

“Lessons from the Past: Chinese-Jamaican Relations” by Dr. Victor Chang

Delivered on Sunday 26 November 2017 at CBA

It has been said that those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it. With that in mind, I would like to look at the events that have been described as the anti-Chinese riots of 1918, 1938 and 1965, and try to suggest in what ways they share certain features and what they reveal of the relationship of the minority group of Chinese in the context of the wider Jamaican society, and how they might be seen as warnings for the future.

The two that interest me most and for which there are more details are the first in July 1918 and the third in the weekend of 28-29th of August 1965 because in both those cases, it seems that what were private disputes between individuals became flashpoints that ignited the powder keg and unleashed explosions of violence and destruction, but what triggered the 1938 rioting is not so easy to explain.

What all three share is a common background that is derived from the history of slavery and exploitation in Jamaica. We know that after slavery was abolished, the colonial ruling elite –faced with a desperate labour shortage—came up with the idea of importing labour from India and China.

But from the outset the British had in mind another reason for bringing the Chinese to the Caribbean apart from labour: it was a sound strategic move since the Chinese would be “a barrier between us and the negroes, with whom they do not associate; and consequently to whom they will always offer a formidable opposition...” and “who, from habits and feelings would be kept distinct from the Negroes, and who from interest would be inseparably attached to the European proprietors.”

The Chinese immigrants who came in 1854, and later, also came under very favourable conditions: it was contracted labour for which they would be paid, they came voluntarily, they had initial 3-year contracts at the end of which they could choose to return to their homeland; they would be given housing and gardens rent-free, punctual payment of wages and allowed to remit portions of wages for people left in China. No matter that many of these turned out to be vain promises never fulfilled, those were extraordinary conditions which the black slaves had never had, so that was already initial cause for simmering resentment and hostility.

Secondly, while many chose to return to China at the end of their indentureship, quite a few stayed and continued to expand on the small shops they had been allowed to set up on the estates, and thus

expanded these into small retail shops which became a network that spread across the whole island, and could be seen in almost every town and village in Jamaica. Many jostled with and overtook native competitors, who had started shops that were vulnerable and non-lasting because of “lack of capital, credit and general inexperience in business matters”. Moreover, the Chinese Benevolent Society-- established in 1891—provided “mutual assistance” for all the Chinese shopkeepers. With this support system, they could call on supplies and credit from fellow Chinese, thereby making it “impossible for the natives to compete” (Johnson, 25). We learn that by 1930 the Chinese owned 1,200 groceries, 400 in Kingston and 800 in the other parishes. It was a “swift ascent out of the plantation environment to visible middle-man minority status based on mercantile activity.” They were seen to “evolve from agricultural workers to small and large-scale traders and progressed in the 1880’s into the lower middle class and eventually partially into the upper middle class.” (Look Lai).

That in itself was another source of resentment and hostility because in the harsh economic conditions and widespread poverty of the time, the Chinese had come with “nothing but oil cloth on their backs”, and in a short time had accumulated wealth, status, and property, so the Blacks

felt that they MUST have gained all this by thieving from those who had been here long before they came!

And there was resentment at the sheer numbers of Chinese, increasing from the 472 in November 1854, to 696 in 1884. Though by 1911 there were 2,439 Chinese resident in the island, they still comprised less than 0.3% of the population. Still, in letters to the *Gleaner*, we see anti-Chinese tropes such as “yellow plague”, “the yellow peril” and “locust invasion” being repeated. One letter to the Editor observed: “Let us, in heaven’s name, wake up and do something, for these people are coming, coming, always coming. Can anything be done to stem this Chinese invasion? Are these people to be allowed to overwhelm us?” In response, laws were passed that required the immigrant Chinese to each pay a £30 deposit and pass a written test to demonstrate that they could write 50 words in three different languages!

Still, the number had increased to about 4,000 by the mid 1920’s and to 6,000 by 1930. In 1931 Jamaica asked Hong Kong not to issue passports to Chinese coming to Jamaica. In 1940 all Chinese were barred from Jamaica except diplomats, tourists and students with permits, and yet by 1943 the census shows the number was up to 12, 394, with 5,155 in a category called “Chinese Coloured” which tells how much mixing had taken place. It was said that in Jamaica the Chinese arrival started as a

brook, “became a wider stream, and eventually developed into a flood.”

Things were particularly bad in 1918 in the immediate aftermath of World War I, a year which saw a lot of worker unrest and increased food prices because, as Howard Johnson notes, “[Jamaica] faced ...wartime inflation and food shortages, [and] the populace saw the Chinese as responsible for the increased prices of imported staples.”

The Parochial Board of St Ann had even minuted on the 4th October, 1917 that the Chinese “are the cause of many bankruptcies, vagrants and paupers” and that “present war conditions demand that something be done to protect the fathers, mothers and relatives of the men who have gone to fight, while the Chinese are left to become rich and enjoy all safety and privileges. Not even a special tax levied on these aliens to compensate the men fighting for them.”

In 1924 the Jamaica Chinese Benevolent Society reported to the Chinese Ambassador in London that they were living in an atmosphere of fear and violence and that 6 Chinese immigrants had been murdered.

The 1930’s too were years of turmoil and shortages, triggered by the Great Depression, a severe worldwide economic depression that started in 1929 and pushed unemployment as high as 33% in the USA,

and even higher in the underdeveloped West Indies. This led many countries to develop a policy of protectionism and so many Jamaicans working and living abroad were returning to the island and swelling the ranks of the unemployed. So 1938 was a year of general labour unrest throughout the British West Indies. Inevitably, the Chinese were again scapegoats, accused of increasing the prices on goods and gouging the public to increase their profits. Further, they were accused of taking advantage of the appalling economic conditions and forming “a strong combine to enter fields of enterprise, including the purchase of ...sailing vessels and the acquisition of wharf premises”. The Depression brought political upheaval everywhere, and even led to the coming to power of the Nazi regime in Germany 1933. So the conditions favoured a riot by the masses against the Chinese in Kingston.

1965 was another year filled with tumult and unrest, which led to a State of Emergency being declared in Jamaica in 1967. It was unclear which side the Chinese were on in the developing anti-colonial struggle against the British, and which political party they supported. Garvey saw them “essentially as honorary whites and as conservative, and anti-nationalistic,” and they were accused of being “entirely devoid of public spirit and arrogantly individualistic.” His wife, Amy Jacques Garvey claimed the island’s Chinese community had given £100,000 to wounded soldiers in China besides funding the Kuomintang’s consulate

in Kingston. She claimed that the busiest Chinese stores averaged £1,000 a year in profits, and asked: “what are the underlying motives of these people who owe it all to the Islands and yet give it all to China?” and then “Are they just ‘colonies’ of Chinese in the Caribbean now? Or will they be ‘colonies’ of China later on?”

Above all, there was a universal distrust of the Chinese. They were said to be cunning, exploitative, always putting profit first, skimping and short changing customers. W.H.Gamble claimed that “duplicity and deceit...are notoriously prevalent among them,” and they were thought “to adulterate food and drinks.”

And always in addition there was the problem of human relations, swinging first from the accusation that the Chinese were aloof and maintained “racial and cultural separateness,” [Brereton] and yet at the same time charging that the Chinese men were poaching their women! There was resentment because many of the Chinese men –being human—had taken on local paramours. We read in 1898 that “As Chinese women are scarce, the Chinaman has always a coloured woman as a concubine, and they generally manage to get the best looking girls in the place.” It was not until 1947 that the Chinese were allowed to bring in an annual total quota for the whole island of 20 wives and children.

One notable feature about the three riots is that there does not seem to be any evidence of advance planning and organization before the events. They seemed to have been spontaneously generated and they were all localized: to a few towns in 4 parishes in 1918, and in 1938 and 1965 to sections of Kingston: North Street, Barry Street, West Street, East Queen Street and Spanish Town Road, and none lasted more than a week , due to the actions of police and those in authority. Indeed, no Chinese was killed in all the rioting, though their lives were threatened and they had to take flight, or seek refuge with sympathetic Black families.

Now to the first riot in July of 1918.

Ironically, this was triggered off by the amorous exploits of a policeman, Acting Corporal “Pretty Man” McDonald who had slipped into a Ewarton shop owned by Chinese shopkeeper Fong Sue to meet with Caroline Lindo who was Fong Sue’s “paramour”. Fong Sue had gone to Kingston on business, and returned unexpectedly to find the couple in bed, and in the words of Lee Loy, “did what any other man would have done and ... gave [Pretty man] a licking. It must have been pretty serious because McDonald ran away and went missing for two days”.

In his absence rumours spread in the community that he had been assaulted by Fong Sue and 3 fellow Chinese, had been emasculated and killed. The rage caused by these rumours resulted in a riot. In the night of 9 July a crowd of more than 300 converged on four shops in Ewarton, smashing and looting in revenge for the purported violence against Pretty Man. The crowds were heard shouting the rallying cry of “Not a damn Chinaman leave today”. (quote from Lee Loy)

Over the course of three days and nights, Chinese shops were smashed and goods stolen or destroyed, involving almost 1,000 people. Of the 452 arrested 300 were sentenced to one year hard labour for their participation. A *Gleaner* report in 1919 quoted a witness at one of the trials in St Catherine: “The Chinamen all had to run and hide themselves...the witness said the [rioters] all acted in unison. They were not quiet. They made a great noise and were determined to put an end to the Chinese lives.”

The official Police report by Police Inspector Wright confirms that the rioting started because “the lower orders made out that [the constable] had been killed by the Chinaman. Giving this as an excuse, big crowds assembled in the village of Ewarton on Monday night the 8th, and started to beat down all the Chinese shops there, and loot the goods. This they succeeded in doing, as only a handful of police were present,

who were only able to protect the Chinamen from being killed.” The *Gleaner* on July 10 reports that “the crowd [was] all bent on attacking the Chinese.” “Give us the body of the policeman you killed; that is what we want, nothing more.”

Inspector Wright details the rapid progress of the rioting from Ewarton to Linstead: “the Chinese shops were already smashed up similar to Ewarton, and a big crowd of rioters about 500 in the act of smashing up and looting the last and biggest Chinese shop accompanied with the usual hurling of brickbats, rocks, stones, etc.”

The *Gleaner* of July 9, reports: “Four shops were smashed and looted. Nothing remains in any of the shops and the owners have left the town in flight...the street is literally paved with cornmeal, flour and salt from the looted shops.”

The rioting then rapidly spread to Bog Walk, to Linstead and on to Redwood, Pear Tree Grove, Mount Rosser and Cedar Valley before going on to Troja, Spanish Town and Old Harbour, encompassing four parishes: St Ann, St Catherine, St Mary and Clarendon. Armed policemen and a detachment from the West India Regiment “in the shape of 150 officers and men....were then dispatchedto prevent further outbreak and put a stop to it.”

By the 11th, the rioting had been controlled and quiet restored, with 452 people arrested and of these 300 convicted. About 22 shops were totally destroyed and looted. While The *Gleaner* of July 12 estimated that in St Catherine alone, damage could run into Thousands of Pounds, P.I. Wright reports that the approximate value of the damage was Fifteen Thousand One Hundred and Seventy Six Pounds, one shilling and three pence! And The *Gleaner* of July 9 reported that the government was offering £15,000 in compensation for damages.

Two other bizarre aspects of this rioting must be noted. One was the rumour that the policeman had been killed and pickled and sold as salt pork and as one bystander noted; “dem eat dawg, so dem will eat man too!” It goes to show what low regard the masses had for the Chinese.

Secondly, when Corporal McDonald returned two days later to resume duties at the station, and his safe return “spread about in these affected districts with a view to quieting the mobs.... this had no effect, and riots continued...” Indeed, The *Gleaner* reported that “when the corporal, his lips a bit swollen and with a scar on his head, appeared before the crowd they declared that it was camouflage, that he was not the ‘missing man’. A clear case of how irrational a mob can be.

The Second riot in 1938:

There is little evidence to show what was the trigger for the 1938 riots, and I have done little work on it. All we know is that it was a year of widespread labour unrest, with the growth of an anti-colonialist struggle and new nationalist voices like Bustamante and Norman Manley challenging the government and the voices of the educated Black middle class being heard. I have already outlined above how volatile and tense the 1930's were and how the existing conditions could easily have triggered off a riot.

The Chinese were accused of exploiting shop assistants by paying poor wages, of breaking laws and selling on Sundays, staying open later than they should, and promoting the use of “pernicious drugs” like opium [“natives are succumbing to the vile and deadly habit”] and breaking spirit and gambling laws in the gambling dens where drop pan and peakapow had been introduced: “The poor, the starving and the obscene are always amongst the visitors to these dens of iniquity—both women and men carry their few pence ...to be swallowed up by John Chinaman.”

The Third Riot in 1965:

On Saturday, 28th August 1965, Joyce Copeland reported to the police that she had had a dispute with her boss about the non-payment of her

instalments on a radio, and that she had been beaten up by the three Lue brothers. As in 1918, the rumours triggered off a spate of violence resulting in numerous Chinese shops being attacked over the weekend and looted by crowds of up to 300, and then set on fire. It is said that two policemen were shot in the disturbances and 6 civilians wounded.

But that account does not take a hidden story into consideration and the details reveal a dimension similar to the 1918 riots in Ewarton. It turns out that Joyce Copeland had been in a paramour relationship with her employer Mr Lue and had been turned out of the house in Vineyard Town after his Chinese wife came to join him in Jamaica. She had then gone to the house and had an altercation with the wife, and on hearing about this, Lue had then physically manhandled her, and kicked her several times. So again there was a sexual dimension to the conflict, but this was not known to the crowds and a private conflict became the impetus for lawless behavior and rioting. What is interesting is that in every instance the stress was on looting so that the crowds weren't necessarily acting out of any high-minded motive but rather seeking to remedy their harsh economic state.

What does all this tell us about the possibilities of future conflicts with the newly come Chinese? The recent expressions of hostility to the mainland Chinese and their being granted land by the government near

the Roaring River watershed, plus the Goat Island controversy, mining in the Cockpit country, the accusation by Mr Bunting of “economic colonialism” are all items that are like a powder keg as in the past, and once again, with distorted rumours, wild accusations, provocation and lies as catalysts, could blow up in another catastrophic explosion. And I fear that if there were such another riot that the crowds would not distinguish between older settled Chinese and newly-arrived ones, and we would once again be all swept up together in the violence.

■ by Victor L. Chang