

THE TOMB OF THE UNKNOWN CHINAMAN

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Fifteen miles downstream from Calcutta on the left bank of the Hooghly, at a village called Achipur, stands a sparkling red tomb, with an uncommon shape and a little known tale. Its brightness can not fail to attract all and sundry who choose to glide along this lazy stretch of the river a few miles before it flows out to the sea. Its horse-shoe architecture with the two ends inclining downwards is supposedly characteristic of Chinese cemeteries. The waves of the river lap dangerously close to the tomb, and had it not been for the embankment built recently by some thoughtful Chinese gentleman, the tomb of the first Chinaman to set foot on the shores of Bengal, (or for that matter, India) would have been lost to the muddy Hooghly. The first Chinaman, in modern times, that is.

Till quite recently, groups of enthusiastic Chinese families would descend near the tomb in gaily decked steamers, playing their musical instruments and clapping their hands to the beat and rhythm of Chinese folksongs and film scores. And they came between mid-February and mid-March, for it was, and remains, one of the few lasting customs among the Chinese settled in India to visit this tomb and the Chinese temple, a mile away. The fireworks, crackers and dragon dances that announce the Chinese New Year around the middle of February, are followed invariably by a visit to the grave of the old man, variously called as Yong Achee, Yong Atchew, Yong Ta Cheu or Tong Acheu. Yong Atchew Chinese, as he signed his letters, was the first recorded Chinese to have settled in modern India, sometime between 1780 and 1783. Itinerant tradesmen, peripatetic monks and scholars as well as curious tourists have come from China to India at periodic intervals, mainly along the tedious land routes, and have also gone back. But Atchew came to settle here and his mortal remains lie a few feet below the bright red horse-shoe tomb, on the banks of the Hooghly.

History is not clear on many a point surrounding this mysterious Chinaman who came to live and die in this alien land. In fact, had it not been for his correspondence with Governor General Warren Hastings, faithfully preserved according to the commendable Mahafez-khana practice of the bureaucracy of British India, the real 'Achi' of Achipur would have faded into the mists of time.

It would appear that Yong Atchew Chinese visited India as a trader and a man of the world, at least a couple of times, before opting to stake his fortune here. India, if one chooses to recall the history of the 1780s, was the India of the three British Presidencies of Calcutta, Madras and Bombay and countless bickering kingdoms. Less than a century ago, an Englishman, Job Charnok, had founded a settlement on the marshy left bank of the Hooghly and though the city was bustling with life, mainly around the Great Tank and a few furlongs to its north, it was nowhere near the 'First City of the British Empire' that it was destined to become. Europeans and Indians of different muluks and languages rubbed shoulders with Eurasians, Armenians, Jews and the odd Persian or Pathan. But no Chinaman roamed the streets except for a few 'Maccao – ship deserters' and as the world knows, ship-deserters were certainly no heroes in a settlement based on maritime mercantilism.

The Company had just about secured its Diwani rights and had not yet consolidated its grip over its Indian affairs, when this Chinaman appeared on the scene in the late 1770s. He seems to have hit off particularly well with the Hon'ble Company, especially with its colourful Governor-General, to be writing the sort of familiar letters that he did. It became apparent that Hastings gave, or caused to be given, to Atchew a grant of land in and around the village that was to bear the latter's name. Atchew, on his part, shipped across a hundred and ten of his countrymen to found the first Chinese colony in this region. Atchew mentions this figure in a letter to the Hon'ble G.G. in February 1782, and after swearing absolute loyalty and everlasting gratitude to his benefactor, states with considerable delight: "Your Honour will, I daresay, be pleased to hear, what gives me infinite pleasure to tell, that this climate is by no means unfavourable to a Chinese institution, having only lost two men of the 110 that I brought with me". The survival rate of the Chinese settlers is sure to have gladdened the hearts of their protectors, worried as they were about the abnormally high rate of mortality amongst the first few generations of English colonists in India □ especially in the inhospitable climes of the Gangetic delta.

Thong Yen or 'Sugar Plantation' is the name by which Achipur is called by the Chinese, even till today. And they are absolutely correct. For it was a sugar plantation along with sugar mills whereby Yong Atchew commenced his enterprise in India. Records say that he had a full 2000 maunds of sugar ready for sale in April 1782. Fermented sugar was

distilled into arrack, and given the ageless popularity of the liquid that cheers, it is not difficult to presume that the sale of spirits earned a tidy sum for the businesslike Chinaman.

But neither his trader's instincts nor his powerful English friends (who issued proclamations in his favour) could avert his financial disaster. His enterprise was plagued by a chronic paucity of funds, for which he appealed to Hastings with nagging regularity. In one of his last letters, Yong Atchew mournfully mentions that unless his Chinese labourers could remit some money home, not only would they and their families suffer, but so also would the reputation of the first Chinese venture in India. This would mean that no more Chinese might migrate to this infant colony.

In the same letter, Mr. Atchew is quick to add that, if the Company is generous to him, he could "pledge to bring artificers (carftsmen) of all kinds by the returning ships next season, and the manufacturers of China are too well known and generally esteemed in his settlement to need any comment on the advantages attending such acquisition". "I am very willing," continued the Chinaman, "to give my Bond for such sum as you (the Company) may be pleased to advance me, and have not a doubt but I shall be able to in the course of a very few years not only to repay that, but accumulate a fortune equal to my wishes".

Though the loan came and the Bond went into the custody of John Company's safes, Atchew's fortune never became equal to his wishes. In a letter dated 8th of Dec., 1783, from the Company's attorney, it appeared that the Company applied to the executor of Yong Atchew for the payment of the Bond from the deceased to the Hon'ble Company. The enterprising Chairman must have expired a little earlier, that is, around 1783, or so. A few years later, an advertisement appeared for the sale of the estate of "Atchepore, situated about six miles below Budge, with all the buildings, stills, sugar mills and other fixtures". The estate was proclaimed to consist of 650 bighas held by pottah from the Burdwan Raj and paying rent of forty five rupees per annum.

But the Chinese settlement of Yong Atchew in India did not flounder or wither away with the demise of its founder. The few score Chinese 'indentured labourers' moved to Calcutta and joined their countrymen, most of whom were either 'Maccao - ship deserters' or escapees from Atchew's farm (against whom the Board at Calcutta issued threatening notices in Atchew's lifetime). Skillful craftsmen and hardy labourers that they were, they survived and prospered in the metropolis,

attracting thereby more and more Chinese over the years.

Oriental cultures tend to weave legends that bind together historical facts with purposeful fiction: they spread the net to capture customs and tradition in so mystical a manner that it becomes impossible to distinguish the strands, or separate the different plaits of religious rituals, social practices, communal necessities and socio-economic realities. Such a tangled web binds the legend of Yong Atchew and his Achipur □□ in the minds and hearts of the Chinese community in India.

On all the Sundays that fall in the first month of the Chinese calendar (i.e. the last two Sundays of February and the first two Sundays of March), streams of Chinese, whatever might be the province of their origin or whichever be their religious faith, flock to the grave of Yong Atchew and to the Chinese temple at Achipur. The annual pilgrimage to their Thong Yen brings the Chinese together and reminds them of the man who brought most of their ancestors to this part of the world.

Long excursions by boats and launches have steadily given way to shorter and quicker drives by cars, jeeps, vans and buses. As the temple comes first on the motorable route, the groups normally halt here before proceeding to the tomb. The freshly painted exterior of this tiny shrine and its satisfactory maintenance belies its relative antiquity. It is said that Yong Atchew and his bonded countrymen used the cool shade of the banyan tree, under which the temple is situated, to meditate and offer their daily prayers. Even if one were to believe that Atchew did not construct this edifice □□ though one may find it difficult to accept this, for Atchew did build quite a few houses, mills, wells and the like in and around Achipur, the temple could easily claim to be almost two centuries old. Visitors often tend to be misled by the comparable modernity of the later additions to the original temple, for it is certain that the beams and bars of these annexes are of more recent times.

The temple has a small courtyard with surrounding walls and is approached by a low ornate entrance. The exquisite Chinese laver described by L.S.S. O'Malley 70 years ago is probably the sand-trough that I saw, exquisite enough all right, but put to more profane and practical uses rather than ceremonial ablutions □□ that is, for stubbing out the last burning ends of candles, joss-sticks and matches. Chinese rituals are marked with heavy doses of luminosity and fragrance. Siang, the Chinese essence and joss-sticks, ranging from the little Sai Chi Heng to the bigger Tai chi Hengs, are lit in such abundance that it becomes impossible for the devotees to penetrate the thick curtain of smoke and approach the idol after

the first couple of hours of worship. For such occasions, the Chinese prefer the red candles with stands and holders, called Lap Chok.

Offerings made on the long tables spread out under the covered porch in front of the idol, consist mainly of rice, eggs, fruits, buns and sweets. The typically Chinese Pein cakes and fries called Chian Toi are placed beside boiled chicken and condiments. But it is Sau Chu, the whole pig, large as well as the suckling, faithfully roasted upto its curly tail and decoratively served to the gods on the ornamental tray, that takes the pride of place. The local villagers possibly do not look upon this offering with equal piety, which explains why the Chinese devotees obtain this requirement from their compatriots' restaurants in Calcutta, rather than lighting their own barbeques near the temple.

The Chinese, many of whom no longer believe in the religions of their forefathers, approach the business of propitiating the Goddess of the Earth, Thu Ti, in a brisk, practical manner. After spreading their varied offerings on the tables for the gods (and their kinsmen) to see, they light their joss-sticks, red candles and incense and bow their heads to the almighty. They kneel before the image and pick up the cylindrical bamboo 'fortune boxes' (Aatheens), stuffed with a score of thin bamboo 'fortune strips'. They rattle the hollow bamboo cylinders fondly, patiently and delicately, until the destined 'fortune strip' pops out. The strips have Chinese characters painted on their flat polished sides and a dash of colour, too. With visible trepidation, or with amusement and curiosity, the Chinese take up the single strips to the priest sitting on the verandah across the courtyard where he exchanges his fortune strip for a bright red 'fortune card' with shiny gold characters. A small down payment is taken by the priest first, before handing over the message of Lady Luck, which may not always be up to the seeker's expectations.

After pocketing his 'fortune card' with a smile or a frown, the Chinese moves around the small courtyard, paying homage to the memory of his departed ancestors and meditating for a few moments in the small but clean prayer rooms built along the enclosing walls. The faded inscriptions on the blackened bronze tablets are hardly decipherable and a couple of ornamental bowls and urns with curious figurines complete the decor. The Gee Hing Church and Club of China town, Calcutta, seem to be taking its maintenance functions quite seriously.

The trunk of the banyan tree is bound by a circular masonry, as is common in most religious shrines in India. Legends speak of this tree

under which Yong Atchew sat with his Indian Muslim wife, Peri Bibi. The local Mohammadans have conflicting stories about their 'Achee Saab' and Peri Bibi, but the memory of the couple appears fresh and quite alive, even till today.

I was shown a simple low mound amidst a bamboo thicket, as the grave of Peri Bibi, but here again, the Chinese versions and local lore do not agree. Some knowledgeable Chinese claim that the site marks the mass graves of scores of Chinaman who, they claim, were slaughtered by the local populace shortly after Atchew's death. History does not record this claim, and I moved away with a lighter conscience.

Conflicts abound in the versions offered by the Chinese themselves. While some claimed that the pilgrimage was mainly to the first Chinese Temple in the first month of their New Year, others claimed it was a visit to the Mu (grave) of Atchew to seek his benediction. One group declared that their rituals centered around the festival of the Goddess of the Earth, Thu Ti, while another band insisted that it was for the Hong Jong Aan, the 'Feast Day'. Both groups, however, agreed that the Big Day was on the second day of the second month of the Chinese calendar (on the 16th of February, this year), but as most Chinese are busy on weekdays, they prefer to bring their families on the excursion on the preceding Sundays, when the sun is more merciful.

A curious incident is possibly worth mention. Yong Atchew, who was of Fukinese origin is said to have introduced tea (which the Fukinese called Tei) to the English lords. His Cantonese labourers sipped the same beverage and passed it on to the native Indians. As the latter groups of Chinese called it Chhaay (the Cantonese name) the Indians named the same drink Chaay, which the English would insist on referring to as 'Tea'. Signs of class conflict ☐☐☐ all over a tea cup!

While Atchew sips Tei with his honourable ancestors in heaven, his descendants do not seem to have done too badly on this portion of the earth. Their tanneries and shoe shops, their dentistry clinics and restaurants, their furniture stores and laundries, all form a permanent and an inseparable part of Calcutta's life. For the thousands of Calcuttans who dream of Chow Mein and Chop Suey, Crab Foo Yong and Pork Mei Foon; for those who must have a pair of Chinatown shoes before the pujas, the memory of Yong Atchew Chinaman will find a permanent fond niche in their hearts.