

Negotiating Presences: Examining the Indo-Chinese Culture Through its Food

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Abstract

This paper examines the historical trajectory and cultural assimilation of the Chinese diaspora in India, with particular focus on Calcutta (Kolkata), and explores how food becomes a crucial site for identity formation and negotiation. Tracing the origins of Chinese migration from the late eighteenth century, the study situates the community within broader Sino-Indian relations shaped by colonial trade networks and economic migration. Over time, Chinese settlers established distinct occupational identities and thriving neighbourhoods, contributing significantly to the urban and cultural fabric of the city. However, political disruptions, especially the 1962 Sino-Indian War, led to marginalization, displacement, and a reconfiguration of identity among Indian Chinese communities. The paper foregrounds food as a primary medium through which cultural exchange, adaptation, and hybridization occur. Indo-Chinese cuisine emerges as a dynamic product of this interaction, blending Chinese culinary techniques with Indian ingredients, spices, and taste preferences. This hybrid cuisine reflects both the community's strategies of economic survival and their efforts toward social integration, while simultaneously revealing tensions between authenticity and adaptation. The study argues that "Chineseness" in Indian Chinese food is not an essential quality but a socially constructed perception shaped by consumer expectations and market forces. Drawing on literary representations, particularly Kwai-Yun Li's *The Palm Leaf Fan and Other Stories*, alongside cultural and sociological analyses, the paper highlights how food practices encode deeper questions of belonging, nostalgia, and generational shifts in identity. While first-generation migrants retain ties to their homeland, subsequent generations negotiate a more fluid, hyphenated identity rooted in Indian social realities. Ultimately, the paper conceptualizes Indo-Chinese cuisine as emblematic of a "Third Space," where new cultural forms and identities are continuously produced through processes of acculturation, adaptation, and mutual influence.

Keywords: Cultural Hybridity, Identity Negotiation, Sino-Indian Diaspora, Indo-Chinese Cuisine

Indian history is punctuated by several such decisive moments that have shaped its culture in various ways. India's relations with other countries have always been a determining factor for its cultural development. Sino-Indian relations have been forged since the days of British imperialism. In 1782, the first Chinese, Tong Achi or as he is commonly known, Tong Achew, landed in the then Calcutta, the capital of British India, and set up a sugar mill with the permission from Warren Hastings, the Governor General of that time, at Budge Budge. Since then, traders started coming to the Indian heartland in search of trade. The silk route facilitated

the influx of the Chinese and soon, the Chinese from various parts of China started settling in Calcutta. By 1837, “three hundred and sixty-two individuals of pure Chinese origin had been recorded in the city” (Ghosh, 6). Calcutta (now Kolkata) and Bombay (now Mumbai), the two most favoured port cities, had become the initial places of settlement for the Chinese immigrants from different parts of China such as Guangzhou, Hakka and Shandong. They came with specific skill sets of their own and very soon marked a distinct identity for themselves through their profession. While the Cantonese were categorized as carpenters, the Hakka immigrants as shoemakers and tannery workers, those from Shandong were silk traders. By 1901, the census recorded 1640 Chinese people living in Calcutta alone while by the 1950s, the number had shot to 26, 250. China’s overbearing and failing political system and financial instability drove many to migrate to other lands—India, Pakistan, Canada, the United Kingdom and the United States of America. The Chinese in Calcutta set up two main areas of settlement—one near Tangra and the other near Bow Bazaar and flourished as a community by setting up several tanneries, eateries, shoe shops, dentists’ clinics, carpentry shops and Chinese schools where the medium of instruction was Mandarin. The Chinese were known for their hard work and unique skill set as their businesses of teeth-fitting, carpentry and cooking skills made them instantly popular in their fields. The 1962 Sino-Indian War changed the dynamics as the status quo was upset by widespread Sinophobia as the Chinese were suspected of being Communist spies and thus were interned at a camp near Deoli, Rajasthan, and deported back to China in large numbers. The background of Chinese settlement in India is a significant moment for this diasporic community as this instance of settlement is the middle step to the triad of the settlement pattern enacted by Chinese immigrants—from the homeland to the temporary place and finally in the west. The first-generation Chinese migrants who settled in India made India their home with no or very little hope of ever going back to China because of the rising political and social tensions. Straddled with their settlement-out-of-necessity rose the need to reconfigure their identity.

“[I]t takes a generation to lose China”, according to Lynn Pan (288). The Chinese were conspicuous among a predominant community of Bengalis through their bodily features as well as their craftsmanship as most worked in tanneries or factories or owned different businesses. The beginning of cultural assimilation or attempts to strike a compromise between the host culture and the foreign one take place through food. The first Chinese restaurant in Calcutta, Eau Chew, started in 1924 and became an instantly popular low-cost tiffin place for European and Chinese immigrants. It served pork chops and cutlets for European clients but soon this highly potent food industry began serving Indianized versions of Chinese food with the exact touch of the exotic or the foreign in it for the specific appeal of the dish being unfamiliar yet with strong hints of the known flavours and tastes. Food became the gateway for the Chinese to understand and incorporate the host culture and vice-versa. Calcutta’s heritage is not devoid of the Chinese imprint on it and the food of this community is its strongest testament. It was the need of the hour to sell the food dressed in Chinese garb but seasoned by Indian spices to make it palatable to the natives. The process of assimilation for the Chinese starts with food but not with the food they were selling; in order to be incorporated within the mainframe of the host culture, it is imperative to partake of that culture. Their ability to do so proved successful and it is through several instances of intermarriages that we see an amalgamation of the two communities. Dominique Lee, a member of the Indian Chinese Association says, “We are already integrated. We have intermarried and there are fifth generation Indian Chinese living here. We celebrate Durga Puja and worship Kali” (Ghosh, 18). The culture that rises is undoubtedly a hybrid culture

that signals the existence of Sino-Indian relationship beyond geographical and political bounds. Often in a host and foreign culture dynamic, the foreign culture is subsumed within the dominant native culture but in this case, however, the Chinese have found a way of making their presence felt through their ubiquitous presence in their food or in the conceptualization of their food. Chinese food in India is not the kind found in the Chinese provinces; instead, they are heavily Indianized by the use of available ingredients and the spice blend that is known to and appeals to Indian taste buds. It will be the aim of this paper to explore such instances of intermingling between the two cultures and the consequences of such an interaction on identity making and constant negotiation between a nostalgic sense of identity as a Chinese and the current state as unacknowledged Indian-born Chinese.

As time passed, the hyphenated state of being was expressed through their trysts with food. To fashion food in a form of employment, the Chinese community in Calcutta began selling Chinese food with a distinct and deliberate Indian touch. The use, or overuse, of certain herbs and condiments to suit to the tastes of the Indians gave birth to a cuisine which had, at once, an Indian spice blend with umami flavours. This is telling of the identity of the Chinese community of India which has modified its lifestyle and habits according to the host nation. Through food, we can then divulge into a bigger issue—that of identity and the constant negotiation and self-making process through which generations of Chinese immigrants in India traverse. Their food is, at once, telling of their insecurities as a community as well as harbours a sense of individuality. The food that they sell is not for their everyday consumption. Dumplings, soups, pork roast, moonshine, fire-water—some remnants of their indigenous culture—find their way into their lives. This is in stark contrast to an Indian born Chinese dish as the ‘chilli chicken’ or the ‘manchurian’. Appropriation of culture happens at two levels simultaneously—the Chinese appropriating Indian culture for greater assimilation and the Indian making way into the Chinese by way of unmaking the ‘authentic’ Chinese into an Indian Chinese. Questions of authenticity and adherence to ethnic authenticity are examined in this context as well. The first generation immigrants adhere to the culture back home by incorporating elements from their previous life but the second generation, born in the host nation, is severed of any such loyalty. The crux of this paper lies in an attempt to understand how the two cultures have evolved and negotiated their existence simultaneously vis-à-vis the food and the acceptance of each other in general. Food plays a crucial role in this study as it is through food that such an exchange of cultural forms and transformation in the same can be perceived. The aim of this paper is to understand the influences on the two cultures that have played a role in shaping and constructing identities. How the host nation infiltrates the everyday lives of the immigrants and how the foreign culture appropriates the native culture becomes a crucial point of focus in this paper made evident through Kwai-Yun Li’s collection of short stories, *The Palm Leaf Fan and Other Stories*, based on her experiences of the Chinatown of Calcutta, where she was born and brought up. Through vivid memories of her past life in Chhattawalla Gully and some mature insights, Li, in her stories builds up the life of Chinatown through her characters and their everyday lives and practices. Food plays a seminal role as through it we divulge into issues such as acculturation and authenticity. Ethnic authenticity in terms of food and adapting to the host culture are the two prime focuses of this paper and food as realized in Li’s stories and food or Indo-Chinese food as realized in our social world will further be examined in this paper.

“Indian-Chinese food is a perception of what Chinese food is like, as conceived by Indians” (Sankar, 268). The umami flavours found a vacant spot in the Indian food palette and its

combination with ginger, garlic, soy sauce and red chilli sauce created the concept of ‘Chinese’ food. This was in no sense adhering to what the authentic Chinese food is but an innovation as hybrid and as contemporary as the social situation of the Chinese immigrant settlers was. The ‘Chineseness’ is created through the appearance of a Chinese identity and heritage by invoking images of the exotic such as the dragon or Chinese pagodas. This is instrumental in drawing the clientele to an experience of the authentic exotic but tweaked such in terms of taste so that it is familiar. What is being marketed as Chinese food is in a way locally sourced and easily available ingredients that has a spicy and pungent taste in shining gravies or red and reddish brown greasy dishes. The predominant use of the colour red in all the dishes is a means to draw the customer’s attention to the food. “Chinese food is analogous to red or brown, greasy and hot in taste” is what the general opinion is and that is what the restaurateur sells and people consume (Sankar, 271). The uniqueness of the food is what attracts and repulses one at the same time. People are attracted by the unknown flavours of the Chinese and the tension between attraction and repulsion draws one to buy the food. The sellers, however, blend the unknown with an array of tried and tested flavours and ingredients.

The use of known spice powders and masala is a process of familiarizing the strange food the “Chinese” part of the “Chinese” food. The novelty has been overcome by making it taste like Indian food. In a way, altering the tastes of unfamiliar foods to familiar tastes is a form of dealing with omnivores’ dilemma, the tension between neophobia and the tendency to seek out new foods. Thus, omnivores must successfully balance curiosity and caution, and this is as true for humans as it is for any other omnivorous animal. This tension is one of the several deep-seated conflicts at the very foundation of human eating patterns. All omnivores, also humans, find ways of coping with this paradoxical juxtaposition of attraction and repulsion. Adding substances to give Indian flavor to unfamiliar food stuffs is one form of such coping actions (Sankar, 271).

So while the base ingredients are rice or noodles, the clever use of “capsicum, boiled paneer, spring onions, semi-cooked chicken, garlic, coriander leaves and ginger” along with “salt, chilli powder, turmeric, garam masala, chaat masala, food colours and other flavouring substances along with soya sauce, red chili sauce, green chili sauce, tomato sauce, vinegar, and different oils” make the dish not distant, instead a sibling of the everyday curries or the regular dishes at home (Sankar, 270). The problematic elements such as pork, beef, or any other meat are conveniently absent from the menu of these ‘Chinese’ eateries except for chicken and the dishes such as stews or soups are significantly less in number too. The numerous ‘fried’ dishes as the ‘fried rice’ or ‘pan-fried noodles’ or ‘pan-fried dumplings’ are closer to the Indian customer than a bowl of soup or steamed dumplings. A Chinese identity is essential to the hyphenated identity of the food. Familiarizing the unfamiliar food by means of infusing Indian flavours is, and by, the “appearance” (Sankar, 268). The cooking process itself is telling of the culture of the ‘other’. “The wok and the process of cooking are mostly visible to the customers. Most of the restaurateurs have...a semi-open kitchen where the making and processing of Chinese food is visible to the customers....The use of the wok and the action of the chefs, such as tossing, blending, smoking, and the use of sauces, are visible to the customers” (Sankar, 270). The very culinary experience of absorbing the food being prepared with techniques hitherto unused in the making of food in daily life, such as the preparation of the food in a wok or smoking the meat, evokes the element of the strange or unknown to the Indo-Chinese food. This lends an aura of

enigma to the food. The utensils used, such as bowls or circular plates and forks and spoons are in accordance with the usage pattern of the Indians. Except for big restaurants, chopsticks are not the favoured crockeries for eating noodles or rice. The dishes are usually accompanied with forks and spoons and sauce bottles—green and red chilli and tomato along with vinegared onions and chillies are often kept on the table. The packaging of the food which symbolically becomes packaging the Indo-Chinese culture is made evident through “the predominant use of red color, random Chinese scripts, images of Chinese temples, paintings or statues of Buddha, symbols of wok, picture of fat Chinese chef, picture of dragon, symbols of bowl and chopsticks” (Sankar, 268). The representation of the food along these terms evokes a lingering nostalgia and connection with the homeland but the food born out of such cross-cultural connections is “intrinsically Indianized Chinese food” (Sankar, 273). This emergent new form of food is symbolic of the emergent immigrant identity which is not only hybrid in nature but also does not make any claim to tenable ‘purity’ of culture. The attitude towards adapting the culture of the host nation and forging a new identity of one’s own that at once is reminiscent of the forsaken motherland and the new country with which the immigrant community intends to assimilate. India, therefore, becomes the place where they can assert and articulate their individuality as a Chinese immigrant engaged in a constant refashioning of the self. The immigrant is no longer just Chinese but has adopted the ways of the present land as their native culture. The “Third Space of Enunciation”, therefore, provides the possibility of the presence of a new culture, a new identity and the food of that culture heralds such a promise.

What constitutes the ‘Chinese’ in Indo-Chinese cuisine is how the food is represented. Nelson Wang, in *Secret Sauce*, recounts how ‘Chicken Manchurian’ came to be. Nelson, a second-generation Chinese immigrant to India, was born in 1950 in the Calcutta Chinatown and thereafter moved to the then Bombay at the young age of fifteen to work at the newly opened Chinese restaurant, Frederick’s. He then went on to become the most famous chef of Chinese dishes and opened several restaurants as the China Man and was even the designated chef for the CCI (the present day BCCI). He opened his restaurant China Garden in several parts of the country, which specializes in Chinese and Indo-Chinese specialties. He is credited with inventing the Chicken Manchurian. It came about as “a response to requests from CCI members who said ‘Kuch Alag Karo’, make us something unique. Essentially, the dish consists of chicken pakoras tossed in soy sauce and condiments. It first bowled over the diners at China Man and went on to become the ubiquitous snack it now is” (Bala, 27). An essentially Chinese sounding dish, assumed to be from a specific province of China, with the promise of its native flavours and taste is actually an Indian fried snack. The clever remodelling of the humble pakora into a stylish plate of ‘Chinese’ food or Chinese-sounding food makes the dish more palatable because of its connection with an exotic land. Exoticizing the familiar as the unusual, the faraway, stands up to the promise of being ‘unique’. The menu card of China Garden in their outlet at Connaught Place, New Delhi, is interesting in this regard as it indulges in the same oriental romanticizing as with Chicken Manchurian. The abundant use of Chinese lanterns, dragon motifs, or Chinese emperors printed on every page evokes the romantic nostalgia of a bygone era and its heritage. The use of certain words and phrases as “imported”, “traditional”, “Emperor’s chef recipe” or “family recipe handed down generations” harps on to questions of ethnicity and ethnic belonging (Saha, Web). Besides, the recurrent use of the word ‘China’ or Schezwan or any Mandarin word for that matter makes the case for the ‘authentic’ Chinese. The lingering of an ethnic past helps in the fashioning of an identity, especially that of a diasporic community but the interaction with

the dominant culture and the consequent hybrid cultural forms give rise to an imagination of that ethnic past. Hence, Chinese food is not what is available in China but what feeds the imagination of the Indians as Chinese food. Ethnic authenticity, therefore, is a social construction that operates within the bounds of the dominant cultural expectation. It is where ethnic tradition continues but in the context of a continuous process of adaptation. The need to maintain a balance between ‘Indianization’ and ‘authenticity’ and between responses to local tastes and cultures and ethnic tradition is significant. The Indianized Chinese food is emblematic of the same. In America, until 2017, there were about forty thousand Chinese diners and takeaway stalls. A similar process of adaptation and indigenization of taste and flavours have happened in America too. There are a few Americanized Chinese tastes that the Americans prefer and expect. In an interview, the chef of Jade Dragon, a local ‘Chinese’ restaurant in Johnson City, Tennessee, speaks thus:

The taste of Chinese food is appealing for local Americans. When we started in the 90s, customers even needed to wait in line to eat our food because we improved the taste of our food to accommodate the local taste. Americans in this area prefer dishes with heavy flavouring, especially more sugar and salt, we like a light taste, but they would find it tasteless. That’s why we always put extra salt, sugar and soy sauce on the table. (Shi, 26)

Changes in food are also influenced by food availability, environment and audience. In America, “some of the major ingredients [in Chinese cuisine] such as fresh bamboo shoots, hotbed chives, garlic bolt and wax gourd have been replaced by carrots, snow peas, green peppers, broccoli and mushrooms, which are easily available in America and familiar to the Americans” (Sankar, 271). Local and traditional cultures amalgamate to give rise to new cultural forms. Lu and Fine in their study, find authentic food as products that are “prepared using the same ingredients and processes as found in the homeland of the ethnic, national or regional group” (539). Social, cultural and economic constraints hinder the production of genuine ethnic food as “in all cases of cultural diffusion, adjustments are made to accommodate the values of the host society” (538). However, consumer-oriented businesses see “the adherence to tradition as anything but secondary” (547). The most important aspect for restaurant owners is to match the “primary sensory satisfaction” (547) of their client; this explains that “Chinese food served in foreign countries is a consequence of an adaptation to the demand of the market” (547) which is why they deduce that authenticity is a social accomplishment and the purity of ethnicity cannot be replicated in foreign societies as they are of no or very little consequence to the foreign customer and that authentic experiences are influenced by “aesthetic preferences, economic status, and activity schedules” (544).

The process of acculturation is not one-sided. As Indians learn to indigenize the umami flavours of Chinese food and develop a taste for the Indianized Chinese food, so do the Chinese immigrants living in India and accommodating their lives in this land. Culture and food habits are highly influenced by such intermingling and inter-living. When a foreign culture initiates interactions with the local over a period of time, the two amalgamate so that the foreign community is not just a diaspora community anymore. “The Indian Chinese community living in the Calcutta Chinatowns at present stand to defy any working definitions of a diaspora community. They have integrated to the adopted country in a way that their notions of homeland and motherland have melted together into a collective notion of India—their country in which they are deliberately othered and placed on the outskirts of any discursive nation formation or

political theories” (Ghosh, 17). In Kwai-Yun Li’s *The Palm Leaf Fan and Other Stories*, the stories reveal the influence of the dominant culture on the foreign one so much so that some critics contend that in the triad of the path of migration, the concept of home has changed for second and third generation Chinese immigrants who do not have any bond with the motherland but have made India their home. Li’s stories “reveal a hybrid identity for its Chinese characters in the way Indian food, language, relationships and Hindi cinema are intermingled in the stories. Thus the short stories suggest a Sino-Indian identity for its author and its characters. In spite of the fact that even when the Chinese who populate Li’s stories immigrate to the West they are unable to shake off the Indian identity that they had acquired till then” (Pulugurtha, 68). Li recreates the everyday life of the inhabitants of the Chinatown in Calcutta and we enthral in the picture painted in front of our eyes. The diasporic community is no longer a social and physical presence but an emotional and sentimental value is added to every character, place and story as they unfold the lived experiences of the author and numerous others as her. They inhabit the geographical world of Calcutta and make it all come to life—references to Kidderpore, Bentinck Road, Bow Bazar Street, New Market, Chowringhee, Park Street, Sun Yat Sen Street, Chattawalla Gully among others make the presence of the Chinese palpably felt in the stories. This is, as Pulugurtha argues, “evidence of the way in which an immigrant community has recreated the country of their origin in the land that they have migrated to” (67). Local culture exhibited through food habits as the drinking of tea or buttermilk or relishing Mughlai food are telling of the intermixing of the two communities and the influences each have had on one another. The very first story of the collection begins with the narrator’s mother fanning herself with a palm leaf fan on a very hot day and having a glass of ‘lassi’ to cool herself down. The two objects of importance here—the palm leaf fan and the glass of buttermilk are distinctly Indian and their use by a first generation Chinese immigrant shows the ways of adapting to a foreign land, now the home. The stories “seek to establish a sense of oneness with everything that is Indian. One area where this is achieved is in the way food and language is used. This is evident from the first paragraph of the title story. The narrator’s father is “always drinking chai” with friends (1). Kwai-Yun does not use the English tea or the Chinese word for tea. Neither does she italicise “chai,” showing the naturalisation of Indian words in the Sino-Indian imagination as well as the naturalisation of Indian food in the Sino-Indian diet. The mother drinks a “glass of lassi (2)” (69). The two objects of importance here—the palm leaf fan and the glass of buttermilk are distinctly Indian and their use by a first-generation Chinese immigrant shows the ways of adapting to a foreign land, now the home. When she celebrates the marriage of her only son, though, every food item is distinctly Chinese, even the drinks, firewater and moonshine, are procured from a local Chinese brewery. The interaction with the dominant culture, then, is layered and works through specific spatial and temporal bounds. Such interaction is required for general acceptance and to earn a livelihood but in the deep crevices of one’s heart lays a fondness for indigenous values and culture. The second generation, however, is much more cosmopolitan and severed of a tenable bond with the motherland, fosters a new identity that is neither completely Chinese nor Indian. This is harped at through several instances, where the narrator recounts how the thought of an afternoon meal at a local Muslim restaurant made her salivate instead of the indigenous food offered to the Buddha.

Food plays an integral role in exhibiting cultural presences. Indo-Chinese food is a prime instance for the same. Assimilation with and acculturation into the dominant culture in the case

of the Chinese immigrants has been so successful that the Indo-Chinese has become a cuisine in itself. Not only is the mainstream commercial fusion food exemplary of such an exchange but also the food of the everyday exhibits such cultural exchange. “[D]uring the summer Dragon Boat Festival (Duai Wo Jai) celebrated to mark the birth anniversary of the poet Qu Yuan, the Chinese all over the world consume a specialty food called Zong Ze. However in India, the members of the community confess to consuming mangoes in addition with Zong Ze to blend in the local flavours along with traditional ones” (Ghosh, 17). In fact, during the worship of the goddess Kali at “the sixty-year-old Chinese Kali Temple at Matheshwartala Road at Tangra”, noodles and rice soup as ‘bhog’ is served and handmade paper is burnt “to ward off evil spirits in accordance to ancient Chinese traditions, to believe in the level of the assimilation in Calcutta” (18). Such cultural assimilation is telling of the emergent identities and new forms of being and instead of negating identification forms as the diasporic or the unsettled or the alien, a new sense of the self is achieved. Indo-Chinese cuisine has helped establish this identity in that it is a lesson in itself of the adaptability of the human nature and accommodating of heterogeneous cultural presences.

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