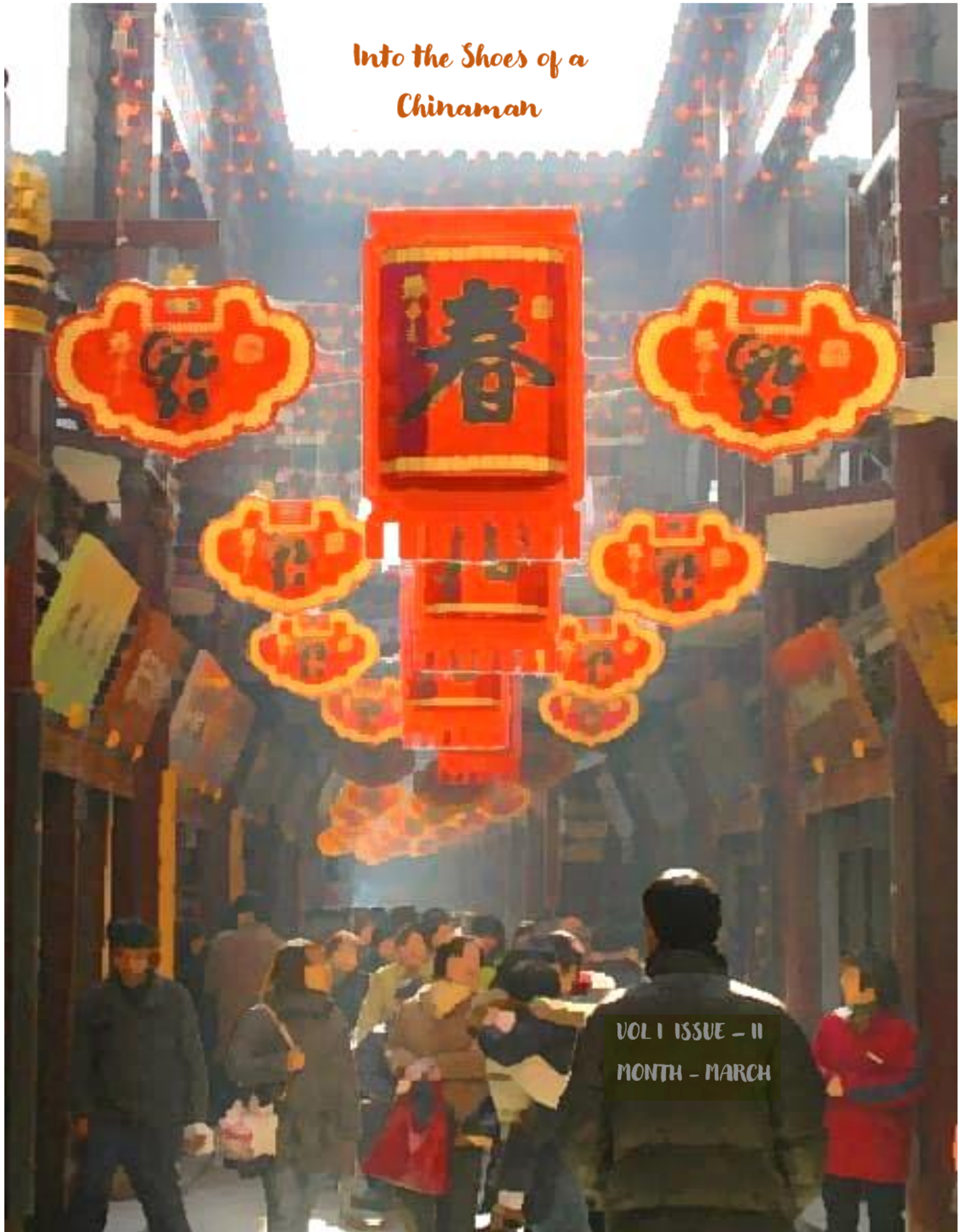
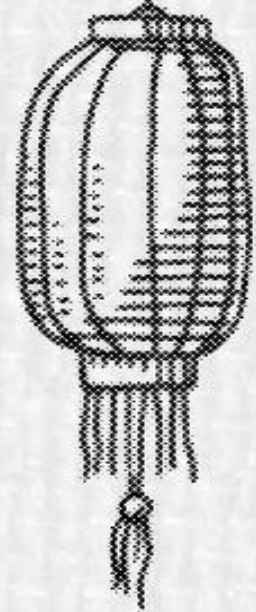


*Into the Shoes of a  
Chinaman*



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*in collaboration with*

**THE HERITAGE SCHOOL**

*presents*

## 'Into the Shoes of a Chinaman'

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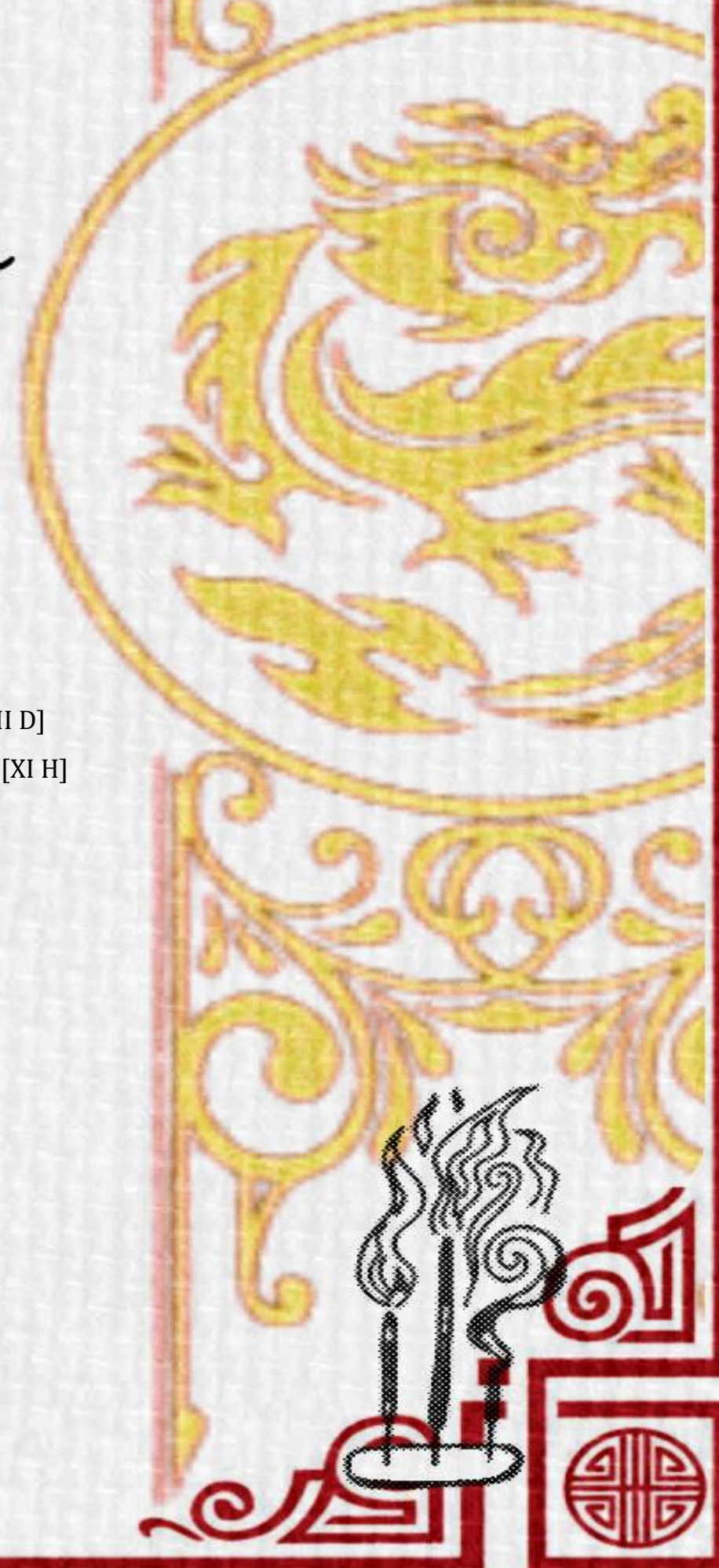
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# Our Return to Tangra

The same mild winter breeze blew through the air. The clangs of the cymbals and gongs filled the streets as the Chinese Lions frolicked happily, nibbling Napa cabbage. We stood there, each with a beaming smile on our face, our adrenaline pumping. Exploring Tangra had been one of the most enjoyable experiences of our lives, and we didn't want it to end. As we turned back to the crowd, we realised that Tong Atchew, our guide through Chinatown, had disappeared. We searched through the swarms of people, but to no avail. Growing increasingly desperate, we began asking others if they had seen him. We approached a resting lion dancer who was taking off his lion head with a sigh. "Excuse us," we said, "have you seen an elderly man with a short beard and small, glistening eyes? His name is Tong Atchew, and he guided us through Chinatown." "I'm sorry," the man replied, "but that's impossible. Tong Atchew was the first Chinese man to come to India, and he used to run a sugar mill here near Budge Budge. He passed away many years ago; you couldn't have met him."

As we tried to get a firm grasp of the situation, the man kindly offered to take us to his office. He introduced himself as Li-Kuo Choong, or Henri, and revealed that he was the owner of "So Asean Food Products", an in-demand brand of fish and prawn crackers, and the unofficial leader of the Shining Stars, a lion dance group. After arriving at his office, he gave us a packet of delicious prawn and fish crackers to express his gratitude and engaged us in a lively conversation.

Us: Can you tell us about your brand, So Asean?

Henri: Certainly. So Asean is a food brand focussing on traditional recipes for egg noodles, veg. noodles, and prawn and fish crackers. Our team has worked hard to refine these recipes and create high-quality products free of additional colours, flavours, or preservatives. While many of my peers went into blue-collar jobs, I used my passion for business and good food to create So Asean



Us: What is your experience of living in Kolkata as a Chinese Indian?

Henri: Growing up as a Chinese Indian in Kolkata, I faced discrimination, chiefly based on my name and appearance. Many have difficulty pronouncing my Chinese name, and my teachers purposely mispronounced my full name to make it funny. Though much of it was good humoured and I laughed along, it could get hurtful every now and then. Additionally, people would make fun of my appearance and my small eyes, saying I looked unlike any Indian they had ever seen. But I was born one and I am as much a part of the country as any of you.

In the past, the Chinese community in Kolkata was very insular and discouraged intermingling and marriage with Bengalis or anyone outside our community. However, in recent times, this attitude has changed, and Bengalis are more accepting of the Chinese community and vice versa.

As a business owner and community member, I am proud to have embraced both my Chinese heritage and Indian upbringing. I strive to bridge cultural gaps through my work and interactions with others.

Us: What changes do you anticipate for the future of the lion dance and the Chinese community in Tangra?

Henri: Unfortunately, I see a bleak future for the lion dance and the Chinese community in Tangra. Many young people are leaving Tangra for opportunities and a better life elsewhere. More support from the government would benefit the community. The demolition of various facilities and the denial of distinction and recognition within the community indicate a worrying trend. I fear that in 10-15 years, this two-century-old community will have dispersed and moved to different parts of the world. Those who remain may feel compelled to hide their heritage to avoid discrimination.

Us: What steps can we take to improve the prospects of the Chinese community in Tangra?

Henri: In my opinion, the first step would be to gain recognition for the Chinese community in Kolkata. This step would involve support from the government, banks, individuals, and NGOs to provide resources, help, and subsidies to the Chinese people. The production industry in Chinatown is still better than the marketing channels here, and China still produces most of our products. Therefore, supporting the industries and the Chinese Indian workers in Chinatown would be crucial for their prospects.





## Meet the Lions of Tangra

The Lion Dance is the traditional dance of China, where performers wear a lion suit and mimic the movements of a lion to bring good luck and fortune. It is typically performed during the Chinese New Year. One lion is usually two people: one who operates the head and the other who operates the body. The dance dates back 5,000 years.

Each Lion dance company is started by an individual who automatically becomes the owner. He manages the group and handles their shows and finances. Following him in hierarchy is the Captain who also doubles up as the main Teacher of the troupe. He must be someone who is trained in all aspects of the performance. He knows how to train school children in playing cymbals and also adeptly teaches acrobatic moves to the dancers. Imagine our delight when we discovered that Henri is the Captain of the Shining Stars dance troupe!

We had been captivated by the lion dancers ever since our first encounter at New Year's Eve and Henri was not spared a fresh barrage of questions...

Us: Can you tell us about what inspired you to join a lion dance group?

Henri: As a teenager in school, I was enthralled by the awe-inspiring Lion Dance performances during the Chinese New Year celebrations. Although the tradition has slowed down over the years, during my childhood, the Lunar New Year festivities in Tangra were grand and spectacular. At that time, numerous children and adults started lion dance groups, such as Fa Mulan, Phoenix, Fitness Club, Legend Warriors, and more. Naturally, this trend inspired us, and we founded our group in 2013. Ahmi Loy owns our group and I have assumed responsibility as the chief teacher of Shining Stars. Only a few groups remain, and the Shining Stars is now the most renowned among them. Fa Mulan was a group of all-women dancers who disbanded when the dancers started moving out of the country to pursue their careers.

Us: How do you feel about your tryst with lion dancing?

Henri: While I enjoy lion dancing, it's challenging. Initially, it was exciting and fun, but as time passed, I realized the amount of hard work that goes into it. Every year, we must sacrifice our celebrations to make others happy. At the same time, our families have grown used to the idea of having to spend Chinese New Year without their loved ones. Despite these challenges, I am grateful for the opportunity to keep this tradition alive and share it with others. We hold the keys to a very rare art form, and it is up to us to pass it on to the newer generations.

Us: What are some crucial factors to consider before starting lion dancing?

Henri: Safety is a top priority since lion dancing can involve acrobatic movements and stunts that require proper training and protective gear. One should also consider the time commitment required for practice and performances, which can mean sacrificing holidays and family time. It's crucial to have a supportive family and community that understands and appreciates the cultural significance of lion dancing.

Us: Could you tell us more about the training process for the lion dance?

Henri: The training process is rigorous and requires dedication and practice. Initially, trainers teach us basic skills and then move on to more advanced techniques, such as playing the cymbals, drums, and gongs and performing the lion head dance. We train for all the skill sets, but eventually, we choose the one we enjoy the most and feel most comfortable doing. It's a choice based on our affinities and interests.

Us: Can you tell us about the preparation involved in the lion dance performance?

Henri: Before the enactment, we have an eye dotting ceremony where we dot the eyes of the lion's head in red. This Chinese tradition brings good luck and makes the lion's head feel alive. In the past, the performers would pull the mane of a rooster to procure blood for the ceremony, but now we use red mercury as a more ethical alternative. This ceremony is a significant part of our preparation for the lion dance performance.

Us: With only a couple of functional troupes left in a city, what future do you envision for the artform?

Henri: The future is bleak to say the least. The new year celebrations that you have been witness to, is a fraction of what Chinatown had when I was a child. Most of my friends have migrated to other countries. This is an art form that is taught through generational training. Even if we have teachers, the groups are disbanding rapidly as the members are leaving. Fa Mulan was a group of all female performers that do not perform any more. And that is just one example. Our owner Ahmi Loy has always been very strict about only letting the Chinese community learn the dance. I feel differently. Art and culture is bigger than race. It should bring us together and for that we need to preserve what we have inherited. I am open to letting everyone learn the lion dance. Or else we run the risk of the dance form dying out in the next decade or so.

We found out from Henri that another young man named Jonathan, along with running his restaurant, Kafulok, was also the head of the performing group Phoenix. This group originally belonged to a person known as Edwin, who is the owner of Big Boss restaurant and the founder of the majestic and graceful dance group, Phoenix. Since 2013, this dance group has been doing exceptionally well. Jonathan held the positions of manager and head of finances. The members of the dance group are not professionals and just perform for the fun of it. Everything they earned was not put back into the business but was rather donated to charity. We could not help but feel optimistic about Henri's ideas and views on passing on the dance form to people outside the community. As we left Henri's factory, all of us secretly cherished the hope of seeing them perform at our school in future.





## A Peek Inside Kafulok and Kim Ling

Henri took us outside his office, and as we stood talking to him, our hair blowing in the already warm February wind, we came to realise just how much Henri reminded us of our old friend, Tong Atchew. He was industrious and hardworking, the first Chinaman to call Calcutta his home, and had built a business out of scratch. Our old friend too had that same sense of industry and the same business-like approach. He has been courageous and adventurous and set up a business in a land he knew nothing about. We walked away, happy to have made new friends in this buzzing city where people rarely have time for each other anymore. However, disappointment at not having found Tong kept gnawing on our minds. The afternoon sun beat down on our heads as we made our way towards Tangra, hoping to find a snack to abate our hunger. Our hopes for finding Tong were fizzling out by now. Henri's parting words to us had been, "I think I know someone like the man you are searching for, He is the head of another lion dance group, Phoenix, and the owner of Kafulok, one of the oldest restaurants in Tangra."

Not having given up hope yet, we ambled idly through the streets around Kafulok until we ran across Jonathan, the man Henri had mentioned. Jonathan had inherited Kafulok from his grandparents, who started it in 1989 and even though business was not what it had once been, it certainly kept him busy. Kafulok had been one of the most famous restaurants in Tangra before the pandemic. However, due to the pandemic, people preferred new and upcoming restaurants that were in more strategic locations. Luckily, they had loyalists who would not go anywhere else, including veterans from the Tollywood film industry. Jonathan had a quiet sense of humour and certainly reminded us of Tong Atchew but he was not our old friend. We voiced our concern and his eyes instantly lit up. Surely his friend, the manager of Kim Ling could help us! Robert looked after five restaurants after all! Being a man of few words, Jonathan promptly started his massive Royal Enfield and led us through the bylanes we had grown to love. We were to continue on our quest after all.

Jonathan's powerful motorbike rumbled to a stop outside a white and red gate with two majestic marble lions on both sides. It was opening time and the workers were in a frenzy. However, Robert came out smiling and seemed unnerved by all the chaos around him. Yes, he certainly was a lot like our friend. We patiently sat at our table waiting for a steaming bowl of chilli vegetable noodles, while the manager engaged in conversation with us. The restaurant began sometime in 1991 and has been running for the last 32 years. At first it was a tannery, but Monica Lieu, known to be one of the most successful entrepreneurs of the community, owns five restaurants: Kim Ling, Beijing, Tung Fong, Mandarin, and New Mandarin. She renovated the place into a restaurant after tanneries were banned in the area. Kim Ling is also known for being one of the first AC restaurants in Tangra, Kolkata. Through the last three decades it has been host to multiple famous celebrities like Saswata Chatterjee, Vidya Balan, Abhishek Bachhan, and Arjun Rampal. The manager even gifted us several new Chinese calendar. He told us, to our great disappointment, that he did not know of anyone who matched our description of Tong Atchew but that he knew someone who could help us.

"Polly," he said, "is the wise owl of our neighborhood." There is no one in Tangra whom she doesn't know. If the man you met lives in this Chinatown, Polly must know him." So on we went, on our endless search for Tong Atchew.





## Holi in Pou Chong

Polly was very specific about where she would meet us. Sunday morning at 7.30am in front of the Raymond's showroom outside Poddar Court-she had been quite strict about the instructions. We know from experience that hair stylists are not to be trifled with, so we mutely agreed. Bleary-eyed and unhappy with the sacrifice of Sunday morning sleep, we made our way across the city to Tiretti Bazaar one more time. What greeted our eyes was far from a sleepy idle Sunday morning. Tiretti bazaar was alive! Guided by Polly we walked through the bustling market of fresh produce until we reached the famous Chinese breakfast spot. Polly knew what she was doing and minutes later we had before us steaming bowls of dumplings and soup, fried momos and meatballs. The walk had worked up our appetite and before we had even started to know Polly, we dived straight into our breakfast.

Not wanting to miss the opportunity, our teachers stuffed their bags full of vegetables from the vendors around us. Soon with bags stuffed with bok choy, fennel and lemongrass we looked like regular shoppers. However, it was Polly who reminded us that we must go visit the Pou Chong Kim sauce factory.

When we made it to the doorway of the factory, we looked in awe at the humongous building, stocked to the brim with a selection of authentic, high-quality products such as spices, sauces, and snacks. The customers there joked that it was a one-stop cornucopia for Asian culinary ingredients, and home to great staff who were always ready to help out the customers, and provide them with tips and recommendations for recipes and ingredients. We were introduced to Janice and Anne, the owners of the store. Their faces had a smile extending from ear to ear, and a certain gleam in the eyes which is seldom seen nowadays. They informed us that they have been committed to providing quality products and services for the past 65 years, and the company is currently being run by the third generation. Janice took us around the bright and colourful aisles, brimming with fresh produce. She showed us their assortment of sauces, the signature being their tangy sweet Green Chilli sauce. Below the sauce aisle was their collection of vibrant jars of fruit jam, gleaming bottles of chilli and sesame oil, and fresh packs of glistening rice noodles. They have a variety of flavours and textures, each suited for the palettes of buyers all over India. Janice told us, for example, how their sauces were more sour in the South, saltier in the North and sweeter in the East. They explained that the company's demand was at its peak and countries all over the globe were on the waiting list for their products. They also keep a large number of foreign convenience products for resale, which they refer to as "trading items".

It was just not the mind-numbing variety of food which struck us at Pou Chong. What will remain forever etched in our memories is the Holi celebrations we witnessed there...

We had still not seen everything that was on display at the Pou Chong office, when Anne, Janice's mother and the head of the firm excitedly called us downstairs. Everyone from the shop had gathered for Holi celebrations and they wanted us to be part of it. The news made us jump in glee but we looked at each other sceptically. We had dressed in the crisp white shirts which was our school uniform and surely we could not play with colours right then! However our teachers smiled at us indulgently and reassured us and flinging our bags aside we rushed into the mayhem that only Holi can bring.

Pou Chong mostly employs migrant workers who have settled from Bihar. Most of these employees have their families living with them in the slums in and around Tiretti Bazar. It is no wonder that their children are always to be found in the shop premises. But the morning soon revealed to us that these children are completely at home with Janice in her office and do not think twice before demanding candies or smearing her face with colours. The Holi we played that day was unlike any other in our lives. The workers had painstakingly decorated the factory grounds and a rangoli had been drawn in front of the altar used for New year's decoration. The children screamed in hysterical joy as they ran around with plates of colour, their hands and faces already unrecognisable. Janice put colours on us all while Anne stood in a corner smiling indulgently. The Pou Chong factory had created a home away from home for their workers, the heart and soul of the company. So much so that, third generation Indians of Chinese origin had organised Holi celebrations for first generation migrant workers in Calcutta.

Overwhelmed with our experiences, we traversed our way through the market once again. Our heads were filled with thoughts and we slowly made our way back to Tung Nam Eating House. After our morning's adventures we looked forward to the peace and calm of Sea Ip Church that beckoned to us from across the lane







*Polly seemed to know everybody at Tiretti Bazar. She met her old friend named Baby outside Tung Nam, the famous eatery. The two friends decided to have a glass of freshly squeezed sugarcane juice. They caught up on all the news from the community and seemed to be delighted to have met. Baby had gone to Loreto Bow Bazar and married a Hindu gentleman. Marriage outside the Chinese community was not common back then.*

*While Polly rues that there is no sugarcane juice sold in the part of Ballygunge where she lives, Baby triumphantly says that she has a glass every Sunday on her way back from church.*





## Religion and Superstitions

Our minds buzzing with information and face covered in the colours of spring, we moved on to the Sea Ip Church, a Chinese temple. It was founded in circa 1905. The two-story structure is a sight for sore eyes and the only one of its kind in the area. There is a library on the ground floor. The worship space is located on the first level and can be accessed through wooden stairs to the right of the main door. Kwan Yin, the Goddess of Mercy, is worshipped at the shrine on the first level. Next to Kwan Yin is the Chinese Earth God. To the left of Kwan Yin is another shrine. The decoration makes extensive use of red and gold, and the addition of tinted light gives the shrine a grandeur look. Candles and incense sticks are seen burning at the shrine. Wooden beams support the roof's slope, painted bright red. We were handed a bundle of incense sticks, which we lit up with the help of candles placed on an altar right outside the worship place. We first prayed to a small shrine placed on the altar on which the candles were placed. We then went back to the inside where we prayed to the three gods. There was another room which was to the left of the place of worship, where we prayed to Guan Yu, the Chinese warrior god. We placed our incense sticks on the altar which was located outside the main temple after we were done with the prayers.

The temple is overseen by a gentle old man who is distantly related to Polly. He guided us through the rituals which were simple yet profoundly spiritual. A gong was beaten for as long as we prayed and no priest intervened while we did so. He emphasized that in a temple there is nobody between a devotee and the divine presence and one must simply ask for what his heart desires. An offering of one hundred rupees was made by us and this would go towards the upkeep of the temple which is a work of art in its own right.

The Chinese are a superstitious people and many tales permeate the musty walls of this old temple. As we walk outside into the spring morning, Polly takes us through some of them..

### Superstitions

The number 4 is the unluckiest Chinese number because it sounds like the word for "death". Many buildings in China don't have a 4th floor; some skip any floors with the number, such as 14, 24, 34 and all 40-49 floors. Chinese people like superstitions so much that they've even adopted the Western superstition of the unlucky number thirteen.

The number 8 is the luckiest Chinese number because it sounds like the word for "wealth". 88 is considered particularly lucky because it symbolized the "double happiness" characters.

The color white is known as one of the unluckiest Chinese colors because it is associated with mourning and loss.

The color green can also be considered to be unlucky as it is associated with infidelity. A man wearing a green hat is said to have an unfaithful wife.

The color black is considered to be unlucky as well given its association to the darkness and secrecy. The word 'mafia' translates to 'black society' in Chinese.

As it is the color of blood, red is associated with life. In traditional Chinese wedding ceremonies, the bride would wear a red dress.

In Cantonese, "to give a clock" is pronounced "song zung", a phrase that sounds the same as "to prepare for the end", referring to the rites of paying one's last respects to a loved one near the end of their life and burying them after they die. Clocks are also solemn reminders that time is running out.

Dragons, used to represent men, are divine beings capable of bringing happiness and good fortune. Phoenixes, representing women, are also auspicious.

Turtles are revered for their longevity in Chinese culture, they can also be a symbol of bad luck. For example, keeping a turtle as a pet may slow down your business.

Chopsticks in a rice bowl resemble the sight of incense at a tomb.

On the first day of the spring festival, anything that involves cutting - such as having a haircut or clipping your nails - is a no-go if you want to have good luck in the year to come. Same for cleaning the house and washing hair.

Fish is popular as the word sounds like "surplus", while round food items such as oranges, lotus candy and *tangyuan*, a dessert made from glutinous rice balls, all symbolize family unity.

Gifted knives and blades is frowned upon because they are seen to represent a severing of relationships.

Feng shui is the Chinese architectural philosophy of organizing your surroundings to attract good luck and ward off bad energy.

If you look closely in older neighborhoods, at the entrance to many buildings you will find a small red plaque and an accompanying pot in which to place joss sticks. This is a doorway spirit tablet - a ritual object dedicated to deities - for Tudigong, the Lord of the Soil and the Ground, who is believed to safeguard and bless the people living on his grounds.

It is believed that during the 7th lunar month ghosts come out from the lower realm - the spirit world - and are free to roam the mortal world. During Ghost Month many people avoid renovations in order not to disturb any temporary spirit visitors to the house.





## The Chinese Warriors of Old

As Polly was telling us tales of the superstitions and beliefs of the Chinese people, and we were engrossed in conversation, we bumped into a red door. We came to see that the door had on it painted a burly Chinese warrior, decked in gleaming armour, and an intimidating ridge spined, curved spear, his beard flowing in the wind and an expression of rage on his face, Polly, on seeing how interested we were about the picture, engaged us in a lively discourse on the tales of the Chinese Militia and the Chinese Warriors of Old.

The history of the military has traversed over 4200 years, from 2200 BC to the present day. The Chinese introduced the custom of implementing crossbows, advanced metallurgical standardization for arms and armour, and early gunpowder weapons in warfare. They not only introduced but also adopted nomadic cavalry and Western military technology. The Chinese armies also benefited from an advanced logistics system as well as a rich strategic tradition, beginning with Sun Tzu's *The Art of War*, which deeply influenced military thought. The main objectives of the armies were to defend China and its subject peoples from foreign intruders, influence the world with Chinese cultures, and expand the boundaries of China to various parts of Asia.

Chinese generals and ambitious officers researched and memorized the tactics on how to win a war, but beginning from the position of the emperor, warfare was considered by the Chinese as a policy of last resort. As Sun Tzu had wisely said, "No country has ever profited from protracted warfare."

Some famous dynasties and their achievements in warfare include the Han Dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE), which was recognized for its expansion. The Tang Dynasty (618–907 CE) was known for paying enemies with large amounts of silver and silk to defend imperial China's border. They believed that if war was completely unavoidable, the best way to get on with it was to recruit foreign troops.

The Chinese military was headed by capable and powerful leaders; some of them are:

**Sun Tzu:** He was born in the Chinese state of Ch'i and served King Ho-lu of Wu as a military specialist during the late Zhou dynasty (1046 BCE to 256 BCE). He is the author of *The Art of War*, which is widely recognized as one of the most important books written on the subject of warfare. Through his knowledge and experience, Sun Tzu developed innovative military theories that focused on psychological warfare. This was a unique concept introduced at a time when most militaries were generally focused on suppressing their enemies through overwhelming physical force.

**Wu Qi:** He was a highly successful military leader and politician born in 440 BCE during the Warring States period of the Zhou Dynasty. He was initially placed as a highly effective military strategist, and later, due to his abilities, King Dao of the State of Chu appointed him Prime Minister of the Chu State.

**Qin Shi Huang:** He belonged to the Qin State and achieved a seemingly impossible task when he conquered all of the other Warring States during a brutal ten-year campaign that ended in 221 BCE with the formation of the first Chinese empire, the Qin Empire.

**Cao Cao:** He made history as one of the most powerful Chinese generals of the Han dynasty, which spanned 206 BCE–220 CE. Cao was promoted to the rank of general due to his significant contributions to ending the Yellow Turban Rebellion—an uprising of peasants and common folk that began in 184 CE and ended in chaos.

**Han Xin:** He served in the Chinese military during the Han Dynasty, occupying the position of a low-level guard before being promoted to the rank of senior general in merely a matter of a few years.

**Qi Jiguang:** He was born in 1528 CE during the Ming dynasty, which spanned 1368–1644 CE. When the Mongol army—which had been forced out of power at the end of the previous dynasty—attempted to reclaim Chinese territory by breaching the Great Wall of China in 1549 CE, Jiguang served as a general in the defense of Beijing and contributed significantly to repelling the Mongol invaders.





## An Evening with the Consul General

The 25th of February was an exciting day for us, the students of The Heritage School. Not only did our final exams end on that day but we also received some good news. We had secured an interview with the Consulate-General of the People's Republic of China in Kolkata for the project that you now do us the kindness of reading. This was an unprecedented event because, even though our school had conducted myriad interviews, none of them had been with a man who directly represents a foreign government and has such influence over and respect among the community.

Our visit took place on a beautiful spring day. The weather was perfect (an unlikely event in Kolkata, one must admit) and we could barely bring ourselves to contain our enthusiasm. The party consisted of 14 of us students, accompanied by our principal, two of our teachers and three parents. And so we arrived at the Consul-General's residence in the late afternoon wearing our white-and-blue formal school uniforms, some from school and some from home.

The Consul-General, Mr Zha Liyou himself welcomed us into his drawing room, which was magnificent. The room was adorned with exquisite decorations, including beautiful chandeliers, leather sofas, and two fluttering flags of India and China dominated the walls. A breath-taking painting depicting terraced farms and the Great Wall of China hung on the wall, adding to the room's grandeur.

Ming vases and waving cats dotted the tables, and a stunning wooden screen known as pingfeng separated the seating area from a large round dining table. Mr Zha presented our principal, teachers and parents with beautiful, hardbound notebooks, and the students with adorable panda dolls as tokens of goodwill and cooperation. To reciprocate his hospitality, we gifted him the first edition of our journal, some embroidered hand towels and a painting which were made by our school friends. The painting depicted a pomegranate over which a beautiful butterfly hovered. The gift brought a smile to his face, and Mr Zha explained to us how a pomegranate symbolises a closely knit country that stays united despite ethnic, religious, racial, or ideological differences. He then introduced himself and his role as the Consul-General in Kolkata, working tirelessly to bridge the gap between China, India, and Kolkata's Chinatown, and fostering trade and exchange between the two sides. He believed that interacting with the Chinese would be highly beneficial for both parties and was eager to explore opportunities for collaboration, suggesting an India-China student exchange program and a Mandarin learning initiative. We then settled down to have an enlightening conversation.

Any knowledge of the present, of course, is incomplete without a knowledge of and awareness of the past.

Mr Zha, for our benefit, gave a succinct account of Chinese communities, and how they have come to be integrated into Calcuttan culture.

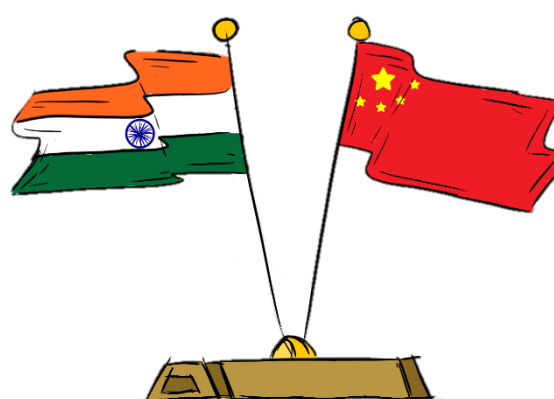
China has 56 minor groups and ethnicities; however, in Kolkata the Chinese community mainly comprises three major groups - Hakka, Cantonese and Hubei. Each of these groups has contributed uniquely to several different fields in the daily design of the busy city life of Kolkata.

The largest Chinese community in Kolkata is the Hakka. The Hakka are Han Chinese originating solely from the Central Plain. Originally Hakka means "families of guests" because of their constant migration from Northern China, due to unrest and war, to the hilly trilateral junction in the South. The Hakka then migrated from Southern China to various other locations. In Kolkata, the Hakka reside in Tangra and are owners of excellent Chinese cuisine restaurants and guest houses.

The next is another major group of China - the Cantonese. The Cantonese people originate from the city of Guangzhou and its surrounding area in South-eastern China. They reside in the lively area of Bow bazar in Kolkata and primarily work in tanneries and leather factories.

The Hubei, originally from a landlocked province of Central China, form an integral part of the Chinese community in the city of joy. Their groups practise dentistry for a living and have made some of the best doctors of Kolkata!

Each of these Chinese communities is integrated into the fabric of the city and displays its unity and diversity in its way of life.





As our conversation with Mr Zha progressed, he introduced to us the delightful tradition of mooncakes. He said that a mooncake is a Chinese bakery product traditionally eaten during the Mid-Autumn Festival. The festival is about lunar appreciation and a practice called 'moon watching' - whereupon one gazes at the moon and thinks of home. Mooncakes, a great delicacy, are offered between friends or at family gatherings while celebrating the festival. The Mid-Autumn Festival is widely regarded as one of the four most important Chinese festivals. The moon cake may contain one or more whole salted egg yolks in their centre that symbolise the full moon. Traditional mooncakes have an imprint on top consisting of the Chinese characters for "longevity" or "harmony", imprints of the Moon, the Chinese goddess of the Moon (Chang'e), flowers, vines, or a rabbit (symbol of the Moon) may surround the characters for additional decoration. Because of its central role in the Mid-Autumn festival, mooncakes remain popular even today. For many, they form a central part of the Mid-Autumn festival experience such that it is now commonly known as 'Mooncake Festival'.

Listening to this, we couldn't help but think of the many Chinese people in Kolkata, who, too, look at that far away yellow orb every year, flooded with memories of the Oriental land they have left behind.

This period is a carefree time for children, free from the burdens of schoolwork and responsibilities. It also signified the start of the harvest season. Winter, autumn, spring, and summer are the four primary seasons on the Chinese calendar. The majority of crops are sown in spring and harvested in October. To ensure there will be plenty of food throughout the winter, the people work arduously all year long. Tomb Sweeping Day (5th April) is a significant occasion when the sons of a family come together to honour their ancestors, signifying piety and a sense of belonging to their ancestral roots. The greatest tea in China is picked on the day before Tomb Sweeping Day, and the most expensive first flush is processed and packed to be sold all over the world fifteen days later.

Let this lunar year, then, be auspicious for you, the reader!

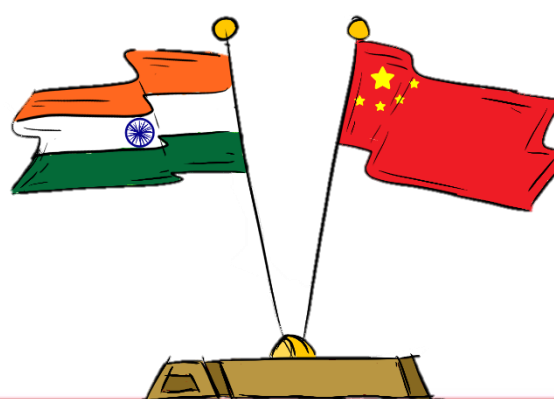
The Chinese community is an integral thread in Kolkata's cultural fabric, one without which the heritage of our city will split. Mr Zha told us that there are only about 1,600 Chinese people still residing in Kolkata - a number that has dwindled from 2,000 in 2013. Why is this so?

In our city, Chinese businesses are being uprooted. Long-standing establishments in Tangra and Tiretti Bazar are being sold and replaced, and historical residences and apartments have seen newer communities flooding in. Rampant urban development projects have seeped into the area - and this relentless urbanisation leaves no place for older houses, shops, and cultural centres for the Chinese.

It is a known fact that family ties have always been an integral part of India and respect and gratitude towards elders is everything to the people. The Chinese, not unlike us Indians, have tremendous value for and give great importance to family ties and respect to elders.

People of China value family tremendously - this becomes apparent in the various customs Mr Zha elaborated on. Before the start of the Chinese New Year, there is a practice of children taking the blessings of their parents. It is said to bring good fortune to them for the rest of the year - and it's also a form of showing respect to their parents so they can begin a new journey in their life, taking with them the reassurances of their parents.

He explained the Chinese Spring Festival, which marks the beginning of the Chinese New Year, is a joyous time for Chinese families marked by the traditions of togetherness and celebration. Preparation for the Lunar New Year starts a month in advance, but with everyone's busy schedules, it can be a challenge to find time for cooking and household tasks. Nevertheless, families come together to prepare delicious meals and enjoy one another's company for the two-week festival. Children eagerly anticipate waking up, as the first crackers of the new year burst, to find red envelopes under their pillows filled with money, which they can use to indulge in their favourite treats and toys without any judgement.





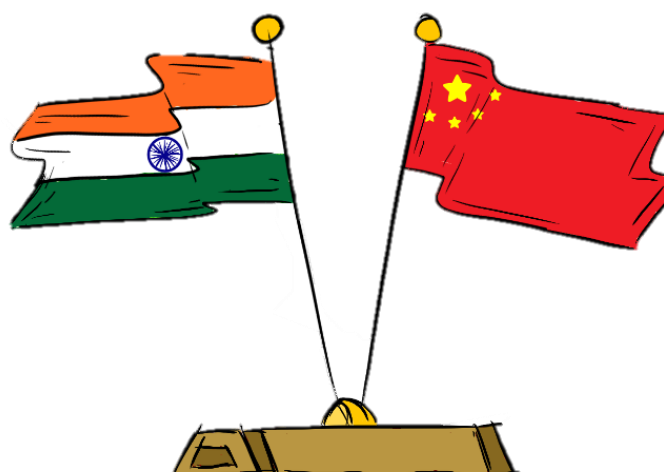
Mr Zha said that the younger generation of Chinese people have been moving out of the city and the country, finding no opportunity for economically profitable businesses here.

The Consul General spoke to us regarding the concept of rural revitalisation and urban development. According to him, it was a difficult prospect to bring back life and modernity into Chinatown while keeping its past character intact. The owners and people may also be hesitant to change.

For those of us who are familiar with the word 'gentrification', this might ring a bell. Gentrification is the process whereby the character of a poor urban area is changed by wealthier people moving in.

After our conversation came to an end, Mr. Zha kindly invited us to a dinner, where he shared more of his insights. He explained that in Chinese culture, inviting someone into your home and seating them at the round table is a sign of considering them family, as the Chinese are very particular about who they include in their family circle. By inviting us to dinner and sharing a meal with us, the Consul General indicated that he considered us a part of his family. As we sat down to eat, we were surrounded by the tantalising aroma of the food and couldn't wait to indulge. Amidst the warmth, happiness, and sense of kinship that permeated the room we dug into the delicious food. Over dinner, the conversation shifted to career opportunities in China. Mr Zha also honoured us by inviting us to take a tour of Tangra with him, while we invited him to visit our school too.

Like many heartening encounters, this one too seemed to pass extraordinarily quickly - when we looked up, we saw, to our surprise, that it was already dark outside. After a scrumptious dinner that Mr Zha very kindly invited us to, we found ourselves headed home, watching the house grow smaller in our rear-view mirror. But the imprinted memories that we returned with - the enhanced knowledge, the greater awareness and emboldened aspiration to celebrate our differences - will always loom large.





## The End of Our Journey

The tranquility of the Sea Ip Church had set our thoughts in order and we ambled slowly along the lanes of Chinapara with Polly chatting happily all the time. We felt a strange sensation inside us, a strange longing for our old friend, Tong Atchew. Talking with Polly felt almost like talking with an old friend; she had the same charm and grace which he embodied, the same kind soul and cheerful heart. She had learnt her art as a young married woman with a lot of time in her hands and soon found that she was good enough to start her own salon.

We waved goodbye, and moved through the bustling crowd, asking if anyone had seen our old friend, though by that time we had lost all hope of finding him again. Soon enough, we realized we had wandered into the streets of Clayton's neighborhood. Clayton Chen was a young man in his 20s whom we had met way back in Tiretti Bazaar and made friends with. He was a student of medicine completing his degree at the South West Medical University in China's Sichuan Province. Clayton is also a teacher in Shining Stars and that is how we had met him a month back while the troupe was performing at the Nam Soon church before the spring festival.

Once more we stood outside the church awaiting his arrival and soon enough the familiar smiling face walked up to us. We had only met twice before but the lively banter that arose inside the deserted church said otherwise. He informed us that he was soon flying back to China to finish his degree. We voiced a question that had kept us wondering for some time. Why did he not plan to move to other countries like his friends did? Was his family holding him back?

Clayton smiled in his characteristic shy way. No, his sister was in Australia and they had no inhibitions regarding his choices in terms of his career. He wanted to come back to India to study psychiatry. There is a lot of stigma surrounding mental health and not enough research is being done in the field, he feels.

If not medicine then he would have taught Mandarin to the Chinese youngsters in Calcutta. Alongside his medical studies, he was also taking Mandarin classes in China. The younger generation were not learning the language anymore and it would soon die out if nobody took an initiative. So we figured that Calcutta never features far from his mind.

Clayton's family migrated to Calcutta during the Sino-Indian war in 1962. His paternal grandparents found jobs as chefs at a restaurant in Park Street while those from his mother's side were dry cleaners in Tangra. Clayton's father had moved away from the family business and gone to Dubai to work as a technician.

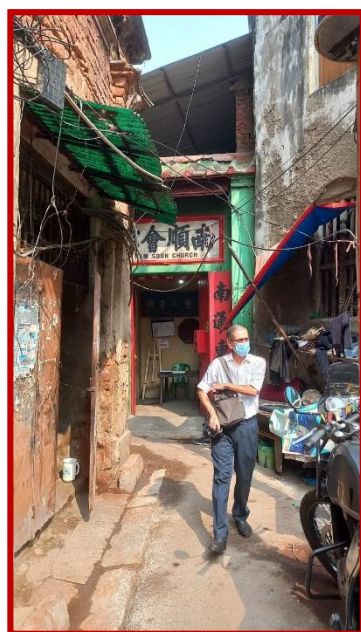
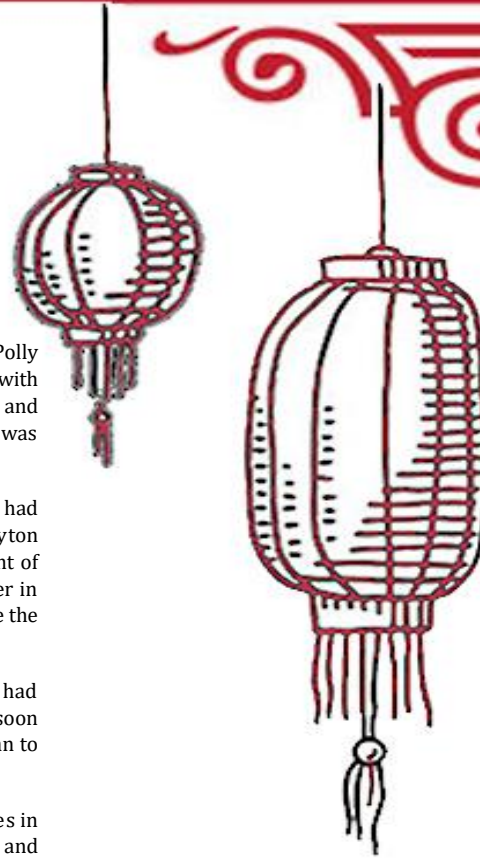
As Clayton said, growing up in Tiretti Bazaar has had its ups and downs. While he loved the sense of community and the amazing food, he had also faced discrimination and negative stereotypes as a young Chinese-Indian. This has led to a decline in traditional Chinese culture and language in the community, with few people now knowing how to speak Hakka or Cantonese. Learning Mandarin is also a challenge for many young people, with the language mostly being used to increase prospects for Chinese universities. While the Chinatown in Canada may be more attractive to young people, the older generation who were raised in Kolkata feel a strong sense of belonging and do not want to leave this accepting environment. However, there are still those who are passionate about preserving our heritage and making a positive impact in our community. For example, Clayton was a lion dancer in a local group, and now he teaches new dancers. While there are challenges, he believes that there is still hope for the future of the Calcuttan Chinatown, and he is proud to call it his home. His favourite food is the city's chicken biryani and he cannot imagine life elsewhere.

As shy as he is, Clayton also happens to be the most versatile young man we have met in Chinatown. Being a lion dancer since he was a student of sixth grade, he had slowly orked his way up through the ranks to become a teacher for new dancers. Shining Stars, the lion dance group, has been around since the 1970s when it was founded by Uncle Ahmi Loy. While lion dancing is not as prevalent as it once was in the Calcuttan Chinatown, Clayton is proud to have been a part of this traditional art form and to have passed on his knowledge to the next generation of dancers.

But lion dance and Mandarin and medicine are not his only passions. We were quite stunned when he showed us the wrapped parcel he had been clutching on to all along. He is perhaps the most talented painter we had ever seen. Wrapped in the brown paper package was a freshly painted depiction of Jesus Christ that he had just framed. He shared his concern about not being able to carry all his art supplies and unfinished works back to China. However life as a student would be busy, especially after two years of online classes and his hands would be full in the upcoming months!

As we spoke with Clayton, we were struck by his passion and determination to succeed as a young Chinese Indian in Kolkata's Chinatown. Despite the challenges he faced as an ethnic minority, Clayton remained rooted in his heritage and proud of his ancestry. His perspective gave us hope for the future of the community, and we realized that the essence of the Chinaman was not limited to our friend Tong Atchew but lived on in the vibrant and resilient Chinese community of Kolkata. Though we had not asked Clayton about Tong Atchew, we felt that in speaking with him, we had rediscovered the essence of our old friend and felt comforted that it would continue to thrive as long as the community did.

Our journey to find Tong Atchew had finally come to an end.





# Afterword



"Hi! My formal name is POLLY YU. Pleasure to meet you all."

Polly's infectious laughter filled the room which was already flooded with the slanting rays of the afternoon sun. We were back in Polly's apartment in Ballygunge, in which a room has been fashioned into a salon for her clients. As we made ourselves cozy after the long and tiring walk in Tiretti Bazaar, we wondered at the journey that this journal has taken us on.

We had started off as starry-eyed school children who had accompanied our teachers on a walk around Chinapara. That Sunday morning we had walked into Nam Soon church expecting a day of festivity to break the monotony of preparing ourselves for our Final Term examinations. Morning had soon ambled into afternoon. The dragon dance was over. We had eaten to our heart's desire at the Sei Vui restaurant. We had even bought a few souvenirs to take back home. And yet we had not had enough of Tiretti Bazaar.

One morning in school, our teachers suddenly decided to take us exploring around Tangra. Calls were made, transport was arranged and off we went. Neither of us knew the lanes and bylanes of Tangra then, but we knew that a hidden world of mysteries awaited us in the part of Calcutta that people have no purpose of visiting except the occasional dinner at its oriental eateries.

It was a lazy winter afternoon and Tangra was deserted. But then Tangra has been deserted by the Chinese community ever since the tanneries had shifted to Bantala Leather Complex. A rare scooty sometimes zoomed by us now and then and there wasn't even a soul to ask for directions. However, we Heritans are explorers and pride ourselves on our thirst for adventure. We were already planning a trip to Achipur to visit Atchew's grave. It would take a lot more than a few empty streets to deter us from our quest.

Very soon we had successfully made our way to Pei May School and the Sing Cheung sauce factory. We were quite taken aback when we discovered that we were standing right outside a cemetery; the Choong Ye Thong cemetery. To our disappointment the caretaker had left for lunch and we could not visit it. But we visited the Toong On cemetery. More than a hundred years old, the cemetery gave us meaningful insights into the rituals and practices of the Chinese community with regard to death and burial. These discoveries in quick succession had however reinforced our belief that Tangra would not send us back empty-handed. We left that day after visiting the Chinese Kali Mandir and as we made our way back to school, we had already made plans to come back for the midnight celebrations of the Spring Festival.

A month had passed since then and our first journal had been published. Our teachers had repeatedly warned us that research meant a lot of closed doors and we were quite flustered as to who to approach for our second edition. The answer came in the form of our Principal, Ma'am Seema Sapru. We had gone to her office to tell her about our exploits in Dhapa at Henri's factory when she casually mentioned that we could always talk to somebody she knew very well- Polly Yu.

"Oh she is brilliant! I will get you in touch with her," she said in her characteristic optimistic way.

Well we thought an interview on Polly Yu would easily add another page to our second journal. But little did we anticipate what a powerhouse of enthusiasm and knowledge she would turn out to be.

Polly Yu is a third generation Chinese living in Calcutta and is easily one of the most coveted hair stylists here. She had been married young and sometimes visited a friend's beauty parlour out of curiosity. While one would expect boredom to set in, quite the opposite happened in her case. The trade sparked an interest in her and whenever an apprentice was on leave she would request her friend that she fill in her shoes. Soon she started picking up the techniques of holding a pair of scissors with only two fingers and would strategically snip a lock here and a strand there. In a matter of months Polly had developed a style that was unique to her and enrolled herself for a few professional hair styling courses. She soon realised that the art of hair cutting and designing deeply interested her.

Being a passionate cook, she had been considering opening her own eatery for some time. But hairstyling had started to grow on her. She steadily rose in her career and became the resident stylist for Taj Bengal. Whenever a celebrity stylist came to Calcutta, Polly would be sure to volunteer as an attendant and get her skills tested.

Years later when she started visiting her daughter in Canada, she enrolled herself in yet another advanced level course in styling. To her delight and dismay she discovered that whatever was being taught, she could already do better. The trainer would often stop teaching and ask the other students to come watch her techniques. The skills of the orient continue to remain a mystery to the west.

"What they do, the way they put streaks of colour in their hair, is cheating the client in my opinion," she says simply. "I have handled thick Indian hair all my life. I will work my way through several haircuts by the time they finish measuring a single strand of hair with their fancy rulers."

Nobody has reminded us more of Tong Atchew or whoever we had seen that night at Tangra, than Polly herself. She was ambitious and had started from scratch. Not only was she exceptional at her art but constantly experimented with what easily intimidated others.

Perhaps it is this indomitable spirit which does not deter the Chinese from migrating to different and little known parts of the world and starting their own trades. In the age-old chasm between the superiority between the east and west, the east has time and again challenged the west's appropriation of the east and its history.

Although the Chinese population in Calcutta was dwindling, we could not help but draw comparisons with Hsiuen Tsang. They had left the land that their ancestors had called home and charted their way to foreign lands, struggled in the most abject adversities and flourished in culture, sport and technology. Courage and skill can be learnt but what this community inherently possessed was a deep sense of rootedness and an indomitable desire to flourish against all odds. It is no wonder that the Chinese community in Calcutta has given the city its best restaurants, best salons, favourite shoe makers and most fervently sought after furniture stores, not to forget the remarkable dentists.

But what this community gave us in the brief two months that we have set forth to know about them, is love and unconditional acceptance. Clayton, Henri, Jonathan, Anne, Janice and Polly, and all the others whose names we do not know and whom we met at the Chinese New Year's carnival, have embraced us into their community with open arms and taught us more about our city than we had ever hoped to learn. All of them were busy in their own ways and each had gone out of their way to show us around Chinapara and answer the innumerable questions which only students in their teens can have.

Why did they do it if not for a deep sense of belonging to the city? We had attempted to know about them and in exchange left pieces of our soul with them in Chinatown.

We hope against hope that Polly would never leave the city for good and join her daughter in Canada. Though what can be more natural than a parent wanting to reunite with her child?

We were quite overwhelmed when we said goodbye to Polly. Something told us that this was just the beginning of our journey. Tong Atchew awaits us in an old suburban Chinese colony an hour outside the city. And if we knew anything about our teachers by now, it was that they would not resist the temptation to pack us off in a car to Achipur soon.

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