. Tschin provided funds to a gold prospector for passage to California. When the gold miner sent correspondence and funds home, however, an acrimonious dispute between Dr. Tschin and the family of the overseas relative arose over the right to the letters.<sup>2</sup> A few migrants struck it rich; some settled down in other occupations, and in Malaysia especially, they often married local women. Many, though, returned home penniless and dispirited.

## **B. Evolution of the Indentured Labor System: The West Indies**

Of recent and growing importance by the mid-nineteenth century was the indentured labor system that was characterized by the immobility and isolation of the laborers. Because of ditches, dams, and dikes to control the water during the two rainy seasons of the West Indies, each plantation became, in effect, a walled entity. So long as the laborer was

under contract, he belonged to the plantation to which he had been assigned and could not venture off of it without permission. In the West Indies the indentured labor system grew directly out of the abolition of slavery. Freed slaves deserted the sugar plantations in droves or they were pushed off by the owners.<sup>3</sup> Many Blacks became artisans and eventually, they dominated the police and security forces. The planters, meanwhile, insisted that they could not afford to pay competitive wages in order to retain the former slaves. Compounding the financial difficulties of the sugar planters, the British Parliament passed the Sugar Duties Act of 1846, which ended preferential treatment for sugar imported from British colonies. The sugar industry in the West Indies suffered a sharp decline.

Free enterprise quickly moved in to fill the need for cheap labor. Ship captains offered their vessels for hire to carry indentured workers to the sugar plantations. Some laborers, nearly all of them males, volunteered freely. Chinese “crimps,” working on a commission basis, however, recruited many of those who filled the ships.<sup>4</sup> Frequently, the “crimps” employed alcohol, drugs, kidnaping, and misrepresentation of contracts to reach their quotas. They purchased prisoners taken in lineage conflicts and they induced gamblers to stake their own persons. Conditions on the crowded vessels were often so unhealthy that by the end of the journey, over 15% of the recruits had perished, and once on the plantations, the workers had little recourse when abused by the planters or their managers. Suicides by the plantation workers were not uncommon.

Sugar planters in the British West Indies turned to the British government for assistance in recruiting cheap labor, and Parliament listened. In 1851 it legalized the indentured labor system whereby workers were imported under a contract which bound them to work for a designated number of years, usually five. The system, of course, drove down wages for any free laborers, particularly the Blacks, who had so recently emerged from slavery. But the sugar industry thrived. The British Colonial Secretary dryly observed, “in civilised countries [i.e. Europe] the labourer, though free, is by a law of nature dependent on capitalists; in colonies this dependence must be created by artificial means.”<sup>5</sup> Certainly this was true of the origins of the indentured labor system in the West Indies.

Public outcry in Britain against the abuses of the system, which was now legal, but unregulated, mounted. Chinese were antagonized by the coercive methods of the “crimps” and by the horror stories from the plantations; they often called the recruiting of indentured workers the “pig trade.” These plus pressure from the sugar planters spurred action by the British government in 1853-54 to regulate and facilitate the operation

of the indenture system. Having so recently abolished the slave trade, Britons were sensitive about comparisons between indentured labor and slavery. The London Missionary Society, the Jamaica Baptist Union, and anti-slavery groups agitated against the system; they argued that there would be no shortage of labor if the planters paid a living wage. All to no avail; instead of abolishing indenture; the parliament set up a regulatory system subsidized by the government. In part because of the frequent turnover of British agents in China, the recruitment regulations were only mildly successful. A Rev. Henry Clarke became the major opponent of the system in the 1860s. He wrote: "This system is more unjust and inhuman than slavery and the slave trade. Under the old system planters imported slaves at their own expense, but now [they do so] at the expense of the public. Under the old system they had to pay people to catch them; now this is done for them by ordinary police."<sup>6</sup>

For indentured labor in Cuba and Puerto Rico under Spanish rule, however, the Portuguese in Macao continued to rely on private recruiters with all the abuses accompanying the system. Especially grueling was the task of digging *guano* on the islands off Peru. The fierce heat, the stench, and the quota of 100 wheel barrow loads of *guano* per day made many workers long for death, according to Dr. Peter Parker, a medical missionary to China and later U.S. consul in Canton.<sup>7</sup> And death did actually come early to many *guano* workers. American vessels were the principal carriers of indentured laborers to the West Indies, and American citizens, with Peter Parker as their spokesman, became concerned about the reputation of the U.S, which had only abolished slavery in 1863. Their publicity regarding the flagrant abuses contributed to passage of a law by Congress prohibiting American vessels from transporting indentured laborers. During the 1870s the international outcry grew so loud that recruiting and transporting indentured laborers declined sharply, though it did not disappear. Protests continued and at the turn of the century they were led by the Jamaican Baptist Union with the support of the Negro Baptists of America and the Baptist Union of Wales. Black Christians were leading the fight, partly because indentured workers who had completed their servitude were competing with Blacks in the job market, but humanitarian concerns were also a driving force.<sup>8</sup>

Between 1838 and 1918 approximately a half million new immigrant laborers entered the British West Indies, eighty percent from India, primarily from Bengal, the Northwest Provinces, and Oudh. Only 3½ percent were Chinese, mostly Cantonese and Hakka from the Pearl River delta, that is, coastal southeast China that looked toward the sea and that was subject to Western influences. The majority of Chinese went to British Guiana. The years of peak immigration were 1853 to 1866, an era that coincided with massive displacement of Chinese due

to the Taiping Rebellion and the Hakka-bendi feuds.<sup>9</sup> Some went as free laborers, as mentioned above; others emigrated as indentured workers. Nearly all indentured recruits were male.

Even under the British regulated system of indentured labor, contracts changed over time and contracts for Indians and Chinese differed in the British West Indies. Ordinarily, the recruit was given an advance of about twenty dollars upon signing his contract, this loan to be paid off though a deduction of one dollar a month once he began work. Usually, the period of indenture was for five years with a bounty for renewal. During this term the laborer was tied to the plantation, and he needed the permission of the planter or the manager in order to leave its boundaries. Wages varied from \$2.00 to \$4.00 a month, and the workday was limited to nine and a half hours a day with Sundays off. A daily ration was guaranteed with the cost deducted from the monthly wages, but medical attention was to be free.<sup>10</sup>

Such in theory were the conditions of indenture. In actuality, working in the cane fields was hard, hot work and the conditions of the indenture were dependent upon the kindness or cruelty of the planter and his manager. For the immigrant, fines for infractions could eat up much of the wages while the planters and managers were rarely called to account. In 1858 China lifted its ban on emigration though it did not assume responsibility for protecting its citizens overseas. Chinese who became involved in disturbances or riots as well as Chinese who were accused of minor infractions had no advocate in their government. The fact that there was often antagonism and racial prejudice between the Indians and the Chinese also played into the hands of the planters. The two groups rarely cooperated in disputes with the planters<sup>11</sup>.

### **C. Christian Involvement in the British Recruiting System**

Under the British system, a recruiting agency was founded in Hong Kong, while agents in the British West Indies and British Guiana were to oversee the distribution and management of laborers. Sugar planters covered two-thirds of the cost, with the British government paying the remainder out of customs receipts. J. Gardiner Austin, the British agent who organized the recruiting agency in China, had his headquarters in Hong Kong, but he set up sub recruiting stations in market towns and employed missionaries as agents at several of them. The missionary most deeply involved in the indentured labor system was Dr. Wilhelm Lobschied. Not only did Lobschied recruit workers, but he was consulted by British agents as the latter attempted to develop guidelines for recruitment. Lobschied, for example, suggested that the frequent factional disputes among the Chinese emigrants could be reduced if the various



dialect and regional groups traveled on different ships. In order to interest Chinese in emigrating, he advised Austin to post copies of indenture labor contracts in market towns. One of the notices [in Chinese] states: "There is no slavery wherever the British Flag flies. The Law is the same to rich and poor. All Religions are tolerated and protected ... The climate is very much like that of Southern China. The cultivation is chiefly that of Sugar cane. The wages offered during five years service under contract, are in accordance with the current price of labor in the West Indies, and vary from 2 shillings to 4 shillings per day."<sup>12</sup> Lobschied recruited especially among Christians, and he recommended that the British agent, Austin do the same; he recommended in addition that the crew of each ship include a doctor and a Christian minister. Conversion to Christianity, he argued, brought greater orderliness among the recruits and made them more amenable to discipline; he also believed in the power of Christianity to act as a bond attaching the laborer to the plantation milieu. Addiction to opium and gambling, both of which were legal in the British colonies, were, however, insoluble problems that were the source of many conflicts and of ill health among the immigrants.

Lobschied encouraged the recruiting of more women as a way of bringing greater stability to the Chinese community. In 1862, therefore, the British agent began to offer a \$20.00 bounty to any man accompanied by his wife,<sup>13</sup> and Lobschied actually assisted in recruiting the first women under the new regulations. Women were to be bound to the plantation but were not obliged to work in the fields.<sup>14</sup> Exceedingly few Chinese were willing to bring their families along, however, for they intended to return to their homestead after getting rich. For them, taking the wife indicated that they expected to become permanent emigrants rather than temporary sojourners. Most of the women Lobschied recruited were women of questionable background and the men claimed them as wives simply to receive the \$20.00 bounty.<sup>15</sup> Some of the women had bound feet, which limited their usefulness as laborers, though there were some Hakka women, who did not bind their feet and were accustomed to hard labor. Upon arrival in the British West Indies, many of the "husbands" repudiated their "wives," and many women formed other liaisons.

On Lobschied's way home on sick leave in 1861, he decided to stop off in the British West Indies in order to see first hand the status of the Chinese émigrés. He took passage on the *Mystery*, which was carrying Chinese indentured workers to British Guiana. He praised the *Mystery* as a fine vessel with a high ceiling between decks, thus providing ample ventilation. Lobschied reveals, however, that a wide gap often existed between the recruiting regulations and reality. In order to fill the ship with workers, Austin had compromised the rules. Among the *Mystery* indentured émigrés, Austin had accepted a group recruited by the Portu-

guese in Macao. In a letter to the Governor of British Guiana, Lobschied describes them in highly derogatory language:

The truth is that the Portuguese parceled up the men in Macao and adjacent cities, where they were lying about in the streets by thousands, looked upon by the people as outcasts, most of them frightfully diseased and emaciated from the habitual vice of opium smoking. Unable to procure the poison any longer, the Portuguese had acquainted them with a new channel of getting money [the bounty paid for signing up] ... Ninety of these men had paid from \$15-\$20 each to the Portuguese and a crimp of the name of Nung ... Seeing the scanty supply of opium which they had been able to secure for the few dollars left them from the \$20 advances, nearly exhausted, two of them tried to commit suicide immediately after we had set sail, thus could only be prevented from trying the same by the assurance from me that if their opium be really short, and there be no means of saving their lives, they should apply to me and I would see what I could do for them.<sup>16</sup>

The rest of the emigrants, he concluded, were in general good health and “will prove to be useful Colonists. Their treatment here on board has been very kind ...”<sup>17</sup> Lobschied does relate one misunderstanding which, with his knowledge of Chinese, he was quickly able to clear up. Upon docking at St. Helena, some visitors came on board and asked to see a Chinese. The captain picked out a pretty Chinese girl of twelve and bought her up on deck. Immediately the Chinese men below became restive and the women commenced crying. Apparently, a rumor had circulated among the emigrants that all the women were to be left on St. Helena. Lobschied was able to reassure the Chinese that such was not the case, and peace was restored. “All was joy and joviality.”<sup>18</sup> Misunderstandings must have festered frequently on ships lacking a Chinese interpreter, and there were reports of many instances of mutiny and of attacks on the ship’s crew during the long journey of several months.<sup>19</sup>

Some China missionaries, including Lobschied’s fellow German colleagues, became concerned about Lobschied’s deep involvement in the indentured labor system, apparently feeling that he was motivated as much by the monetary rewards as by concern for the welfare of the emigrants. It becomes apparent, however, that the Basel missionaries were also disturbed by the loss of so many of their Christians to diaspora.<sup>20</sup> In 1861 they circulated letters from Lobschied recruits in British West Indies which were critical of him.<sup>21</sup> Philip Winnes of the Basel mission likened the indenture system to the slave trade and call it a “dirty business.”<sup>22</sup> He reported in regard to the recruitment of Christians: “Our mission thereby suffered a great loss, no less than 94 baptized Christians have emigrated to the West Indies in the course of one year.”<sup>23</sup> An equal number of Chinese who had ties with the mission had joined the Chinese

converts in emigrating. He had, he said, a poor impression of the way recruiters had drawn emigrants to the movement. Several Chinese had written him expressing their dissatisfaction and regretting that they had ever left China.

#### **D. Hakka, Christianity, and Emigration**

One interesting sidelight on Chinese indentured labor and Christianity is the experience of the Hakka ethnic group and the Basel mission, which had concentrated its evangelism among the Hakka. Somewhat on the fringes of the Confucian mainstream, the Hakka were often considered more open than other Han Chinese to heterodox teachings: folk and Buddhist sects, Christianity, and Taiping Christianity.<sup>24</sup> Hakka had sparked the Taiping Rebellion against the Qing dynasty in the mid-nineteenth century, and Hong Xiuquan, their leader, and a majority of the early adherents were Hakka. As the fortunes of the Taiping rebels ebbed and flowed, many Hakka were forced to flee their homes. Those who sought refuge in the Canton-Hong Kong district often turned for assistance to the Baslers, who spoke their dialect. Also in the early 1860s, a long simmering feud between the bendi (original settlers) and the Hakka (guest people) in the Foshan district of Guangdong erupted in open warfare. The Hakka were defeated and tens of thousands of Hakka lost their lives or fled. It is said that many were forced into indentured service in Guano and Cuba. A fortunate three thousand were brought to Hong Kong where with government aid, the Basel missionary Rudolf Lechler and his assistant Li Zhenggao found temporary lodging and food for them.<sup>25</sup> Despite Lechler's warnings, some eventually decided to return to their home territory; and Lechler secured transportation for them. Feuding was soon renewed, but finally a special area nearby was designated for Hakka settlement. Many transferred to this region while others emigrated to new territory, including Hawaii, Southeast Asia, and the West Indies.<sup>26</sup>

A Presbyterian minister, Rev. Kenneth J. Grant, related the story of a Chinese refugee from the Taiping Rebellion who ended up in the West Indies, a young boy who became known as Jacob W. Corbie. He had fled in the company of his parents, but mother and son became separated from the father. Somehow the two made their way to Trinidad where in 1872 the Rev. Grant took Jacob under his wing. With the aid of the Galt Presbyterian church in Ontario, Jacob attended the Galt Institute for two years. He returned to Trinidad to teach in the day school and Sabbath school and to serve as lay leader in public worship and elder in the Presbyterian church.<sup>27</sup>

As the decades passed and Chinese communities came into existence

in the West Indies and Trinidad, “contract ticket” immigrants often came as families. Small numbers of Chinese converts migrated with the assistance of Christian missionaries, sometimes as indentured servants and sometimes as free immigrants under the contract ticket system. The combination of being Christian and Hakka, both of which loosened ties to the Confucian heritage, may well have contributed to a greater readiness among Basel converts to emigrate as families and with the intention of permanent residence abroad. Rudolf Lechler reported that during 1861 thirty members of the Christian community had departed for North Borneo, five for California, and yet others for the West Indies and British Guiana.<sup>28</sup> There is the example of Hong Kuiyang, a relative of the leader of the Taiping Rebellion, Hong Xiuquan, and an official in the Taiping capital of Nanjing. After the defeat of the Taipings, Kuiyang fled with a price on his head. He found sanctuary in Hong Kong with the Basel missionaries and converted from Taiping Christianity to Protestant Christianity. After teaching for a while in Marie Lechler’s school for girls, he married one of her graduates. In 1872 Hong and his wife, along with many members of the Basel Hong Kong church, were assisted by the Lechlers in emigrating to British Guiana. Whole families went, and in 1878 they founded a church in Georgetown.<sup>29</sup>

The Chinese community in Georgetown and elsewhere kept in touch with the Basel missionaries and sometimes imported Protestant ministers from the Basel seminary in Guangdong. In 1880 Hong wrote to Rudolf Lechler thanking him for news of Christians in “our old mother country.” He revealed that he had become an overseer on the Great Diamond Plantation. The sugar industry was depressed at that time, he said, and some immigrants had been unable to find jobs; others were working at subsistence wages. Hong complained that many of the Chinese Christians were only superficial believers and did not attend church regularly. One of the difficulties was that the English clergymen did not understand Chinese and had to rely on inadequately trained Chinese assistants. In so far as possible, he tried to fill the gap for Hakka speakers both on the Great Diamond plantation and at nearby communities. He assisted the Chinese preacher on the plantation on Sundays and he held Bible lessons elsewhere. On one occasion, he read Lechler’s letter to Christians in British Guiana, much to their pleasure, for many still considered Lechler their mentor.<sup>30</sup> One woman on the Great Diamond plantation wrote to Lechler, “We are overjoyed to have Fung Khui Syu [Hong] near us, who helps us readily, and without whom we would truly be like sheep without a shepherd, the reason being that the local missionaries do not speak Chinese and the Chinese preachers being mostly Punti [bendi] or Hoklo [do not speak Hakka].”<sup>31</sup> Language was a problem in other Chinese communities as well. In Surinam, where the Roman Catholic

church continued to hold services in Dutch and Latin, some Hakka and Cantonese speakers transferred to the Protestant church when Hong sent a clergyman who could speak both Hakka and Cantonese.<sup>32</sup>

### **E. Christian Involvement in Hawaiian Indenture**

The sugar industry also spawned the indentured labor system in Hawaii. In 1802 the first sugar mill was imported to Hawaii, and raising sugar being highly profitable, the sugar industry expanded rapidly. Since the Hawaiian population had declined to 71,000 by 1883, it became necessary to import laborers, and the Royal Hawaiian Agricultural Society began to recruit workers for the fields. Initially the Chinese came from Fujian province; later most of them were either bendi (Cantonese) or Hakka from Guangdong, Hong Kong, and Macao. The conditions of indenture were similar to those in the West Indies: five year contract, \$3.00 to \$15.00 a month, ten hours of work a day, six days a week. Ordinarily the Fujianese and the bendi came as single males, hoping, of course, to return to China once they had made their fortune. The Hakka, being seasoned migrants, frequently came as families with the intention of settling in Hawaii. By 1884 Chinese laborers constituted almost one-fourth of the Hawaiian population.<sup>33</sup>

In 1868 the Hawaii Evangelical Association appointed Samuel P. Aheong (Xiao Xiung) to work among the Chinese and he immediately began holding Sunday evening services in English, Chinese, and Hawaiian at Bethel Union Church. He also opened an English language school for Chinese there. A portion of the Hakka who came to Hawaii were already Christians, having been converted by the Basel mission. The church served as a center where Chinese gathered to sing, read the Bible, pray, and socialize. The Christians formed a Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) as well. Chinese Christians, with the blessing of King Kalakawa, built the Fort Street Church, which was dedicated in 1881. The church congregation supported a kindergarten, the first pre-school in Hawaii and also the Wai Wah Hospital, staffed by two Western-trained Chinese physicians. In 1919 it became self-supporting and began to engage in mission work on its own.<sup>34</sup>

Just as the Basel missionaries had assisted Hakka refugees to migrate to the British West Indies, so they were instrumental in Hakka emigration to Hawaii. Among these were a group who during the 1870s went to work for the Rev. Lias Bond. He operated a sugar plantation in the Kohala region in order to support his mission work. Lechler encouraged them to travel as families, an arrangement which was acceptable to Bond. Perhaps the fact that they were Hakka, whose women did not bind their feet and were accustomed to hard agricultural labor was persuasive.

At any rate, many of these émigrés quickly settled down as permanent residents. The Rev. Bond wrote to the Hawaiian Evangelical Association requesting a Chinese evangelist, and in 1877 Kong Tet Yin, a Basel convert who had worked with the Anglican church in Australia, arrived. Within six years, a chapel had been erected on the plantation.

### **F. Post Indenture and the Christian Experience**

As the Chinese completed their term of indenture and moved off the plantations, they often established churches, where they could find fellowship, comfort, and a sense of belonging in a strange land. According to Carol C. Fan, geographic origins, linguistic similarities, and personal or family relationships rather than denominational loyalties were ordinarily the determining factors in forming a new church or dividing an existing one.<sup>35</sup> Denominationalism never acquired much meaning for most Chinese. There is the prominent example of Luke Aseu. Baptized by the Basel Mission, which had links with the Lutheran Church, Aseu migrated to Hawaii where he became one of the founders of the YMCA and the First Chinese Church of Christ. He was, however, also instrumental in building two Episcopal churches, St. Paul's and St. Peter's in Honolulu.

Many Hawaiian Christians remained in communication with the Basel mission in China. In 1883, for example, a wealthy Christian in Hawaii sent funds to support a Christian teacher in his home village, and Basel transferred one of its teachers there.<sup>36</sup> Goo Kim, another of the founders of the Chinese YMCA and the First Chinese Church, returned in 1892 to his Hakka homeland in Meixian, northwest Guangdong, where he built a school and a church. After returning to Hawaii, he continued to support both.<sup>37</sup> When Marie and Rudolf Lechler went to Europe on home leave in 1887, their former parishners in Hawaii collected enough money so that the Lechlers could stop off for a visit. It was a joyous reunion, and the Hawaiian Christians held a special service during which they offered a prayer of thanksgiving celebrating the fact that they could again see their old pastor. Marie Lechler was reunited with some of her former pupils in Hong Kong, and she also brought two of her girls who were affianced to Christians in Hawaii. Though Lechler recorded that a few individuals had succumbed to temptation, he was gratified at how well most of his Christians had done. The son of his closest assistant was known as the best interpreter at the tribunal in Honolulu, and others were successful merchants and artisans. Like many former indentured laborers, they were now urban dwellers. The Lechlers then moved on to San Francisco where again there were joyous reunions with former Basel converts.<sup>38</sup>

Only a minority of the Chinese laborers remained in agriculture once they had served out their indenture. Many of the recruits had come from market towns and urban areas so they lacked agricultural skills and did not find farming attractive. Also, most had not accumulated sufficient funds to purchase land upon completion of their indenture. One group that did attempt to establish an agricultural community, unfortunately, only added to history's long list of failed utopias. In 1865 a Chinese Christian named Wu Tai Kam (O Tye Kim) applied to the governor of British Guiana for a grant of crown land where free Chinese Christians could farm. Otherwise, Wu argued, many Chinese would emigrate to Trinidad where it was said that Chinese fared better economically. Wu had been a lay preacher in Singapore for thirteen years and had traveled to London where he had become acquainted with leaders of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts. The Society, in 1864, sent him to British Guiana as an evangelist and within a short time Wu had gathered a congregation of about 125. The governor granted both a tract of property on the Kamuni Creek about thirty miles from Georgetown and a £600 government loan.

Adopting the name of Hopetown, 170 Chinese Christians, mostly male, moved to the plot in late June 1865. From its inception Hopetown was plagued by problems. Unusually heavy rains delayed the planting of food crops and inundated the huts. The settlers soon discovered that the area did not drain well and was subject to frequent flooding. Wu, however, inspired a strong work ethic and demanded a high standard of morality. Community morale remained good as the settlers dug ditches, constructed dikes, and erected a church. There was even talk of a school. The community turned to charcoal burning to make a living and for two years matters went quite well. At its height in 1871 the settlement had a population of 567 (311 men, 123 women, 133 children). Soon, however, the tract had been denuded of trees and the fees for timbering other lands were prohibitively high; the drainage and flooding problems had not been solved. Hopetown never became a truly prosperous agricultural community. Moreover, the community had lost its driving force, Wu Tai Kam. Wu had become involved with a local woman, and when it became apparent that she was pregnant, Wu and two of his closest followers fled the country and were never again located.

Hopetown's population gradually decreased, and its cohesion declined as non-Christians and non-Chinese moved in. Instigated by a gambler who resented the fact that the Christians did not patronize his den, several non-Christian Chinese accused the Christians of having forsaken Confucianism for a foreign religion and threatened to burn the church and the school. With the aid of the government, the Hopetown settlers were able to avert this disaster and in 1881 they were even able



to raise two thousand dollars to build a new church. Settlers, however, continued to drift away to Georgetown and Trinidad, which offered a better economic future and where there were Chinese communities they could join. By 1891 only 240 people were left, many of them neither Chinese nor Christian. The community had lost its identity. The attrition continued and in 1914 the settlement consisted of 23 houses and 76 inhabitants. The dream had failed.<sup>39</sup>

### G. The Decline of the Indentured Worker System

The era of massive importation of indentured workers was relatively short. In 1870 a mutiny aboard the Chinese “coolie” ship, *Nouvelle Penelope*, in which many passengers died precipitated an investigation of the Cuban trade. The resultant Cuban Commission concluded that “the commerce in Coolies is a true slave trade.”<sup>40</sup> Amidst much publicity detailing the abuses in Macao, Britain, the U.S., and China put such pressure on Portugal that she forbade the recruiting of migrant workers in Macao, then under her control. An inquiry into the indenture system in British Guiana led, after much debate and controversy, to the Kung Convention of 1873. The new set of regulations limited re-indenture to one year, required better housing, and stipulated that Chinese, upon completion of their contract, should be given free passage home. The cost of importing Chinese laborers became so high that the recruiting of Chinese for the West Indies virtually ceased. A few coolie ships bringing Chinese indentured and contract workers arrived in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, but planters relied increasingly on Indians and free white labor. The migration of Chinese indentured workers to Hawaii peaked somewhat later in the 1870s and 1880s, but it too had largely ended by the turn of the century.

In Cuba slavery was abolished in 1886 and when the Americans took over Cuba in 1898, U.S. laws prohibiting indentured labor and restricting Chinese immigration were thereafter implemented. The importation of unskilled Chinese laborers for the gold fields of the Transvaal began late, 1902-04. During the next few years, however, over sixty thousand indentured Chinese came to South Africa, most of them from north China, Shandong and Hebei, not the southeast China coast, the usual source of émigrés. Chinese soon represented over forty per cent of the unskilled work force in the gold mines. Then, in 1907 the government began a repatriation program, which enabled the African miners to regain their monopoly of work in the mines. By 1910 few Chinese were left in South Africa.<sup>41</sup>

In India during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century G.K. Gakhale launched a campaign against indenture emigration, arguing that “it is degrading to



the people of India."<sup>42</sup> He moved in the Indian Legislative Council that the recruitment of emigrants in Mata be prohibited and the proposal was enacted in 1911. Meanwhile, two missionaries, Pearson and Charles F. Andrews condemned the indentured labor system on moral grounds because of the disproportionate ratio of males to females. In 1917 the Indian government suspended emigration of indentured laborers and the Imperial Government acceded. What is significant is that agitation in the home country led to prohibition and that the argument against it was primarily on nationalist grounds.

As already indicated, only a small per cent of the indentured Chinese renewed their indenture contracts once they were fulfilled. But most lacked the funds for passage home. They began to move into niche occupations. The Indians, on the other hand, were generally guaranteed return fare, and so a much higher percentage of them were repatriated. Those who stayed ordinarily became farmers, perhaps first as tenant farmers or squatters on waste land.

Since the local Portuguese controlled the trading market in the West Indies, Chinese often set up shops on the fringes of plantations to serve the daily needs of the plantation workers. Others engaged in market gardening on small plots near an urban area and opened vegetable and fruit stands. Many moved to the cities. Because of the shortage of women, they found openings in the laundry, tailoring, and restaurant businesses. A number of them went into cabinetry. Except for those who succumbed to gambling or opium, they lived frugally. They accepted low wages and worked long hours. They were frequently accused of undercutting the wages of local unskilled workers, of underselling other markets, and of resisting acculturation.<sup>43</sup> In the 1880s Australia passed laws stringently restricting Chinese immigration, and the U. S. followed suit at the turn of the century.

A few Chinese, however, became prosperous business men, taking over from the Portuguese in British Guiana. Some intermarried with the local populace; others imported wives from China. Always, they sacrificed to educate the younger generation, most of whom went into the professions and enjoyed social mobility. But with the disproportion between males and females in the West Indies, the Chinese population inevitably declined. Not until the civil conflicts of the first quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was there another spurt of emigration to the West Indies. In Hawaii where the sexes were more evenly balanced, there was initially less intermarriage between Chinese and the local population. Once the U. S. took over Hawaii and established American public schools, however, acculturation inevitably occurred. The United Church of Christ, which had at first supported an English school, began to teach the Chinese language in 1932. Increasingly, Chinese and Chinese Hawaiians identi-

fied themselves as American citizens.<sup>44</sup> Perhaps the Chinese in Hawaii faced fewer obstacles to mobility than those in the West Indies. Quite a number became prominent and prosperous citizens. William Kwai Fong Yap, who participated in the establishment of the Chinese YMCA, also shared in the founding of Sun Yat-sen's revolutionary society, the Xin Zhong Hui (Revive China Association). Likewise, He Zhongguai, a member of the Church of Christ and president of the United Church Society, was a supporter of the Xin Zhong Hui. The philanthropist Goo Kim was Associate Commercial Agent for China in Hawaii.<sup>45</sup>

When Australia and the U.S. loosened their immigration restrictions after World War II, a significant number of the second and third generation Chinese in the West Indies and Hawaii as well as Chinese in mainland China took advantage of the opportunity to emigrate to America, Canada, and Australia. Later, the founding of the People's Republic of China led many mainland Chinese to move to Hawaii; by 1984 over eight hundred were coming annually. Well-educated professionals and businessmen were conspicuous among them.

#### **H. Legacy of the Indentured Labor System**

The ability of the mining and sugar industries to mobilize labor on an international scale was built on the massive imbalance of economic power between metropolitan countries and their pre-industrial peripheries. Improved transport and communication facilities and technology facilitated the mass movement of peoples. Commoditized labor such as the indentured worker system enabled the labor intensive industries to survive and expand.<sup>46</sup> Between 1839 and 1909 Trinidad's annual sugar exports went from 17,214 tons to 45,000 tons while British Guiana's sugar exports rose from 28,343 tons to 100,000 tons.<sup>47</sup> Until well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, economic monoculturism and cultural pluralism were the result. Neither the West Indies, Hawaii, nor South Africa sought to diversify their economies, leaving them vulnerable to the international market.<sup>48</sup>

On the other hand, the indentured labor system left a legacy of multi-ethnic and multi-cultural societies in the West Indies and Hawaii. Among those who remained in the West Indies and Hawaii, a hybridization process began. It was more pronounced among the Chinese than among the Indians. The Indians were deterred from intermarriage by caste as well as race, and many returned to their homeland. Though a portion of the Chinese lived within semi-isolated Chinatowns, a significant number of the single males married or formed liaisons with local women. The Creole population of mixed racial heritage grew.

Tensions between groups there were and even occasional outbreaks

of violence. Instead of retaining separable and unchanging identities, most communities of Hawaiians, Chinese, and Creoles in both the West Indies and Hawaii underwent a hybridization process. They retained some elements from their home culture but also added elements from the culture of their new residence, whether it was Hawaii or the West Indies. Individuals managed to carry within their personalities several layers of identity and loyalty. Western dress replaced both Chinese and local styles. Their cuisine retained much of its Chinese heritage, but gradually the Chinese language was ceasing to be an active medium of communication. Ironically, Chinese respect for the scholar contributed to the loss of language. In so far as possible, Chinese, Creole Chinese in the West Indies, and Hawaiian Chinese ensured that their children obtained an education. In most public schools, however, English was the medium of instruction, so that by the second or third generation, facility in written and spoken Chinese had declined.

The Chinese continued to celebrate New Year's and other special Chinese holidays, but many Chinese converted to Christianity and so they also celebrated Christmas and Easter. Sometimes their celebrations were an amalgam of Chinese, Christian, and local customs. For some, Christianity filled a moral void created by their dislocation and isolation from their cultural heritage. Sometimes Christianity facilitated the acculturation process, and quite a few Chinese, Hawaiian Chinese, and Creole Chinese adopted Christian names. Churches sponsored classes in English and instruction in hygiene, mathematics and typing. They established schools, and sometimes free education in parochial schools was a draw to Christianity.<sup>49</sup> And sometimes the need for a community and its support was decisive. Whatever the initial reason for accepting Christianity, new and viable Christian congregations were established in many parts of the world through emigration and the indentured labor system.

### Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Choi (1975:3-35).

<sup>2</sup> Philip Winnes, "Protocol of a Conference with the Gehilfen and Teachers at Pukak, 10 August 1854," Archive of Basler Missionsgesellschaft: Korrespondence, China (BMG), A1.3, # 20.

<sup>3</sup> For further detail, see Douglas (1996:55-63).

- <sup>4</sup> “Crimps” were recruiters who received a commission from the ship captain for each indentured worker they brought to the ship.
- <sup>5</sup> Quoted in Adamson (1984:42).
- <sup>6</sup> Quoted in Look Lai (1993:184).
- <sup>7</sup> Sue-A-Quan (2003:55).
- <sup>8</sup> Look Lai (1993:185).
- <sup>9</sup> The Taiping Rebellion was a mid-nineteenth century peasant uprising that very nearly overthrew the Qing dynasty. The leader of the rebellion, Hong Xiuquan preached a Sinified form of Christianity. During the rebellion large sectors of the country were devastated and some 20,000,000 individuals lost their lives. The Hakka were a Han minority who as relative newcomers to Guangdong often met with discrimination by the native Cantonese or bendi. Competition for arable land erupted into warfare during the 1850s and 1860s.
- <sup>10</sup> For a copy of a typical British contract, see Sue-A-Quan (2003:325-327).
- <sup>11</sup> Adamson (1984:49-52).
- <sup>12</sup> For a copy of an English version of a notice, see Sue-A-Quan (2003:121).
- <sup>13</sup> “Public Notice displayed in China to intending emigrants by J.G. Austin, Special Agent of the British Government,” in Look Lai (1998:128-29).
- <sup>14</sup> Atteck (2000:72).
- <sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>16</sup> Quoted in Sue-A Quan (2003:85-88). The letter is included in the Colonial File CO 111 of the British Public Records Office. It should be noted that Lobschied was prone to exaggeration. For example, after decrying the condition of the Chinese on the ship, *Mystery*, he says that all was joy and gladness after he reassured the women that they would not be separated from their husbands. “Relieved” might have been a more appropriate description.
- <sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 88.
- <sup>18</sup> Look Lai (2003:134-135).
- <sup>19</sup> Sue-A-Quan (2003:520). According to one source, at least 42 emigrant ships from Chinese ports experienced mutinies between 1850

and 1872. Of these, 13 ships were captured or deserted by Chinese emigrants and 6 were destroyed by fire.

- <sup>20</sup> The Basel mission to China had originated in 1847 as a response to Karl Gutzlaff's call for German missionaries to China. Though based in Switzerland and non-denominational, the Basel mission recruited mostly German missionaries, who were Lutheran .
- <sup>21</sup> Sue-A-Quan (2003:90).
- <sup>22</sup> Schlatter (1911(2):308).
- <sup>23</sup> Philip Winnes to Inspector, "Annual Report on the China Mission, 1860," Hong Kong, 14 January 1861, BMG, 1.4. Personal frictions may also have entered the picture. Lobschied was quite critical of most missionaries and he had by this time resigned as a missionary to take a position with the British government of Hong Kong as Inspector of Schools. See Lobschied to Herr von Rodhen, Hong Kong, 10 March 1872, Vereinte Evangelische Mission, Wuppertal, Germany. Archives of Rheinische Missionsgesellschaft: Lobschied Korrespondence.
- <sup>24</sup> The Taiping leader, Hong Xiuquan, developed his own interpretation of Christianity. Among other ideas considered heretical by Christian missionaries were the denial of the Trinity and the contention that Hong was the younger brother of Jesus Christ.
- <sup>25</sup> Philip Winnes to Inspector, Hong Kong, 25 September 1861, BMG. A-1.4. # 1; Rudolf Lechler, Annual Report, Hong Kong, 11 January 1861, *ibid.*, A-1.5.
- <sup>26</sup> Lechler to Inspector, "Erster Quartalbericht," 1 April 1868, *ibid.*, A-1.6, # 5.
- <sup>27</sup> Grant (1923:218-19) quoted in Look Lai (1998).
- <sup>28</sup> Rudolf Lechler to Basel Committee, Hong Kong, 10 January, 1862, BMG, A-1.4, # 19.
- <sup>29</sup> Rudolf Lechler to Committee, 1 February 1872, *ibid.*, A-1.8 # 2; Carl T. Smith 1985 *Chinese Christians, Élités, Middlemen, and the Church in Hong Kong*, pp. 84-85.
- <sup>30</sup> Look Lai (1998:229-230).
- <sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 230.
- <sup>32</sup> Man A Hing (1994:189-193).
- <sup>33</sup> Fan (1990:575-577).

- <sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 581-584.
- <sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 574-575. See also Schlatter (1916:184-85) and Mitchner (2002), chapter on the Hakka.
- <sup>36</sup> Schlatter (1911(2):345-346).
- <sup>37</sup> Fan (1990:583).
- <sup>38</sup> Schlatter (1916:185-187).
- <sup>39</sup> Sue-A-Quan (2003:208-226); Look Lai (1998:219-225); Adamson (1984:197-200).
- <sup>40</sup> Laurence (1970:33).
- <sup>41</sup> Richardson (1982:260-281).
- <sup>42</sup> Quoted in Laurence (1979:73-76).
- <sup>43</sup> Choi (1975:3-35, 106).
- <sup>44</sup> I remember hearing the prominent Chinese historian, Evelyn S. Rawski, who had moved from Hawaii to the U.S., tell of repeatedly being asked who she was. When she replied that she was an American, the person nearly always pursued the matter, but who are you really. Finally, she gave up and provided an Asian background.
- <sup>45</sup> Fan (1990:583-584).
- <sup>46</sup> Richardson (1982:188-189).
- <sup>47</sup> Laurence (1979:77).
- <sup>48</sup> There was, of course, farming in South Africa, but the major generator of wealth was the mining of gold and diamonds.
- <sup>49</sup> Man A Hing (1994:191).

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