



The fascinating tale of the one  
and only **Chinatown** in the Indian  
sub-continent

# ON THE SINO-CALCUTTA TRAIL

*By Sravasti Ghosh Dastidar*

The idea of going in search of the Chinese in Calcutta started forming in my mind since I read Amitav Ghosh's Ibis Trilogy. Having had Chinese friends in school, it did not take me long to resolve to trace the origins of the oldest and only well-established Chinatown in the Indian sub-continent. After all, what is Calcutta without Chinese food, shoes, laundries and beauty parlours?

For more than 2000 years, two of the world's oldest civilisations maintained harmonious ties via the silk route. Many a monk and trader followed the route to and fro. It helped spread Buddhism to the Far East and facilitated China's flourishing opium trade with the British. There was also the Indian Ocean that connected the two countries. Centuries of

unrecorded immigration of the Chinese to India followed Fa Hien's travels in the 5th century AD. Calcutta (now Kolkata), being the capital of the British Empire and a port city of eastern India, was the easiest to access from far-flung China by land or sea. Hence, it attracted many Chinese traders and workers. The Bengali words, chini for sugar (sini in Sinhalese) and Chinemati for porcelain chinaware bear testimony to this Chinese influence.

In 1778, Yang Tai Chow arrived in Calcutta from China, to work in a sugar mill and later started a tea trade. However, it was businessman Tong Achi (or Achew) who has been recognized as the first Chinese settler. He landed 33 km from Calcutta, near Budge Budge during the time of the first British Governor-General Warren Hastings (late 18th century). Tong Achi founded a sugar mill and a sugar plantation on the banks of the River Hooghly. Many of his countrymen started working for him. This place has since been named Achipur. The first Chinese temple and Tong Achi's grave still remain, secluded from the public eye but overlooking the scenic river. The Chinese of India visit the site every Chinese New Year.

After the death of Achi, the settlers slowly moved into the



city and chalked out a world for themselves in central Calcutta, in the Bowbazar and Tiretta Bazar areas, which became India's first Chinatown. Most of the immigrants from the Hakka community, gathered near the Temple of Guan Yu (god of war). The numbers increased to almost 20,000 till the Sino-Indian War in 1962. This saw an exodus and Calcutta's Chinese population dwindled by half. Those who remained had restricted movement as they were seen as enemies. Not until 1998 were they given naturalized Indian citizenship. Currently, only a 3000-odd Chinese population remain. A few hundreds live in Mumbai. The rest have moved on to various countries, following their children.

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When I enter the 110-year old Sea Ip Church, I am given a tour of one of the better-maintained Chinese temples. The insides of the shrine are a sad reminder of its glorious days. The

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Chinese ancestral gods are enshrined with care and surrounded by age-old vases, religious weaponry and scrolls. I see the Chinese newspaper, The Overseas Chinese Commerce in India on an antique table. It is still being published in Tiretta Bazar, although the editing office is in Tangra.

The caretaker regrets that many of them have had to leave India due to lack of support from the government. The area, which was once full of Chinese,

is now being taken over by traders of other Indian communities. These people have little or no value for the rich cultural contribution the Chinese have made towards their adopted country.

The Chinese founded the Ling Liang High School (Bowbazar), the Grace Ling Liang School (Topsia) and the Pei May Chinese School (Tangra), so that their progeny would not lose touch with their mother tongue. Most of them had prosperous family-owned businesses in leather goods (especially shoes), restaurants, laundries, beauty parlours, noodles and sauce manufacturing, carpentry and dentistry.



Walking through these gates into Chinatown draws visitors into a world that is vastly different to the rest of Calcutta.



Clockwise: The Overseas Chinese Commerce in India office in Tangra; Chinese ancestral gods in the 110-year old Sea Ip Church surrounded by age-old vases, religious weaponry and scrolls; the Chinese Kali Temple, which draws visitors from different communities; and the grand entrance of the Sea Ip Church.



Chinese laundries are still frequented by many Calcuttans, who are served by amiable Chinese families who speak English, Bengali, Hindi and Mandarin.

The ethnic Chinese of Tiretta Bazar, however, distinguish themselves from those of Tangra. Since the tanneries were situated in east Calcutta's marshy lowlands of Tangra, a throbbing Chinatown grew up in this locality away from the city centre. It consisted mainly of leather suppliers of Hakka origin. The Hakka Chinese owned leather-manufacturing business is one of the major industries of West Bengal. It not only provides employment to thousands in the neighbourhood but also supplies shoes and raw material to most of India's leather-based industries.

In the 1990's, the tanneries were moved 14 km away from the city to the Calcutta Leather Complex in Bantala, due to pollution issues. A sizeable Chinese population has now moved to this part of the city. Here, the decade-old Hsuan-Tsang Monastery (Tiljala) proudly welcomes both Chinese and Tibetan worshippers. What is especially noticeable is the fervour with which Chinese New Year, Hungry Ghost Festival, Moon Festival and the Dragon Boat Festivals are celebrated in all the four Chinese settlements.

While doing the rounds, I notice the quiet integration of Hindu culture with the Chinese. The Chinese Kali Temple in Tangra draws worshippers from both communities. When I question the juxtaposition of photos of Chinese and Hindu Gods on the walls of the Great Shanghai Dyers and Cleaners (since 1926), the shy proprietress relates how from her childhood she has not known otherwise. She, and most like her, have worshipped daily at the Firingi Kali



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Temple in Bowbazar before attending convent schools.

Despite the war and mass emigration, the common Calcuttans accepted the Chinese as their own. In our childhood, it was hard to imagine a laundry, beauty parlour or shoe shop, which was not owned by the amiable Chinese, speaking in English, Bengali, Hindi and Mandarin.

Those were the days when Bata was the only shoe brand available in India. Our school shoes had to be bought either from Bata or from one of the many handmade footwear shops in New Market or on Bentinck Street like Henry's, Willy & Co or Wanley & Co. Many of these outlets date back to the early 1900's, spanning generations of families in business. In fact,

most of the remaining Chinese businesses are as old. The shops are not thriving anymore due to stiff competition from several brands. Yet it is not unusual to sight a Mr. Willy being helped enthusiastically by his convent-educated tech-savvy daughters.

The dentist's clinics and beauty parlours have similar stories to tell. The matronly beauticians are holding onto the bastions while the children are helping them survive. I, somehow, feel more comfortable and confident when my hair is in the hands of these veteran hairstylists, like Rosy and Florence.

The tale of Chinese in Calcutta is incomplete without the mention of scrumptious Indo-Chinese cuisine. It sprang from the kitchens of the dwellers of the by-lanes of Old Chinatown. The householders of Cantonese and Hakka origin started cooking with whatever available items. As with the varied Chinese cuisine around the world, they gradually adapted their style



*Dental clinics and beauty parlours are struggling to survive. But veteran beauticians are holding onto their bastions with the help of their better-educated, tech-savvy children*

will find it hard to accept this as Chinese cuisine.

While some of the old restaurants, like Peiping, have downed their shutters, new ones have opened. Gen-Y has expanded the restaurants in Tangra by taking over the empty tanneries. Restaurants like Golden Joy and Kafulok almost run for a mile and are always bustling.

Michael Hsieh, whose family owns one of the oldest eating-houses of Tiretta Bazar, Tung Nam, has opened a new restaurant Tak Heng in a posh locality of South Calcutta. The USP of all these restaurants is personalized cooking – the owner's family cooks for all guests. Initially, only the women of the household cooked and served food in their drawing rooms, while the elderly sat and read the Chinese newspaper.

Food-lovers throng the Old and New Chinatowns, especially on Sunday mornings (6:30 am to 8:30 am) to treat their palates to delectable home-cooked and cheap Chinese breakfast. The Chinese vendors and their Indian helpers sell an array of items like, chicken and pork momos, dim sums, Shu Mei, sausages, sticky rice, prawn wafers, fried dough sticks, fish ball soup, pok choy, Chinese spinach along with sauces, purses, wallets and diaries! The food is sold under garden umbrellas and kept warm in huge Aluminum vessels.

The few vendors of the Tiretta Bazar Chinese breakfast are, however, a depressing reflection of the glorious days of Chinatown and its residents. Stella Chen's 150-year old shop selling Chinese noodles, incense sticks, sauces, dried mushrooms and a wide variety of other goods, was founded by her grandfather and is like the Last of the Mohicans.

It will be heartening to see the state government take serious measures to beautify the Chinese localities and showcase the Chinese heritage that has become so effortlessly deep-rooted in the heart of the Kolkatans. Till then, let us hope there is no more emigration of these industrious citizens. **E**



*Chinese cuisine gradually adapted to local Bengali tastes. Today, it is synonymous with Kolkata street food, and food lovers throng the Old and New Chinatown streets for cheap, delectable food.*

to the local Bengali taste buds and created the widely popular Kolkata Chinese or Indian Chinese Cuisine.

They successfully owned restaurants, which served spiced up Cantonese sauces to make unique dishes with monosodium glutamate. They coined names like chicken sweet corn soup, chilli chicken, Manchurian, American Chop Suey for the fare. And, mind you, it is always 'chowmein' (stir-fried noodles) and not 'noodles' for the Bengalis. Now, they also cook up vegetarian varieties that include paneer (cottage cheese)! Today, Chinese cuisine is synonymous with Kolkata street food. Any Hakka or Cantonese connoisseur from China