

Nancy Y. W. Tom, *The Chinese in Western Samoa, 1875-1985*. Apia: Western Samoa Historical and Cultural Fund, 1986. Pp. viii, 112, map, tables, illus., bibliography.

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Nancy Tom's book on the Chinese in Samoa is a modest contribution to the historiography of Asian immigrant communities in the Pacific. Although a few individual Chinese lived in Samoa in the nineteenth century, they did not start arriving in numbers until 1903 to work on newly developed cacao plantations. Between then and 1934 almost seven thousand Chinese laborers were brought to present-day Western Samoa, and like most Asian migrants in the Pacific, and elsewhere, they faced restrictions and disabilities, both social and legal, in their new home. The political and administrative aspects of their complex story have already been dealt with in a thesis by D. R. Haynes (1965). Tom, by contrast, is more concerned with the human dimension of her subject and there are some moving passages that successfully convey the hopes and anxieties of individual Chinese, and which breathe a sense of life into parts of the book.

Tom explains that her documentary research was limited to sources in Samoa itself. She has largely relied on reminiscences from elderly Chinese in Samoa and contemporary Samoan newspapers; good use has been made of the latter source. This research was initially conducted in 1973 when she first went to live in Western Samoa and "a mimeographed paper" resulted; her return to the country in late 1984 "provided an excellent opportunity to revise, expand and update my original manuscript" into its present form (p. vii), It is therefore understandable

that Tom has not been able to consult the New Zealand government material used by Haynes in the National Archives of New Zealand, much less the records of the German Colonial Office in the Deutsches Zentralarchiv in Potsdam. The next best thing would have been to consult two important articles on Chinese labor during the German period (1900-1914) that are firmly based on these official German records (Firth 1977; Moses 1973). The whole question of Chinese labor during the German regime is very complicated and Tom might have come to grips with this part of her topic with the help of these two articles-- although she does in fact quote from Firth's article (compare p. 82 with Firth 1977: 171-172) even if she does not acknowledge having used these works. This in itself is perhaps neither here nor there. It is less evident why Tom's chapter on German Samoa is so wide of the mark when she had a key secondary source at her disposal.

The overall result is a book that is very thin in many respects and essentials. Her purpose was to tell a human story, which is laudable given that so much written about labor migration is couched in impersonal terms. It is not being suggested that Tom should have replicated the existing state of scholarship or forced herself into the same grooves, but her general lack of concern with the political contexts and wider circumstances that shaped the private and working lives of the Chinese in Samoa impairs the value of her well-written narrative. The result is a book that is very partial in its coverage, partly because of the author's single-mindedness to tell a human story and partly because she was less than assiduous in tracking down easily obtainable secondary sources (e.g., O'Connor 1968) that would have plugged some of the gaps.

Where this book goes beyond existing accounts of the Chinese in Samoa is in the use of oral testimony, which often reveals details that no document is likely to tell. In its combined use of written sources and oral evidence, *The Chinese in Western Samoa* adopts the same basic approach as the monograph on plantation workers in Hawaii by Ronald Takaki (1983). Both he and Tom are descendants of immigrant workers to Hawaii and perhaps for this reason their respective books recreate the drama of individual experience with such feeling. But the similarities should not be pushed too far. Takaki was less reliant on oral testimony and was more far-ranging and competent in his use of written sources. And what is one to make of this disclaimer in Tom's foreword (p. vii): "Because the ideas gathered were collated and then portrayed in **COMPOSITE** form, fictitious names were used in most cases. Hence, unless indicated otherwise, any similarity to persons living and deceased is purely coincidental. Historical accuracy was clearly intended and any

inaccuracies found are regretted"? The many doubts that this strange statement, whatever it means, raises about veracity might have been resolved by the simple expedient of footnote referencing.

The Chinese in Western Samoa was evidently written in celebration of the Chinese community in that country. Every migrant community in the Pacific probably needs a usable past as a focal point for their tenuous identity. Warm-hearted and compassionate, Tom's book has few scholarly pretensions, and is the worse for it. There need not be a disjunction between "popular history" and "academic history." The book would have better served its local audience, as well as its potentially wider readership, had it been more attuned to the academic conventions and methods that amateur historians and undergraduates alike seem to find so tedious.

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