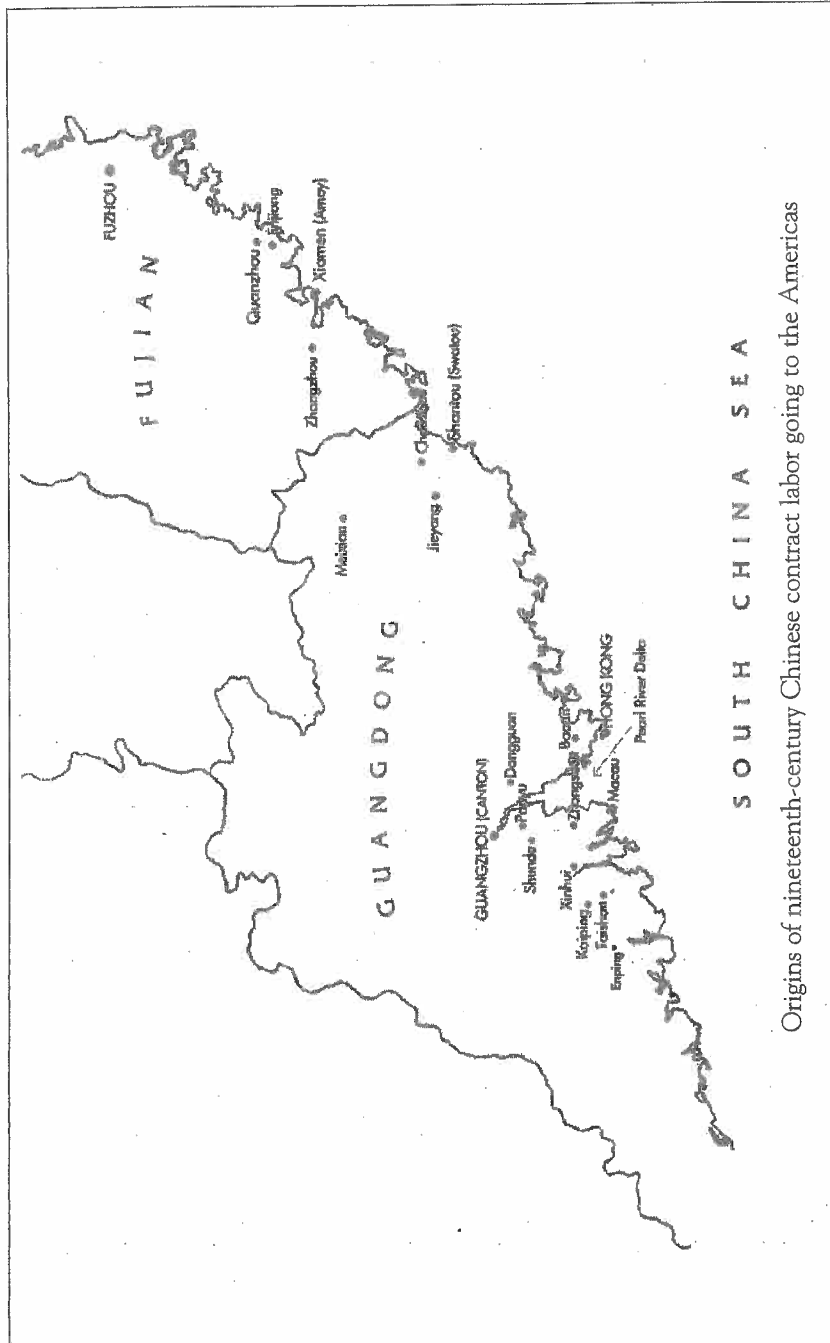

Origins of nineteenth-century Chinese contract labor going to the Americas

CHAPTER 1

# The Chinese Indenture System in the British West Indies and Its Aftermath

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The first Chinese migrations to the British West Indies took place at the same time as the worldwide Chinese migrations in the nineteenth century, and from the same cluster of emigrant districts around the Pearl River Delta in Guangdong province (see map at left for names of key districts involved).[1] With the post-1840 large-scale arrival of Europeans, led by the British, and the imposition of the treaty port system, which rapidly opened a series of coastal and riverine ports to both foreign imports and labor exporters, China's rural and urban poor were presented with new emigration horizons that had not existed before. Several of these new destinations turned out to be catastrophic for the average Chinese migrant, and a large number of people were actually coerced or tricked into migrating during the nineteenth century, but many destinations (among them the West Indies) proved in the long run to be beneficial, despite the local hardships encountered in the passage from sojourner to settler, from alien immigrant to citizen.

The circumstances of the early West Indian migrations are to be found in a combination of a number of factors: the conditions of life in Guangdong in the mid-nineteenth century, British migration and recruitment policy in China, and the condition of the West Indian sugar economy after slave emancipation in 1834. Guangdong in the mid-nineteenth century was afflicted, like much of rural China, with a population explosion that could not be properly accommodated on

available lands. Local and imperial authorities also exacerbated the plight of the average rural dweller with exorbitant taxes and cruel local administration, helping to create a social environment of anti-imperial rebellion, widespread social unrest, and personal insecurity. Social upheavals in the form of the massive Taiping Rebellion ravaged southeast China from 1850 to 1864 and almost toppled the Qing Dynasty (1644–1911). These disruptions were compounded by tribal and ethnic struggles for scarce land between "native" Cantonese or "Punti" and the more recently arrived Hakka (literally "guest families").[2] As such, there were massive forces pushing Chinese laborers out of rural Guangdong, toward China's treaty ports and even beyond. In the midst of this unsettled situation, eagerness to migrate overseas became one of the many responses to the domestic condition. It was a natural response, especially since Canton and its environs, with their centuries-old overseas trade connections, had long been, along with Fujian province, the major outlets for the pre-nineteenth-century Chinese overseas migrations to Southeast Asia.

In the course of the nineteenth century, more than 7.5 million Chinese émigrés left Guangdong and Fujian provinces to travel overseas. About 6.5 million went to familiar regional destinations in Southeast Asia. Another million ventured beyond the familiar to newly available destinations, sometimes with the help of Chinese middlemen (such as to the United States), and often under the auspices of various Western middlemen who had entered into the business of transporting Chinese overseas. About 100,000 went to Australia, and 600,000 to the Americas. Of the migrants to the Americas, about forty-five percent went to Latin America and the Caribbean, mainly as contract or indentured laborers. The main receiving countries were Cuba (125,000), Peru (100,000), and the British West Indies (ca. 18,000), with a remaining six percent siphoned off in smaller streams to Central America (Panama and Costa Rica), the Dutch and French West Indies, and Brazil.

British officials along the coast of China in the nineteenth century were not initially concerned with issues of Chinese labor migration, although a substantial spontaneous movement of labor had already begun toward the British-held possessions in Southeast Asia, notably



Penang in Malaya, and a few British shipping firms had already been involving themselves in the transportation of laborers overseas.[3] An official based in Malaya, who was familiar with this growing migration to British Southeast Asia, suggested in 1802 that a trial emigration to newly acquired and sparsely settled British Trinidad should be tried under official auspices. This resulted in the arrival in 1806 of the vessel *Fortitude* with 192 Chinese males (eight having died on the voyage). Interestingly, all the workers were recruited in Macao, Penang, and even Calcutta, rather than directly from the Chinese mainland. This Trinidad settlement became the first organized Chinese settlement in the Americas in the nineteenth century, coming as it did a full forty years before the first major arrivals in Cuba and California. Fated to be a solitary shipment, rather than the beginning of a regular migration, the Chinese were housed west of Port of Spain in North Trinidad, and were given a choice as to whether they would work on the sugar plantations or as independent small farmers. They were also given a chance to return home, passage paid, if at any time they were dissatisfied with their new environment. All except for about two dozen exercised the return option within three years, and about sixty Chinese returned aboard the *Fortitude* itself.[4]

It was not until the 1850s, after the forced establishment of the treaty port system in China, that the British began to formulate a coherent policy on Chinese labor migration, in an atmosphere of growing migration to new destinations like Cuba and Peru, the United States, the Sandwich Islands (later Hawaii), and Australia. A few hundred had already been shipped under private auspices to Demerara (British Guiana) in 1852–53. The main intermediaries in this early traffic were often English,[5] and some of the tensions arising out of the recruitment process exploded into violence at Xiamen (Amoy) in Fujian (Fukien) as early as 1852.[6] One of the clauses of the Treaty of Beijing (Peking), concluded in 1860 after the Second Opium War, explicitly endorsed the emigration of Chinese to British colonies. The emigration to the British West Indies was specifically designed to alleviate the labor shortage in the West Indian sugar industry, then going through the difficulties of the post-Emancipation experience.

In the aftermath of Emancipation in 1834–38, the West Indian planter elite was beset with a number of problems:

*The Labor Problem*. Having gained their freedom, ex-slaves exercised the full range of their expanded options. They increasingly left the plantations for lands elsewhere in their respective colonies (acquired either by purchase or by squatting). Those who remained on the plantations often agitated for higher wages and pressured owners by providing reduced or irregular work. According to many planters, collective work discipline also suffered under the new dispensation, with a resulting impact on productivity. On some islands where land availability was low, or where wages remained unsatisfactory, such as Barbados and the Leewards, and to a certain extent the Windwards, freed slaves migrated to the newer British colonies like Trinidad and British Guiana in search of higher wages, often initially in the sugar industry.

*Capital and Credit Access*. By the late nineteenth century the British capital that had once financed the West Indian sugar industry was increasingly siphoned away to the many alternative and lucrative outlets of an expanding British Empire. Many of the old merchant houses on which the West Indian planter elite relied also went through financial travails of their own during this period, with the resultant tightening of credit. Some planters were more fortunate than others, but many lost their plantations to metropolitan creditors. Other plantations were carved up and sold in smaller plots to newly mobile middle-class elements, and even to ex-slaves who could buy them either outright or with the assistance of church groups.

*Markets and Prices*. Global competition required that West Indian planters produce more efficiently and cheaply than the new sugar-producing countries of the nineteenth century,[7] and those who did not modernize and/or resolve their labor problem were vulnerable to being undersold by the competition.

It was within this context that the West Indian sugar planters lobbied for, and eventually won, the right to bring in laborers from other countries under arrangements that would tie workers to the plantations for a fixed minimum number of years, since they could no longer tie them there forever. The indenture experiment was the result. This



followed a larger trend in the world sugar industry, which in the nineteenth century came to rely heavily on indentured labor.[8] In the British West Indies, labor migrations can be broken down into two discrete phases. During the first phase, 1850s to 1870, the laborers were multi-racial, as the planters experimented with various sources of migrant labor. This was the period that saw the arrival of Europeans, Portuguese, Chinese, Indians, and "liberated" Africans under various short-term indenture contracts. From the early 1870s the labor supply became overwhelmingly Indian, down to the end of the indenture experiment in 1917. All in all, a total of 536,310 migrants entered the West Indies between the 1830s and 1917. They were made up as follows:

**Table 1.1**
**Migrants to the West Indies, 1830s–1917.**[9]

| Period | Nationality | Number of immigrants |
|---|---|---|
| 1838–1917 | Indians | 429,623 |
| 1835–1881 | Portuguese | 40,971 |
| 1834–1867 | freed Africans | 39,332 |
| 1853–1884 | Chinese | 17,904 |
| 1834–1845 | Europeans | 4,582 |
| 1835–1867 | others (mainly Black Americans) | 3,898 |

Thus 83.5 percent of these immigrants came from Asia: 80 percent from India and 3.5 percent from China. British Guiana alone absorbed 56 percent (300,967) of the total migration, 55.6 percent (238,909) of the Indians, and 76 percent (13,533) of the Chinese. Trinidad absorbed 29.4 percent (157,668) of the total migration, 33.3 percent (143,939) of the Indians, and 15 percent (2,645) of the Chinese. Jamaica received 10 percent (53,940) of the total migration, 8.5 percent (36,412) of the Indians, and 6.4 percent (1,152) of the Chinese total.

From these figures it can be seen that the Chinese contribution to the survival of the West Indian sugar industry was marginal. This stood in marked contrast to its counterpart in Cuba—where about

125,000 Chinese were brought into the sugar industry between 1849 and 1874—or Peru, which received about 100,000 during the same period.[10] In total, there were fifty-one voyages from China to the British West Indies between 1853 and 1884, the year the last ship arrived in Jamaica: thirty-nine to British Guiana (13,539), eight to Trinidad (2,645), two to Jamaica (1,152), one to British Honduras (474), and one to Antigua (100). (If one includes the 1806 experiment, this would bring the number of shipments to fifty-two, and the Trinidadian total to nine). The more extensive traffic to Cuba and Peru between 1847 and 1874 saw 347 vessels bringing Chinese to Cuba, and about 276 vessels to Peru.

Similar, more sporadic, efforts at Chinese labor importation were made during this period by the Dutch government in Surinam, and by the French West Indian colonial authorities. In 1853 the Dutch authorities in Surinam began with one vessel bringing a small group of fourteen Chinese from Java, and the British Guiana legislature also briefly considered importing Chinese from Holland's Southeast Asian colonies. Two further shipments of five hundred were attempted in 1858, under state auspices, this time from Macao. With the end of slavery in 1863, the issue was again raised, and between 1865 and 1869, a private company, the Surinam Immigration Corporation, brought seven more shipments of Chinese from Hong Kong. In 1869, however, the Hong Kong government banned further shipments of contract laborers to non-British territories, and the Surinam government turned once more to Java, bringing in another 115 laborers between 1872 and 1874. All in all, about 2,645 Chinese arrived in Surinam between 1853 and 1874. [11] The French West Indies also imported Chinese labor from Canton, as well as a few from Shanghai. Only a handful of vessels carrying Chinese workers, however, made the voyage to this part of the Caribbean. In 1862 there were 800 Chinese in Martinique, and 112 in Guadeloupe, along with 8,000 and 98,389 Indians, respectively. [12]

The indenture arrangements under which the Chinese came to Trinidad, British Guiana, and Jamaica were closer to those under which the Indians came than to those under which Chinese immigrated to Cuba or Peru. The key factor here was British policy on



indenture, which was shaped under the stern gaze of metropolitan abolitionists and human rights activists preoccupied with the possibility of the re-imposition of slavery under a new name. One consequence was the active involvement of the state and its agencies in all aspects of the migration process, from recruitment and transportation in the East, to arrival and distribution in the West Indies. All recruitment—mainly in Hong Kong and Canton—was done under the supervision of an Emigration Agent responsible to the British government; officially permitted vessels under the Chinese Passengers Act did all transportation; and all allocation of jobs was coordinated by the Immigration Agents based in the different territories. This helped to avoid the worst abuses associated with the privately operated indenture recruitment conducted out of Portuguese Macao by vessels recruiting for Cuba and Peru, as well as those abuses resulting from the private sale and distribution of the immigrants on arrival in Cuba or Peru, often indistinguishable from the slave trade.

The British emigration agent in the East deliberately tried to distinguish the British efforts from Latin American recruitment, which used Chinese recruiters or "crimps" who were paid a fee for each migrant "recruited." Naturally, this per capita system led to myriad abuses. The unscrupulous tactics (kidnapping, deception, and physical coercion) of these crimps had become something of a scandal in coastal China and colored much of the labor export business. At the end of the 1860 season, the British Emigration Agent J. Gardiner Austin reported as follows:

> Mr. Parkes, the British Commissioner of Canton, Mr. Lobscheid, a German missionary, and myself, were all agreed that as our acts and intentions were as different to those of the Chinese crimps as day to night, so should every step taken be dissimilar. Instead of collecting people by force or fraud, I therefore employed the press to sow the good seed over the length and breadth of Quantung, and to make known to those who were in poverty that the British Government offered them a new home where comparative affluence was the reward of honest labor.

Instead of the Swatow dens of filth and iniquity where the sustenance barely sufficed to support life, and where husbands and children torn from their families were caged till their purchasers called for compulsory removal to the ships, I offered the best and amplest food at houses to and from which there was FREE ingress and egress, where every information was available from maps, pamphlets and notices, and from whence the laborers were at perfect liberty to return to their old homes, or to seek the new one offered to them.

Instead of forcing the emigrants to indent themselves to worse even than slavery by renunciation of the advantages of free British citizens, [I offered] the current wages of the colonies, house and garden rent free, correspondence free of cost with relatives left behind, and the punctual payment at Hong Kong or Canton monthly from the day of embarkation, of such portion of the wages to be earned as the emigrants desired to appropriate in China.

Lastly, instead of placing my ships where oppression could be practised with impunity, I selected Hong Kong and Canton for their anchorage, and facilitated their inspection, by the Chinese authorities and people as much as possible. You may judge of the influence of this over the feelings of the emigrants when I tell you that the first Canton ship, the *Red Riding Hood*, left with 10,000 crackers blazing at each yard-arm, amidst cheers which told far and wide that there was no compulsion, and you may judge of the character of the emigration by the contrast afforded in the behaviour of our people in the *Dora*, and those of the *Flora Temple* for Cuba when sailing down the China seas, the latter—800 in number—rising in the bitter agony of despair, only to meet grape shot, imprisonment, cruel abandonment on the reef, and a watery grave, whilst the former, to use the words of the surgeon, passed Anjer after the quickest passage ever made, singing hymns and joining regularly in the morning and evening services.....[13]



The public notices posted by the British in Canton emphasized these differences:

- There is no slavery wherever the British Flag flies.
- The Law is the same to rich and poor. All Religions are tolerated and protected, and the Queen of England has appointed Special Magistrates in her West Indian Colonies, to look after and protect the strangers, who go there to seek their fortunes.
- All Chinese may therefore go without fear to the British West Indies.
- The climate is very much like that of Southern China.
- The cultivation is chiefly that of the 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[14] per day, according to the industry and ability of the emigrant. House, garden ground, and medical attendance, are supplied free of charge.
- Any laborer entering into a contract for five years, and desiring to cancel it at the end of the first year, and work where he pleases, can do so on repayment of four fifths of the passage money from China to the West Indies, estimated at $75. At the end of the second year, he can cancel it on repayment of three fifths, and so on, one fifth being deducted for every year's service.
- Special means of remitting money, and of corresponding with relatives gratuitously, will be afforded.
- A free passage is offered, and clothing for the voyage.
- A special Law has been passed by the Parliament of England, for the feeding and protection of the emigrants during the voyage.
- An advance of wages to the extent of twenty dollars for the married men, and ten dollars for the single men, will be made, either by monthly payments in China to the families of male emigrants, or to themselves. If an emigrant

desires to draw the whole advance himself he can do so, but if leaving a monthly allotment of one or two dollars to his family, the first six monthly payments will be deducted. The cash payment to the emigrant will be deducted from the wages to be earned by him, at the rate of one dollar per month, and the payments to his family in equal amounts monthly.

- To such emigrants as may be desirous of taking their families, a gift of twenty dollars will be made to the wife, a similar sum to each adult daughter, and five dollars to each child.
- Provision will be made in the West Indies, for the education of children.
- Women will be unfettered by any engagement whatever, being free to work or to attend to their household duties, solely as their wants and inclinations determine.
- Lastly a Depot has been established by me at for the reception of emigrants, where those enrolling themselves can be housed and fed until a vessel is ready for sea, and where those who desire further information, can obtain it from the Officer in charge.

J. GARDINER AUSTIN.[15]

Because of the unsettled environment in coastal China in the 1850s and 1860s, and the instability of British personnel at the China end of the recruitment system (there were three emigration agents between 1859 and 1866), during its short life-span (1852–66) the labor export process was neither as smooth nor as well-regulated as the British authorities would have liked. The contracts offered to potential recruits were never standardized, and there were several versions of indenture contracts offered to the Chinese. The most important difference had to do with the redemption or cancellation clause. Some contracts allowed redemption by the immigrant after one year, subject to repayment, by the immigrant, of the balance of the passage monies, calculated at one-fifth for each year of the five-year contract. Some contracts allowed no redemption during the five-year period. In addition, the contracts made in 1859 were actually altered on arrival in British Guiana by the Agent-General for Immigrants, changing the start of the redemption period from one year to three years. The redemption sums were also made specific: $50 for two years, $25 for any single year.



There were other differences as well. Some contracts specified the amount of wages to be paid monthly, while others did not, offering only an amount corresponding to that earned by free laborers at the time. Some arrangements even gave the migrants a choice between timework at specified wages, and task work at unspecified wages, measured against corresponding wages earned by free laborers. Even when the wages were specified, the amounts were not always the same. Many specified $4 plus free rations, some specified $5 plus rations, and one even offered $2 plus rations.[16] Contracts made after 1860 did not mention free rations at all.

In addition to all these discrepancies, the Chinese contracts differed from the standard Indian contracts in substantial ways.

- There was no provision for a pre-paid return passage to China at the end of the five-year term, or any period of service. [17]
- The contractual workday for the Chinese was generally stated as seven and a half hours, while for the Indians it was nine hours for Trinidad and seven for the British Guiana immigrants.
- The Chinese were given repayable loan advances as well as bounty payments for accompanying family members ranging from $10 to $20, whereas their Indian counterparts were not.
- Indians were expected to pay for their own food rations, delivered for only a short period ranging from 3 months to a year.
- Many Chinese contracts also mentioned free garden grounds, although it is not clear how many actually received such grants.
- Most important, Chinese women were not allowed to enter into contracts of indenture, but instead into what were called contracts of residence, which bound them to their designated plantations for the full term but did not oblige them to work at all.[18]

In addition to the instability regarding the contracts, British recruiting efforts were not free from some of the very questionable methods they tried to avoid. The 1859 efforts to bring Chinese to

British Guiana were deeply flawed. It was claimed that emigrants had been recruited at Hong Kong, when in fact most had been obtained in Macao, home to the "crimps" and crooked foreign agents responsible for the infamous shipments of Chinese to Latin America. The same was true for the 1866 shipments, which were done via a private mercantile firm utilizing suspect recruiting procedures at Amoy, while the Emigration Agent himself remained based at Canton. The matter was cause for some official correspondence, and the Emigration Agent was sanctioned.[19]

The Chinese migration to the West Indies, episodic and marginal, was eventually terminated because of a dispute over a treaty concluded in 1866 between China, Britain, and France known as the Kung Convention. Articles VIII and IX of the Convention granted every emigrant the right to a return passage for himself and his family at the end of his five-year term of service, or a cash grant in lieu of passage. Article IX further specified that in the event that a migrant should reindenture himself for a second five-year term, he should receive a bounty equivalent to half the amount of his return passage, while still retaining his right to a free passage at the end of the second term. These agreements had a significant impact on the future of Chinese immigration to the British West Indies. The West Indian planter elite and the Colonial Office objected to this Foreign Office–negotiated concession, on grounds of cost, and looked to alternative sources of labor. By the time the Chinese government made concessions in 1872, reducing the obligation to a single cash grant of $50 in lieu of return passage after five years, Indian indenture had already taken root as the more financially viable and better organized alternative. A few vessels came in the 1870s and 1880s, but the vibrancy of the Chinese emigration effort had long since subsided.

## Settlement Patterns

The Chinese were employed on sugar plantations along with other free and indentured immigrants who had arrived in the 1860s: Portuguese Madeirans, Indians, and Black immigrants from the other West Indian islands and West Africa. The Chinese were widely dispersed in British Guiana and Trinidad, ending up on 116 out of 153 estates in the former, and 70–76 out of 153–58 estates in the latter. What we know of the social conditions on the British Guiana plantations comes from an 1869–70 investigation by an official commission of enquiry. The resulting report was published as a parliamentary paper in 1871.[20] In addition to the official report, there was a dissenting independent view, which the commission found too harsh in its judgments to be accepted as part of the final report, authored by Ex–Chief Justice Beaumont. Beaumont subsequently published his version under the title *The New Slavery: An Account of the Indian and Chinese Immigrants in British Guiana*. Although the conditions described were nowhere as damning as the 1874 Chinese government commission report on conditions among Chinese laborers in Cuba, the two Guiana reports demonstrated that life was far from satisfactory for many of the Chinese (and Indians) who had migrated to the British colonies.[21]

Some of the main irregularities pointed out by the Guiana critiques involved

- Misrepresentation by recruiters in China of the actual level of wages a prospective immigrant could hope to earn in the new environment;
- Arbitrary wage delays or deductions for minor violations, a penalty not sanctioned by the laws but widely applied;
- Violations of minimum wage stipulations, especially in periods of economic downturn;
- Abuse and intimidation by plantation officials like drivers and overseers, as well as managers, ranging from physical brutality to bribery and extortion for favors rendered;
- Frequent resort to prosecutions for minor offenses, as a way of disciplining the rebellious, with the result that the jails were often full of immigrants imprisoned for minor and major offenses against the labor laws, living side by side with hardened criminals;
- Court partiality toward planters in the dispensation of justice;
- Defective health care and housing conditions, as individual planters evaded the formal provisions of the law.

How did the Chinese themselves respond to conditions of life in

their new environment and in the new societies in general? As was to be expected, these responses were quite varied.[22] The social and regional backgrounds of these migrants were diverse, and this reflected itself in their adjustment patterns. Those from stable, hardworking peasant backgrounds were the most praised by the planters for their diligence and enthusiasm. Even migrant women occasionally joined voluntarily in this collective adjustment to plantation life. On some voyages, however, the émigrés included a large number of social miscreants, "recruited" from China's coastal ports. Their habits of opium smoking and chronic absenteeism were cause for frequent complaints from the planters and their representatives. Some Chinese even brought with them a propensity to brigandage and social parasitism that characterized the unstable, war-torn environment of South China. Non-Chinese villagers often had to guard their property and produce from thieving and plundering raids by Chinese, whether acting individually or as part of an organized gang.

Frustrated with their lot, many Chinese ran away from plantation life, to pursue independent lives as fruit and vegetable growers or as small proprietors in the villages beyond the reach of the planters, occasionally engaging in illicit rum smuggling and distillation, and even the keeping of gambling houses and brothels. In Belize (British Honduras), a number of Chinese migrants even fled into the interior to make common cause with the indigenous peoples of the colony. In Guiana, there was an independent settlement of free Chinese upstream along the Demerara river where runaways could seek refuge. One observer recorded that "it would be a bold policeman who would attempt to execute a warrant in their midst."[23] Violent confrontations between laborers and plantation personnel were not unknown. On the island of Antigua in 1883, two migrants were tried and executed for the murder of a plantation manager.[24] Beaumont's 1871 account of the fate of the Chinese and Indians in British Guiana, *The New Slavery*, as well as the pages of the (Demerara) *Royal Gazette*, chronicled the many graphic incidents of violence by and against Chinese workers in the colony, including the retaliatory murder of a cruel white overseer by a Chinese plantation hand who subsequently received ten years' imprisonment for manslaughter for that offense. In Trinidad in 1866,



at the height of the Chinese labor influx, as many as 902 Chinese spent some time in prison for various offenses. While the majority were jailed on matters of work discipline for which all indentured laborers, both Indians and Chinese, were often incarcerated for short periods, there were also offenses ranging from resisting a police constable, to larceny, to trespass and assault, to using violent and obscene language against officials.

Chinese interactions with their fellow Asian laborers and with Black villagers were never systematically chronicled, and we do not have insider accounts like the Afro-Cuban Esteban Montejo's *Autobiography of a Runaway Slave* to enlighten us. Given the colonial obsession with law, order, and good government, the documentary record covers mostly ethnic interactions that required a legal response. There are official reports of early clashes between Chinese and Black villagers in Guiana, triggered by language difficulties and motivation misunderstandings. There was also the constant friction between some Chinese and both Africans and Indians over Chinese praedial larceny. There are likewise accounts of rebellious Chinese laborers killing Black drivers or foremen in plantation-related disputes, as well as accounts of harsh treatment by the latter group toward immigrant laborers. There are also accounts of clashes between Chinese and Indian workers, as well as Chinese siding with one side or the other in Indian-Black clashes. [25]

At the same time there are indications of less contentious ethnic interactions, such as laborers of all colors sharing one another's recreational pastimes. A frequent complaint by planters was the tendency of some Indians to indulge in the Chinese pastime of opium smoking, and also of Africans learning and popularizing among themselves Chinese games of chance. One account spoke of the Chinese actively participating in the Indian Muslim festival of Muharram ("Hosay"), which in the West Indies seems to have become an all-inclusive festival with the active participation of Hindus and Africans.

> This year the [Indian] Coolies called in the aid of the Chinese to build their gaudy temples, and these ingenious fellows gave the Coolies better temples than they have ever

> had before. As on former occasions the black people followed the procession in thousands, and seemed to look on the [Tadja] festival as one designated as much for their spiritual benefit as for that of the Coolies. [26]

The post-indenture fortunes of the Chinese were also quite varied. In Trinidad, the Chinese moved quickly off the plantations as early as the 1870s. Beginning often as small peasant food cultivators and truck gardeners, former indentured laborers quickly gravitated toward the rural and urban petty commerce in which a small number of Chinese had been active since the 1860s. We get brief glimpses of these shopkeepers in the writings of missionaries and others who lived or traveled in Trinidad and British Guiana in the 1880s and 1890s: the Abbé Massé, the Reverend Cothonay, the Reverend Kingsley, Edward Jenkins, Henry Kirke, the Reverend Bronkhurst.[27] In British Guiana, where reindenture was actually a common practice up until the mid-1870s, many Chinese remained on the plantations for as many as ten years or more.

Nonetheless, even the Chinese in Guiana explored a wide variety of post-indenture options in the late 1870s and beyond. A few hundred actually returned to China at their own expense, having amassed small savings during their stay in the colony. Many chose to relocate within the Caribbean region itself. About three thousand had left British Guiana by the mid-1880s for Trinidad, for Surinam and Cayenne, for Jamaica and Panama. Contemporary reports spoke of a restlessness among the Guiana Chinese between the 1860s and 1880s that was due to the inability of many to get past the hurdles of Portuguese domination of the small-scale retail merchant sector. The immigration reports spoke of them heading in large numbers for Trinidad, where the Chinese had in fact gained a foothold in the retail trade sector and were being described as "the Portuguese of Trinidad." The reports also described the Chinese as attracted to the Surinam and Cayenne goldmines, and spoke of some who received bounty to reindenture themselves in the Nickerie district of Surinam. A small number found their way to St. Lucia in the Eastern Caribbean in the 1870s, under a dubious labor exchange arrangement which was terminated when discovered by the Guianan authorities. Census reports for the Leeward Islands in the Eastern Caribbean islands in 1881 recorded minuscule numbers of Chinese in St. Christopher (13), Dominica (4), and Anguilla (1). This was one year before the small group of 100 landed in Antigua.[28] For those who relocated as well as those who stayed on in their original destinations, the census reports recorded the occupational transition they had made out of the sugar plantation environment by the 1880s and 1890s.[29]



After the period of indenture, a small but steady trickle of voluntary free migration from China continued into the region in the 1880s and 90s. Some of this was family- and village-related—managed through migration networks based on the native-place (*qiaoxiang*), or more narrowly the kin of a first generation émigré—while other migrations were part of a larger deflection of migration flows toward Latin America and the Caribbean in the period after the ban on Chinese immigration to the United States in 1882. These flows were subsequently augmented as a result of the social turmoil arising from the fall of the Qing Dynasty in 1911 and the Warlord Era that followed. By the mid-1920s, there were over twenty-four thousand Chinese in Mexico, a destination which had assumed significance only in the 1880s. There was also a new influx of about seventeen thousand in Cuba, many of whom came under a special agricultural worker program between 1917 and 1921. Several hundred Chinese had also migrated to Panama. At the same time a small number—probably between six and seven thousand—found their way into the three main West Indian territories and Surinam. Unlike the earlier migrants of the mid-nineteenth century, most of these new migrants gravitated toward the small-scale retail trades, rather than toward agriculture. Most of them also went to Jamaica and Trinidad, while far fewer went to British Guiana, in significant contrast to earlier indentured migrations. The growth of the Jamaican-Chinese community in fact dates from this period at the turn of the century. While the number of Chinese in Jamaica rose from 99 in 1881 to 2,111 in 1911, and to 6,879 in 1943, those in Surinam rose from 784 in 1920 to 2,293 in 1941. The foreign-born Chinese of Trinidad alone increased in number from 832 in 1901 to 2,366 in 1946. Meanwhile the Chinese com-

munity in British Guiana showed a steady but not nearly as dramatic increase, from 2,622 in 1911 to 3,567 in 1946.[30]

Originating in the nineteenth-century global labor dispersals, the turn-of-the-twentieth-century migration flows to the British West Indies built on the connections established by the first generation, but the new influx was motivated more by domestic factors pushing émigrés out of China rather than by economic opportunity or other forces within the Diaspora pulling them in. The networks were also dominated by small traders looking for cheap and trustworthy clerks and/or by families seeking to reunite overseas or to pool manpower to exploit the modest commercial opportunities available in the colonial West Indies. By the 1940s, the descendants of the original indentured laborers in the British West Indies were significantly replenished by these new inputs, but thereafter, especially following the Communist victory in the Chinese Civil War, migration flows declined. The history of the Chinese in the West Indies between the 1950s and the 1990s has therefore been one of adjustment and assimilation to the multi-racial post-colonial polities of the region rather than one of continuing migration.

Although migration from Asia has not played a large role in the life of this community since the 1950s, there has nevertheless been a small influx since the 1980s. These new elements do not necessarily originate from the same older emigration districts. The arrival of this new group has instead been the result of different island government policies (in Guyana, through invitation by the late Forbes Burnham; in Jamaica, as part of the development of export processing zones). Many are also transients intending to relocate to the United States as soon as circumstances allow, and they have been spontaneously trickling into several islands in the Eastern Caribbean as well as Trinidad.[31] Ironically, for the mainstream Chinese community in the West Indies, outward migration toward North America (Canada and the United States) has played a more significant role in shaping the community since the 1970s than immigration from China into the West Indies. These new patterns of migration have opened a new chapter in the history of these communities, which are an appropriate and rich topic for future scholarly inquiry.



**Table 1.2**
**List of Vessels traveling to the British, French, and Dutch West Indies from China between 1853 and 1884**

| Name of Ship | Whence | Destination | Arrived | Total Embarked | Total Landed | Females Landed | Infants Landed |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Glentanner | Amoy | B. Guiana | 12.1.53 | 305 | 262 | 0 | 0 |
| Lord Elgin | Amoy | B. Guiana | 17.1.53 | 154 | 85 | 0 | 0 |
| Samuel Boddington | Amoy | B. Guiana | 4.3.53 | 352 | 300 | 0 | 0 |
| Australia | Swatow | Trinidad | 4.3.53 | 445 | 432 | 0 | 0 |
| Clarendon | Canton | Trinidad | 23.4.53 | 254 | 251 | 0 | 0 |
| Lady Flora Hastings | Swatow | Trinidad | 28.6.53 | 314 | 305 | 0 | 0 |
| Merwede | Batavia | Surinam | 20.10.53 | 18 | 14 | 0 | 0 |
| Epsom | H. Kong | Jamaica | 30.7.54 | 310 | 267 | 0 | 0 |
| Vampire | Panama | Jamaica | 1.11.54 | 195 | 195 | 0 | 0 |
| Theresa Jane | Panama | Jamaica | 18.11.54 | 10 | 10 | 0 | 0 |
| Minister Pahud | Macau | Surinam | 18.4.58 | 257 | 257 | 0 | 0 |
| De Twee Gezusters | Macau | Surinam | 21.4.58 | 243 | 243 | 0 | 0 |
| Galilee | Canton | Martinique | .59 | 426 | (?)426 | 0 | 0 |
| Admiral Baudin | Shanghai | Martinique | .59 | 355 | 331 | 0 | 0 |
| [?] | Shanghai | Guadeloupe | .59 | — | 208 | 0 | 0 |
| Royal George | H. Kong | B. Guiana | 29.3.59 | 300 | 249 | 0 | 0 |
| General Wyndham | H. Kong | B. Guiana | 13.5.59 | 461 | 450 | 0 | 0 |
| Whirlwind | H. Kong | B. Guiana | 11.3.60 | 372 | 372 | 60 | 1 |
| Dora | H. Kong | B. Guiana | 3.4.60 | 385 | 383 | 133 | 12 |
| Red Riding Hood | Canton | B. Guiana | 8.4.60 | 314 | 311 | 10 | 0 |
| Minerva | H. Kong | B. Guiana | 23.5.60 | 310 | 307 | 67 | 2 |
| Thomas Mitchell | Canton | B. Guiana | 9.6.60 | 252 | 252 | 0 | 0 |
| Norwood | H. Kong | B. Guiana | 23.7.60 | 331 | 317 | 52 | 3 |
| Sebastopol | Canton | B. Guiana | 28.3.61 | 333 | 329 | 43 | 0 |
| Red Riding Hood | Canton | B. Guiana | 13.4.61 | 314 | 310 | 47 | 4 |
| Claramont | H. Kong | B. Guiana | 13.4.61 | 282 | 282 | 87 | 1 |

Continued on p. 22

## Table 1.2, continued

| Name of Ship | Whence | Destination | Arrived | Total Embarked | Total Landed | Females Landed | Infants Landed |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Saldanha | H. Kong | B. Guiana | 4.5.61 | 500 | 492 | 67 | 1 |
| Chapman | Canton | B. Guiana | 9.6.61 | 303 | 290 | 53 | 1 |
| Mystery | H. Kong | B. Guiana | 9.6.61 | 360 | 337 | 40 | 1 |
| Montmorency | H. Kong | B. Guiana | 27.6.61 | 290 | 283 | 17 | 1 |
| Sea Park | Canton | B. Guiana | 7.7.61 | 293 | 263 | 40 | 0 |
| Whirlwind | H. Kong | B. Guiana | 31.7.61 | 365 | 352 | 51 | 2 |
| Lancashire Witch | H. Kong | B. Guiana | 5.8.61 | 461 | 433 | 26 | 3 |
| Agra | Canton | B. Guiana | 15.2.62 | 287 | 287 | 35 | 1 |
| Earl of Windsor | H. Kong | B. Guiana | 17.3.62 | 325 | 303 | 126 | 3 |
| Red Riding Hood | Canton | B. Guiana | 11.4.62 | 326 | 324 | 46 | 1 |
| Maggie Miller/ Wanata | H. Kong | Trinidad | 3.7.62 | 547 | 467 | 125 | 2 |
| Persia | H. Kong | B. Guiana | 10.7.62 | 531 | 525 | 112 | 0 |
| Lady Elma Bruce | Amoy-Swatow | B. Guiana | 15.8.62 | 385 | 384 | 32 | 0 |
| Sir George Seymour | H. Kong, Canton & Swatow | B. Guiana | 20.8.62 | 324 | 289 | 29 | 0 |
| Genghis Khan | H. Kong, Canton & Swatow | B. Guiana | 20.8.62 | 512 | 480 | 88 | 3 |
| Ganges | Canton | B. Guiana | 29.6.63 | 413 | 396 | 96 | 2 |
| Zouave | Canton | B. Guiana | 28.2.64 | 517 | 509 | 152 | 7 |
| Brechin Castle | Canton | B. Guiana | 26.1.65 | 270 | 269 | 76 | 2 |
| Montrose | Canton | Trinidad | 18.2.65 | 320 | 313 | 101 | 2 |
| Queen of the East | Canton | B. Guiana | 18.4.65 | 490 | 481 | 109 | 1 |
| Paria | Canton | Trinidad | 25.5.65 | 289 | 280 | 76 | 0 |
| Light of the Age | Amoy | B. Honduras | 12.6.65 | 480 | 474 | 16 | 3 |
| Sevilla | Canton | B. Guiana | 22.6.65 | 312 | 305 | 91 | 2 |
| Arima | Canton | B. Guiana | 18.7.65 | 343 | 311 | 50 | 0 |
| Tricolor | H. Kong | Surinam | 29.7.65 | 475 | 286 | 120 | 17 |
| Bucton Castle | Canton | B. Guiana | 28.8.65 | 353 | 325 | 60 | 4 |
| Dudbrook | Amoy | Trinidad | 12.2.66 | 286 | 272 | 1 | 0 |



| Name of Ship | Whence | Destination | Arrived | Total Embarked | Total Landed | Females Landed | Infants Landed |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Red Riding Hood | Amoy | Trinidad | 24.2.66 | 327 | 325 | 6 | 0 |
| Light Brigade | Amoy | B. Guiana | 14.4.66 | 493 | 487 | 5 | 0 |
| Whirlwind | H. Kong | Surinam | 30.3.66 | 409 | 404 | — | — |
| *Whirlwind & Golden Horn combined* | | | | | | } 203 | } 28 |
| Golden Horn | H. Kong | Surinam | 9.7.66 | 416 | 403 | — | — |
| Pride of the Ganges | Canton | B. Guiana | 31.7.66 | 305 | 302 | 30 | 0 |
| Veritas | H. Kong | Surinam | 28.1.67 | 291 | — | 9 | 0 |
| *Veritas & Marie Therese combined* | | | | | } 516 | | |
| Marie Therese | H. Kong | Surinam | 20.8.68 | 252 | — | 3 | 0 |
| Veritas | H. Kong | Surinam | 13.5.69 | 202 | — | — | 0 |
| *Veritas & Ferdinand Brumm combined* | | | | | } 405 | } 11 | |
| Ferdinand Brumm | H. Kong | Surinam | 23.8.69 | 298 | — | — | 0 |
| Wilde Man | Batavia | Surinam | 3.11.72 | 11 | 11 | 0 | 0 |
| Krommenie | Batavia | Surinam | 23.11.72 | 10 | 10 | 0 | 0 |
| Kosmopoliet | Batavia | Surinam | 6.3.73 | 13 | 13 | 0 | 0 |
| Julius | Batavia | Surinam | 21.5.73 | 5 | 5 | 0 | 0 |
| Adriana Johanna | Batavia | Surinam | 19.6.73 | 16 | 16 | 0 | 0 |
| Willem Jacobus | Batavia | Surinam | 27.8.73 | 7 | 7 | 0 | 0 |
| Kosmopoliet | Batavia | Surinam | 12.9.73 | 17 | 17 | 0 | 0 |
| Lida | Batavia | Surinam | 5.11.73 | 18 | 18 | 0 | 0 |
| Adriana Johanna | Batavia | Surinam | 18.12.73 | 5 | 5 | 0 | 0 |
| Hendrik Daniel | Batavia | Surinam | 12.2.74 | 13 | 13 | 0 | 0 |
| Corona | Canton | B. Guiana | 23.2.74 | 388 | 388 | 45 | 4 |
| Dartmouth | H. Kong | B. Guiana | 17.3.79 | 516 | 515 | 52 | 9 |
| Clara | H. Kong | Antigua | 1.2.82 | 128 | 100 | 0 | 0 |
| Diamond/Prince Alexander | Macao, H. Kong | Jamaica | 12.7.84 | 681 | 680 | 122 | 3 |

Sources: (1) Annual Reports of the Colonial Land and Emigration Commission, 1859–73. (2) Great Britain, Colonial Office Correspondence, C.O.111 Series (British Guiana) and C.O.295 Series (Trinidad). (3) Cecil Clementi, The Chinese in British Guiana, Demerara 1915.

**Table 1.3**

**Natives of China in the British Caribbean, 1861–1946**

| | 1861 | 1871 | 1881 | 1891 | 1911 | 1921 | 1931 | 1946 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| B. Guiana | 2,629 | 6,295 | 4,393 | 2,475 | 634 | 376 | 423 | 548 |
| B. Honduras | 1 | 133 | 68 | 52 | 27 | 12 | n/a | 42 |
| Antigua | — | — | — | 111 | 13 | 4 | n/a | — |
| Trinidad | 461 | 1,400 | 1,266 | 1,006 | 1,113 | 1,334 | 2,027 | 2,366 |
| Jamaica | — | — | 140 | 347 | 1,646 | 2,413 | n/a | 2,818 |
| All Others | — | — | — | — | — | — | — | — |
| TOTAL | 3,091 | 7,828 | 5,867 | 3,991 | 3,433 | 4,139 | n/a | 5,774 |

n/a = not available
Source: West Indian Census Report 1946 (with corrections of 1946 figures)

CHAPTER 2

# Kissing the Cross: Nineteenth-Century Representations of Chinese and Indian Immigrants in British Guiana and Trinidad

ANNE-MARIE LEE-LOY

In March, 1870, a small article appeared in British Guiana's *Royal Gazette* newspaper that described the final hours of life for two immigrants who were executed in the colony. The article details how, the night before their deaths, an Indian migrant spent his final hours dancing in his cell, while a Chinese prisoner was engaged in prayer.[1] The differences between the two men were made explicitly clear on the scaffold. The Indian resolutely refused to be attended by any clergyman. In contrast, "the Chinaman was very attentive to the prayers of the Roman Catholic Priest who accompanied him on the scaffold and kissed the cross that the Priest presented to him just before the drop fell" (RG 22 March 1870).

Why would West Indian colonists be interested in such an article? Why did the author pay so much attention to the differing behavior of the two prisoners? In particular, why was it so important to record and report that moment when the Chinese prisoner chose to kiss the cross of the priest? Contemporary readers' sympathies might lie with the Indian migrant, who seemed to demonstrate a powerful resistance to the domination of the European colonists even in the face of death; but this is not how a West Indian colonist would have read this story,

8. See Linda G. Bausch, Nina Glick Schiller, and Cristina Blanc-Stanton, *Nations Unbound: Transnational Projects, Postcolonial Predicaments, and Deterritorialized Nation-states* (Langhorne, Penn.: Gordon and Breach, 1994) and Leo Douw, ed., *Unsettled Frontiers and Transnational Linkages*.

9. Adam McKeown, *Chinese Migrant Networks*, 3.

## Notes to Chapter 1

1. Fujian province, the other major emigrant region, continued to send migrants during this century to the traditional destinations in Southeast Asia, but small numbers were also involved in the wider global movements of the nineteenth century.

2. The Hakkas or "Guest People" originated in North China, and relocated to the Southeast provinces as followers of the Southern Song dynasty (1127–1279). When that dynasty collapsed in 1279, several thousands remained in the region and were given the name "Guests" by locals because of their outsider origins.

3. Tait & Co; Syme, Muir & Co; Hyde, Hodge & Co.

4. See Barry Higman, "The Chinese in Trinidad 1806–1838," *Caribbean Studies* 12, no. 3 (1972): 21–44.

See also Walton Look Lai, *The Chinese In The West Indies 1806–1995: A Documentary History* (Kingston, Jamaica: UWI Press, 1998), chapter 2. Official records identified about twenty or thirty of them on the island in the 1820s, and a mere two or three by the time slavery ended in 1834.

5. There were six foreign coolie agencies at Amoy (Xiamen) in the early 1850s, five of them British: Syme, Muir and Co; Tait & Co; Hyde, Hodge & Co; Jackson, Robert & Co.; and Turner & Co. See Yen Ching-Hwang, *Coolies and Mandarins* (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 1985), p. 42, n. 43.

6. W. Look Lai, *The Chinese in the West Indies*, chapter 4.

7. Mauritius, Natal (South Africa), Queensland (Australia), Louisiana (U.S.A.), Bengal (India), Hawaii, the Philippines, Java, Fiji, Peru, Puerto Rico, as well as the older Cuba and Brazil. See Eric Williams, *From Columbus to Castro* (New York: Random House, 1970), chapter 20.

8. See David Northrup, *Indentured Labor in the Age of Imperialism 1834–1922* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

9. George Roberts and Jocelyn Byrne, "Summary Statistics on Indenture and Associated Migration Affecting the West Indies 1834–1918," *Population*



*Studies* 20, no. 1 (1966): 125–34. This does not include the inter-island movements of the West Indians themselves, which was quite substantial, especially to Trinidad and British Guiana.

10. Chinese labor in Peru was used in sugar as well as in the guano industry.

11. J. Ankum-Houwink, "Chinese Contract Migrants in Surinam between 1853 and 1870," *Boletin de Estudios Latinoamericanos y del Caribe* 17 (December 1974): 42–69.

12. Paul Leroy Beaulieu, *De la Colonisation chez les peuples modernes* (Paris: Guillaumin, 1902), vol. 1, p. 233. A 1955 study states that between 1852 and 1887, 1,300 Chinese and 500 Annamites arrived in the French West Indies. See Eugene Revert, *La France d'Amerique* (Paris: Editions maritimes et coloniales, 1955), 54.

13. Twentieth General Report of the Colonial Land and Emigration Commissioners, Appendix no. 45. *Irish University Press Series of British Parliamentary Papers. Emigration* (Shannon: Irish University Press, 1968–71), vol. 14.

14. One British pound equalled 20 shillings in British currency, $4.80 in British West Indian (BWI) currency, and $4.87 in U.S. currency. Dollars referred to in the text are BWI dollars.

15. Great Britain, Colonial Office Documents, CO 111, vol. 334, Hincks to Newcastle, 21 March 1862, enclosure.

16. The *Glentanner* to British Guiana from Fujian province in 1852/3.

17. Indeed, it was precisely the Chinese government insistence on such a provision in 1866 that led to the demise of Chinese emigration to the West Indies.

18. Many did, though.

19. See Walton Look Lai, *Indentured Labor, Caribbean Sugar* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 71, 75.

20. P.P., 1871, XX (C.393): Report of the Commissioners appointed to enquire into the treatment of immigrants in British Guiana.

21. See Denise Helly, ed., *The Cuba Commission Report: A Hidden History of the Chinese in Cuba: The Original English-Language Text of 1876* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993).

22. See Walton Look Lai, *Indentured Labor, Caribbean Sugar*, chapter 4, and Trevor Sue-a-Quan, *Cane Reapers* (Vancouver: Riftswoods Publishing, 1999), chapter 6, for detailed accounts.

23. Henry Kirke, *Twenty-Five Years in British Guiana, 1872–1897* (London: Sampson Low, Marston & Co., 1898), p. 216; repr. (Georgetown [British

Guiana] Daily Chronicle, 1948), p. 160.

24. Walton Look Lai, *The Chinese in the West Indies*, 205–206.

25. Trevor Sue-a Quan, Cane Reapers, chapter 6.

26. (Demerara) *Royal Gazette*, 11 March 1873.

27. See Walton Look Lai, *The Chinese in the West Indies*, chapter 9. See also *The Diaries of Abbé Armand Massé* (1878–1883), translated by M.L. De Verteuil (Port of Spain, 1988); R.P.M. Cothonay, *Trinidad, Journal d'un Missionaire Dominicain des Antilles Anglaises* (Paris, 1893); Charles Kingsley, *At Last—A Christmas in the West Indies* (London, 1871); Edward Jenkins, *The Coolie—His Rights and Wrongs* (London, 1871); Henry Kirke, *Twenty-Five Years in British Guiana 1872–1897*; Rev. H.V.P. Bronkhurst, *Wesleyan Missionary: The Colony of British Guiana and Its Labouring Population* (London, 1883).

28. See table 1.2.

29. See Walton Look Lai, *Indentured Labor, Caribbean Sugar*, Appendix 1, table 30, for Trinidad.

30. The figures in table 1.3 apply to China-born alone.

31. Many are also from Fujian province, rather than the traditional Guangdong.

## Bibliography for Chapter 2

*Abbreviations*

| | |
|---|---|
| CO | Colonial Office |
| PP | Parliamentary Papers |
| PRO | Public Record Office |
| RG | *Royal Gazette* |

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Parliamentary Papers, vol. XXXV, Correspondence Relative to Emigration of Labourers to the West Indies and the Mauritius from the West Coast of Africa, the East Indies and China, 1844 (Chadwyck-Healy 48.291–48.292)

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