

BOB DYE

The Great Chinese Merchants' Ball of 1856

AT SUNRISE, JUNE 19, 1856, to the top of every mast in Honolulu harbor and every pole in town, flags were raised to herald the marriage of Liholiho, Kamehameha IV, to Emma Naea Rooke. By mid-morning the grounds of the Kawaiaha'o Church were crowded with people who hoped to catch sight of the bride and groom, as they walked over a path, strewn with green rushes, from the palace to the old stone church. The wedding ceremony was performed at 11:30, and at its conclusion the battery on Punchbowl fired a salute. To the applause of their subjects, the king and queen retired to their suites on the palace grounds. That evening the royal residence was illuminated by vessels of oil with floating wicks, and the gates to the palace grounds were opened to the public.¹

Over the next few weeks, groups in the foreign community extended their aloha to the handsome royal couple in small and large ways. The American Club honored them at a Fourth of July ball, and members of the German Club did the same at a "tasteful and elegant" ball held three weeks later. Shortly thereafter, their excellencies left Honolulu for an extended tour of all the islands.² Their departure meant that the French would miss the chance to honor them at Fête Napoleon on August 15. It was perhaps just as well, for Emile Perrin, the French consul, once again proved himself to be a parsimonious man. "Sour claret and lemonade were the principal articles of entertainment," complained the American commissioner, who called the French ball a "miserable failure."³

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The three dozen Cantonese in Honolulu felt that it was necessary for them, if they were to succeed in the mercantile trade during the reign of the king, to have a personal relationship with him. And they did not intend to wait until Chinese New Year to begin it. As soon as their excellencies returned, the Cantonese decided to demonstrate the depth of their loyalty to the throne by presenting an extravaganza that would surpass those given by the Americans and Germans. Their generosity, they expected, would buy them protection from government abuse, as had the largess of their white competitors. Additionally, the event would make perfectly clear the class distinction between them and the Chinese contract laborers, nearly three hundred men, brought from Fukien by white planters four years earlier.⁴

A respected Cantonese merchant, Chun Afong, who was proficient in the Hawaiian and English languages, and conversant with Western manners, was persuaded to head the committee of arrangements for a ball. He embarked on the venture with some trepidation, however. Nobody in China danced heterosexually, except for some indigenous tribesmen. For a Han Chinese to dance with a member of the opposite sex was, quite simply, not socially acceptable behavior for a Chinese gentleman.⁵ Not one of the Cantonese merchants knew how to perform this Western activity with any degree of grace; so, they trooped to Field's dance hall to learn how to waltz, polka, schottische, participate in a quadrille, and execute a gallopade.

Terpsichore must have smiled on Afong, for he was quick to master ballroom dancing. A proud man, he would be able to escort a lady onto the dance floor and be secure in the knowledge that he would not embarrass himself and his countrymen. He had piercing black eyes, that people remembered, and women were fascinated by him—one later wrote of "the keen intelligence of his face, and the courtesy and dignity of his manner."⁶ He usually treated strangers with benign indifference, which some whites may have seen as thinly masked racial arrogance. But friendship was important to him, as it was to his fellow Chinese merchants. They survived the competition of Hudson's Bay Company and the Boston and European merchant houses only because they helped each other.

There was no Chinatown in Honolulu. The Cantonese enterprises, scattered throughout the small business district at the harbor's edge, were open from eight in the morning until the last customer left after

eight in the evening. The merchants made all calculations with an abacus, which each morning, they shook back and forth, first slowly and then with increasing speed, until the sharp clicks of the balls reached an ear-piercing crescendo.

In all endeavors, went a wise Chinese saying, count half on friendship and half on money. Chun Afong collected from his fellow Cantonese \$3,700.⁷ When coupled with their enthusiasm for joint action, the fund was large enough to ensure that the ball would be a spectacular social event. But just as Afong's committee began detailed planning, three related and grisly murders horrified the kingdom. A hunchback laborer from Fukien stabbed to death a native Hawaiian, following a fight in which another Chinese had been hacked to death to avenge the killing of "a native of great respectability."⁸ The Chinese was found guilty of murder by a non-Chinese jury and was sentenced to hang. As additional punishment, the judge ordered that the deformed body be offered to any Honolulu physician who wanted it for dissection and study.⁹

The Cantonese merchants were concerned that the public outrage over the terrible crime, though committed by a contract laborer from Fukien, would reflect badly on them. So, they asked Asing, the grocer on Marin Street, to go to the prison and convince the murderer "to prepare an address for the benefit of his countrymen, to be delivered from the gallows." But the condemned man was truculent, and Asing failed to extract an apology from him.¹⁰

On Friday, November 7, at eight in the morning, the killer was led from his cell to the gallows in the yard of the fort. No Chinese attended the execution, and when, at the last minute, the condemned man decided to make a statement, there was no one present to translate his last words into English. Impatient to get on with the hanging, the marshal stepped forward and paid the man's respects to the curious people who had come to watch him die. After a prayer, the little hunchback laborer was dispatched. "The arrangements were admirably conducted; there was no noise, no pushing," the *Polynesian* proudly proclaimed.¹¹

The execution did not dampen the enthusiasm of the Cantonese for their ball. If anything, it spurred them to work harder at their practice sessions in Field's dance hall. After work one evening, an amused crowd of whites gathered to watch Asing, who had been

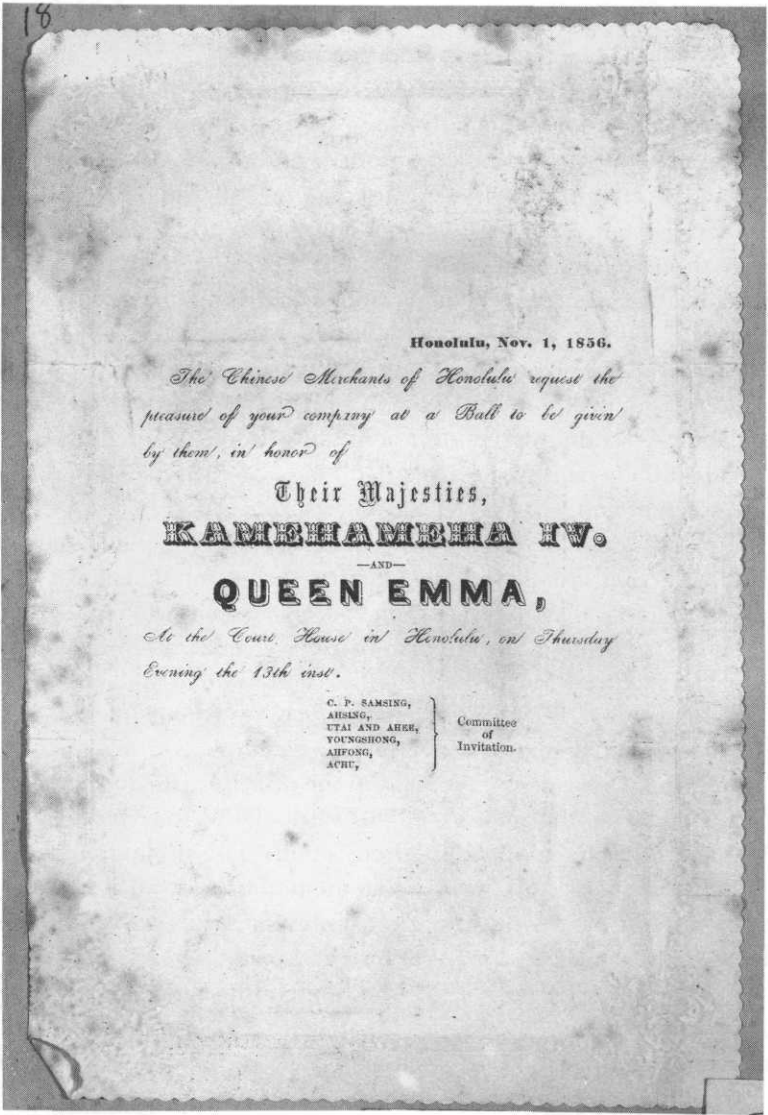


FIG. 1. Invitation to the Chinese merchants' ball in honor of King Kamehameha IV and Queen Emma held in Honolulu on November 1, 1856. (HHS)

selected to dance with Queen Emma in the first set, struggle to keep his feet from tangling. It was obvious that Asing was more grocer than courtier. But one of the spectators, U.S. Commissioner David Gregg, was impressed by the effort of all the men, and he remarked that it was clear the Chinese meant "to rival everything of the kind that has yet taken place."¹²

Within two days of the return of their excellencies from their wedding trip, the Cantonese merchants delivered invitations to their ball. It was soon apparent to them that nearly everyone in Honolulu wanted to attend the November 13 affair at the courthouse on Queen Street. Invitations were shamelessly sought after, and Chun Afong, not wanting to offend anyone, decided with the other sponsors that to further social harmony they would accommodate all those who wanted to attend. He directed Victor, the chef at the Canton Hotel, to roast six sheep and 150 chickens. While Victor made the "substantial" dishes, the Cantonese merchants themselves prepared the pastries and sweetmeats.¹³

During the evening, perhaps a thousand people came to the courthouse, which was nearly twice the number who attended the royal ball held in June.¹⁴ The guests were greeted by hosts dressed formally in "magnificent" Chinese gowns that were "made like (sleeping) robes only closed in the front and open in the back from the waist down so that . . . one could see different colored under robes, dresses of heavy satin, brown, blue and white" which hid "strange beautiful shoes."¹⁵

Also in the reception line were "Mandarins Anglais," four white businessmen who had contributed to the ball in one way or another; one of them was Barnum Field, owner of the dance hall where the Chinese merchants had practiced their steps. For the evening, they dubbed themselves Weong Chong, Weong Kong, Ming Ching, and Chong Fong.¹⁶ The aliases were used in a spirit of good fun and carried no cryptic meaning. The white "mandarins" were further disguised by Chinese dresses, "white pants very wide and shirts . . . all of blue satin," blue caps and fans included.¹⁷ They were charged with the duties of directors general—"a ball being, practically above the comprehension of a Chinaman," explained the editor of the *Pacific Commercial Advertiser*.¹⁸

When the royal guests of honor arrived shortly past nine, the Chi-

nese hosts scurried to form a long reception line and bowed deeply at the approach of their excellencies.¹⁹ The king and queen were escorted to a couch on a dais flanked by Hawaiian flags, where they were seated in front of an illuminated Hawaiian coat-of-arms, which was so large that the figures on it were life-size. Across the room, over the main entrance, was a transparency with the Hawaiian words *Aloha Nui* and the Chinese characters for the greeting.

In the hall, hung "the greatest curiosity," a large octagonal lantern, commonly called an "umbrella lamp" (*sang teng*), "bearing on its sides figures of men and animals . . . capering about with life-like precision." The figures, painted on thin panes of paper, were cleverly set in motion by ascending convection currents, from the lamp inside, that struck the structural vanes of the canopy.²⁰ "Birds, for instance, flew from the ground up, moved on in the air and came down again." A German guest wrote to his homeland, "The large lantern is said to have cost \$400 and they worked on it for months. . . . The funniest thing is this. The Chinese man who gave one of his rooms in his house for manufacturing the lantern, he had not taken the measurements of the house door and when the lantern was finished he had to enlarge the door to get it out."²¹

The ballroom was ringed by flags of all nations, the most "conspicuous among which was the fierce dragon of China," described as an "entire novelty . . . showing, when spread, a monstrous gilt and red figure, a sort of a dragon with wings." Hanging in each window was a large bouquet of flowers "representing vases, a monstrous spider with legs three feet in length, a dragon-fly five feet long, a butterfly of equal dimensions. . . ." Blossoms were everywhere "in the most flowery style of the Flowery Kingdom."

Even the dance cards were in Cantonese. Headed *GEE JIK TUNG SUN KIE YIN*, the card listed the first dance as a *Ching Gok Luk* and the second as *U Chong Gok Lok*. Because each succeeding line ended in *Gok Lok*, whites assumed that those words meant dance or music. But none of the guests had any idea what the other words meant. The mystery added to the fun, and as the evening wore on dancers were exchanging translations. "Schottische . . . Miss Paty," wrote a young bachelor on his dance card, to remind him what the Cantonese words meant.²²

To open the ball, lovely Queen Emma was escorted to the floor by

GEE JIK TUNG SUN KIE YIN

U HAMG HONG LOOK NIN SUP GU LOOK YIK KUNG
CHING

WONG KAMEHAMEHA IV

PUNG

WONG NEUNG EMMA



- 1.—CHING GOK LOK... *Mrs. Beckley*.....
- 2.—U CHONG GOK LOK... *x*.....*x*.....*x*.....*x*.....
- 3.—U CHONG GOK LOK... *Mrs. Beckley*.....
- 4.—CHUN SUN GOK LOK... *Miss Booth*.....
- 5.—TAN SUN GOK LOK... *x*.....*t*.....*t*.....*t*.....
- 6.—JOY U CHONG GOK LOK... *Mrs. Butler*.....
- 7.—SOU MU JOOK TOE GOK LOK... *Mrs. Parke*.....
- 8.—YEU CHUN SUN GOK LOK... *x*.....*t*.....*t*.....*t*.....
- 9.—JOY U CHONG GOK LOK... *t*.....*t*.....*t*.....*t*.....
- 10.—TUE UN GOK LOK... *Miss Mopley*.....
- 11.—JOOK TOE GOK LOK... *t*.....*t*.....*t*.....*t*.....
- 12.—CHONG SUN GOK LOK... *Mrs. Ballins*.....
- 13.—JOY U CHONG GOK LOK... *x*.....*x*.....*x*.....*x*.....
- 14.—JOY JOOK TOE GOK LOK... *Ahkin*.....
- MAN IN *Miss Mopley*
- 15.—TUE UN GOK LOK... *t*.....*x*.....*x*.....*x*.....*x*.....
- 16.—JOY CHUN SUN GOK LOK... *t*.....*t*.....*Schittische*.....*t*.....*t*.....
- 17.—JOY U CHONG GOK LOK... *x*.....*x*.....*Miss Paty*.....*x*.....
- 18.—JOY TAN SUN GOK LOK... ..
- 19.—HOW LU SONG TAN SUN GOK LOK... ..
- 20.—ENHOON GOK LOK... .. *left*

FIG. 2. A filled-in dance card from the Chinese merchants' ball of 1856 preserved in the Dudley C. Bates scrapbook. (HHS)

the handsome and urbane Young Sheong of Samsing & Company, a last-minute substitution for Asing, who spoke English too poorly and danced too clumsily "to represent the whole race of Celestials." The king escorted Mrs. Gregg, wife of the U.S. commissioner. They were followed by other members of the royal family, the foreign minister and members of the diplomatic corps and their wives, British and French naval officers whose ships were on the Honolulu station, and members of the ball's organizing committee, whose crash course in Western dancing was about to be tested. Afong's partner was Mrs. William Parke, wife of the marshal who officiated at the hanging.²³ None of the missionaries in attendance took to the dance floor, not because they weren't welcome, but because they frowned on dancing.

After fourteen dances, supper was served from three tables that stretched across an adjoining hall. The quantity and quality of the dishes was notable, but what most impressed the guests was their presentation; watermelons had dragons and reptiles carved into their rinds, and most amazing were pastries in the form of three-foot-high pagodas and temples complete with doors and windows with tiny balls hanging from them.

With supper over, the guests again jammed the dance floor; "fortunate was he who secured a fixed place to stand and was not exposed to be pushed and stepped upon," complained one man.²⁴ The editor of the *Advertiser* grumbled that the crowd was "excessive" and an "indiscriminate assemblage of all Honolulu." But, he concluded, "if their efforts are an indication of their hearts, they as yet stand far above us outside barbarians in our efforts to 'honor the king.'"²⁵

The ball had attracted every influential person in Honolulu. U.S. Commissioner Gregg, himself a non-dancer, was surprised that so many "missionary people" attended. The following day he noted in his diary: "The whole town is dull and sleepy. It was half past 4. this morning before all the dancers dispersed. I left at 1. The King and his party went about the same time. The Chinese waited till the last and took formal leave of all their guests. They appear to be delighted that their party passed off so well."²⁶ To signify the appreciation of the king and queen, in late November, at a royal ball, a Cantonese merchant (probably Chun Afong or Young Sheong) was seated at their majesties' table.

So unusual was a Chinese ball that the *Polynesian* account of the event was reprinted in *The Friend of China and Hong Kong Gazette*,²⁷

with an accompanying note from a lady correspondent: "I did not know they [the Chinese] were a dancing people. . . ." Chun Afong may have been the first Chinese ever to stage a Western-style ball. His foot-bound wife in China, for whom dancing of any kind was impossible, would have been scandalized.

On New Year's Day, the queen was given a fancy new Boston-made carriage, a gift from forty foreign residents of Honolulu. The presentation was made by a committee of four businessmen, composed of an American, a Frenchman, a German, and a Chinese, the grocer Asing.²⁸ The ball had produced another desired result: Cantonese merchants were now publicly recognized by other businessmen as peers.

Throughout the reign of Kamehameha IV, which was marked by good feelings among Honolulu's racial groups, the public image of the Cantonese merchants remained generally favorable, in part because of their unfailing generosity to the throne and their commitment to civic betterment.²⁹ Chun Afong became the leader of the Chinese community and prospered in business. He married a *hapa haole* woman and reared a large family. When the Hawaiian government adopted anti-Chinese policies following the rebellion of 1887, he removed himself and much of his capital to Hong Kong in 1890 and there invested in real estate, shipping, banking, and merchandising ventures.³⁰

NOTES

¹ Sanford B. Dole, "The Wedding of Alexander Liholiho and Emma Kaleleonalani," *FM* May 1920: 104.

² Pauline King, ed., *The Diaries of David Lawrence Gregg* (Honolulu: Hawaiian Historical Society, 1982) 334, 339; *P* 26 July 1856.

³ King, *Diaries*, 331, 345; *P* 15 Aug. 1856.

⁴ Tin-Yuke Char and Wai Jane Char, "The First Chinese Contract Laborers in Hawaii, 1852," *HJH* 9 (1975): 128-34; Clarence Glick, "The Voyage of the 'Thetis' and the First Chinese Contract Laborers Brought to Hawaii," *HJH* 9 (1975): 135-39.

⁵ Derk Bodde, *Chinese Thought, Society, and Science: The Intellectual and Social Background of Science and Technology in Pre-modern China* (Honolulu: U of Hawaii P, 1991) 280.

⁶ Isabella L. Bird, *Six Months in the Sandwich Islands*, 7th ed. (Rutland, VT: Tuttle, 1988) 34.

⁷ *HHA* 1931: 36-37.

⁸ *P* 5 July 1856.

- ⁹ King, *Diaries* 336; P 8 Nov. 1856.
- ¹⁰ P 18 Oct. 1856.
- ¹¹ P 8 Nov. 1856.
- ¹² King, *Diaries* 362.
- ¹³ PCA 20 Nov. 1856.
- ¹⁴ P 21 June 1856.
- ¹⁵ Heuck to Albertine, 7 Dec. 1856, Heuck Papers, AH.
- ¹⁶ PCA 20 Nov. 1856; Gavan Daws, *Shoal of Time: A History of the Hawaiian Islands* (Honolulu: U of Hawaii P, 1982) 179–80.
- ¹⁷ Heuck to Albertine, 7 Dec. 1856.
- ¹⁸ PCA 20 Nov. 1856.
- ¹⁹ Descriptions of the decorations are all from PCA, 20 Nov. 1856, unless otherwise noted.
- ²⁰ Joseph Needham, *Science and Civilization in China*, vol. 4, pt. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1962) 123.
- ²¹ Heuck to Albertine, 7 Dec. 1856.
- ²² Dudley C. Bates Scrapbook. HHS.
- ²³ King, *Diaries* 362; HHA 1931:36–37.
- ²⁴ Heuck to Albertine, 7 Dec. 1856.
- ²⁵ PCA 20 Nov. 1856.
- ²⁶ King, *Diaries*, 362–63.
- ²⁷ 28 Jan. 1857.
- ²⁸ King, *Diaries*, 378; P 3 Jan. 1857; PCA 8 Jan. 1857.
- ²⁹ Wai-Jane Char, “Three Chinese Stores in Early Honolulu,” *HJH* 8 (1974):34.
- ³⁰ Robert Paul Dye, “Merchant Prince: Chun Afong in Hawaii, 1849–1890.” Paper presented at the Conference on the Chinese in Hawaii, Honolulu, July 1988.