

Chinese New Year Celebrations in the One and Only China Town in India...

Text & Images **Jayati Saha**

The Hakka Chinese people, principally hailing from the provinces of Guangdong, Jiangxi and Fujian, China, have been living in Kolkata for at least 230 years, dating back to the time when the city was the capital of the British Empire in India. It all started with a Chinese trader Tong Achew, who reached a place near Budge Budge in the outskirts of the current city Kolkata and settled. That place is named after him and is currently known as Achhipur.

The Hakka Chinese built the structures over many years upon marshy and reclaimed low land. Over the past several decades, it has served as the location of Kolkata's Chinatown, the one and only Chinatown in India. Currently, there are two locations in Kolkata where the Chinese community live. One is in Tiretti Bazaar also called the Old Chinatown and the other



The dragon is carried by the Chinese people during the procession. (Tangra- New Chinatown)



Jayati Saha,
Kolkata

A split second storyteller who tells stories without saying a single word, photo-artist **Jayati Saha** of India amazes with her frames of nuanced light and shadow, seamlessly fusing her art with technical finesse.

Exhibited and owned worldwide, she is a much-in-demand artist, teacher and competition judge. Her extremely sensitive eye has captured moments glistening with human emotions and her forte is seeing the unseen and the unnoticed. Based out of Kolkata, India, she is peripatetic and her journeys have taken her to the India not known or seen by many. She is also a regular contributor at Getty Images Inc., USA. Jayati was also the adjudicator at the Photography competition hosted by the SAARC, 2015.

The Chinese New Year is the most important festival in the Chinese calendar. But over the years, the Chinese community settled in the one and only China town in Kolkata is gradually shrinking, with the generation next moving over looking out for better career opportunities to settle in the West. Nonetheless, the overwhelming emphasis of this photo story is to demonstrate how they come alive during the festival in Kolkata, and also making their presence in society.

The central market place comes alive with the flavor of the celebration. (Tangra- New Chinatown)



is in Tangra also called the New Chinatown.

Chinese people have been celebrating their New Year as a spring festival for thousands of years. Since Chinese culture has a very long history, the Chinese have maintained a very traditional way of celebrating the New Year as per the Lunar Calendar, which is their own calendar system. The Chinese New



Lion dance at the central market place. (Tangra- New Chinatown)

Year is based on this calendar.

Kolkata, the city with the only Chinatown in India, witnesses a varied colourful events around the Chinese New Year.

Michael Liu (Chinese name Liu Kuo

Wen), Mary Liu (Chinese name Liu Wei Ni) and their 2 sons, Dylan Liu (Chinese name Tet Chiang), Marcus Liu (Ka Chiang) and 1 daughter Adora Liu (Chinese name Xin Ye), have been living in the New Chinatown for last 4 generations. Michael and his family, like all other

On the second day of the new year, lions visit every household and business establishment.
(Tangra- New Chinatown)



Colourful balloons are let loose at the central market place. (Tangra- New Chinatown)



Clubs with the Chinese drum and cymbals in a procession.
(Tangra- New Chinatown)



Children take part in the celebration.
(Tangra- New Chinatown)





Chinese families in this Chinatown, have been celebrating Chinese New Year every year.

The celebration starts by Michael and Mary thoroughly cleaning the house, which signifies removing the old and welcoming the new. They buy flowers, candles, fireworks, incense sticks, decorations, food from a temporary market specially set up for the purpose.

After the cleaning, people decorate the house to welcome the New Year. Most of the decorations are red in color. The most popular New Year decorations are upside down fu, dui lian, lanterns, yearly paint, papercutting, door gods, etc. Red lanterns hang at the doors and red couplets are pasted on doors.

On the morning of the New Year Eve, Michael and Mary prepare the altar before the pictures of their ancestors for the morning worship. Then they light the candles, burn the incense sticks and offer gifts and fruits to the

Lions dance at the beat of the drum in front of the Sea IP Chinese Church. (Tiretti Bazaar- Old Chinatown)



Chinese people also visit the Pei May School temple located within the China Town and pray. (Tangra – New Chinatown)



Mary and Michael burn incense sticks and light candles at the beautifully decorated altar in their house, created for the purpose. (Tangra- New Chinatown)



Sydney prays intensely in front of the God at the Sea IP Chinese Church on the eve of the Chinese New Year (Tiretti Bazaar-Old Chinatown)



ancestors. They also thank the God for the previous year that has gone by and the ancestors who have passed on. As the Chinese believe in life after death, Michael burns symbolic money before his ancestors for a good life after death. They also pray to the departed relatives, who they still consider as part of the family.

The gifts are wrapped and Michael starts preparing for the grand family reunion feast. It's usually a lavish dinner made at home. After the dinner, Michael and Mary set up and decorate the altar with fresh flowers, incense sticks, candles, food items comprising of fruits, nuts and cakes (in multiples of 5), to welcome the God in the household.

After dinner Michael, Mary and their children go out to the central market place for the festive and jovial parade. Dragons and lions



Mary stands at the entrance of the temporary marketplace set up for the celebratory shopping. (Tangra- New Chinatown)

line the streets and dance while fireworks fill the night sky. Fireworks are used to drive away the evil.

An auspicious time for the New Year is announced by Mr. Lee, the astrologer and Michael and Mary and their children rush back home to pray and welcome God and the New Year. Thereafter, the Chinese community visits relatives and friends and stay up all night. As the legend goes, there was a mythical beast

named "Year", who comes out on the night of New Year's Eve to harm people, animals, and properties. People found that the "Year", was afraid of the color red, fire, and loud sounds. Therefore, on the New Year's Eve, people burst crackers, light fires and stay awake the whole night to fend off the "Year".

On the second day of the New Year, the lions are invited by the business communities to their individual

Strings of crackers are burst to fend off the evil 'Year' on the eve of the new year. (Tangra- New Chinatown)





During this time of the year, friends and relatives living outside Kolkata come back to the China Town. (Tangra- New Chinatown)



Mary is busy shopping decorations for the new year. (Tangra- New Chinatown)



Its mandatory to wrap gifts in Red called Hongbao during the celebration. (Tangra- New Chinatown)

Mary's family gather together at her mother's place to celebrate new year. (Tangra- New Chinatown)



Michael burns symbolic money in front of the pictures of his ancestors believing in life after death. (Tangra- New Chinatown)



establishments. The teams visit the business establishments. They are given a red envelope, which contains money. The lions enter the premises bow before the altar and leave. Its considered good omen for ushering in New Year and for prosperity of the business.

But over the years, the Chinese community has become an endangered community, with the majority of the generation next moving over to settle in the west, for better career opportunities. This trend is indeed worrisome for the local elders in the community but then they cannot do anything to arrest the migration either.

Gong Xi Fa Caiin Mandarin is wishing you to be prosperous in the coming year. 🍀