

Stress of Weather

A COLLECTION OF ORIGINAL SOURCE DOCUMENTS
RELATING TO A VOYAGE FROM CHINA
TO TRINIDAD, WEST INDIES IN 1862
in conjunction with a family chronicle



Helen Atteck & Philip Atteck

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STRESS OF WEATHER

Cover design by Keith Atteck

Cover photo: Detail from the *Eleanor*, oil on canvas, 122.0 x 78.0 cm

Artist: John Hughes (active 1839-1870) Liverpool

Collection of the New Brunswick Museum, Saint John, N.B.

N.B. The *Eleanor* was of the same class as the *Maggie Miller*
and the *Wanata*.

Sadly no pictures can be found of the latter two vessels.

Dedicated to "Mums"
Elizabeth Atteck nee George



Photograph - circa 1904

Foreword

This book is a combination of family history and reminiscences, on the one hand, and documentary excerpts pertaining to one particular ship's voyage from China to Trinidad in the year 1862, on the other. There were actually two ships involved, since the original vessel was incapacitated by a hurricane enroute to Trinidad. The passengers who left Hong Kong with the *Maggie Miller* arrived eventually in Trinidad on the *Wanata*. The authors have traced an original ancestor back to this voyage and have been inspired to piece this manuscript together in an attempt to combine the story of their family roots with the story of the 1862 voyage. They have effected this combination in an unusual and refreshing fashion, uninhibited by the constraints that would normally bind a trained researcher into family history or immigration history. The family portion leaves open many fascinating questions about specific individuals about whom we would like to know more, and the historical documents give us just a tantalizing glimpse into the complex decision-making processes and the web of circumstances surrounding this crisis-ridden voyage. They have also included a complete list of the original indenture contracts associated with this voyage, which should be useful to researchers.

The authors are to be commended for their enthusiasm and initiative and with this publication are included among the growing list of West Indian Chinese who are now, whether in print or on the internet, engaged in retracing their family roots and learning about their ethnic history.

Walton Look Lai
History Department
University of the West Indies
St. Augustine
Trinidad & Tobago
21st November 1999



Louis Atteck -Chan a Tak (circa 1823 -1888)
Photograph - Circa 1875

Preface

It was in Trinidad, almost 40 years ago, that I first heard the story about Philip's grandparents, the Atteck forebears who came to Trinidad from China. We were sitting around the massive dining table at 31 Victoria Square, just finishing Sunday lunch, and I was still filled with so many questions. Where did they come from? When did they arrive in Trinidad? What was the name of the ship that brought them? Why did they change the family name from Chan to Atteck? Mums did not know.

My mother-in-law was the matriarch of one of the oldest Chinese families in Trinidad. She was a tall and kindly soul with a twinkle in her eye and a genuine interest in people. There usually were other guests on Sunday, always interesting, and from a variety of backgrounds, as Trinidad is a cosmopolitan place. I glanced around the room. The style of this wooden 'ginger-bread' house, with its high ceiling and open design, was typical of this old residential area of Port of Spain. There was always a breeze blowing through the house, for the verandah doors were only closed at nighttime, and the large windows, with lace curtains fluttering, were wide open. The interior was painted a wedgewood blue, offsetting the polished mahogany floor. White wood trim completed the decor. We all sat under the watchful eyes of several of Sybil's paintings and sculptures. Sybil was one of Philip's sisters, and the last of the eleven siblings to remain at home with Mums.

"We could check the records," said I, feeling the need to find the answers. But no, the records were burnt, along with the Red House, back in 1905, during the "water riots," was the reply. All of the records of births, marriages, deaths, etc. were kept in the imposing government building, painted red, which was located along the western side of Woodford Square, in the downtown area of the city. The Red House looked as though it had been there forever, so I was surprised to hear of the fire. It had been re-built in the image of itself.

After all these ensuing years, thinking that the origins of the Atteck family were lost in time, Philip and I came across a most amazing book entitled *Indentured Labor, Caribbean Sugar* by Walton Look Lai. This book contains a plethora of facts, tables of information, and, lo and behold, a list of ships that sailed from China to Trinidad. It shows a breakdown of the number of people embarked and a listing giving the number of women and girls who had commenced and completed the journey on each voyage. The first ship to bring women from China to Trinidad had started out with four little girls, of whom only one survived. Why, that must have been Aunt Fanny!

This discovery started us on a treasure hunt. What was, at first, simply research for a family history has evolved into this volume because we understand that there are other descendants of those early immigrants who will be just as curious and asking the same questions about their family origins as we are about ours.

In pursuing our quest for information, we have discovered a wealth of archival material that has been carefully maintained by those entrusted with its care. We have searched in libraries and sought the help of specialists. And, along the way, there have been many friends and family members who have contributed whatever they could to assist in completing this task, for which we are deeply grateful.

We owe a special thanks to Walton Look Lai for his extensive research and active encouragement. Also to Dr. Huguette Ly-Tio-Fane Pineo of Mauritius for her input regarding Flat Island, and to Dr. Wu Jinping for his detailed 1860s map of Guangzhou Province. We also give grateful thanks to Cynthia Lee Reif and Gilbert Wong for their calligraphy and advice, as well as to Dr. Tom Mah and Professor Cheng Luo for their input in understanding the names shown on the Articles of Agreement that covered the indentured labourers who travelled on the ships that we are studying. Special mention must also be made of Edward Von der Porten, who supplied advice and a coveted book; Grace and Lloyd Farnum, Alyt Christopher, and Geoffrey MacLean, who greatly assisted in Trinidad; Lily Chan, who helped in Hong Kong; Jeremy Brown

and also Susy and Louis Atteck, for their kindness in London; and to Edita and Keith Atteck, whose aid was invaluable.

In the chapter entitled "The Voyage," the authors have used poetic licence to re-create the conditions on the ship. For this we make no apology, for the tale fits comfortably with known facts. The quote from Basil Lubbock is made with gracious permission from his publishers, Brown, Son & Ferguson, Ltd.

The archival documents, letters, and personal information extracted from the Articles of Agreements are presented in full in the latter two parts of this book. The authors have been careful not to tamper with the grammar, etc. in the archival material.

Although this is a story of a voyage, in a sense it is also a biography of a family and a tale of the times in which they lived and worked and put down their roots in a new and different environment.

Helen Atteck

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Early Chinese graves overlooking cane fields
Holy Cross R.C. Church yard, Princes Town



Chan a Tak / Louis Atteck grave
Holy Cross R.C. Church, Princes Town

Introduction

In the southern part of the island of Trinidad, surrounded by sugar cane fields, there is a town that was once an important center of commerce for south Trinidad. In 1880, this town, then known as "the Mission," underwent a change of name in order to commemorate a visit by two Princes of the Realm, Prince George, the Prince of Wales, and his brother Prince Albert. That town is still called Princes Town. Within the boundaries of Princes Town, there are two old churches, one Anglican and one Roman Catholic. Behind each church, there are graveyards with headstones that date back to the early period of Chinese immigration. Among these, we found the imposing grave of Philip's grandfather, complete with an engraved stone giving his name in both English and Chinese. When this was erected in 1888, Philip's grandmother must have known that her descendants would want to know their correct family name. She made sure that the record would endure.

Three circumstances have made this book possible. One is the oral history passed down through the Atteck family by both Mrs. Elizabeth Atteck, nee George (1886-1975), and by Philip's cousin Mrs. Rita Fung, nee Lai Awa (born in 1909); the second is the extensive research done by Walton Look Lai. It is through these two occurrences, and the tombstone inscription, that we have been able to identify the ships that brought the Atteck ancestors to Trinidad, a fact that had been lost in the passage of time.

We feel very fortunate that we have now been able to delve into the circumstances of the early migration of the Chinese to Trinidad. We knew that Philip's grandparents had travelled from China on the same ship, however, two ships' names were listed for the voyage. Assuming that the first ship had been a local transport between Fukien and Hong Kong and that the latter one was the main ship, we wrote to the Maritime Museum in Greenwich, London, England, asking for information about the second ship listed, the *Wanata*. They supplied the link to Mauritius, a fact that came as a complete surprise. Then we

understood why two ships' names were given for this voyage, for the *Wanata* had not originated in Hong Kong or China. Another letter to the Maritime Museum brought us the description of the massive damage to the *Maggie Miller*, wrecked by the hurricane in the Indian Ocean. We then wrote to the National Archives in Mauritius, who provided us with the details about the illnesses aboard the *Maggie Miller* and the quarantine on Flat Island. Our subsequent journey to England enabled us to find a large collection of letters pertaining to these ships. The majority of these letters are in the Colonial Office archives in the Public Records Office. Two letters come from Matheson & Co. Ltd., whose archival material is in the Cambridge University Library. The final link fell into place when Philip made a journey back to his homeland, searching the National Archives in Trinidad and finding the complete collection of Articles of Agreement covering the men who embarked on the *Maggie Miller* in Hong Kong in 1862. The contracts are bound into three volumes. Among these are the documents for Chun a Tak (Chun being another spelling for Chan), and also for Loo Seen, who had embarked with a wife, mother, a boy, and a girl, the only boy and girl combination on the ship. William and Fanny! This tied in exactly with the family's oral history! We had found the right voyage.

From the archival letters, we have now distilled the details to be able to present a concise story for the reader. With the many additional facts that we have culled from other sources, we have also been able to include a version of the daily life onboard ship.

Part Two is a section that presents an example of the outcome of this extraordinary tale, in the form of a brief family chronicle.

The latter two parts of this book contain copies of the official documents that we have extracted from the archives in divergent parts of the globe. Although this material concerns only one particular voyage, a letter regarding a Surgeon Superintendent of another concurrent sailing, namely of the *Persia*, has been included for the unique information that it contains.

The letters offer an insightful view of the British Colonial system and of the personal interaction of the Emigration Commissioners and their Agents as the story unfolds. They provide a glimpse into the world as it existed in 1861-62 and cover several points that are central to the Emigration Scheme as practised by the British Colonial Office in Hong Kong during that period. This was a time when the British packed many

a three-masted sailing ship with emigrants from the far corners of their sphere of influence to send them to their West Indian colonies. In these colonies, the planters were in need of hardy workers to replace the recently emancipated slaves in order to keep the sugar plantations in production. From these letters, the discerning reader will be able to evaluate the events and the personalities involved.

After the letters, there is a section giving the individual details shown on the 364¹ Articles of Agreement that covered the adult males who were signed on in China for the voyage in the *Maggie Miller*, including mention of the wives and children who accompanied them. The men's names are listed in both English and Chinese. For those who signed on at the Amoy or Swatow depots, the Chinese names are in local dialects; however, the majority are in Cantonese.² It is hoped that this publication may assist some of the descendants of these intrepid Chinese to identify their ancestor and thus determine their proper Chinese surname.

It stands to reason that the immigrants would have had no knowledge of world geography and that they must have been most amazed at the breadth of the seas that they were traversing in a seemingly endless journey on a crowded wooden sailing ship. The experience of that voyage would have been so terrifying that the memory of it was best forgotten. No oral history was passed down about this event, although Fanny Atteck was subject to horrible nightmares until the end of her life. Read on, and we will explain.

¹ There are 366 contracts. The correct number should be 364, however, for two documents were duplicated. Since the authors cannot determine which is the correct contract for each man, both are shown. The names on the duplicate contracts are Chung a Sing in book one, and Tan Leong in book three.

² Even in Cantonese there are several different spoken dialects, according to the village of origin.