Athulya Aby

CEPT University, Ahmedabad

A Palimpsestic Narrative Of The Chinese Settlement In Calcutta: Spatial Indicators of Assimilation, Exclusion and Gradual Disappearance

Abstract

"Self-imposed invisibility is the distinct characteristic of Kolkata's Old Chinatown today" (Bose, 2016). Yet, their presence in the city is strongly felt through the Chinese breakfast street of Tiretta bazaar, hand-made leather shoe-shops in Bentick Street, Chinese owned beauty parlours and laundromats, and the week-long festivities of the Chinese New Year. Though the diaspora has maintained a cultural specificity by means of temples, clubs, schools and newspaper presses, their aspiration to assimilate is evident in their built environment. In Calcutta, the often-overlooked stories of the Chinese settlements highlight a hidden side of the city's architecture. Through the spatial study of two Chinatowns—Cheenapara, within the Central Business District (CBD), and Tangra, on the outskirts—this study explores the indicators of assimilation and assertion of identity of the Chinese diaspora in the city.

It delves into the hidden, yet pivotal spatial practices that reveal a complex interplay of inclusion, exclusion, and displacement—factors often overshadowed by the physicality of architecture. The essay is the result of the research conducted during my master's program in Architectural History and Theory from CEPT University, India, under the guidance of Dr. Sonal Mittal. The research foregrounds the intangible heritage of the Chinese in Calcutta, through a meticulous exploration of archival documents and histographical maps. By transcending the traditional architectural narrative that prioritizes tangible outcomes, this paper argues for a recognition of the invisible actants—stories, myths, and archived narratives—that mould the unseen architecture of community identity and memory. Through this lens, the paper contributes to an understanding of architecture not merely as a physical artifact but as a repository of underrepresented narratives and contested heritage, challenging the borders of conventional architectural discourse and advocating for a broader, more inclusive historiography that recognises forgotten labours and decolonial approaches.

Introduction

"Self-imposed invisibility is the distinct characteristic of Kolkata's Old Chinatown today" (Bose 2016). Whenever spaces are rebuilt or redesigned, former evidences remain and are never completely erased. In that sense, every city is a palimpsest – a site with multiple layers of historical interventions, in terms of use and design. The appearance of new structures and new uses often means the disappearance of earlier ones.

For the Chinese diaspora in Calcutta,[1] the notion of disappearance permeates the city, hidden in plain sight through assimilation in the built environment. Though the diaspora has maintained a cultural specificity by means of temples, clubs, schools and newspaper presses, their aspiration to assimilate – to disappear into the chaos of the city - is evident in their architecture. Yet, their presence in the city is strongly felt through the Chinese breakfast street of Tiretta bazaar, hand-made leather shoe-shops in Bentick Street, Chinese owned beauty parlours and laundromats, and the week long festivities of the Chinese New Year.

Through the spatial study of the two Chinatowns of Calcutta—Cheenapara, within the Central Business District (CBD), and Tangra, on the outskirts—this study tracks the physical manifestations of the growth and decline of the Chinese diaspora in the city. By transcending the traditional architectural narrative that prioritises tangible outcomes, this paper argues for recognition of the invisible actants—stories, myths, and archived narratives—that mould the unseen architecture of community identity and memory. Through this lens, the paper contributes to an understanding of architecture not merely as a physical artifact but as a repository of underrepresented narratives and contested heritage, challenging the borders of conventional architectural discourse and advocating for a broader, more inclusive historiography that recognises forgotten labours and decolonial approaches.

[1] Presently Kolkata, but this study will be using its historical name Calcutta as the study focuses on the time period when it was so called.

Methodology

The essay is the result of the research conducted during my master's program in Architectural History and Theory from CEPT University, India, under the guidance of Dr. Sonal Mittal. The research was completed during the COVID pandemic with online classes and travel restrictions, therefore online archives and publicly accessible information formed the database for the study.

Emulating the palimpsest methods of erasing, collating and stacking, archival materials such as maps, text, newspapers, photographs etc. are overlapped to map the sites of inclusion and exclusion of the Chinese community within the urban fabric of Calcutta. Historical events that ruptured their neighbourhoods led to displacement and dislocation of the Chinese Indians, in effect erasing their

cultural identity or reducing them to mere sites of memory.[2] Often in such cases, toponyms were the only remaining indicator linking the region to the Chinese settlement that prospered. Stacking the three – spatial study, archival materials and historic events – reveal a complex interplay of inclusion, exclusion, and displacement, factors often overshadowed by the physicality of architecture.

While the maps and other archival data provided information on the physical aspects and timelines of events regarding the Chinese settlement in Calcutta, a theoretical framework was necessary to delve into the deeper, more nuanced aspects of immigration as a process. The data revealed the 'what' and 'when' of the community's presence, growth, and displacement, but to truly unpack the 'why' and 'how' behind these shifts, I required a framework that could address the psychological and socio-political stresses that accompany immigration.

The inclusion of Yuval Harari's (2019) two-prompt approach on immigration, from his book 21 Lessons for the 21st Century, serves as a valuable lens in this regard. His examination of immigration as a deal between host countries and immigrants allowed for an understanding of the expectations, obligations, and

[2] Refer to map legends.

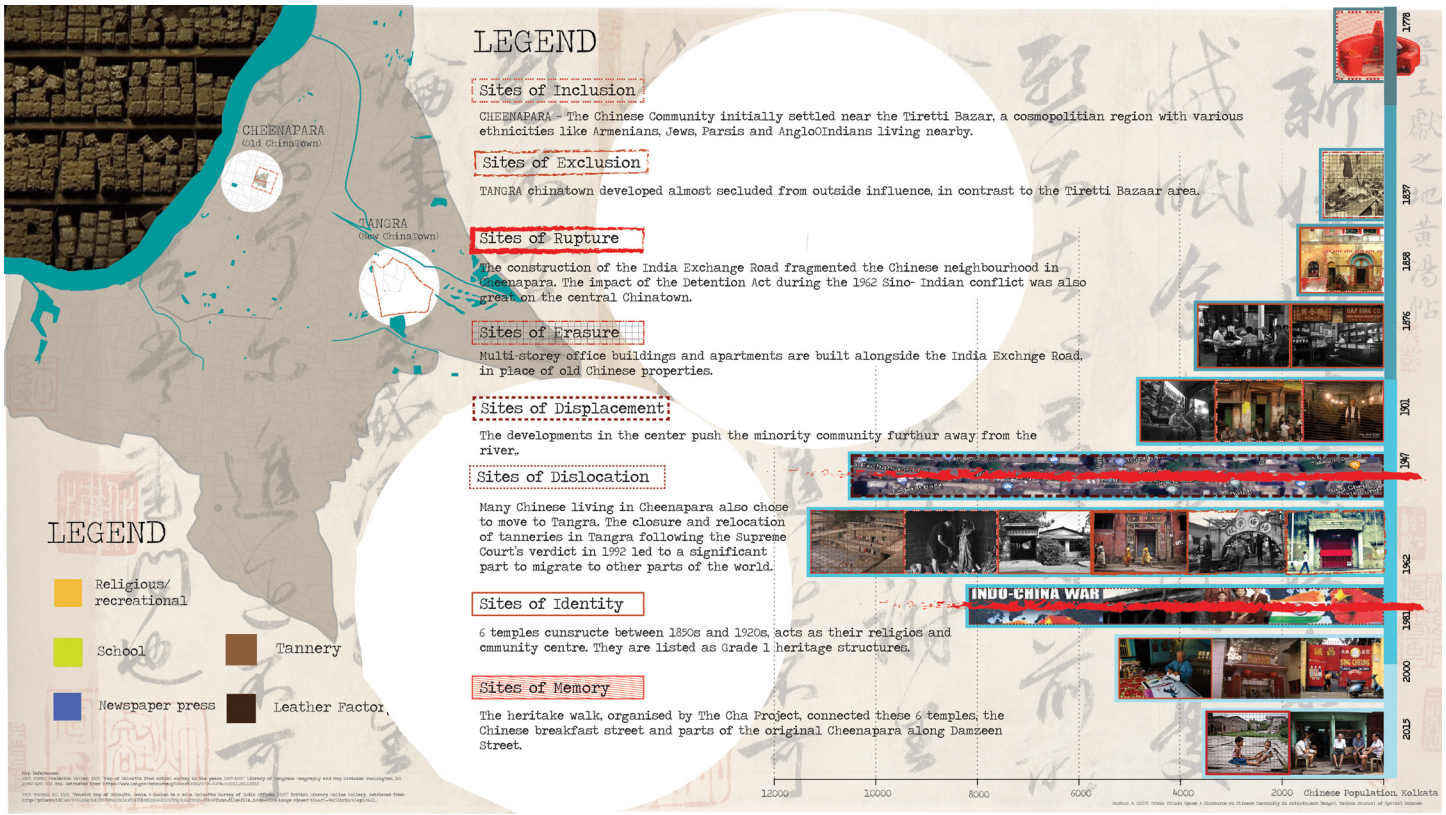

Figure 1: The sites of inclusion, exclusion, rupture, erasure, displacement, dislocation, identity and memory are mapped using assigned legends that allow observing their overlap and inferring implications for the community. The Chinese population in Calcutta is charted as a bar chart against the years with corresponding images of spaces associated with them.

often fraught relationships that arise in such exchanges. This framework complements the postcolonial and subaltern perspectives of the paper. His theory helped contextualize the tensions of assimilation, exclusion, and the Chinese community's oscillation between invisibility and assertion in Calcutta.

Harari's approach dissects immigration as a transactional process, with specific expectations placed on both the host country and the immigrants. The first expectation, the obligation to assimilate into local culture, mirrors the Chinese community's historical attempts to blend into Calcutta's urban fabric through architecture, social practices, and cultural institutions. The second expectation, that the host country must treat assimilated immigrants as first-class citizens, is particularly significant when analysing the challenges faced by the Chinese in India, especially in the wake of political tensions such as the Sino-Indian war. This theory allows an interrogation of whether this 'deal' of mutual obligation has been honoured or broken, offering a fresh perspective on the social exclusion, displacement, and partial erasure of the Chinese identity in Calcutta.

By choosing Harari's framework, the paper positions itself within broader discourses that not only explore subverted and marginalized histories but also critically examine how global processes of migration intersect with local histories, identities, and the built environment.

Figure 2: Map of India showing the location of the two study areas in Kolkata (called Calcutta in present day).

Collision between global problems and local identities[3]

A study of the population census of immigrants that settled in Calcutta during the colonial reign reveals an intriguing phenomenon. Among the many diasporas (European, Armenian, Greek, etc.) only the Chinese increased in number after the Partition. For the Chinese-Indian community, it was the 1962 Sino-Indian war that ruptured their relationship with the city and the country, during which many were forced into internment camps.

> A voice floats through the cell phone I hold close to my ears – "Bijoy, what's going on? When will all this trouble end? This does not seem right." The voice does not pause to breathe. There is a clear anxiety in that voice. And, the voice belongs to my Chinese-Indian friend from Kolkata, Asi Hong.

The above excerpt from the blog post of Bijoy Choudary (2020), a photographer who has been documenting the life of the Chinese community in Kolkata, throws light on the tension gripped within the community in the wake of the recent anti-Chinese sentiments among the Indians. With increasing propaganda against China and Chinese goods, they feel apprehensive of their future in the country.

1a-1b: Photographs taken by Bijoy Chowdhury, Humans of Little China: Walkthrough with a Kolkata lensman, July 16, 2020, Indiablooms. Accessed 10 September, 2022, https://www.indiablooms.com/life-details/L/5223/humans-of-little-china-walkthrough-with-a-kolkata-lensman.html

[3] Subtitles as frameworks borrowed from "21 Lessons for the 21st Century" by Yuval Harari.

Image 1.a: Hupeh Association – a Chinese Club in Cheenapara, Old Chinatown.

Image1.b: A Chinese shoe shop at Bentinck Street, Cheenapara.

Once almost 12,000 people strong, less than 2000 remain, composed mainly of an aging population with most of the younger population migrating to Toronto, Canada or Australia in search of better education, job opportunities and safer environments. Within Kolkata, the drastic shift in their geographic spread – from the Central Business District (CBD) to the outskirts – reflects not only the physical displacement of the community but also the erasure of cultural memory, as their presence and identity fade from the city's core and are overwritten by new urban forms.

In this scenario, it becomes important to assess the relationship between the immigrant community and the country by going beyond the visible shifts in population and geography to include the intangible narratives of displacement, memory, and identity that continue to shape their presence within the city.

The host country 'allows' the Immigrants in?

"Everything begins and ends at the Old Chinese temple at Atchipur, where the first Chinese[4] came over 200 years ago," (Ellias 2012). Those who came in to work in the sugar mill of Atchipur moved to the city of Calcutta in 1804, where some Cantonese men, who were skilled carpenters, were already working at the ship-docks and jute mills, (Bose 2019). They wedged themselves into the 'grey town' in–between the European settled 'White' town and indigenous 'Black' town - occupied largely by other immigrants like Armenians, Jews, Portuguese and Parsis. Bayly's Map of Calcutta in 1792 (Upjohn, n.d.) is perhaps the first to indicate the 'China Bazaar Lane'—presently known as the Old China Bazaar Road—near Clive Road. The Simms map of Calcutta (Simms 1858) from actual survey in the years 1847-1849, also locates a New China Bazaar just behind the Writer's building, of which no records can be found elsewhere.

Until 1837, the Chinese community in Calcutta was a "bachelor society" (Bose 2019, 143), made up mostly of labourers. The 20th century colonial India saw a heavy influx of migrants from colonial China due to famines and opium wars, which peaked post-World War II. Cantonese carpenters, Hakka shoe-makers, dentists and teeth-setters from the Hubei province, laundromats from Shanghai and Shandong silk-traders flocked to Calcutta in search of fortune. The demographic data suggests that a majority of the community was already settled in Calcutta before the formation of the country itself.

[4]A Cantonese sailor,Atchew Po (Yang Dazhao), established the first sugar mill of India in 1788, 80km southwest of Kolkata. The place is believed to be named after him, Atchipur.

The 'obligation' to assimilate?

The neighbourhood or para invokes a sense of community and "often cuts across ethnic and/or class lines," (Bonnerjee 2010, 69). The Simms Map of Calcutta (Simms 1858) includes a label for a road near the Tiretta Bazaar as Cheenapara, leading us to believe that it was majorly occupied by Chinese immigrants.[5] The earliest mention of 'The Chinese Colony` is by C. Alabaster in his article in the 'Calcutta Review' in 1858, in which he describes in detail about "the temples, the graveyards, the opium-dens and the living quarters of the Chinese,"(Bonnerjee 2010, 11).

The initial migrants were mostly men, who formed associations or social clubs, usually on the basis of occupation, called huigans. Most of these huigans also had a temple built along with it, "so basically it was a social club where everyone could come to socialize, play some games and pray to their Gods," (Mukherjee 2018). These became their first sites of identity assertion. "The traditional game of Mahjong continues to be played by elders in Gee Hing Church, Sea Ip Church hosts evening abacus classes and meetings, and political discussions take place in the Voi Ling Club," (Bose 2016).

These temples, built between 1850 and 1920, serve as anchor-points for the community within the undefined boundaries of the present Cheenapara. Yet they "do not claim an explicit cultural expression through architectural form," (Bose 2016). Ionic columns on the Toong On Church façade and the arched windows and door with Corinthian columns at Choonghee Dhong Thien Haue Church display the adoption of neo-classical façade prevalent in Calcutta at the time. It was only in the interior spaces that the Chinese character was expressed. This was done using colour, calligraphy and artifacts, especially in the shrine room. Most temple buildings performed multiple functions. While the Gee Hing Church and the Hubei Association occupied the first floor, Chen's Carpentry Works functioned from the lower floor (Bose 2016). The Nanking Restaurant that functioned off the lower floor of the Toong On Church was a sought-after destination for authentic Chinese food, until it was shut down following the Indo-China War. The fact that the temples are called 'churches', is a remnant of their attempt to conceal their identity, or an attempt at legitimising themselves in the colonial city. Thus through hybridisation and multi-use typologies, the Chinese community asserted their ethnic identity while blending into the existing urban fabric.

[5] This region also has a high number of 'huts' (structures which were not made of brick and mortar) depicted by unshaded building footprints.

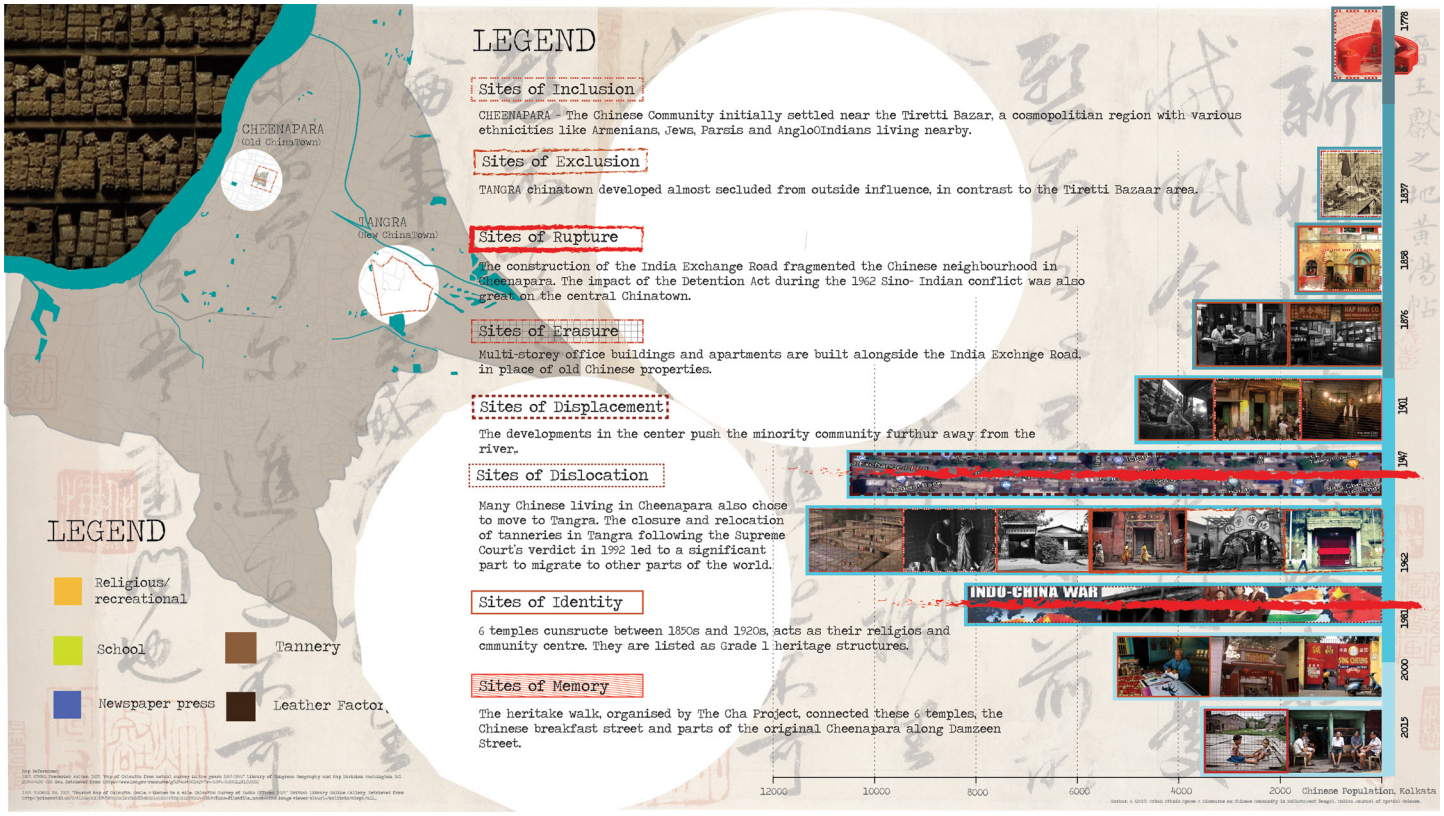

Figure 3: Palimpsestic mapping of Cheenapara. Relevant parts of old maps are overlapped on the present map of Cheenapara to identify sites as mentioned. The write-ups in boxes act as supporting statements from references corresponding to the site or timeline.

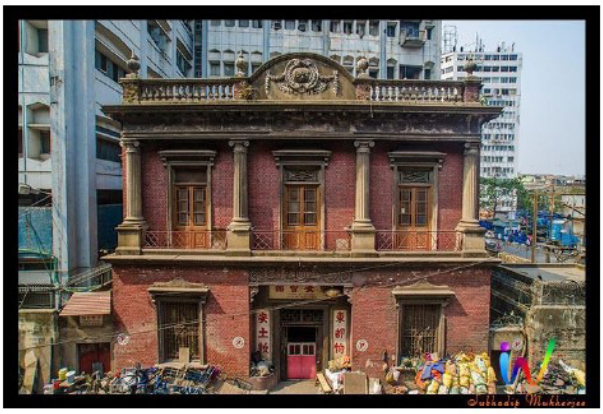

Image 2.a: Ionic Columns on Toong On Church with Nanking Restaurant (closed) on the ground floor.

Image 2.b: Interiors of temple on the first floor of Toong On Church.

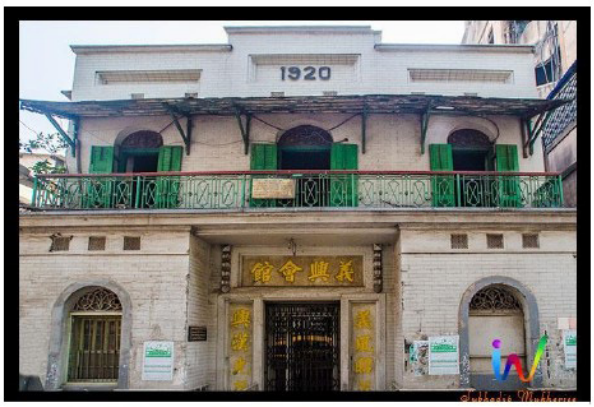

Image2.c: Gee Hing Church disguises itself as a typical colonial bungalow of the time.

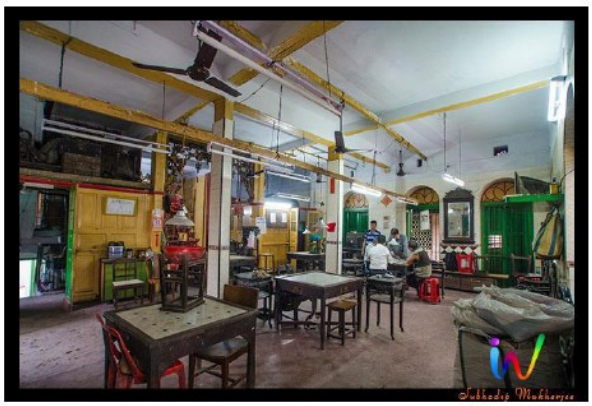

Image2.d: The club on first floor of Gee Hing Church where members play Mahjong.

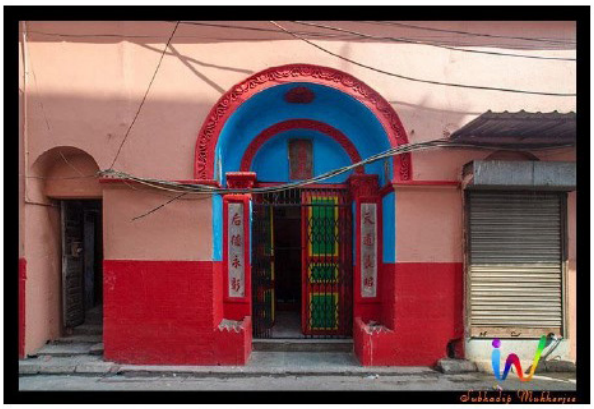

Image 2.e: Arched windows and door with Corinthian columns at Choonghee Dhong Church. Only the inscriptions at the entrance give away any Chinese association.

Image 2.f: Main Temple Choonghee Dong Church. It was only in the interior spaces that Chinese character was expressed.

2a-2f: Photographs taken by Subhadip Mukherjee, Chinese Temples and Churches of Kolkata, March 12, 2018, IndianVagabond. Accessed September 10, 2024, https://indianvagabond.com/2018/03/12/chinese-temples-and-churches-of-kolkata/.

But how far should assimilation go?

In 1910, some Hakka Chinese were relocated from the CBD to the marshy wetlands of Tangra in the outskirts due to environmental concerns about their tanneries in the city. "Tangra, ...in contrast to the cosmopolitan Tiretta Bazaar area, appeared more insular," (Bonnerjee 2010, 13). This New Chinatown developed almost secluded from outside influence. The more-or-less homogenous neighbourhood is inward-facing, asserting their identity "around the community places like Pei May School, a Chinese school built by the community, and the market" (Bonnerjee 2010, 13).

Image 3.a: Gate announcing the entry to the New Chinatown, Tangra, clearly exhibiting Chinese elements.

Image 3.b: High-walled, steel gated territories in Tangra reflect a more insular, guarded community as compared to the old town.

Image 3.c: Cheena Kali is a Hindu goddess worshipped in Tangra Chinatown. It has two Kali and one Shiva deities, which is honoured by offering Chinese food such as dumplings and noodles.

Image 3.d: Kim Li Loi is one of the oldest Tangra restaurants. As the tanneries were closed, several restaurants opened up, and the place became a popular spot for Chinese food lovers.

3a-3b: Photographs taken by Alice Carfrae, China Town Kolkata, June 28, 2014, Alice Carfrae Multimedia. Accessed September 10, 2024, https://www.alicecarfraemultimedia.com/blog/2014/6/28/china-town-kolkata-private.

3c-3d: Photographs taken by Amrita Mukherjee, Chinatown in Kolkata: A Heritage of Negotiation and Survival, June, 2021, Sahapedia. Accessed September 10, 2024, https://map.sahapedia.org/article/Chinatown-in-Kolkata:-A-Heritage-of-Negotiation-and-Survival/11284.

The construction of the India Exchange Road (presently, Lu Shun Sarani) by the Calcutta Improvement Trust in 1950s through Cheenapara fragmented the Old Chinatown, displacing many more Chinese to Tangra. Lacking any territorial markers, the insertion of multi-storeyed office spaces and apartments is gradually erasing the original human scaled settlement to emerge as the 'office-para' of Kolkata.[6]

Despite the physical transformations, Cheenapara's ingrained cosmopolitan character "continues to integrate and absorb multi-ethnic communities who live in close proximity," (Bose 2016).[7] Amongst this amalgamation of diverse cultures, "the Sunday morning market ... and road names like Sun Yatsen Street and Lu Shun Sarani hold on to the Chinese presence in this area of Calcutta," (Bonnerjee 2010, 12). Formerly known as Russel Street, Lu Shun Sarani was renamed in honour of Lu Xun, a renowned Chinese writer and intellectual. The Sun Yat-sen Street is named after Dr. Sun Yat-sen, a revolutionary leader and founding father of the Republic of China. Such dedications may have been official attempts to promote historical and cultural ties between China and India. At first glance, place-naming may appear to be an innocuous exercise, a way of simply creating a means for spatial reference and orientation. Yet, toponyms are also allegories from which people draw identity, and the naming process can give insight into the history, social and political power relations of a particular place.

[6] The current name "Kolkata" is used to highlight events occurring in the present.

[7] Dislocation and emigration of other ethnic communities that existed during the colonial period brought in migrants from other parts of the country into the grey town area of Calcutta.

Image 4.a: Tiretta Bazaar in Kolkata's Cheenapara is still popular for Chinese delicacies.

Image 4.b: Chinese New Year celebrations at Tiretta Bazaar.

4a-4b: Photographs taken by Mallika Khurana, From Dragon Dances To Sui Mai Feasts: Inside Kolkata's Tiretta Bazar's Chinese New Year Extravaganza, February 12, 2024, Curlytales. Accessed September 10, 2024, https://curlytales.com/from-dragon-dances-to-sui-mai-feasts-inside-kolkatas-tiretta-bazars-chinese-new-year-extravaganza/

Although the two China towns appear to have drastically different characters, for the Chinese, the differences between the two Chinatowns were mostly in their way of living. While Cheenapara represented a more mixed neighbourhood, Tangra was more homogenous, originating from occupational requirements. For the Chinese diaspora, Calcutta becomes a palimpsest of self-imposed invisibility, by assimilation in the built environment, overlapped by indicators of identity construction through language, education and traditions.

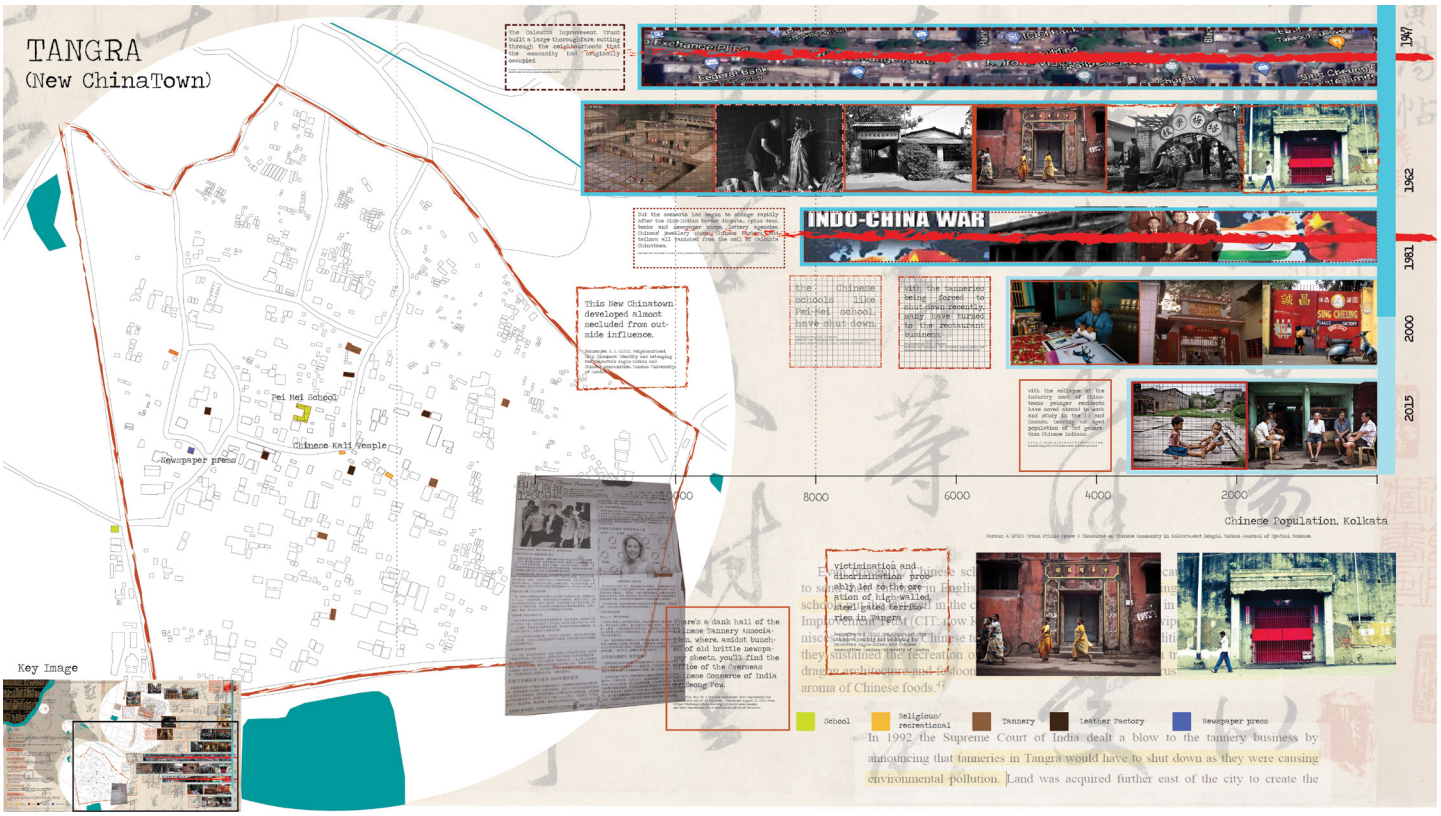

Figure 4: Palimpsestic mapping of Tangra. Relevant parts of old maps are overlapped on the present map of Tangra to identify sites as mentioned. The write-ups in boxes act as supporting statements from references corresponding to the site or timeline.

The host country's duty?

"... Exactly how much time needs to pass before the immigrants become full members of society?" (Harari 2019, 132). The Chinese Kali Temple is a testament to the amalgamation of the Chinese and Indian cultures. However, the victimization and discrimination faced by the Chinese as a result of the Detention Act[8] following the 1962 Sino-Indo War is probably what led to the creation of high-walled, steel gated territories in Tangra (Bose 2016). Considering ethnic Chinese residents as potential spies, the Indian government ordered many Chinese-Indians to leave the country and held thousands of those who did not comply in internment camps. With the constant fear of internment, heightened distrust by the Indians and restrictions on movement, many Chinese lost their jobs and were forced to move.

One can see a disproportion even in the emigration patterns between the two towns. The Cantonese population living within the CBD were the first to leave, possibly because they were "more 'anglicised'... compared to the Hakka Chinese who lived in Tangra, making it easier for them to emigrate," observes Bonnerjee (2010, 114). It was the closure and relocation of tanneries from Tangra following the Supreme Court's verdict in 1992 that led to significant emigration of the Hakka community. The larger tanneries relocated to the Calcutta Leather Complex at Bantala while some of those who could not afford it, turned to restaurants and sauce factories and the others simply ground to a halt. The same fate awaited the first Chinese newspaper of India, the Chinese Journal of India that was started in 1935, near the Old Chinatown. With the younger generation moving out, and those who remain preferring to study in English medium schools, the Chinese schools that were once their community space are becoming a memory.[9] From the office of the only functioning Chinese newspaper press in India, in a dark hall of the Chinese Tannery Association, The Overseas Chinese Commerce of India, or Seong Pow, fights for its sustenance with only 200 subscribers (Datta, 2019).

An aged population of third generation Chinese-Indians remains in Calcutta. Though many of them hold Indian passports, recent stand-off between India and China has increased their anxieties about their life in the State. It is deeply ingrained in Nationalism "... to treat foreigners as distinctive kinds of people deserving limited right and close surveillance," (Tilly 2015). So even after the immigrants have been tolerant, will the host country ever accept them as first-class citizens?

[8] The act led to the forced relocation and incarceration of 3000 Chinese-Indians in an internment camp in Deoli, Rajasthan.

[9] Cheng–Kuo and Hing-Wah schools, which were supported by Chinese governments, were shut down after the border dispute in 1962. The Pei-Mei school, one the last Chinese Medium schools closed in 2009 due to lack of students.

Are both sides living up to their obligations?

"Human mental identities are not like shoes; of which we can only wear a pair at a time," (Hobsbawn 1996, 1067). Chinese Calcuttans, particularly those in the city, drew upon their 'invisibility', with a dual identification as Chinese by community and Indian by nationality. However, "their identification with the nation was ruptured through the traumatic experiences during this period [of unrest during the Sino-Indo War]," (Bonnerjee 2010, 138). While their sincere effort to assimilate is evident not only in their lifestyle but also in the built environment, they are still treated as second-class citizens even in the second and third generations.[10] The lack of mutual support gradually resulted in the isolation of the diaspora from the mainstream communities.

In August 2005, the Indian Chinese Association for Culture, Welfare and Development, along with the Municipal Corporation of Calcutta put up a road sign at Tangra- 'Tangra China Town'- written in Chinese, English, Bengali and Hindi. This apparent acceptance of Chinese identity by the state, offers hope to pro-immigrationists. However, these acts might also serve to frame the Chinese community as the other—distinct and separate, rather than fully integrated into the fabric of the host country.

The heritage walk organised by The Cha Project[11] connects six temples, the Chinese breakfast street, Damzen Street and Blackburn Lane that still retain the original character of Cheenapara (Bhowmik, 2014). Still, global political turmoil is mirrored at the city level, particularly within neighborhood spaces, making Calcutta feel once again inhospitable to the Chinese Indian community.

[10] Referring to the pro-immigrationist's side of the immigration debate by Yuval Harari (2019).

[11] The Cha Project (Cities, Heritage, Architecture) is a design and creative placemaking studio based in Singapore. The group of urbanists, designers, planners, architects, engineers, artists, heritage enthusiasts, scholars and creatives lead urban revival initiatives for Kolkata's iconic neighborhoods starting with Chinatown.

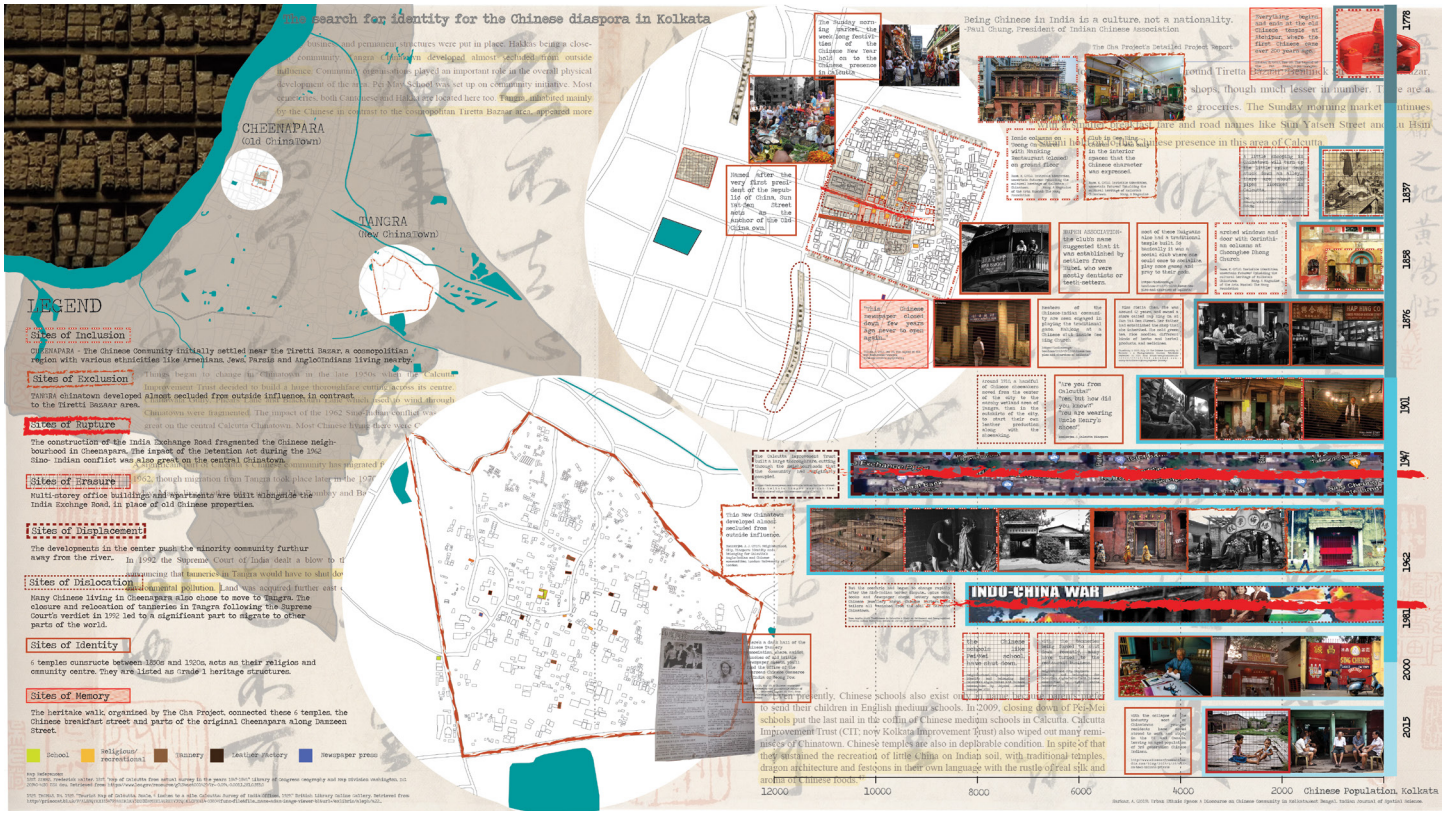

Figure 5: Combined palimpsestic map of the two Chinatowns of Calcutta by stacking spatial study, archival materials and historic events show the role of the invisible actants—stories, myths, and archived narratives—that mould the unseen architecture of community identity and memory.

Conclusion

While the presence of the Chinese community in Calcutta is still prominent, the palimpsestic mapping of their settlements, read together with the socio-political events, weaves a story of inclusion, exclusion, gradual displacement and possibly eventual disappearance. Within the present-day Cheenapara, a region devoid of clear boundaries, urban redevelopment looms over the old Chinese quarters. The remaining minority is being pushed further away from the city, towards the outskirts. A more 'fortified' Tangra indicates their insecurity. The dwindling Chinese-Indian population finds solace in the few remaining temples and shops run by them. These remnants of a once thriving community serve as crucial anchor-points for the Chinese diaspora amidst the city's evolving landscape. As the younger generation continues to migrate elsewhere, a small, aging population of Chinese-Indians remains. Their fading presence is manifested through altered (and forgotten) place-names and increasing sites of memory, serving as poignant reminders of their past.

The Chinese diaspora's story in Calcutta offers a reminder that cities are not just physical entities but repositories of collective memory, stories, and invisible identities. As cities grow and change, newer layers often overwrite or erase the tangible and intangible heritage of minority groups. The experience of the Chinese diaspora illustrates that built forms are merely spatial indicators of the deeper, intangible actants that shape community identity. The methodology of palimpsestic mapping used in this research provides valuable insights for understanding the complex layers of migration, assimilation, and erasure in other geographical or cultural contexts, offering a more nuanced understanding of urban development and memory.

This study offers a blueprint for how to approach architectural and urban history from a decolonial perspective. By combining spatial study, archival research, and historical context, it becomes possible to see beyond the physical structures and understand the deeper social forces at play. The use of Harari's immigration framework further enriches the analysis by linking global immigration dynamics to local urban realities, making this approach relevant for studying migration in cities around the world.

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