

THE ARRIVAL OF THE CHINESE IN JAMAICA AND THEIR IMPACT ON JAMAICAN SOCIETY

The Chinese first arrived in Jamaica on July 31, 1854 on the ship, *Epsom*, after a three-month voyage. They left Hong Kong with 267 men; however, 43 died at sea and more soon after arrival.

Another group from Panama came in November 1854 with 195 men on the *Vampire*. They were sent by the Panama Railroad in exchange for Jamaican workmen; however, they died out quickly due to disease and the harsh conditions.

Between 1864 and 1870 an additional 200 Chinese came from Trinidad and British Guiana on three-year contracts. They planted coconuts, bananas, and sugar cane in Jamaica on a large scale, while others set up small shops.

In subsequent years, only a small number came to Jamaica. However, on July 12, 1884, 680 indentured workers arrived in Jamaica on the *Prinze Alexander*. On arrival, they were bound to work for a period of five years on a specific estate for fixed wages of 300 pounds per month. They could not travel beyond two miles of the estate without a pass. Some of these indentured labourers left the plantations, but many completed their contracts and went on their own as soon as they could.

FREE IMMIGRANTS

The 20th century saw the arrival of free Chinese immigrants, some of whom grew rice and became involved in market gardening. The vast majority, however, found their niche in the establishment of small grocery shops islandwide, which escalated to the point where the food retail trade became almost synonymous with the local 'Chiney shop'.



A Chinese grocery shop in Jamaica (Source: www.google.com.jm/chinese grocery shop in Jamaica)

The Chinese presence became so pervasive in rural Jamaica that it was believed that no village could prosper if it did not have a Chinese shop. The Chinese family dwelling usually formed part of the shop, so purchases could be made on Sundays, holidays, and late at nights when the shops were officially closed. The shops won popularity as the proprietors catered to the poor, gave credit, and sold goods in very small amounts. Some shop owners were willing to barter shop goods in exchange for local produce, which aided the poor farmer without ready cash.

In the early days, few Chinese women emigrated and many of the Chinese men married Jamaican women. This allowed them to connect with Jamaicans and added to the racial mixture of the country. However, many never lost contact with their homeland and, as they grew more prosperous, were able to bring wives and family members to Jamaica from China or Hong Kong or return home.



An early Chinese family in Jamaica (Source: [www.google.com.jm/early Chinese](http://www.google.com.jm/early%20Chinese) families in Jamaica)

By the 1940s, the Chinese in Jamaica had established a Chinese language newspaper, a school, and a community centre – the Chinese Athletic Club in Kingston – as well as benevolent societies.

The 1950s saw the entry of the Chinese into the white banking world. Chinese tellers broke the colour bar by being among the first non-whites to be employed behind the counters in the British and Canadian banks of colonial Jamaica.

Chinese entrepreneurship also blossomed during this era, with some of the small Chinese grocery shops advancing to become supermarkets. The Chinese also became active in the development of other businesses, such as bakeries, aerated water factories, ice cream parlours, restaurants and catering, laundries, hardware stores, dry goods stores, bars and taverns, haberdasheries, and wholesale groceries.

Today, the Chinese represent approximately 1.2 per cent of the Jamaican population. Though a very small proportion, their impact on Jamaican society has been great, especially in the development of commerce in the island. Many Chinese Jamaicans have also earned recognition in the country's civic, industrial, political and cultural life and, since the 1960s, there has been an increase in Chinese professionals.