

THE CHINESE OF CALCUTTA

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Original draft, later abridged and published in Chaudhuri, Sukanta (ed) 1990 (Calcutta Tercentenary), Calcutta: The Living City, Vol. II pp. 64-64: New Delhi: Oxford University Press

Of all the quaint and colourful foreign communities that have contributed their distinctive hue to the kaleidoscopic variety of Calcutta's life during the preceding centuries, the Chinese stand out prominent, bright and with a rare degree of permanence. For, while the Jews and Armenians have almost entirely left the second city of the Empire, and the European nationalities have dwindled to minuscule numbers, the Chinese have swelled their ranks to carve out for themselves a special niche in the hearts and minds of Calcuttans.

History is not clear on many a point surrounding the first Chinese colony that was set up around this metropolis. While China has sent itinerant tradesmen, peripatetic monks or scholars and curious travellers to visit India at regular intervals throughout history, it is Yong Atchew who is acknowledged as the first Chinese settler in India. The mortal remains of this first Chinaman who came here around 1780, lie beneath a sparkling scarlet horse-shoe shaped tomb on the banks of the Hooghly at Achipur, the village he founded fifteen miles south of Calcutta. Over the centuries, it has become a shrine for all Chinese of these parts to visit at least once, during the Chinese New Year. The Imperial Archives inform us that it was Governor-General Warren Hastings, who granted some 650 bighas of land at an annual rent of forty-five rupees to this pioneer from China to start a sugar plantation and a sugar-mill and also that the first 110 Chinese came here at Atchew's call to work for him.

By April 1782, Yong Atchew had two thousand maunds of sugar ready for sale, along with good quantities of the popular spirit, Arrack, but this enterprise was plagued with chronic troubles. Desertion became so problematic that a 'Warning Notice' had to be issued on the fifth of November 1781, by the Governor-General to deter "several ill-disposed persons (who) have endeavoured to entice away the Chinese labourers in the employ of Atchew, a native of China, now under the protection of this Government". Paucity of funds was the other distress that drove Yong Atchew to apply for a loan from John Company, promising not only that "I am willing to give my Bond for such sum as you may be pleased to advance", but also that "I pledge to bring artificers (craftsmen) of all kinds by the returning ship next season from China,

and the manufacturers of China are too well known to need any comment". Though the loan came and the bond went into the company's safes, Atchew's fortunes never really looked up and he died, heart-broken, a few months later. A letter from the Attorney of the East India Company dated the 8th of December 1783, applying to the executor of Atchew's estates for payment against the bond appears in the archival records. A year later the estate was up for sale.

With the sale, most of the remaining Chinese are reported to have joined their vagabond compatriots, the 'Macao-ship deserters', in Calcutta — a city the primacy of which over other British possessions in India was confirmed by the Regulating Act of 1784. This association of the Chinese with Calcutta that began from the heady days of its adolescence would be steadily sustained, right through the city's youth, maturity and grandeur, to its present day.

Writing about life in Calcutta, Sixty-five years after Yong Atchew's death, Colesworthy Grant would remark that the twenty-five Chinese shoemakers who carry on business from Cossaitolah (Bentinck Street) "manufacture with much taste and at moderate charges". The author would proudly report that " all carpenters attached to our ships in the country service are Chinese" and that " in matters of skill and ingenuity the Chinese mechanics and artizans may claim precedence of all other Orientals". By the middle of the nineteenth century, this community had established itself in Calcutta as a skilled, industrious, sober, honest, and above all, a clean people. Their few vices that shocked the Europeans were their " fearful addiction to opium smoking ... which leads to occasional midnight brawls, mainly over gambling.... with serious consequences". The only western report about the Chinese in Calcutta during this period that one finds difficult to believe, knowing their obsessive endogamy, is that "here they cannot get them wives of the daughters of their own people, but intermarry with the humbler orders of the Portuguese".

This is not to suggest that the Calcutta Chinese were all of one single stock or lineage or that they were all the descendants of Atchew's band. Far from it: almost every decade for the past two centuries had brought new faces from China, both the Imperial and the Republican one. And with every infusion of new blood, the community renewed its cultural links with 'mother China' and continued to develop with fresh vitality, its unique Chinese-ness. In fact, the forefathers of most modern day Calcutta Chinese came to India mainly during the turbulent years of the Kuomintang rule — those precarious decades between the Celestial Empire and Red China. The Second World War and Mao's Revolution also sent another lot to India.

Though small in number — they totalled only 5710 in Calcutta during

the 1951 census, with perhaps a couple of thousand more in the adjoining district of Twenty-Four Parganas — but they were never a community that could be ignored or forgotten. One of the reasons was, perhaps, the community's skill in re-creating 'little Chinas', replete with traditional Chinese temples, dragon-architecture, gaily-painted signboards and festoons in their bold and picturesque langauge with the rustle of red silks and the aroma of Chinese food so temptingly around. 'China-towns' are or were so typical of the emigrant Chinese that visitors strolling around in the Bentinck Street - Lower Chitpur Road - Phears Lane area of central Calcutta would find it difficult to believe, at least till the Indo-Chinese war in 1962, that they were not in some part of China. Not now, but so very true till the sixties, the fateful decade for Sino-Indian relations, when the prevalent bonhomie and tolerance were temporarily overshadowed by border skirmishes and migration — to other parts of the city and the country, as well as to distant shores. Another Chinatown came up in Tangra on the eastern fringe of Calcutta, mainly with its smelly tanneries, until this Chinese locality eclipsed the other in central Calcutta, in almost every dimension. 'Tangra-type Food Available' — the numerous advertisements for Chinese cuisine proudly proclaim in other parts of Calcutta, as befitting testimony of the genuine Chinese character and tastes of the one and only Tangra. And for good reasons too, as every gourmet would heartily agree. The scores of Chinese leather tanneries with their formidable gates and huge padlocks that dot the area are the nuclei around which this Chinatown is built. Though tanneries were started here as early as 70 years ago, the locality grew as a bustling leather centre and a congested but lively colony for the Chinese, mainly in the past couple of decades.

Present estimates would place the population of the Chinese in and around Calcutta — who account for the overwhelming majority of the Chinese in India — as around 20,000. The vast majority are actually Indians of Chinese ancestry, for they were born in India and are legally accepted as Indian citizens. Only between a thousand and fifteen hundred Chinese are really 'foreigners' in the sense that they are registered with the government as holders of British or Chinese passports, or are simply 'Stateless'. They have some restrictions on their travel and on their choice of residence. Among the Indian Chinese, the Hakkas are in a majority followed by the Cantonese and the Hupeys. Mandarin, the national language of China, is also the link language among the Chinese in India.

Leather — its tanning, its manufactures and its trades — continues for over a century to be the most important occupation among the Chinese settled here; carpentry, dentistry and hair-dressing or beauty-treatment constitute the next important professions, followed by laundries and piggeries. With the ever-

increasing popularity of Chinese food in Calcutta and in other cities in India, the fare that is dished out in the Chinese restaurants can hardly be termed as authentic Chinese cuisine. Nevertheless, it is a fact that their Indianised Chow Mein and Chop Suey, have done more to endear the Chinese to the people in a short, swift time span than all the rhetoric of Sino- Indian fraternal relations (Hindi-Chini Bhai Bhai) could ever hope to achieve. The long and endless queues of cars parked in the narrow, labyrinthine lanes of Tangra, outside nondescript Chinese eating- houses, often located in dingy, unhygienic surroundings, speak volumes of the craze of the middle class of Calcutta for this gastronomy. Of late, Chinese entrepreneurs have taken to the export of leather products and have established themselves in medicine and in food processing industries — manufacturing sauces, pickles, sea-foods and the like. Difficulties with financial institutions are overcome with credit and help from within the community.

Money has flowed to the Chinese as never before, mainly from leather and Chinese food. Dozens of Chinese have made more money than Yong Atchew could ever dream of. K. C. Yap, Nelson Wong (now in Bombay), Yuan Shin, Yao Shin, Huan Sen, or Samson are some of those who have made it to big business by the 1980s. Even so, vast numbers within their community are still in different stages of struggle. In fact, migration to Europe, North America and Australia has started taking its toll, as the Western-educated younger generation feels that the scope for employment and trade in India are constricted. Really so, for how many professionals does one see in firms and offices, despite adequate education? Citizenship and allied problems tempt many a Chinese to leave, claims K. C. Yap, the respected President of the Overseas Chinese Association in Calcutta.

Two Chinese newspapers, The Chinese Journal of India and The Overseas Chinese Commerce of India are regularly published from Calcutta. The former is over half a century old and is avowedly pro- Kuomintang where Taiwanese events find sufficient publicity. The other newspaper was started in 1969 and contains a fair doze of local news also. A third newspaper existed till 1963.

These Calcutta Chinese also run four schools, the Chen Kuo, the Mei Kong, the Pei Mei and the Sacred Heart. Clubs like the old Chooney Thong, The Lunar and the Chinese Tanners' form an essential part of the social life in Calcutta where cards, Mah Jong games geniality prevail.

The Chinese New Year is heralded in February with bright lights, firecrackers, dragon dances, traditional music and gay abandon. The ‘Rice Pudding festival’ follows five months later, with the ‘Moon festival’ after

another 3 months, when delicious moon-shaped cakes are offered. All Souls' Day and Christmas are also celebrated, as are the local Durga Puja and Kali Puja-cum-Diwali. Buddhism, Confucianism and Christianity all accepted and it is not uncommon to find rituals and traditions from two or three religions being practised simultaneously. Chinese temples, with decorative dragons and typically Chinese embellishments, like the protector, Kuang Ti, are as popular as the Christian churches, like the Sea Voi Yune Leong Futh and Ling Lang. Chei Twing, the goddess of wealth and Thu Ti, the goddess of the earth are offered 'Pien' cakes and 'Chian Toi' fries, while the ceremonial red candles called 'Lap Chok and the fragrant 'Siang' joss sticks may be placed before any god: the Buddha or the Holy Cross. But the pride of place in festivities goes to 'Sau Chu', the whole pig, large or suckling — faithfully roasted up to its curly tail and served to the Chinese gods on ornamental trays. Needless to say, the delicious Lichi (Lee Cheu), our favourite tea (Chia or Chae) and the essential Chini (Chinese granular sugar) are so 'Indian' today that one may not even choose to remember the first Chinese settler, resting for over two centuries beneath his bright red tomb in Achipur, who is said to have introduced them. But the modern Chinese in India, or properly termed as the Indians of Chinese origin, have not forgotten the old man. Year after year, they visit his tomb in the first month of the New Year, with offerings and candles and joss sticks — for seeking his blessings and for paying homage to the first Chinaman in modern India — without whose enterprise and vision Calcutta and this country would have missed so much.