

The Voyage of the "Thetis" and the First Chinese Contract Laborers Brought to Hawaii

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Tracing the movements of the *Thetis*, the British vessel that brought the first boatload of Chinese contract laborers to Hawaii, has added some evidence relevant to the question of where these first laborers were recruited and the province from which they came. Since it is well known locally that nearly all the Chinese who came to Hawaii during the nineteenth century were from Kwangtung Province, it has generally been assumed that this was the province where the first contract laborers originated. This view was supported by some official Hawaiian Government documents, such as a report of the Hawaiian Bureau of Immigration which asserted that the ship bringing these first laborers had come from Hong Kong.¹ However, Tin-Yuke and Wai-Jane Char assembled information indicating that the 195 Chinese brought by the *Thetis* in January, 1852 were not "Cantonese" from Kwangtung, brought from Hong Kong, but Fukienese brought from Amoy. Following a discussion with them of their findings, I decided to try to find out if any information were still available in London on the *Thetis* that might help to answer the query as to the origin of these first contract laborers. Search through the Public Records Office's boxes of shipping documents of the period turned up a detailed report on the crew of the *Thetis* filed by Captain John Cass on his return to London in 1853.² Although the ship's log was not filed with the report and there is no specific information on the Chinese laborers brought to Hawaii, the report does provide relevant information on the ship's movements.

The *Thetis*, a bark of 460 tons owned by a London firm, left London on March 2, 1850 and returned there on October 2, 1853. Captain Cass, 39 when the ship left London, had with him as mate, Robert Westwelsh, 37, a second mate and a crew of twenty, all British. Only Cass and Westwelsh were still with the ship on its return to London. The more than 200 entries regarding agreements with various crew members, discharges, desertions, jailing of crew members, and signing on of replacements (including Lascars and Chinese) enable us to identify ports of call and at least the minimum time in each port

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of call mentioned.³ This evidence shows that the *Thetis* was at Madras in August, 1850; at Singapore September 20–October 8; at Hong Kong December 4, 1850–January 27, 1851; at Oahu⁴ April 27–29; at San Francisco May 22–June 19; at Oahu July 2–August 12; at Amoy October 3–November 6; back again at Oahu January 3–February 12, 1852; at Hong Kong March 29–April 24; at Amoy on June 5th; once more at Oahu August 1–30; again at Hong Kong March 1–10, 1853; at Whampoa, March 13–30; a final stop at Hong Kong April 3–5; at St. Helena July 31st, with the voyage ending at London October 2, 1853.

Circumstantial evidence suggests that when Captain Cass left London in March, 1850 he was headed for San Francisco, the port nearest the places where gold had been discovered a few months before. Within a few days after his arrival in Hong Kong in December, 1850, he had recruited a tindal (foreman of Lascars) and eleven Lascars. These men who gave as their origins places in Southeast Asia—Sourabaya, Semarang, Madura, Batavia, Singapore, Penang, *et al*—apparently included some persons of Chinese or part-Chinese ancestry; this is suggested by names such as Batchoo, Kirtoo, Sechow. An agreement signed by Captain Cass regarding their provisions⁵ stated that the voyage was to be “from Hong Kong to Honolulu, Sandwich Islands, thence to San Francisco and back to a final port . . . in the Indian or China Seas. . . .” In other words, his route after leaving San Francisco was indefinite. The last two entries recorded before the *Thetis* left Hong Kong (January 27, 1851) have to do with the signing on of one “Ayow, 30, of Canton” as “Cook for Chinese Passengers” and of “Ayew, 20, of Macao,” as “Stockfeeder” [of animals to provide fresh meat en route?]. Their recruitment suggests that the *Thetis* was carrying a contingent of ticket-holding Chinese from Hong Kong to San Francisco, perhaps also some to Honolulu, hence the planned stop at Honolulu en route to San Francisco. Both of these Chinese crewmen were given discharges on arrival in San Francisco, May 22nd. Another clue to the probability that the *Thetis* was headed for San Francisco from London is that the second mate and nine of the original twenty British crew deserted ship in San Francisco.⁶

From San Francisco Captain Cass put in again at Honolulu (July 2–August 12). As pointed out by the Chars, the Royal Hawaiian Agricultural Society during these weeks concluded a contract with Cass to bring 200 laborers from China, primarily to work on sugar plantations. The approach to Captain Cass on this matter seems quite understandable in view of the fact that he had been carrying “Chinese Passengers” on board at the time he had put in at Honolulu in April on his way to San Francisco.

Where did Captain Cass go to recruit these laborers? All of the entries regarding the crew indicate that the only Chinese port he went to on this trip was Amoy. On July 8, soon after his arrival at Honolulu from San Francisco, he signed on a ship’s carpenter by the name of Alook, aged 40, born in “China,” who was on the ship’s payroll during the more than a month the *Thetis* remained at Honolulu and again for the more than a month the *Thetis* was at Amoy. The first chronological entry in the ship’s records following the

departure of the *Thetis* in August from Honolulu was one for October 3rd, recording the discharge of one of the Lascars (Seechow) in Amoy; the last entry for a port in China on this trip was Alook's discharge in Amoy on November 6th.⁷ Late in October two other Lascars (Kirtoo and John) were also discharged at Amoy. These three Lascars all report having been born on the island of Java (Semarang, Sourabaya, and Batavia, respectively), an island in the then Dutch East Indies which for over a century had been receiving heavy migrations of Fukienese Chinese from Amoy and other ports of Fukien Province. Judging from the names, Seechow and Kirtoo may well have been of Chinese or part-Chinese ancestry with ties to Fukien. While nothing in the ship's records indicates that Alook or any of the Lascars were Fukienese or of Fukienese origin, may the fact that these men were on board the *Thetis* at Honolulu as well as at Amoy have led Captain Cass to decide to recruit the boatload of Chinese laborers at Amoy? There is no entry which would indicate that Cass went to Hong Kong on this trip. The entry following Alook's discharge at Amoy on November 6th records the death of one of the seamen at sea on December 9th; the next records the drowning at sea of Batchoo, one of the Lascars, on December 18th; the next, the discharge of seven of the crew at Oahu on January 3rd, 1852.

All the evidence from the records on the ship's crew, then, indicates that the 195 Chinese who arrived at Honolulu on January 3rd, 1852 had been taken on board at Amoy. This supports the view that they were Fukienese rather than Cantonese.

During the time Captain Cass was in port at Honolulu in January and February, 1852, arrangements were made for him to recruit additional Chinese laborers. This time, the entries indicate he was headed for Hong Kong. Eight seamen signed agreements at "Woahoo" between February 2nd and 12th "to ship on board the *Thetis* . . . on a voyage from this port to the Port of Hong Kong and various Ports in China and back to this Port." The first entries regarding crew members following departure from Honolulu indicate that he went directly to Hong Kong and was there at least from March 29th to April 24th, a period long enough to recruit the 100 Chinese he had contracted to bring to Honolulu on this trip. On March 29th five of the first set of Lascars were given discharges at Hong Kong. On April 1st Ayew was discharged and on the 5th Atoy, 34, of Macao, was taken on as ship's carpenter. Within the week after reaching Hong Kong (if not before) Cass had decided to stop at Amoy in the way back to Oahu—an agreement dated April 5th for new crew members including Atoy provided that they would serve "on a voyage from Hong Kong to Amoy, thence to Sandwich Islands . . . and to some port of discharge in Indian or China Seas. . . ." On April 24th all twelve of the second set of Lascars on the *Thetis* were sentenced to one month's imprisonment in Victoria, Hong Kong, "for refusal to proceed to Sea in the Ship." Fourteen new crew members joined the ship on April 23rd and 24th, among them four Chinese.⁸

There is only one entry showing that the *Thetis* did put in at Amoy—on June 5th, Achew, 18, born in "China," was signed on as "Captain's Steward."

The Chars report that Captain Cass on arrival presented Robert Wyllie, Minister of Foreign Affairs, with several gifts "shipped from Amoy." Entries regarding crewmen show that Cass left Hong Kong with a full complement except for Achew, taken aboard in Amoy. On the other hand, if the *Thetis* left Hong Kong on or about April 24th, nearly 100 days elapsed before his arrival with 98 Chinese laborers on August 1st. In this time he could easily have spent a month in Amoy recruiting laborers and still have been able to complete the passage to Honolulu in the 50-some days that had been required for the November, 1851-January, 1852 voyage from Amoy to Oahu. Recruiting the laborers in Amoy rather than in Hong Kong could have halved the time Cass would have had to feed and care for the men on board. The ship's records are less conclusive regarding the origin of this second lot than for the first. However, according to information located by the Chars, on August 10, 1852, only a few days after the arrival of the *Thetis* at Honolulu, the Rev. Samuel C. Damon referred to these 98 as "Amoy Chinamen."

Since the nearly three hundred contract laborers of these first two shipments were apparently Fukienese, one wonders why they were not followed by many more migrants from Fukien. The almost complete absence of Fukienese among later Chinese immigrants to Hawaii is especially curious since the Fukienese had been successful settlers in several areas of Southeast Asia. Hundreds of thousands of them had emigrated overseas. One possible reason is that the voluntary Chinese migrants to Hawaii—mostly traders, sugar planters, sugar boilers—who had preceded the first contract laborers were largely, if not entirely, Cantonese.⁹ By the middle of the nineteenth century Fukienese had established themselves as skilled workers and entrepreneurs in Southeast Asia, providing linguistic and cultural contacts, as well as possible family connections, for migrants from their own province.¹⁰ The first contract laborers would not have found such Fukienese connections in Hawaii. It seems probable that the early development of commercial and agricultural enterprises by Cantonese in Hawaii encouraged the importation of laborers from Kwangtung while emigration from Fukien flowed to other areas where the Fukienese had become established. Whatever the reason, Cantonese were favored by the policy of the Bureau of Immigration when importation of Chinese contract laborers was resumed in 1864. Commissioner William Hillebrand, M.D., who visited Asia to study various labor markets, recommended Hong Kong as the immigration recruitment center, and it was from that port that subsequent thousands of migrants came to Hawaii from Kwangtung.

NOTES

¹ *Report of the President of the Bureau of Immigration to the Legislative Assembly of 1886*, Appendix, pp. 267-277.

² Box BT-98-3477, Public Records Office, Chancery Lane, London. This box includes for the *Thetis* the form, "Account of Foreign Going Ship, To Be Delivered at the End of the Voyage to the Shipping Master at . . . the Final Port of Destination in the United Kingdom," which, with several additional sheets, Captain Cass filed in accordance with government regulations. The staff of the Public Records Office were most helpful to me in locating this material, a task complicated by the fact that other

ships with the same name and also of British registry were on the seas during the same period.

⁵ The *Thetis* may, of course, have been in some of the ports longer than indicated since the dates given here are dependent upon the entry of some action involving one or more of the crew. But crewmen seeking discharge were commonly granted this the day of arrival or soon thereafter, while final replacements joined the crew not long before time of departure.

⁴ Several entries referred to this port as "Woahoo"—including some signed by William Miller as H.B.M. Consul General for the Islands of the Pacific.

⁵ The "Scale of Provisions" agreed to was recorded as follows: "Salt Fish $\frac{1}{2}$ lb each daily; Rice, 2 lb daily; $\frac{1}{2}$ oz Tea; 1 oz Sugar; Water at the rate of 1 gallon per day." Later the same year (October 9, 1851) Captain Cass's agreement with a second set of Lascars added to the crew was as follows: "Rice plenty no waste. Salt fish $\frac{1}{2}$ lb ea daily. Oil for Cooking and Light. Tea $\frac{1}{4}$ oz ea man daily. Sugar 2 oz ea man daily. Fresh provisions in port. Any Provisions good and wholesome may be substituted for the above article/rice excepted."

⁶ One of the original twenty had been discharged in Madras, one in Singapore, five in Hong Kong; two had deserted ship at Oahu. The remaining two of the original twenty were given discharges at Oahu in February, 1852, during the third call of the *Thetis* at Honolulu.

⁷ On October 28th another Chinese, Ayew, 24, was signed on as a replacement for Alook as ship's carpenter. Alook, however, was not discharged until nine days later. Could Alook—a man of 40 with perhaps enough command of English to act as interpreter—have also been assisting Captain Cass in recruiting laborers during the five weeks the *Thetis* was in Amoy? But perhaps he remained on ship to install accommodations for the labor recruits going below decks.

⁸ Among the documents was a sheet regarding an "Agreement of food between Chinese Seamen and Capt Cass Thetis." Although date and place are lacking, the placement of the agreement in the records suggests that it was with these four Chinese who were taken on as "Ordinary Seamen" with no experience at sea. On one half of the folded sheet the agreement is set forth in Chinese characters. The other half contains the following as translation:

"Every day Tea & Coffee
Every week—1 lb sugar each man
Limejuice & Vinegar Same as sailors
Two days of the week Salt fish & rice
two lbs/rice each—1 catty fish each man
those two days no other food
Other five days Same as sailors
Suppose no got fish & rice then
every day Same as sailors
Whilst sweet potatoes or yam or coco
ship no allow Chinese to have flour
Ship not give grog not give molasses
Down below no fire or smoking
Down below no water allowed"

⁹ See especially Wai-Jane Char, "Three Chinese Stores in Early Honolulu," HJH, Vol. VIII, 1974, 11-38; Peggy Kai, "Chinese Settlers in the Village of Hilo before 1852," *Ibid.*, 39-75. For a more general treatment of this period, see C. E. Glick, *The Chinese Migrant in Hawaii: A Study in Accommodation*, Chapter II, "Chinese Migration to Hawaii," pp. 5-27. University of Chicago Library, 1938. That manuscript, incidentally, states that the first lot of imported laborers "sailed from Amoy" (p. 8).

¹⁰ See, for example, G. William Skinner, *Chinese Society in Thailand*, Cornell University, Press, 1957, p. 40.