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Assam's Chinese can't live down the dread of '62: segregation, deportation, the loss of home.



photo by Sandipan Chatterjee

Li Su Chen

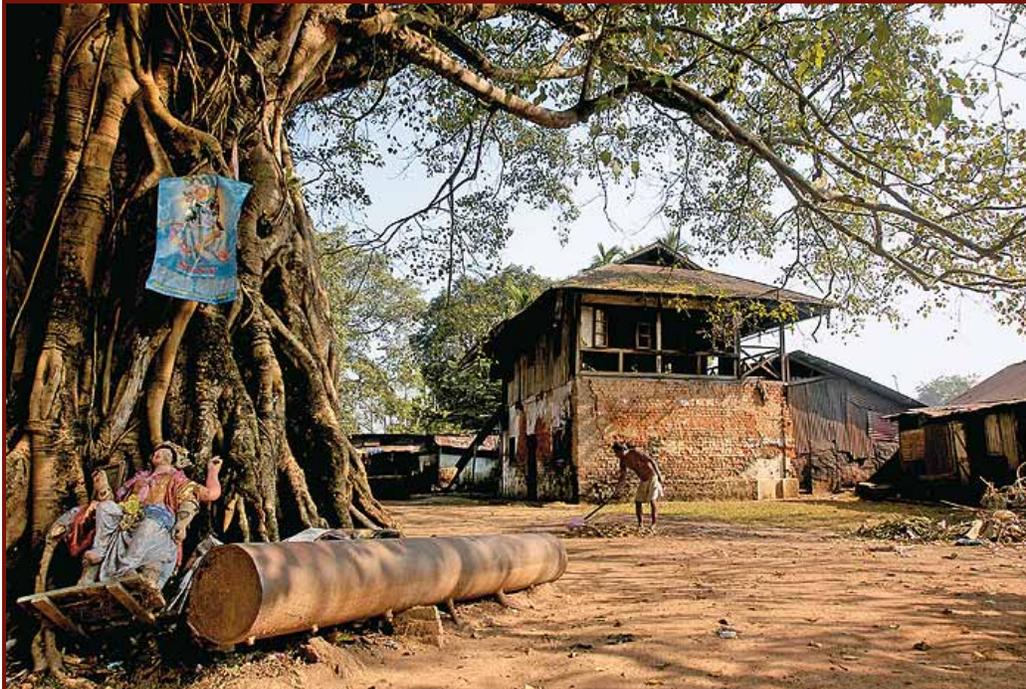
Now 83, she was 31 when she was arrested along with her husband in Tinsukia near Makum. Her son (right) Wong Sing Tung, only four then, accompanied them to the barbed-wire-fenced camp in Deoli, Rajasthan, and her daughter (left), Sweetie, was born there. "At the camp, we lived in a barrack, and there was very little privacy. But the women folk there took care of me before and after I gave birth."
northeast chinese-Assamese.

The China Link

- * Chinese labourers brought to northeastern India by the British in early 19th century to work in tea gardens.
- * They were concentrated in Makum, Shillong and Tezpur.
- * Over 2,000 arrested after the '62 Chinese aggression, ostensibly “to be protected”, but actually to be monitored, at Deoli, Rajasthan.
- * More than half of them sent to China; some families split up. No apology ever rendered.

It's a chilly November morning in Makum, a small town in upper Assam that takes its name from the Chinese word for 'meeting point'. At a little roadside shanty, a gaunt, unkempt man with distinctly Mongoloid features, reeking of stale alcohol, is making coffee for customers. When we ask him his name, he darts a dagger glance at us, before going back to tossing hot brew into glass cups. “Why do you want to know my name?” he asks suspiciously. “He doesn't want to reveal his name,” whispers a customer, “because he's afraid someone will come and arrest him for being Chinese”.

As it happens, Michael Shang—yes, that's his name—is not Chinese. He is an Indian; a descendant of Chinese settlers in Assam, hailing from a family once among the wealthiest landowners in Makum. That was before the Indo-China War broke out in 1962. As the family was caught up in the war and its aftermath, it lost everything. The shop is all that Michael now owns. So, like many other Chinese-Assamese living in this region, he fears undue attention—a fear rooted in the fact that over 2,000 men, women and children of Chinese origin were rounded up from the Northeast in Nehru's India and placed in what were, if not concentration camps, miserable places for innocent people to be in—some for as long as six years. More than half of them were sent to China, leaving family members behind.



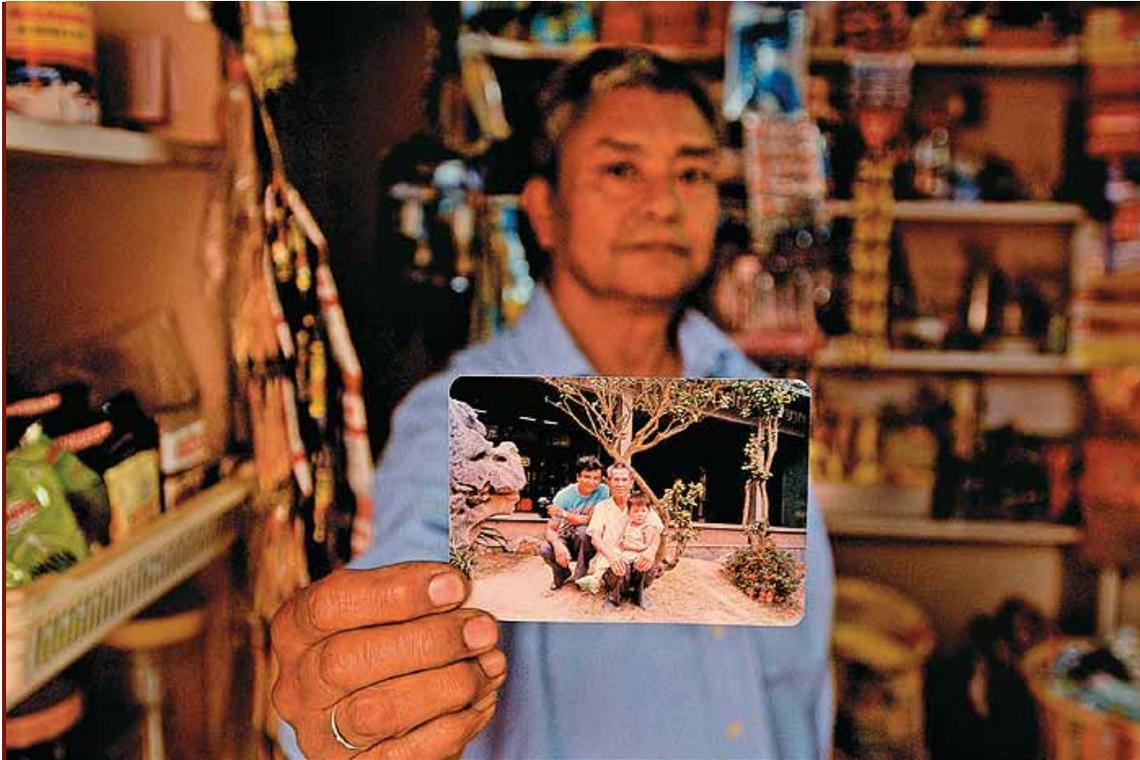
In ruins An abandoned Chinese restaurant in Makum. (Photograph by Sandipan Chatterjee)

For close to fifty years, the story of the travails of this community has largely remained buried, but a novel by Assamese novelist Rita Chowdhury, Makam, who stumbled upon it on during a chance visit to Makum four years ago, has brought attention to its forgotten plight. Much needed attention, because this is not just a grim but a salutary tale. Echoing the story of how the United States—when it was at war with Japan during World War II—rounded up and quarantined Japanese Americans, it is a tale of how a liberal democracy got away, without a murmur of protest, with racial segregation of a community and the severe infringement of its personal liberty, thanks to a war.

The tale begins, properly, in the 19th century, when the earliest Chinese settlers in the region were brought to India by the British to work as labourers in tea gardens. Explains Mankhee Ho, a researcher on Chinese Indians at Guwahati University, and himself half-Chinese, “Tea originated in China so when the British started cultivating tea in India, they wanted to bring in labourers with the expertise of working in tea gardens. They recruited labourers from Hong Kong, another British colony, many of them from among the poor across China who had come there in search of work.”

While Chinese settlers were employed across northeastern India, it was Makum which came to record the highest concentration, followed by Shillong and Tezpur. Over time, many of the early immigrants married local Assamese and tribal women, and by the time of the Chinese aggression of 1962, were already third or fourth generation immigrants. However, there was a steady influx of Chinese immigrants, and many of the newer arrivals got their children married within the community, or to brides and grooms from China. So, while the majority of the Chinese population had become Indian by then, some of the new immigrants did have Chinese passports.

By 1962, Makum had come to be known as a ‘China colony’ with a thriving Chinese population of close to 2,000 people, and when war broke out, all these people, both ‘pure’ Chinese and all those of mixed blood, whether with Chinese passports or Indian, were tarred with one brush, and became objects of deep suspicion for the Indian authorities. Unlike people of Chinese origin in other parts of India, they lived close to the Chinese border, from where infiltration was suspected.



Photograph by Sandipan Chatterjee

Francis Chiang

He escaped arrest only because he was not at home when the rest of his family was picked up from their Shillong home and sent to Deoli. The family later went to China and he lost touch with them. All he had to remember them by was this photograph with his father. He recently reconnected with his family, but forced separation, at 16, has left deep scars.

Most of the first arrests took place in Makum—in the dead of the night, with police and army officers, polite but very firm, knocking on the doors of houses, and asking those who were Chinese, half-Chinese or with Chinese blood, to go with them. As witnesses, still to be found in Makum and Shillong, recall, they were told it was for their protection, that they would only be gone for a few days, and should leave their belongings behind. In reality, they became prisoners of war.

The arrested were first taken to a cowshed in Makum—in Shillong it was the district jail—where they were kept for a night before being taken by train—goods trains, in fact—to a camp in Deoli, Rajasthan. Some still remember the horrors of that long, arduous, cramped journey, lasting a week. Says Wong Ye Hoi, now 88, who was picked up by the police while he was working in the tea garden on a winter morning in 1962: “The word ‘Enemy’ was painted across the train and local people were pelting stones at us. Many of us were injured.”

Others remember the Deoli camp. “It was near the Pakistan border and perhaps meant for Pakistani prisoners of war,” recalls 78-year-old Lee Lan Yun, the oldest surviving person among the Shillong Chinese taken to Deoli. “It was a huge area fenced in by barbed wires. I used to feel claustrophobic.” Some families got a barrack, and some semblance of privacy, but many were

herded together in dormitories. The searing heat got to the northeasterners, they tried to cool their habitation by covering windows with cloth and pouring scarce water on them.

For some it was even worse—their families were split irrevocably by the forced migration to the camp. Sixty-year-old Francis Chiang, now a Shillong-based shop owner, lost touch with his family at the young age of 16. His father, a Chinese settler in India, was hauled off to live in Rajasthan's Deoli camp, as were his brothers and sisters. "My mother was not Chinese so she was not arrested but she chose to go with them because she didn't want to be separated from the family." Francis, not at home at the time of the arrest, was spared confinement but spent, as he puts it, his entire youth in "loneliness and longing" for his family; with only a photograph of himself with his father for consolation. China was too far to travel to and he was too poor to afford it. Looked after by "sympathetic neighbours" until he could fend for himself, he recently reconnected with his family when he made a trip to China. But as he says, sadly, "Can anyone give me back the years with my family that I lost?"

None of those housed in the camps report torture or sexual harassment, but there were other miseries to deal with. There were, for instance, swirling rumours about who would be deported to China; one was that the menfolk would be deported, and women left behind. There were mini-rebellions in response; finally, entire families were given a choice: would they want to stay in India, or go to China. Willie Ho remembers being told by his father, C.M. Ho, "They made it sound like a choice, but they were actually asking us to go back to where we belonged." The Ho family were among the very few who returned to Makum, to reclaim their property; about 1,500-odd Chinese-Assamese are said to have been deported to China, leaving their property behind, and losing it forever. Much of it was apparently auctioned, and snapped up by locals.



Photograph by Sandipan Chatterjee

Pan Shiu Lien

Her fiancé C.M. Ho was arrested and taken away to Deoli camp just a few days before their marriage. She waited five years for him to return, after which they finally got married. In her 70s and bedridden, she says: “Some of my friends advised me to forget him and marry another man. But I had set my heart on him, so I waited.” Seen here with son Willie and daughter-in-law Mary.

“The word ‘Enemy’ was painted across the train and the locals were pelting stones at us,” recalls Wong Ye Hoi, 88.

According to the Chinese-Assamese accounts, the Deoli camp ran for six long years—from 1962 to 1968, even though the Indo-Chinese war barely lasted a month. Some residents remember a visit to the camp by Lal Bahadur Shastri after he became PM, but there was still no positive outcome for the inmates. Says Paul Liang Pyu An, of Shillong, “People began to get released in phases, mostly for China, and some back to the Northeast. A few, like us, were left behind, forgotten, at the camp. We never knew why. We wrote letters to Delhi, pleading for our cases to be reviewed, and finally were able to leave for Shillong in 1968.”

With the majority of detainees from Makum gone to China, the town has the look of a ghost China town. A crumbling building stands where the grandiose Chinese Club once stood. What was once a Chinese restaurant has the look of a haunted house. In Shillong, there are also a few Chinese-Assamese; and what they have in common with their Makum counterparts, apart from tales of sorrow and separation—a woman whose groom was arrested and taken to camp, children

born in the confines of the camp, a man who saw his father dying in the camp as a nine-year-old boy—is a lingering sense of fear. “My mission is to have that fear removed,” says Chowdhury. Pointing out that the Chinese-Assamese have never seen a human rights organisation taking up their cause, or received an apology—or even an explanation—from the government for what they went through, she says: “Only a statement from the government that the Chinese-Assamese are their own people, as Indian as anyone else, will remove that fear.”