

From Port to Chinese Shops: Lingnan Commercial Culture and Chinese Retail Localization in the Caribbean

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores how Lingnan commercial culture was transmitted and localized through Chinese retail network in the Caribbean from the late nineteenth to the early twentieth century. With historical materials, ethnographic records, and literary texts, it tries to sort out the movement of Guangdong migrants from planting labor to small commerce. The Chinese shop helped migrants settle and earn a living in the Caribbean. It worked as a daily mechanism, embedding migrants in local economies by providing ordinary goods, credit, long hours service, family labor, and customer contact. Kin sponsorship, native-place ties, apprenticeship, rotating credit, schools, and benevolent associations helped these retail networks to grow across different islands and generations. Therefore, the Lingnan characteristics of the shops lay in their flexible commercial practices rather than in fixed cultural symbols.

KEYWORDS

Chinese Shops; Lingnan Commercial Culture; Chinese in the Caribbean.

1. INTRODUCTION

By the early decades of the twentieth century, the Chinese shop had become one of the most familiar, and most contested features of commercial life across the Caribbean ([1]: pp.42-43). It appeared in port cities, rural market districts, plantation hinterlands and harbor-front streets. It sold salt fish, cornmeal and whatever else a neighborhood needed. It also brought migrants from southern China into daily contact with Afro-Caribbean customers, East Indian competitors, colonial tax collectors, and a wider port economy. In Trinidad, Chinese merchants who had arrived as contract laborers were among the major commercial figures of Port of Spain. In Jamaica, the association between “Chinese” and “shopkeeper” is so close that the two terms became nearly the same in popular words. Thus, the shop was not simply where these migrants worked, it was also where they settled.

So, this paper tries to explore what kind of settlement the Chinese shop made possible, and why. Existing studies has done considerable work on this question but distributed unevenly. Economic historians have documented with precision how Chinese migrants came to dominate small retail across the region: Levy’s archival study traces the mechanics of Chinese grocery dominance from the 1880s ([2]), while Look Lai and Tan’s comparative volume situates this pattern across multiple colonial territories ([3]) and Palma and Montt Strabucchi map the geographic and commodity concentration of Chinese enterprise ([4]). A less developed line has approached the shop from cultural and literary angles, examining inter-island mobility and cultural adaptation, and how the shop functioned as a contested space in Caribbean fiction and community life ([1, 5, 6]). What this study has left largely unexplored is the cultural interior of these shops, specifically the ways in which the kinship networks, credit practices, commercial habits, and associational forms that migrants carried

from Guangdong were not simply preserved in the Chinese diaspora but actively renegotiated through contact with Caribbean port-market life. This paper addresses this gap by treating the Chinese shop as both a business and a place where migrants adapted Lingnan culture to Caribbean local life.

The difference between “Chinese” and “Lingnan” needs a brief clarification. Most Chinese migrants who arrived in the Caribbean from the nineteenth to the early twentieth century came from Guangdong Province, the heartland of Lingnan culture. Many came from counties in the Pearl River Delta or from Hakka-speaking communities in northeastern Guangdong ([7]: p. 2). Lingnan commercial culture, shaped by centuries of maritime trade, river mobility, and entrepôt commerce, centered on Guangzhou, and later Hong Kong. It carried several recognizable practices. Apprenticeship and kinship chains passed commercial knowledge across generations. Rotating credit associations and native-place guilds helped mobilize capital within trusted communities. Mutual-aid associations also played an important role. Scholars have explained these associations with the broader relational logic of *wu yuan* (五缘), five bonds of kinship, native place, trade, faith, and material interest, which are regarded as ties sustaining social interpersonal relations ([8]: p. 1). It is these specific Lingnan features, instead of a generic “Chinese work ethic”, that this paper tries to trace in the Caribbean context.

2. PORT MOBILITY AND THE FORMATION OF CHINESE RETAIL NETWORKS

The Chinese shop emerged from a history of coerced movement before it became a space of commercial settlement. In the nineteenth century, following the abolition of slavery in British Caribbean, colonial authorities tried to find new sources of plantation labor, and Chinese migrants, who came mainly from Guangdong Province, entered this system through Macao and Hong Kong. Cuba absorbed the largest percentage of Chinese migrants after the first indentured laborers arrived in 1847, while British Guiana, Trinidad, Jamaica, and Dutch Guiana formed a smaller but interconnected field of migration extending across the British and Dutch Atlantic alike ([4]: pp. 186-87). These destinations had both plantation economies and harbors. Each endpoint along the labor migration route was also a port.

This connection between migration routes and port cities had important effects. Port cities mattered already to Chinese migrants before many of them became urban merchants. At first, they were part of the physical machinery of colonial management, where ships arrived, contracts were signed, and laborers were registered before being sent to plantation districts. The same system, however, also served purposes that colonial authorities could not fully anticipate. News about working conditions, commercial opportunities and relatives who had settled in other colonies passed through the ports. Merchants, middlemen, warehouses, and transport links made it easier to find work and move between plantation estates. Chinese migrants did not always remain in the colony of their original contracts. They moved among Port of Spain, Kingston, Havana, Paramaribo and other Caribbean ports more frequently than the original labor contracts had foreseen. Intra-Caribbean mobility soon became as important as the original transoceanic voyage. Look Lai notes that between 1872 and 1887, about 3000 Chinese left British Guiana after the end of their indentureship, to other places like Trinidad, Suriname, Cayenne, and Colon ([9]: p. 210). There is no doubt that it's the Caribbean geography which encouraged this mobility, but the migrants' earlier experience may also have played a part. Many came from Lingnan communities where seasonal labor movement, coastal trade, and travel along river networks were already common. Their circulation across the Caribbean was therefore totally a familiar spatial logic but in new waters.

The ability to change from plantation laborers to small businessmen rested on an economic background specific to Lingnan rural society. In Guangdong farming communities, agricultural smallholding had long coexisted with petty trade. It was a common practice for farm families to supplement their income through craft production or market exchange, bringing surplus produce to

nearby towns. In this process, they gained practical familiarity with bargaining and price negotiation ([2]: p. 33). Hakka migrants who formed the dominant group in Jamaica and British Guiana brought to this general Lingnan background a further history of inter-regional mobility and occupational flexibility, which developed over generations of movement across southern China. Besides these practical competencies, their migration was also influenced by commercial motives. Migration from Guangdong carried stigma. Until 1894, it was legally penalized, those who left therefore hoped to return with a financial success which could redeem the stigma and benefit the family. Residence abroad was viewed, from the beginning, as a choice of accumulating wealth, not settlement. Among the occupations available in the colonies, retail commerce offered the most direct path to capital, while agricultural wage labor, however familiar in practice, offered the least ([2]: pp. 33-34). When plantation contracts were expired, or conditions became intolerable, many migrants turned to shopkeeping. It was not an unexpected choice, but a near-inevitable result of the commercial habits and financial pressures that had first driven them to leave home.

The decisive transition occurred during the 1870s and 1880s, though the precise time varied by colony. In Trinidad, Chinese migrants who had left the sugar estates moved into market gardening and the retail grocery trade, becoming a middleman between import merchants and consumers. Those who settled along the cocoa belt developed a similar commercial role, mediating between small rural producers and export merchants based in the port ([5]: p. 9). From the 1880s onward, this commercial transition was reinforced by a new phase of Chinese migration to Trinidad. Many newcomers arrived as merchant apprentices, not as sugar workers. Several hundred others came from neighboring colonies, especially British Guiana, after completing their indentureship. Trinidad in the 1880s and 1890s was regarded as offering favorable conditions for the rise of a small Chinese shopkeeper and trader class ([10], pp. 60-61). The Chinese grocer and cocoa dealer who emerged from this process occupied a distinctive position: they connected countryside to waterfront, small producer to exporter, household consumption to international trade.

Jamaica followed a similar path. Bryan identifies the first wave of Chinese migration to Jamaica, from 1854 to 1886, as plantation labor migration, while the second wave, from 1900 to the 1940s, was “primarily an immigration of businessmen” ([11]: p.15). By the early twentieth century, new arrivals were entering an expanding Chinese commercial sector in which successful Chinese merchants “invited their relatives to come to the island where, after the necessary apprenticeship, they entered business on their own account” ([11]: p.16). The same pattern appeared across the Spanish Caribbean. In Cuba, former contract laborers and later free migrants from Guangdong moved from plantation agriculture into small enterprises in Havana and provincial towns ([4]: 186). In Suriname, a smaller migration stream followed Dutch colonial routes. It also moved from indentured labor into retail commerce. By the early twentieth century, chain migration from Hakka-speaking communities in eastern Guangdong had helped create a Chinese retail sector, in which “relatives and coregionalists were employed in the corner shops or supermarkets to learn the ropes of the retail business and acquire a basic command of Sranantongo, the Surinamese lingua franca” ([12]: p. 190). Scale and timing differed from colony to colony, but the basic sequence was similar. Migrants entered through maritime routes and first worked under plantation labor systems and later changed to commercial settlement.

3. DAILY LIFE IN A CHINESE SHOP: GOODS, CREDIT, AND LOCALIZATION

If we say that port cities enabled spatial mobility across the Caribbean, then we could also say that it was the shop that enabled local settlement. The Chinese shop was more than a space Chinese migrants obtained after leaving the plantation. It was a mechanism through which they entered local economic life. Over time, it also made them part of this life. What made these shops significant was the practices that sustained them, like stocking provisions that working families could afford, extending credit

across pay cycles, buying local produce for resale, opening for long hours, and using kinship labor to reduce costs. Through these repeated practices, the shop became a form of daily infrastructure. It connected wholesalers to rural consumers, village producers to port markets, and Guangdong migrant families to Afro-Caribbean, Indo-Caribbean, and working-class customers. By the early decades of the twentieth century, this infrastructure was visible across the British Caribbean, both in market towns and plantation districts. Localization, in this sense, was not marked by symbols. It was built through the small, accumulated dealings of daily commerce.

There are Data showing that Chinese businesses across Latin America and the Caribbean concentrated in groceries and general merchandise, while groceries were especially prominent in Trinidad and salt goods dominant among Chinese Jamaican merchants ([4]: pp. 197-98). The goods sold in these shops were not representation of Chinese cultural identity; instead, they were the staples of working-class life. In Jamaica, Bryan links the growth of the grocery retail trade to the rise of former slaves and their descendants as wage earners and customers. One oral account of urban shopping recalls customer going to the “Chinaman shop” for fish, oil, and salt pork ([11]: pp. 16-17). Chinese shops were therefore centered on groceries, not luxury or special goods, which placed them at the heart of everyday consumption. Customers were drawn not by their novelty, but by their reliability. They knew that certain goods would be there, in the quantity needed, and at a price they could afford.

However, none of these local adaptations remove the Lingnan features of the shop. Shopkeepers from Guangdong brought habits shaped by decades of petty trade in rural market economies. They used family labor instead of hired workers, turned over small amounts of capital quickly, and extended credit within networks of trust. They also kept long hours service, so that customers could come at almost any time of the day. In the Caribbean, however, these habits were also adjusted to local diets and shopping habits. For example, a shop might sell rice cakes and Chinese medicine together with salt fish, flour, and local sweets. Such a shop was not simply maintaining its unchanged Chineseness but was adapting inherited practices of small trade into a new commercial context. Willi Chen’s fiction about rural Trinidad describes details of everyday shop life that are often missing from documentary sources. Su’s discussion is helpful for us to understand the shop as a contested space in which commercial habits become acts of everyday participation. In stories such as *No Pork*, *Cheese* and *Return to Guangdong*, Chinese shop is a space where credit is extended, villagers’ papers are safeguarded, and Afro-Caribbean, Indo-Caribbean, and Chinese food, drink, and conversation meet together across the counter, with friction as well as familiarity ([1]: p. 44-45). Literary description cannot replace business records, but it records the social life happening every day in the shop in ways that statistics alone cannot.

For customers who lived from payday to payday, buying on credit mattered as much as price. Chinese grocers in Jamaica regularly extended credit, which was also one of the most important mechanisms through which Chinese shops became part of local life. They sold provisions in very small quantities and kept prices low enough to serve customers with little cash on hand. Jacquelin calls these practices the “farthing trade”. In this system, goods were divided into the smallest units that poor consumers could afford, building over time what she describes as “a steady and even a dependent clientele” ([2]: p. 46). In Chen’s Trinidad stories, this practice appears directly in the dialogue: “Mark it in my name. Will fix you up payday Friday”, one customer tells the shopkeeper Wong ([13]: p. 54). As Su notes, credit built on “deep mutual trust” made the relationship between Chinese shopkeepers and their customers one of “interdependence and recognition”, not merely transactional exchange ([1]: 46). Credit was not simply a financial practice. Each time a debt was marked and later settled, the relationship between shopkeeper and customers would be renewed and would last beyond any single transaction. In this context, the shop counter became a place where price, quantity, and trust were negotiated every day. It was also there that Chinese migrant families built their connections with the communities around them.

Fixed premises mattered too. Unlike itinerant traders, most Chinese shopkeepers ran their business in a stable location, which made them visible and predictable. Customers knew where to find goods,

where to ask for credit, and in many cases where to leave papers or valuables for safekeeping. Across the Caribbean, the centrality of Chinese shop in daily commerce was measurable. By 1925, Chinese merchants in Jamaica held close to 30 percent of this island's retail grocery licenses, with roughly half of the Chinese population worked in this sector ([2]: p. 41). In Trinidad, Portuguese and East Indian merchants shared the retail niche at the same time, the Chinese presence was therefore less dominant overall. But it was concentrated in the cocoa belt and in the capital's waterfront districts, where commercial volume was highest ([5]: p. 9).

Local embeddedness, however, is not always an easy integration. The practices that made Chinese shops indispensable of local peoples' daily needs also made them targets of violence. Long hours service, low prices, family labor, and the willingness to extend credit were seen by customers as helpful, but by competitors as unfair advantages. In her study of anti-Chinese xenophobia in Latin America and the Caribbean, Evelyn Hu-DeHart shows that hostility toward Chinese shopkeepers was rooted in economic competition and anxieties over their visible success in local retail trade. During periods of economic hardship, Chinese businesses were often described as threats to local livelihoods, which was then used to justify hostility toward them ([14]: p. 85). In Jamaica, Chinese commercial success even contributed to anti-Chinese riots in 1918 and 1938. Shops were "set on fire and looted" ([5]: p. 13), becoming the places "where the desperation, rage and frustration of the locals find an outlet" ([6]: p. 3). Shopkeepers also became figures onto whom wider economic grievances were projected. In some cases, they were attacked by the same customers who had bought on credit and left their papers in their care. The shop was thus both necessary and viewed with suspicion. It was embedded in local life because it was useful, and vulnerable for the same reason.

4. REPRODUCING THE SHOP: KINSHIP, NATIVE-PLACE TIES, ASSOCIATIONS, AND APPRENTICESHIP

A Chinese shop in Port of Spain or Kingston was not simply an individual enterprise. It was also a training site for the next arrival, a credit node for a wider ethnic community, and an entry point into native-place networks back to Guangdong. Through kin sponsorship, apprenticeship behind the counter, rotating credit associations, and community organizations, Chinese migrants transformed the social resources from Lingnan into a retail institution that could be passed on, reproduced, and adjusted to new locations without losing its essential character.

The Lingnan roots of this process can first be seen in the Chinese migrants' places of origin. Walton Look Lai notes that about 96 percent of the Chinese who moved to the Americas in the nineteenth century came from a small area in southern Guangdong near Macao, Canton, and Hong Kong, which is why Chinese West Indian communities were mainly "Cantonese" in origin ([7]: p. 2). yet "Cantonese" was never a single identity. It overlapped with Siyi, Punti, and Hakka affiliations, with county, village, dialect, and surname ties mattering too. In Jamaica, in particular, the Chinese community had a strong Hakka presence. Bryan notes that the second wave of Chinese migration to Jamaica was the largest and most influential, most of whom came from southern and southeastern China, "whence came the Hakka, the primary ethnic group that entered Jamaica" ([11]: p. 15). By the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, these personal ties had begun to shape migration. Look Lai describes the second stage of Chinese migration to Trinidad, from the 1880s to the 1940s, as consisting largely of county, district, and family compatriots of earlier migrants who came as merchant apprentices not as sugar workers ([10]: pp. 59-60). The sugar plantation was no longer their main point of entry; instead, migration often began through a shop which later could offer newcomers work and assistance in settling, while also giving them a clearer idea of life there before they left China.

A new arrival didn't need large capital, fluent English, or detailed knowledge of local customers. He could sleep in a relative's shop, work behind the counter, learn prices and credit practices, and finally acquire the skills of the retail trade in the Caribbean. As Bohr argues, "both ethnicity and economics

played a role in the Chinese network”, which “consisted of shops, credit, and goods” ([15]: p. 53). Employment and training were therefore usually arranged by relatives, personal recommendations, and existing business contacts rather than through an open labor market. Daily work in the shop taught newcomers how to keep accounts, purchase goods, bargain, and judge whether a customer could be trusted with credit or not. They also learned Creole speech and how family members divided the work. Such support came with conditions. Newcomers had to be reliable, work hard, and maintain their place within the community. Economic relationships were also personal relationship. Rotating credit associations followed the same principle. They relied on reputation, family connections, shared places of origin, and the possibility of exclusion from future loans. In this sense, trust was “a necessary condition of participation” ([5]: p. 14). it developed through personal knowledge and repeated dealings. The shop gave newcomers work and a way to establish themselves, but it also placed them under the close supervision of relatives and other members of the community.

Chinese associations provided support beyond the family shop. In Jamaica, the Chinese Benevolent Association (CBA) assisted members in both personal and business matters. Bryan writes that Chinese mutual aid treated the Chinese community as “an adjunct of Jamaica’s commercial world”, and the CBA also “acted as guarantor for new Chinese immigrants” ([11]: p. 20). Over time it acquired more functions, like settling business disputes, sharing information about trade regulations, and helping shopkeepers communicate with the colonial authorities. A comparative perspective with other places will show how widely these associations were involved in Chinese migrants’ lives. In Central America, Robinson finds that Chinese associations collected money for education and funerals. They also helped members bring relatives from China and provided new arrivals with goods and funds. Some associations functioned at the same time as banks, social clubs, translation offices, and temporary lodging houses ([16]: pp. 121-123). In Havana, regional and clan associations offered social, financial, legal, and medical assistance. One migrant from Xinhui went directly to a surname association after arriving. He rented a room there and obtained the documents he needed to find work ([17]: p. 213). In Suriname, the first Chinese organization Kong Ngie Tong and later Chinese associations provide newcomers with housing, employment, and financial services including rotating credit based on shared native-place or personal sponsorship ([12]: pp. 194-196). What these organizations shared, across different colonies and legal environments, was a capacity to translate private kinship into something more durable: even after a founding member died, an association could continue to help new migrants and oversee the growth of Chinese shops. The details of organizations differed according to local laws and the size of the Chinese population. However, the underlying logic was similar: they helped Chinese migrants settle, set rules for community members, and allowed Chinese shop networks to continue beyond the first generation.

Commercial culture was also passed on outside the shop. In Jamaica, a Chinese Public School, founded in 1924 under the Sin Min Association was the only institution on the island dedicated to transmitting Chinese history and language to the locally born children. It was reorganized under Jamaica’s Ministry of Education in 1952 and closed in 1965 due to a lack of funds ([15]: p. 63). Language education had a practical value. As Ho notes, only those children with Chinese language skills were allowed to enter the family business and the wider Chinese community. Knowing Chinese could therefore affect whether they could inherit a place in the shop.

Kinship, apprenticeship, rotating credit, associations’ support, and language education all helped the Chinese shop continue after their original owners retired or died. This system changed as locally born generations grew up in the Caribbean. They attended local schools, have mixed families, and became more involved in the creolized society. The older structures of kinship authority and native-place obligation became gradually harder to sustain.

5. CONCLUSION

The movement of Lingnan migrants from port to Chinese shop was a movement from mobility to settlement. Caribbean port cities received Guangdong migrants first as laborers and later as traders, giving them a more stable way to earn a living and live in the region. By selling ordinary goods, offering credit, and buying from local suppliers, Chinese shopkeepers became involved in the daily life of the neighborhood around them, which made them both economically viable and socially visible.

This perspective might change how Lingnan commercial culture in the Caribbean should be understood. The Lingnan characteristics of these shops didn't come from copying a fixed southern Chinese business model. It was found in the ways Chinese migrants organized work, credit, and community support. Chinese shopkeepers relied on relatives, family labor, apprenticeship, and contacts with people from the same place of origin. Rotating credit and community associations provided money, information, and some other practical help. What made these mechanisms last long was precisely their ability to change, their capacity to be adjusted to Caribbean diets, wages, languages, and racial hierarchies without losing their essential logic. Basic forms of support like goods and credit linked individual shopkeepers to their customers, while schools and benevolent associations helped them maintain community ties from one generation to the next.

However, economic usefulness didn't always lead to social acceptance. The stores that had become necessary to local daily life could also attract resentment, accusations of exploitation, and violence. Their businesses were part of Caribbean society, but their position remained uncertain. The Chinese shop was shaped by its Caribbean surroundings, although this didn't mean that Chinese shopkeepers were fully accepted or completely assimilated. Its survival depended on continued adjustment, family and community support, and close relationship with local customers. Ports had brought Chinese migrants into the region, and shops gave many of them the chance to settle, while the conditions of Caribbean society determined how secure that settlement could become.

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