

S.P. Aheong, Hawaii's First Chinese Christian Evangelist

Tin-Yuke Char

The first significant source of manual laborers to be brought to Hawaii under the contract labor system was China. The first group of Chinese arrived in 1852 under the auspices of the Royal Hawaiian Agricultural Society, a private organization of officials, planters, businessmen and other interested people. Thus was inaugurated the policy of importing foreigners to work as contract laborers on the sugar plantations of Hawaii. And thus arrived S. P. Aheong who became Hawaii's first Chinese Christian evangelist and colporteur, a distributor of religious tracts and books.

The social and economic influence of the New England missionaries was strongly evident during this period. As late as 1870, the contracts established between plantations and their Chinese laborers stated: "No labor shall be exacted upon the Sabbath, only in case of emergency, when it shall be paid for extra." During this work-free day, the Chinese in plantation camps looked to their fraternal lodges and clubhouses for rest and recreation. Some Chinese were attracted by Christian church activities, and there was a sincere missionary effort toward their spiritual and social welfare. S. P. Aheong was intellectually curious and responded to the call of the church. He became a convert, and later was designated the first Chinese colporteur in Hawaii.

S. P. Aheong's surname or family name was Siu (variously spelled as Sau, Siao, Hsiao) and his given name was Pheong (variously spelled as Fung, Hung, Phong). S. P. Aheong was a garbled version of Siu Pheong, mistakenly giving initials to his name and then taking the *heong* portion and making it into a last name with the added *A* for the sound effect that was common in Hawaii and in the Cantonese dialect. Mr. Siu himself also used Samuel P. Aheong as his name.

Tin-Yuke Char, an advisor to the Hawaii Chinese History Center, is the author of The Sandalwood Mountain: Early History of the Chinese in Hawaii.

Aheong was an educated man, not an illiterate peasant. His father was a school superintendent in the Ch'ao-An district in the northeastern section of Kwangtung province near the Fukien border. Swatow, about 150 miles northeast of Canton, was the nearest seaport. During the Taiping Rebellion of 1850-64, Aheong was separated from his family and compelled to seek employment at one of the seaports. In Hong Kong he met an agent of labor recruiter Pierce W. Graves and in 1854, while still less than 20 years of age, came to the Hawaiian Islands on a 5-year contract. On his arrival he worked for E. E. Torbett at Ulupalakua and Makawao on the Island of Maui. Later, he was a clerk in the plantation store. At Makawao, he became a pupil of the Rev. Jonathan Green, studied after plantation hours and was converted to Christianity. Once free of his labor contract in 1859, he moved to Lahaina and there he married Naukana Hikiau, daughter of Moses Hikiau of Huelo, Maui. Aheong became a shopkeeper in Lahaina and was active in the Wainee Church at Lahaina under the Rev. Dr. Dwight Baldwin. After almost a decade of church work in Lahaina, he came to Honolulu as a church delegate to the August 1868 annual meeting of the Hawaiian Evangelical Association and made a great impression there because of his speaking talents and ability.¹

The Rev. Elias Bond made this report to Boston:

It was a new feature in our meeting to see a pure Chinese with us as a Delegate from the church in Lahaina. He is a young man, not much beyond 30, able to speak twelve Chinese dialects, a good singer and player on the melodeon, perfectly at home in what interests our Hawaiian Zion and speaking on any topic brought before us with intelligence and unaffected Chinese attachment to our work. You will hear of this man through others and of his engagement to devote a year as evangelist to his fellow countrymen scattered throughout the islands.²

This last reference was to the fact that Aheong had been appointed colporteur at the August 1868 meeting of the Hawaiian Evangelical Association, to start November 1, 1868 at an annual salary of \$800. Although not licensed or ordained, he had already been doing volunteer labor among Chinese and Hawaiians, speaking and writing English and Hawaiian as well as Chinese.

Aheong was diligent in his new religious work. He visited the four major islands of Hawaii, Maui, Kauai and Oahu, including rural areas, before returning to Honolulu and the Bethel Church there. In his report for ten months of religious work, Aheong stated that he had given 75 sermons in Chinese, 58 in Hawaiian, and even a few talks in Japanese.

News of Aheong's missionary tour was carried in both *The Friend* and the Hawaiian-language newspaper *Kuokoa*. *The Friend* reported that during his Oahu tour he visited the sugar plantations, gathering his

countrymen for religious workship. "They gladly received him, and manifested much attention in all the services, as he labored to bring the truths before their minds." He then distributed testaments and tracts and conducted several sabbath evening services in the Bethel Church in Honolulu before leaving for Kauai on his religious rounds.³

Aheong was lauded for his missionary efforts as an assimilated Chinese, but he himself lamented the fact that he was not receiving much assistance from the community. He had helped to establish schools in the Hawaiian language for Chinese and to open a school taught in English in the Bethel Church in Honolulu. However, he reported only a few conversions because "everyone tried to do their own business, to gain money and property, but they seem no care about how their souls would be."⁴ While at the Bethel Church in Honolulu Aheong continued to conduct Sabbath evening services for an attentive congregation varying from 60 to 100 in number. In consideration of the mixed congregation, these sermons were presented in three languages: English, Hawaiian and Chinese.⁵

His written English was somewhat less fluent than his speech. The Hawaiian Mission Childrens' Society library has a folder on the Chinese Mission which includes a manuscript report written on August 18, 1868 from Lahaina to the Rev. L. H. Gulick:

My work was commenced the same day which you pointed out and I hold a Chinese meeting here at last Sabbath. 5 out of 13 Chinamen came. I gave them some books to read which know how to read. One of them says how can a man says that China's idol are not the God because if a man say a bad word to the idol then he shall have pain in the whole body. I say to him that he has by all mistaking, for I am since the great many years refuse the idol: and speak bad work [word] to them but I do not pain in my body at all, and I told him good deal about our heavenly Father is the true God. . . .

Later that year, Aheong wrote from Hilo to the Rev. S. C. Damon:

I am here this few weeks with Rev. T. Coan and family, and try to do my work as hard as I could among my countrymen and native also. I preach in Chinese and in native both every week since I commence to work. . . . I am glad to tell you about the Hilo Chinamen. Some of them been in this country more than 40 or 30 years, and never been to church since they been in these Islands, until I came here. . . .⁶

In 1896, Aheong estimated that there were 1317 Chinese in Hawaii, of which 1201 were men, 76 were women and 40 were children.⁷

Aheong had left his home village, Ch'ao-An, in 1854. Sixteen years later, in 1870, he made plans to return there with his Hawaiian family to tell his Chinese kinsmen about Christianity. At the weekly prayer meeting at the Bethel Church on May 25, 1870, he expressed in English this humble request:

Perhaps this will be the last time I shall speak to you. I expect a ship from California to take me to China. I came sixteen years ago as one of the lower class of laborers. I was a heathen man, but I learned about God, and the Saviour. Now I go back to see my father and mother, grand-parents and brothers and sisters. They all heathen, and know nothing about God and our Saviour. I want to tell them about our Saviour. I want to see my parents once more. Perhaps I come back. God knows; I don't know. I want you to pray for me and for my countrymen. There are 1,500 in this country, and more come this year, perhaps two or three hundred. They come heathen men. I hope, brothers and sisters of this church, you will pray for me, and the millions of my countrymen in China. I go and tell them of our Saviour.⁸

Mr. and Mrs. Aheong, with three of their children, left for Hong Kong on the vessel *Sumatra*, May 27, 1870.⁹ With them were their three sons, Joseph Aki Aheong (born 1862), Benjamin Aming Aheong (born June 7, 1867), and David Aseu Aheong (baptised by the Rev. S. C. Damon on April 3, 1870). Two daughters remained in Hawaii, Pokini with the Rev. Amasa Pratt on Maui, and Julie Apoki with the Rev. Hiram Bingham II in Honolulu.¹⁰

From Hong Kong, Aheong wrote to the Rev. B. W. Parker on July 25, 1870:

We took a very long passage of 58 days from Honolulu to Hong Kong. . . . The captain of our ship was an American. He is a gentlemen, easy and kind. Gave a cabin room nice and clean instead of down in the hold dark hot and dirty. Every Sabbath morning I hold meeting with the 8 Chinese on board. Arrived yesterday Hong Kong 11 a.m. I found some friends here, they invite me to stop with them a few day until I get steamer to go to Shartown [Swatow] my home.¹¹

One wonders whether his kinsmen at home were not disappointed that he did not bring back the proverbial pot of gold.

One year later he wrote to the Rev. J. F. Pogue from his home at Ch'ao-An:

Two months after my return home, my grandfather of 83 died. Since I got home, my health getting poor, taking medicine all most the times. We kept Sabbath meeting and daily prayer at home with my family. My mother is hard to hear any good words of Christ . . . but my brother [Ah Fan] he does not believe the idols now. My countrymen is so hard as ever. I wish I could getting my health stronger, then I would try to go to work, see I can do something good to my countrymen, if God willing. My wife is quite well, our boys are not healthy. . . . We do not forget the Islands all the times, and expecting to go back there soon. . . .¹²

Aheong had received an offer to do religious work in California at \$100 monthly but he hesitated about going to any other place than Hawaii, which he considered a "healthy country and nice people there."

The same day he wrote to Rev. Pogue, he wrote also to Rev. S. C. Damon, who published his letter in the January 1872 issue of *The Friend*.

Aheong never returned to Hawaii. He died in Ch'ao-An, China on June 14, 1876.¹³ His obituary in *The Friend* of October 1876 said:

He was a most genial and agreeable man; and speaking the English language with much fluency, it was delightful to converse with him about China and the Chinese—their history, religions and customs, and his conversion to Christianity. He leaves a widow and two children in China, and one child at Makawao.¹⁴

It took three years for Aheong's widow and family to find a way to return to Hawaii; she and the children were to spend a total of nine years in her husband's country. Finally, late in 1878, Rev. Rudolph Lechler wrote from Hong Kong to the Rev. S. C. Damon in Honolulu that the sailing ship *Crusader* would be taking Mrs. Aheong and three "boys" of hers back to Hawaii, with the financial assistance of the Hawaiian Consul in Hong Kong, William Keswick.¹⁵ By coincidence, the voucher for \$200 sent to Keswick from John N. Kapana of the Hawaiian Ministry of Interior to cover expenses involved in procuring passage for Mrs. Aheong, was sent from Hawaii the same day the *Crusader* sailed, April 1, 1879.¹⁶

The passenger manifest of the bark *Crusader* lists Mrs. Ahiong (Aheong) and three children.¹⁷ The names of the children were not given, but other evidence indicates that those returning to Hawaii were 17-year-old Joseph Aki Aheong, 12-year-old Benjamin Aming Aheong, and Louise Nowelo Aheong, born in China in 1875. One son, 9-year-old David Aseu Aheong, Hawaii-born, was left behind in China. Benjamin, who died in Honolulu in 1891, mentioned in his will his brother in China.¹⁸ David was probably left behind to satisfy Chinese custom that the family line of Siu Pheong in China be assured.

Aheong's property in Hawaii included real estate and personal property on Maui. Apparently Mrs. C. E. Andrews administered his Maui affairs and served as guardian for his daughter Pokini. Included in the probate of his estate is a Ledger Statement by Mrs. Andrews dated September 1, 1875, showing \$520 sent to him in China. Also in the probate file is a copy of the June 2, 1877 appointment of John D. Haverkost as administrator of the estate and guardian of the minor children. Haverkost also was able to send some money to China to Mrs. Aheong. He continued as administrator and guardian until June 26, 1890 when Naukana Aheong signed a receipt for \$595 from the guardianship account and replaced Haverkost as natural guardian of her minor children. This meant only Louise, then 15, as David, then 20, was in China.

Little is known of the boys after they returned to Hawaii except that Joseph became a contractor. Neither had a family.

More is known of the two little girls left in Hawaii.

Pokini came under the care of Mrs. C. B. Andrews of Maui and was enrolled at East Maui Female Seminary at Makawao. According to the probate, the tuition came from her father's estate. She also attended Oahu College, Punahou School. She married Henry Robinson of Maui and had nine children, the first dying in infancy. Many of the eight remaining and their descendents are well-known in Hawaiian society. Pokini was a gifted musician and hula dancer and was charmingly capable of managing the luaus for the Baldwins, her husband's employer. With Princess Abigail Kawanākoā she founded the Hale o Nālii Society of Maui.

Not much is known of Julia Apoki other than that she married Daniel Poki.

Louise, after her return from China, was also enrolled at East Maui Female Seminary and then was graduated from Normal School in Honolulu. She served as a teacher and principal at Pauoa Elementary School in Honolulu for 43 years and initiated the planting of many *ilima* and *lokelani* or cottage roses, on the school grounds. She married William Lucas. They had no children.

In Makiki Christian Cemetery at Pensacola and Wilder Avenues is the family plot of the Aheong family, marked by several monuments.

One is a large square stone pillar, standing in the center of the plot, with the following inscriptions:

[front]	[on right side]	[on back]
MOTHER		
Naukana Hikiau	Jos. A. Aheong	Ben A. Aheong
wife of	1862-1921	Born
Rev. S. P. Aheong		At Lahaina
born August 9, 1847		June 7, 1867
died at Paia		Died
June 27, 1891		Aug. 31, 1891
AHEONG		

At one side is a smaller, flat marble stone with these inscriptions:

LOUISE AHEONG LUCAS
Feb. 2, 1875—Oct. 31, 1938
.....
WILLIAM LUCAS
Apr. 23, 1870—Sept. 24, 1944

To the rear are three small, weathered stones with the words:

MOTHER [this perhaps was placed before the large pillar was erected]

Ake [Joseph Aki Aheong]

Aming [Benjamin Aming Aheong]

An Aheong Family Tree has been constructed for this interesting Chinese-Hawaiian family. The author is indebted to Kulamanu Lyons for making corrections and additions to the following portion of her family's genealogy.

AHEONG FAMILY TREE

S. P. Aheong (1838?-1876, June 14)	m. 1861?	Naukana Hikiau (1847-1891, June 27)
---------------------------------------	-------------	--

DESCENDANTS

Joseph Ake (Aki), 1862-1921	single, never married, listed in 1896 Honolulu Directory as contractor; lived at 112 Robello Lane, near Liliha and King Sts., as did sister Louise.
Pokini, 1864?-1937 m. Henry P. Robinson buried at Oahu Cemetery, Nuuanu	Children: 1) Henry P., Jr., died in infancy. 2) John Adams. 5) Henry P., Jr. 4) Alice m. Lum Inn; their daughter Kulamanu legally adopted by Pokini. Kulamanu m. Auwae N. Kepoikai "Splash" Lyons, Waikiki musician. 5) Selden Hikiau. 6) Alvin K. who adopted name "Aming" to play on Chinese Baseball Team. 7) Thomas R. Foster who adopted name "Aheong" to play on Chinese Baseball Team. 8) Louise Naleileihua Onahena 9) James Colville.
Benjamin Aming, 1867-1891, Aug. 31	Did not marry. Property given to brother Joseph as devisee and executor.
Julia Apoki, 1869?- m. Daniel Poki	baptized April 3, 1870 by the Rev. S. C. Damon, in Honolulu; left in Honolulu with Rev. Hiram Bingham II when Aheong went to China, May 27, 1870.
David Aseu, 1870?-	baptized April 3, 1870 by the Rev. S. C. Damon in Honolulu; left in China, 1879.
Louise Nowelo, 1875-1938 m. William Lucas	teacher and principal at Pauoa Elementary school, Honolulu for 43 years; attended Maunaolu (East Maui Female Seminary) and Honolulu Normal School; no children.

NOTES

- ¹ F, July 7, 1868. See also: Abertine Loomis, *To All People* (Honolulu, 1970); and "Chinese Christian Mission Work in Hawaii Begins 1868 A.D." an unpublished manuscript made available by its author the Rev. Dennis A. Kastens of Aiea, Hawaii.
- ² Ethel M. Damon, *Father Bond of Kohala* (Honolulu, 1927), pp. 210-211.
- ³ F, May 1, 1869.
- ⁴ F, January 1, 1870.
- ⁵ PCA, July 16, 1869.
- ⁶ F, December 1868.
- ⁷ F, July 1, 1869.
- ⁸ F, June 1870.
- ⁹ Passenger Lists, May 27, 1870, Outbound, *Sumatra* (AH)
- ¹⁰ Rev. A. Pratt to Rev. H. Bingham II, HEA mss., 1868-1873, Chinese dept.: Evangelists. (HMCS)
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*
- ¹² *Ibid.*
- ¹³ Letter in Chinese from Aheong's only brother, Ah Fan, dated June 14, 1876, to the Andrews family, verifying Aheong's death. In Probate 778, 2nd Circuit Court. (AH)
- ¹⁴ F, October 1876.
- ¹⁵ F, March 1879.
- ¹⁶ Kapena to Keswick, April 1, 1879, IDLD.
- ¹⁷ Passenger Lists, April 1, 1879, Inware, *Crusader*. (AH)
- ¹⁸ Probate 2754, 1st Circuit Court. (AH) Also unpublished notes of Prof. Carl T. Smith of the Chinese University of Hong Kong.