Even though the planters in Guyana had expressed interest in introducing Chinese labourers since Emancipation, it was not until 1851 that such recruitment first began.

Because of the long travel distance from China, at first Chinese were not recruited since it was cheaper to transport Indians. While it cost a planter 13 British pounds to transport an Indian labourer from Calcutta or Madras, the cost was 15 pounds to transport a Chinese immigrant from any of the Chinese ports. But because of the growing need for labourers for the sugar estates, some planters decided to recruit Chinese especially during the period between 1848 and 1851 when Indian immigration was suspended.

In August 1851, the British Guiana Government agreed to pay the planters a bounty of $100 for each Chinese landed in the Colony. The following month George Booker, one of the sugar estate owners, arranged for the first shipment of Chinese to work as indentured labourers. The 115 men and 39 boys who were recruited were transported from the port of Amoy on the Lord Elgin. The ship departed on 23 July 1852 and after a journey of 177 days arrived in Georgetown on 17 January 1853. On this difficult voyage 69 of the passengers died.

Another ship, the Glentanner, chartered by Hyde, Hodge & Co, left Amoy with 305 men and boys and arrived in Georgetown on 12 January 1853. A total of 51 passengers died on the journey. The same Company recruited another 352 men and boys later in the year and they were shipped from Amoy on the Samuel Boddington on 25 November 1852 and arrived in Georgetown on 4 March 1853, after a voyage which lasted only 98 days during which 52 passengers died. (On this journey, the Chinese mutinied and almost managed to take control of the ship).

Most of the Chinese who arrived during this period were assigned to estates in West Demerara.

The British Guiana Government expressed concerns about the physical quality of the Chinese who were recruited and also about the large number of boys who were apparently passed off as adults. Subsequently, the Government withdrew the bounty payment to the recruiting planters on 1 August 1853.

Earlier that year, James White, who had been the recruiting agent for the British Guiana Government in India, was appointed as Emigration Agent for the British West Indies in China. However, he was dismissed in June of the following year mainly because he failed to recruit any Chinese labourer.

In 1853 also, the British Government had decided to support a government-sponsored recruitment programme, but by May 1854 the British Guiana Government decided to halt immigration from China due to the transportation costs which had increased by over 66 percent and also because of the failure to recruit women.

Resulting from the absence of Chinese women among the immigrants, many of the men established conjugal relations with African women. There were "mixed" children born out of these unions similar to those of Indo-Afro unions, as there were few female indentured labourers. The Chinese proved to be good workers on the estates to which they were indentured for a five-year period. Subsequently, the planters influenced the Governor (Philip Wodehouse) to appeal to the British Government on their behalf to allow the transport of Chinese to Guyana through private enterprise. At first, this was not supported by the British Government, but eventually in 1857 permission was granted for recruitment for a one-year period. Towards the end of 1858 two ships overloaded with 761 passengers, collected from "baracoons", left Hong Kong for Georgetown arriving in March and May 1859 respectively. On these two ships 60 persons died on the long voyage.

In 1858 the authorities in the Chinese provinces of Kwangtung and Kwangsi (served by the city of Canton) began to encourage people to migrate, and this enabled the recruiting agents to finally contract females who were part of entire families. On 24 December 1859 the Whirlwind sailed from Hong Kong with 304 men, 56 women, 7 boys (under the age of 15 years) and 4 girls (under 13 years of age). The voyage lasted 78 days and not a single life was lost.

During 1859-60 five more ships left Hong Kong and Canton for Guyana where 1549 men, 298 women, 53 boys, 26 girls and 11 infants landed.

In succeeding years ships continued to sail from the ports of Hong Kong, Canton, Amoy, Swatow, and Whampoa with Chinese immigrants who included a disproportionate amount of women. The Dartmouth which made the final voyage, sponsored by Hyde, Hodge & Co., started from Hong Kong on 24 December 1878 and after 81 days arrived in Georgetown with 515 passengers (436 men, 47 women, 18 boys, 5 girls and 9 infants). In this group were about 70 Christian converts. For the entire period of 1853 to 1879, a total of 13,541 Chinese landed in Guyana. …… (from: Story of Guyana– The Arrival of the Chinese by Odeen Ishmael)

CHINESE WORKERS ON THE PLANTATION

On arrival in Guyana, the Chinese immigrants agreed to the following terms of employment:

1. Payment was at the same rate as an indentured labourer - $4 a month - with sufficient food.
2. The working period would be seven and a half hours per day, except Sundays and holidays.
3. Free housing and medicines would be provided by the estate owner.
4. One dollar per month would be deducted from the wages for monetary advances made in China.
5. Every immigrant could terminate his contract at the end of a year, on payment, for each unexpired year of the contract, of a sum equal to one-fifth of the amount of the passage money.
6. Every female Chinese immigrant was required to live on the same estate with her husband, or with her father if she was single, and would not work unless she agreed.

These terms were discussed with the Chinese immigrants who signed agreements with the recruiting agents in China before they departed for Guyana. The first batch of Chinese were assigned to Plantation Blankenberg, West Coast Demerara, and to other estates on the West Bank Demerara. Those who arrived later were distributed to other estates, including to a few in Berbice and Essequibo. Working conditions were relatively good on most of the estates, but some Chinese labourers complained from time to time of ill-treatment.

The Chinese came from many regions and they spoke different dialects. They also had varying skills and religious beliefs. Many of them were social outcasts picked up from the streets while others emigrated to escape misery and war. But they were concerned about maintaining their language and forms of their culture, and some of them, who had a relatively good level of education, organised night schools on the sugar plantations to teach the boys writing and singing. Later, they and their descendants, became some of the most successful Guyanese. …… Contributing to the “melting pot” of Guyanese society.

(From writings by Trev Sue-a-Quan: Chinese in Guyana -Their Roots)