

CHINESE INTEGRATION IN TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO

By Sharon Ali Aziz

Trinidad and Tobago has long been recognised as a multi-ethnic society with a symbiotic character. The integration of Chinese immigrants offers a striking example of this dynamic. The first arrivals came as indentured labourers in 1806. Although the plan to use them as a replacement labour force ultimately failed, migration from China continued, mainly from Guangdong Province. Around the same period, similar movements took place in Cuba and Panama, as Spanish colonial authorities also brought Chinese workers to their Caribbean and Latin American territories.

One signal of integration can be observed in the shifting terms of reference: from “the Chinese from China,” to “the Chinese,” to “Chinese Trinidadian,” and eventually to simply “Trinidadian” (Tudoroiu and Ramlogan, 2022). By the early twentieth century, many migrants had become professionals in the Caribbean and in Britain.

Social mobility in Trinidad was somewhat easier than in parts of the Americas. Several factors contributed to this.

The conditions of British colonial society as early as the 1910s facilitated economic success in commerce. Employment opportunities requiring specialised skills became available through the British education system. In addition, creolisation occurred through interracial marriages. During the early 20th century, the Chinese Nationalist Party actively sought to maintain and strengthen its ties with Chinese residents in Trinidad and Tobago.

The Chinese community in Port of Spain experienced growth and development in the 1920s and 1930s, although overall migration had slowed compared to the 19th century. Within the community, social structures emerged along lines of language, generation, class, and political allegiance—whether to the British colonial authorities or to China. During this period, integration into Trinidad’s upper-middle-class society was so significant that many Trinidadians today have Chinese ancestry.



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