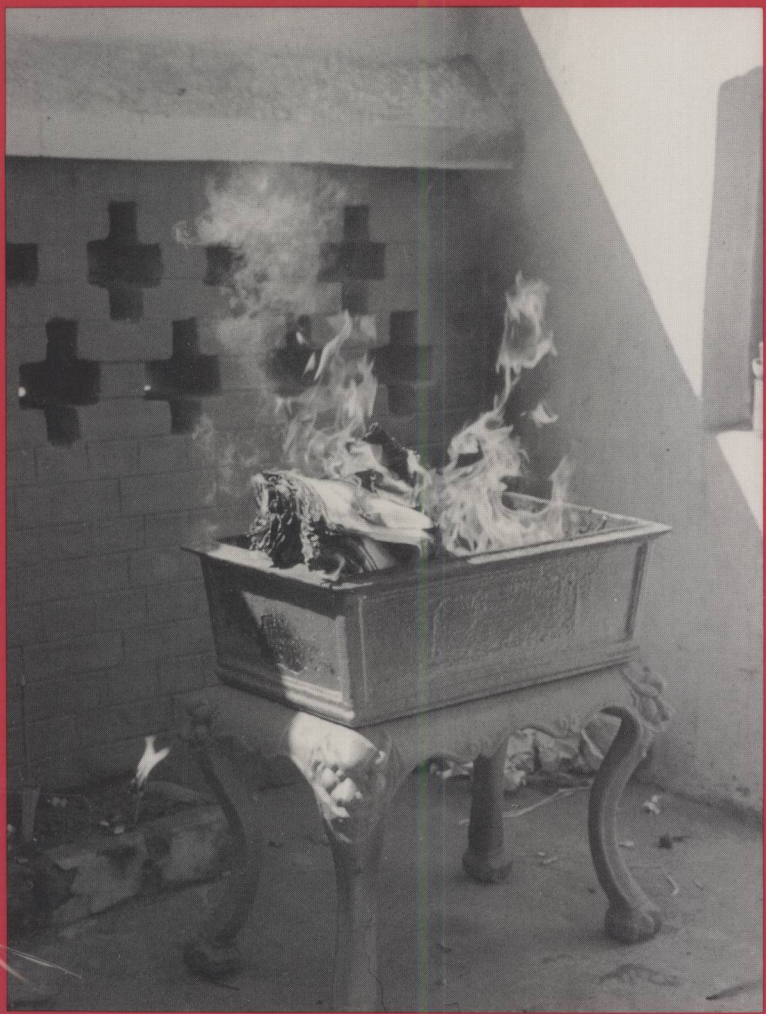
BLOOD, SWEAT, AND MAHJONG

Family and Enterprise in an Overseas Chinese Community

ELLEN OXFELD



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Blood, Sweat, and Mahjong

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For my parents

Preface

This book is about individuals and families in movement, their harmonious and conflicting relationships with one another and with those they consider outsiders, and their steadfast convictions as well as their ambivalent and contradictory beliefs and attitudes. I focus on these issues through an examination of the family dynamics, ethnic role, and ideological orientations of members of a diaspora Chinese community located in Calcutta, India. Tracing the pathways of community members across time and space, I include within my purview both their initial emigration from China to India and their subsequent immigration to North America.

As with many projects, the beginnings of this one are not easy to identify definitively. My interests in the cultures and histories of East and South Asia go back to high school days and deepened during my years at Williams College. After graduation from college, I was the fortunate recipient of a Thomas J. Watson Foundation Fellowship, which enabled me to study Chinese in Taiwan and Hong Kong and also to travel through Thailand and India. It was on this trip that I became aware that Calcutta was home to a rather fascinating overseas Chinese community. I returned to the United States to study social and cultural anthropology at Harvard University, and when the time came for me to choose a site for fieldwork, I decided that an investigation of the Calcutta Chinese community could combine my interests in Chinese culture, Indian society, and the dilemmas and difficulties faced by ethnic minorities.

I was especially fortunate in that the members of the Calcutta Chi-

nese community generously extended their hospitality and opened their lives to me. It is to them, therefore, that I owe the greatest debt of gratitude. So many community members came to my assistance that it would be impossible to thank each one individually. I would, however, like to thank in particular Lee Chiu Fong, Chen Kuin Fong, and their respective families. Both were more than generous hosts, and Lee Chiu Fong, who had an instinctive sense of the kinds of issues I was interested in, was (and still is) an endless source of information and insight.

I also thank the Anthropological Survey of India in Calcutta, with which I was affiliated during my research from 1980 to 1982. Hirendra K. Rakshit, who served as its director at that time, guided me in the intricacies of obtaining necessary official approval for my research. Jyoti Sen, who was my adviser at the Survey, provided many hours of stimulating ideas and advice. My fieldwork in 1980–81 was funded by the American Institute of Indian Studies (AIIS), and in 1981–82 I received financial support from a National Resource Fellowship. During both of these years, Tarun Mitra, the director of the AIIS office in Calcutta, was of invaluable assistance in both the logistical and bureaucratic aspects of my research. Purnendu Bose, reknowned for his camera work in Indian films, and his family in Calcutta were also a source of friendship, technical support, and intellectual stimulation, as were the members of the Basu family of Kalyani and Calcutta.

Summer research in Toronto in 1986 and a trip to Calcutta in 1989 were partially funded by the Middlebury College professional development fund, and the completion of this book was made possible by an academic leave from Middlebury College during the 1990–91 school year. While I was in Toronto, both Dee and Peter Thompson and C. C. Chen were particularly helpful.

During the writing of this book I profited immensely from the acumen and discernment of many distinguished scholars within and outside of Middlebury College. In particular, I thank Rubie Watson, Hill Gates, Stevan Harrell, Arthur Kleinman, Susan Brownell, Jean Burfoot, Lynel Long, Claudia Strauss, David Nugent, Jan Albers, Paul Monod, Shank Gilkeson, Susan Gray, and Burke Rochford for their insightful comments on portions of the manuscript. Thanks also go to Nur Yalman, Sally Falk Moore, Ezra Vogel, and Myron Cohen, who read much of this material in earlier incarnations and who gave many invaluable recommendations. In that regard, I also mention the late Judith Strauch, who served as one of my advisers at Harvard. Al-

though she did not live to see the completion of my project, her work on overseas Chinese and on ethnicity served as a model for me, and her supportive guidance and friendship will always be remembered.

I am also grateful to both an anonymous reviewer for Cornell University Press and Roger Sanjek, the editor of the Anthropology of Contemporary Issues series at Cornell. Their suggestions and criticisms helped me to create a more focused theoretical discussion and a greater degree of ethnographic depth in the final version of the manuscript.

Finally, a special thanks goes to my parents, Edith and Emil Oxfeld. In addition to their everpresent moral support, they were tireless proofreaders. Reading and rereading numerous drafts and ferreting out countless awkward phrasings, they applied themselves to the task with unfailing patience and abiding good humor.

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ELLEN OXFELD

Middlebury, Vermont

A Note on Chinese Romanization and Names

Because most of the interviews I conducted in Chinese were in Mandarin rather than Hakka, all Chinese expressions in this book have been romanized in Mandarin. With the exception of Chinese words included in direct quotations from other sources, these expressions are romanized according to the pinyin system. In quotations where Chinese words are spelled according to different systems of romanization, and where these spellings differ markedly from the pinyin versions, I have added the pinyin romanizations in brackets. Chinese names are spelled with the surnames first when they come from a Chinese source, when they refer to members of the Calcutta Chinese community, or when they refer to a well-known person whose name is conventionally spelled with the surname first (such as Mao Zedong). Chinese names are spelled with the surname last when they refer to authors of essays or books in English. The names used to refer to members of the Hakka Chinese community, both in Calcutta and in Toronto, are pseudonyms.

Blood, Sweat, and Mahjong

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[1]

Family Trajectories and Pariah Enterprise: Hakka Chinese Tanners of Calcutta

It is a warm August morning in Scarborough, an eastern suburb of Toronto. As I walk along the quiet empty streets lined with rows of two-story brick houses, my thoughts shift from the setting before me to the energetic and densely inhabited streets of Calcutta, where I lived between 1980 and 1982.

Calcutta is a pulsating city, a mosaic of different ethnic, caste, and religious groups. The worldwide fame of Mother Teresa, and other individuals who work with Calcutta's poor, has created a popular image of Calcutta as a sea of poverty and destitution. But while the poor are indeed present in Calcutta, the city is also the commercial, industrial, and intellectual center of northeast India. It is a city of many faces. As the journalist William Stevens wrote: "For a city long pictured as the ultimate urban disaster area, a place of putrefying decay and absolute human misery, Calcutta rises awfully early, works awfully hard and radiates an astonishing amount of energy" (1983).

Chinese Tanners of Calcutta—Remembering the Setting

During the years 1980–82, and again in the summers of 1985 and 1989, I conducted fieldwork in a community of Hakka Chinese who had found a profitable niche in Calcutta's leather industry. The Hakka are a distinctive speech group who live in certain regions of the southeastern Chinese provinces of Guangdong, Fujian and Jiangxi (see Map 1). It is thought, however, that they migrated to south China several

Map 1. Areas of Hakka Residence in China. © World Eagle, Inc., 64 Washburn Ave., Wellesley MA 02181, U.S.A. Reprinted with permission from *Asia Today: An Atlas of Reproducible Pages,* 1991 Revised Edition. Areas of Hakka residence are taken from Chiao-min Hsieh, *Atlas of China* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1973), by permission of the publisher.

centuries ago from the north. Indeed, the word *hakka* means "guest people" in Cantonese, and the Hakka therefore received their name from speakers of the Cantonese language, who consider themselves to be the natives of Guangdong Province (Cohen 1968:247).

A small number of Hakka Chinese immigrants to Calcutta entered into the manufacture of leather during the World War I era. This occupation, considered to be polluting by high-caste Hindus and normally left to untouchables or Muslims, proved to be a lucrative source of income. Although the entire Chinese population of Calcutta consists of no more than eight thousand individuals, the Hakka Chinese now own and operate the vast majority of tanneries there, and their contribution to the Indian leather industry is far from negligible on a national scale. Calcutta is one of three major centers of the tanning industry in India, surpassed only by the cities of Madras in the south and Kanpur in the north.

The Hakka do not comprise Calcutta's entire Chinese population. Cantonese-speaking immigrants from Guangdong Province and immigrants from the central Chinese province of Hubei have also settled in Calcutta. The Cantonese are known primarily as carpenters, whereas the major business of the small Hubeinese community is the operation of dental clinics. In addition, the Hakka Chinese themselves are involved in other industries besides tanning. They own and operate shoe shops, hairdressing salons, and restaurants. But the tanning industry still engages the largest number of Calcutta's Hakka population, and the Hakka community itself is by far the largest of the three Chinese subgroups.[1]

The Chinese tanning area is situated on the eastern periphery of Calcutta in an area known as Dhapa (it is sometimes referred to as Tangra or Tapsia since it straddles two districts of those names). Approximately three hundred tanning businesses, the majority employing between five and fifty workers each, are found there. Housed in large concrete buildings of two and three stories, or small one-story

[1] Although the Calcutta census has never broken down the Chinese population on the basis of language, the numerical dominance of the Hakka can be gleaned from the following: there are two Chinese schools for Hakka students and only one for Cantonese students; furthermore, Hubeinese and Cantonese who live in Calcutta are frequently able to converse in Hakka, whereas few Hakka learn Cantonese or Hubeinese (Cantonese and Hubeinese informants assert that this is a result of the Hakka dominating Chinese life in Calcutta). The number of tanning businesses (approximately three hundred in 1980) clearly establishes tanning as the most important occupation of the Hakka. Only shoe shops come close (150 such shops in 1980).

structures with tile roofs, these factories are connected by a maze of unpaved, frequently muddy paths as well as open sewers through which the by-products of the tanning process flow. Yet the tanneries in this rust-colored industrial environment serve as both residences and factories for the Hakka Chinese who live and work there.

At the entrance to each factory stand large impressive wooden doors, above which the name of the enterprise is painted in Chinese characters. As you pass through these doors into the main manufacturing areas, you may notice decorative sheets of red paper with gold lettering pasted on the walls. These are popular Chinese proverbs, and most of them—such as *yi ben wan li*, which means that for each unit of currency invested, one should profit ten thousand times, and *huo ru lun zhuan*, the hope that one's goods will rotate like a wheel, in other words, be in high demand—express the desire for business success. Frequently, there is an altar at one end of the factory floor, on which sit such popular deities as Guanyin, the Buddhist goddess of mercy, and Guangong, a god of war, but perhaps more significant, a god of wealth and stores. Images of the spirits of happiness, wealth, and longevity, Fu, Lu, and Su, are also commonly displayed.

Once inside the tanneries, you may notice that in many of them kitchens and dining spaces are placed directly on the factory floors. Chinese women cook in areas adjacent to those where their Indian employees shave pieces of leather or throw rawhides into tanning solutions. Drying vegetables hang beside drying hides. Small children run about the factories, and elderly and middle-aged women often sit outside the large factory doors and gossip. In the early morning, you can see these women, dressed in Chinese pajamas, shopping for food in a market near the center of the district. Meanwhile, Indian laborers deliver rawhides to the tanneries, and the tannery employees themselves, mostly Chamars, an untouchable caste associated with leather work, arrive at the factories to begin their workday. Later in the day, these workers can be seen nailing semifinished pieces of leather to dry on boards under the hot sun.

The tanning area presents a mixed impression. The strong odor emitted by the tanning process, workers sweating under the hot sun, pushcarts, trucks, and machinery all suggest an industrial locale. The children running about while playing and buying snacks from vendors, and the groups of Chinese women, standing or sitting while gossiping in front of the big factory doors, suggest a residential area. The industrial waste, mud, and smell hardly make the outdoor areas a garden

spot. Yet the residential quarters within the tanneries are often quite large and amply furnished.

In the living rooms, finely crafted woodwork is highlighted by Chinese wall hangings, usually delicately stitched embroidery pictures of birds, trees, and flowers. The latest rages in high-tech consumer gadgets may also be present (while I was there in 1982, videocassette recorders were just beginning to catch on). The one constant reminder of the community's occupational calling is that leather seems to be everywhere. Not only is leather used for covering chairs, but large pieces also cover the broad wooden beds, creating cool, comfortable platforms for sleeping—and for gossiping, taking tea, and for children's play.

Five Years Later—A Calcutta Chinese Family in Toronto

All the aforementioned images, and even my memories of the stench of tanning, pass through my mind on this particular August morning in Toronto in 1986. Perhaps it is because the Toronto street on which I walk, almost antiseptic in appearance, and without a soul passing by, is at such variance with the tanning area. And yet, the association in my mind is natural, for I am going to interview a man whom I knew from the Calcutta Chinese community.

With a prosperous tanning business back in Calcutta, and two married sons who attend to its daily operation, Mr. Kong now has both the economic wherewithal and the time to make fairly frequent trips abroad. This is especially the case during the monsoon season in India, when the tanning business is rather slow (since most tanners rely on steady sunshine rather than expensive automation to dry their semi-finished leather). Every few years, Mr. Kong, his wife, or sometimes both of them, visit their four other children, two married sons and two married daughters, who now live in Toronto.

Mr. Kong is known in the Calcutta community as an expansive talker. He likes to boast that he runs one of the most successful tanning enterprises in the community and to extol the merits of his youngest son, who has taken on a good portion of the responsibility for their business. He complains with equal animation about his eldest son, who he feels lacks talent, is lazy, and does nothing to further the fortunes of the enterprise.

During my initial fieldwork, verbose Mr. Kong naturally became