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## LIFESTYLE

# One Chineej, many Chinas

February 4, 2024, 2:07 PM IST / Abhijit Banerjee in Tasting Economics, Lifestyle, TOI

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**Abhijit Banerjee**

Cooking, and eating, are often on Abhijit Banerjee's mind. But for the Nobel-winning economist, what starts with planning the night's dinner usually ends up in questions about ...

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I was six when I first tasted Chinese food.

Pigeon Roast in a restaurant called Eros, at the edge of Kolkata's crumbling 'New' Market, a plump little bird rich with what I now know to be the flavours of soy and ginger. It was love at first bite. I lobbied to go back, but the inflationary explosion of the 1960s quickly ate into my parents' fixed salaries, and we ate out much less. The restaurant closed, and I never got to verify whether the miracle I remembered was genuine.

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Chinese food stayed with me. On the rare occasion when we went out, it was often Chinese. Hakka chowmein was my favourite — best when rich in chopped cabbage, carrots, French beans, and bits of chicken or pork. I loved steamed bhetki dressed with generous amounts of chopped ginger and scallions in soy-flavoured sauce. And the marvellous chimney soup, (pork?) broth simmering at your table with different vegetables, meats and many types of seafood.

However, by then, the 200-year-old Kolkata Chinese community was shrinking. From more than 20,000 in the 1950s, it is now a mere couple of thousand. Economic opportunity had brought them to Kolkata when it was party central for Britain's grand Bengali bonanza. By the 1960s, that party was well over: years of silting left the river too shallow for large modern ships — Kolkata port was mostly dead. Time was also running out on the city's 19th-century smoke-stack industries. Like Manchester or Mumbai, Kolkata needed to reinvent itself, but bad policy and industrial strife got in the way. For the local Chinese community, it was time to move on, as they had many times before. Hakka, the name of the community that gave us

## BLOGS BY ABHIJIT

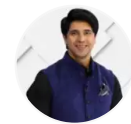
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the noodles, actually means guests (or migrants) — they had a long history of moving south from the very north of China.

It probably didn't help that during the 1962 war with China, several thousand people of Chinese origin were either deported or imprisoned as enemy nationals, even though they had spent most of their life in India. Moreover, this was a time when other expatriate Chinese communities, like the ones in Singapore and Hong Kong, were booming and happy to provide invitations to future workers. Indeed, it is interesting to speculate about what might have happened if Kolkata had somehow weathered the storm of the 1960s and '70s. This was, after all, when the economies of Southeast Asia were getting transformed — Singapore and Hong Kong of course, but also Thailand and Indonesia. And in all of these places, the local Chinese community played an important role, partly through their connections to Chinese diaspora in the West, and a bit later through their networks in mainland China. Could something similar have happened in Bengal? The Chinese community was already visibly entrepreneurial, with a strong presence in shoe-making, hairdressing and dry-cleaning. Couldn't it have been a launchpad?

As it happened, the Chinatowns emptied and the Chinese-run restaurants closed. But Indians stepped in. Restaurants with vaguely Chinese names opened all over the city, not just near the Chinatowns. It was alleged that Tibetans and

Nepalese with 'Chinese features' were drafted to front them.

The cuisine, quite naturally, started to evolve: Indian chefs leaned towards more robust flavours and heavier sauces. The chili chicken had more chilies, the garlic fried rice was inescapably garlicky and their generous hand with corn-starch made the sauces more akin to a dal or a curry. Somewhat later, they discovered Sichuan's spicier cuisine, open season for red chilies and garlic-ginger-scallion, with a bit of sweet and some vinegar added to the chili bean sauce base to make it pop even more. Indian Chinese food had arrived. Indeed, it started to occupy the street corners, where pret-a-porter Chineej noodles were prepared on large tawas.

I must confess that I don't love Indian Chinese food — all too often the overuse of dark soy, cornstarch, capsicum, honey, and/or chili bean sauce seems to drown every other flavour, and to make things worse, the soy sometimes smells burnt. To me, the best Chinese meals in Kolkata are still the much more diverse and delicate flavours that we get in the Chinatowns. The last time I went, now many years ago, on Lunar New Year's Day, I had wonderful fish dumplings in a seafood broth and sticky rice with Chinese sausage and pickled mustard greens that came tied up in a leaf. They told me to stay for the dragon float, but I was in too much of a hurry.

Acknowledging this makes me uncomfortable. In theory, the use of Chinese ingredients to serve an essentially Indian palate — Gobi Manchurian anybody? — is an excellent example of how to do cultural appropriation right. In the minds of the young men (it seems to be always men) who hawk noodles by the roadside, there may indeed be no connection between the Chineej they cook and our rich and somewhat scary neighbour. It is just a different way to be Indian, an authentic distinct indigenous cuisine, much as Chino-Cubano and Chifa (Peruvian Chinese) are. In principle, I want to celebrate that. Just not really by eating it.

On the other hand, the reduction of China's magnificent food traditions to Chineej mirrors our national sense of China as the hulking monolith in our North, which drives our often-skittish China policy (admittedly, what they do in our borderlands has not helped). My (inadequate) reading of their history suggests that while the Chinese imperium has always tried to project itself as this magnificent Han unity, the regions have regularly pushed back and asserted their independence. In fact, according to the work of Fudan University historian Jianxiong Ge, that I found quoted in a recent (2023) economics paper by Haiwen Zhou, between 221 BCE and 1911 CE, China (not including the Far West and Tibet) was only united 45% of the time.

The same diversity is reflected in their food. The cuisines of China are as different from each other as Bengali is from Tamil or Punjabi. And those reflect deep and ancient cultural divides. The food of Beijing is not the food of Guangzhou, which is the food that most closely resembles the food of the Kolkata Chinatowns. And neither is anything like what they eat in Sichuan. The north of China grows and eats wheat; in the south, it's more rice. In the north and west, they eat mutton and goat like us; in the coastal regions, seafood and pork are the dominant sources of animal protein. In Xinkiang, we mostly ate intensely cuminy shreds of lamb stuffed into a roti; in Inner Mongolia that same lamb is cooked at the table in a flavoured broth; the crispy lamb that we love in India seems to be inspired by a Beijing dish. In Yunnan, which is about the same distance from Kolkata as Delhi, unlike in the rest of China, they eat cheese made from milk, somewhat resembling paneer, and banana flowers, what we Bengalis call mocha.

China might seem to us to be a homogeneous regime dominated by a single autocrat, but that is not how Xi sees it. He knows that he needs to balance the needs and interests of these different regions, some much richer than others, with very different histories, cultural leanings, and policy priorities. And though he is powerful, he knows that there are great risks involved in stepping too hard on their toes. The Covid-19 lockdowns in late 2022 generated a spate of

protests in cities like Shanghai that made the government back down.

This is important because we in India tend to imagine that China's main policy obsession is with foreign policy, particularly provoking its neighbours. In fact, all of that is incidental to its primary challenge, which is to keep its diverse domestic constituents happy enough, especially when the economy is faltering. It may still do things we don't like, but even those are probably mostly directed towards its internal interlocutors. What to us looks like a gratuitous show of strength, paradoxically, might actually reflect the relative weakness of the regime, and the consequent need to impress the domestic population by throwing their weight around in the neighbourhood.

This is part of a monthly column by Nobel-winning economist Abhijit Banerjee illustrated by Cheyenne Olivier.

### Chinese Recipes

For the Lunar New Year (Feb 10), here is a nice Chinese meal that you could cook yourself, reflecting the remarkable diversity of Chinese food and its ability to coax intense flavouring out of relatively few ingredients.

Steamed bhetki with ginger and scallions

Julienne two tablespoons of ginger, the white and light green parts of a 2-4 scallions (100 gm total) and 4 tablespoons of coriander leaves. Also mix 2 tablespoons light soy sauce with 2 tablespoons warm water,  $\frac{1}{4}$  tsp sugar,  $\frac{1}{4}$  tsp salt and a pinch of white pepper. Bring 1" of water to boil in your wok/kadhai/pressure cooker. Put the bhetki fillets side by side on a plate that will fit (don't pile up). Place on a trivet in the water, cover and let steam until the fish can be flaked with a butter knife (5 minutes for the usual  $\frac{1}{4}$  inch thick fillets). Do this in several pots in parallel if you have extra fish. When the fish is done, drain any liquid from the plate and keep covered. Heat 2 tablespoons of sunflower (or peanut) oil in a small fry pan at medium, add the ginger and after 30 seconds, the coriander and scallions, and after a minute, add the soy sauce mixture. Let it boil for another minute, and then pour over the plate(s) of fish.



Cauliflower with fermented tofu (available in Chinatowns and online)

Break cauliflower into florets and pan-roast in 2 tbs oil till they are reddish and cooked through but crunchy. Take off the pan, raise heat to medium high, add 5 smashed cloves of garlic to the remaining oil, and let them redden a bit (30 seconds) and then add the cauliflower back with 2 tablespoons water (or chicken stock). Cover and let the water boil off (2 minutes) and then reduce heat and add 3 blocks (60 gm or so) of mashed fermented tofu and stir to coat the cauliflower with it. Remove from heat.