Reckoning with Chinese Food in India

The first thing you give up when travelling through India is silence. There is no such thing as “dead air” in this country: sounds are very much alive. First, there are the sounds of men—always men, always in clusters—yelling at you, trying to take you for a ride. Taxi ma’am, taxi ma’am? 150 rupees! Cheaper than Uber!

I walk past the cluster, avoiding eye contact, not out of fear or malice but to communicate that I don’t need their service. One man walks alongside me. Taxi ma’am, he says. I look over at him. He’s wearing a plaid button down shirt, acid wash jeans, and leather sandals. No thank you, I say, and he responds, undeterred: Taxi ma’am? 100 rupees! His voice comes at me like a gust of wind.

In this country, the cacophony of honking horns is the most pervasive and relentless sound of all. It is the opposite of wind, which is always roving, as if in the midst of a dance. Instead, it’s almost pure atmosphere, enveloping and absorbing everything around it. Despite its ubiquity, the honking never becomes monotonous for me. It has too much texture: if it were a three dimensional object that I could run my hands over, it would feel silky soft and coarse like tree bark, depending on where I place my hand.

My brother, a jazz musician, loves India, has been enamoured with the country ever since he came here as a young man. When he asks me how India is going, I text him back: it’s noisy, and I know he understands what I mean. People who hate jazz call it indistinguishable noise, as if that’s a bad thing. They cannot parse the melody from the rhythm; the rhythm from the harmony. India is noisy, but not in the pejorative sense of the word—if you listen closely enough, you’ll hear it: each car is its own instrument. Large trucks, buses, and loading vehicles are all base instruments with baritone honks; smaller cars are saxophones or trombones; tuk tuks, one of the
lighter, more nimble vehicles in India—like go-carts made of squashed soda cans—are flutes.
Their honks are high-pitched, acute, red hot.

**I meet Shreeja** for dinner in a restaurant in the Hauz Khas area of New Delhi. It is punishingly hot outside—thirty-seven degrees Celsius with the sun down—and the humidity and dust stick to my skin like static. We sit at an outdoor table underneath a ceiling fan, with the song of honking horns and city life playing behind us.

Shreeja is exactly my age—twenty-six—and is completing her master’s in sociology at Jawaharlal Nehru University here in Delhi. I was introduced to her through a professor back in New York who’s friends with Shreeja’s uncle.

“Text Shreeja when you land in Delhi,” he instructed. “She’ll help you with anything you need.”

She sits across from me, and the first thing I notice about her are her oversized, wire-framed glasses, which protrude far beyond the sides of her face. I ask her about her life, about India, and she is gracious and forthcoming with her answers. The second thing I notice is that she talks faster than I can keep up, that she is perhaps the fastest-talking, most verbose person I have ever met, and her oversized glasses are in fact just a prelude for her larger-than-life personality.

I ask her what it’s like being a woman in India (hard), what it’s like living under Modi (hard, depressing), what it’s like living in Delhi (hard, hot, “but not as bad as when I was living in Kolkata”). She tells me that she wants to become a professor, like her uncle. She swears a lot and uses words like “newfangled,” and when she talks I can tell how much she loves sociology: everything is narrated through the exacting prism of Marx, Durkheim, Foucault—even Horkheimer and Adorno make their way into conversation. She speaks with clarity and vigour,
and I imagine all these old theorists sitting inside of her brain, smoking cigars and shooting the shit.

“So,” she says, placing both palms on the table, gesturing that it’s my turn to talk, “what brings you to India?” She takes a sip of her drink through a long straw, and I tell her I’m here studying the food of the Chinese diaspora, that in a few weeks I’ll be heading to Kolkata to start my field work. (I do not mention that my father was born in Kolkata, that his ancestors came to this country from China. That would mean this trip is a kind of homecoming for me, and I’m still not sure if it is. “It has taken me much time to come to terms with the strangeness of India, to define what separates me from the country,” wrote V.S. Naipaul, whose grandparents were born in India and later immigrated to Trinidad. “India for me is a difficult country. It isn’t my home and cannot be my home; and yet I cannot reject it or be indifferent to it.”)

Shreeja abruptly stops sipping and puts her drink down.

“I love Chinese food!,” she says. “Well, I mean,” and here she clarifies: “I love Indian-Chinese food.”

I tilt my head to the side, confused. Sensing this, she goes on, like a professor would.

“There’s two kinds of Chinese food in India,” she says. “There’s Chinese-Chinese food…” She extends her left palm out in front of her, as if holding the concept in her hand. “And then there’s Indian-Chinese food.” She holds out her right palm, stretching it far away from her body, accentuating how vast and unforgiving the difference is between these two things.” We call this ‘good-bad Chinese food’.”

What makes good-bad Chinese food good? According to Shreeja, it’s not only the taste, but how deeply it’s adored in India. It’s a street food phenomenon, meaning it’s cheap and accessible. On the side of any given road you’re guaranteed to find bright red food stalls with
signs reading: Chinese Fast Food: Mix and Match Rice and Noodles, or Jai Kitchen: Chinese Food Xpress. These stalls are usually owned and staffed by Indian men, who stand behind woks, frying and flipping things in brisk, spastic motions, the way humming birds touch things with their beaks, and when they yell your order it feels like they’re yelling not at you but through you.

Good-bad Chinese food is also popular inside restaurants, which serve dishes like Manchurian Chicken, Chilli Paneer, and Chicken Chow Mein. These are usually found at the bottom of a menu, filed under a section called “Chinese selection,” “Chinese food items,” or “From the Wok.”

What makes good-bad Chinese food “bad,” then, is how far removed it is from its origins, how it maintains only an oblique relationship with the ingredients, flavours, and cooking techniques typically associated with China. It doesn’t live up to what Indians commonly refer to as desi—traditional or native. Instead, it’s heavily tailored for Indian palates and religious dietary restrictions, for which there are many. This means a lot of gravy and sauces in the dishes, less pork and beef, more paneer. “It’s absolutely delicious and Indians go crazy for it,” says Shreeja, “but it’s not real Chinese food, and no one here is fooled into thinking it is.” At the center of almost all Chinese cooking is a blend of five spices: star anise, clove, cinnamon, Sichuan pepper, and fennel seeds. In Indian-Chinese food, you’re more likely to find a different five-spice mixture—panch phoron—which is indigenous to India and consists of fenugreek, nigella, cumin, fennel, and black mustard seeds. “I suppose it appeals to that zing that most Indian food has,” says Shreeja.

Most dishes begin with a base of ginger, garlic, soy sauce, or red chili sauce. The central dishes on a menu are often sweet and salty Manchurian chicken, which is cubes of chicken
breast, breaded, deep fried and doused in a chilli garlic gravy, or its vegetarian counterpart: Manchurian gobi, or cauliflower. There’s Hakka noodles, which are thin stir-fried noodles tossed with soy sauce, cabbage, peppers and carrots. Paneer is transformed into chili-paneer; tandoori chicken into chili-chicken. You’ll always find a vegetarian version of each dish, and although you won’t find a single Szechuan peppercorn, you will taste a lot of cumin, garam masala and chilli powder.

The dishes tend to be spicy, fried, and oily. At the end of your meal your lips are left tingling and glossed with oil. Even if you’re completely full, there’s enough umami and sodium in the food to keep you wanting more. You eat only with a fork or with your hands, never chopsticks.

In a 2017 study published in the Journal of Ethnic Foods, author Amal Sankar created a database of 54,103 restaurants in 36 major cities in India, using data from Yelp reviews, food ordering sites, and online blogs. Sankar found that over 37 percent of those restaurants claim to serve Chinese food, and in Mumbai, that number rose to 53 percent.

Of the 1.339 billion people living in India, roughly five to seven thousand are of Chinese descent. Rounded to the nearest sixth decimal place, Chinese people make up 0.000005 percent of India’s population. There is simply no other way to put it: the Chinese are an extreme minority in India. Statistically negligible. Barely there. But on the street and in restaurants, they are ever-present, mystifyingly overrepresented.

“I’m just thinking about the intergenerational conflict I grew up with,” Shreeja says toward the end of our dinner, her voice becoming softer at the edges, more sombre. I picture all the theorists inside her head perking up, shifting in their seats, their interest piqued at her change in tone and the sudden production of the phrase “intergenerational conflict.” “In Delhi, I’ve seen Bengalis crying in restaurants, full-grown forty year-old men crying while eating. It’s quite a
sight—they find one Bengali restaurant they love, like a tiny blip of rainbow light, and they lose their shit and cry.”

More than religion or politics or freedom fighting, food is perhaps this country’s most stable devotion. Indians love what they eat, unambiguously. At some point in India’s history, good-bad Chinese food achieved a distinctive place, not only in the country’s marketplace but in its imagination. It’s a singular kind of enchantment, one that hasn’t been reciprocated for any other kind of Asian cuisine, such as Japanese, Thai or Korean. The secret to this enchantment is the way it fulfills both the need for familiarity and foreignness. I will hear this repeatedly during my time in India: that Indians “aren’t that interested in ‘real’ Chinese food” (the term “mainland” is often used here), but whenever they want to eat “different” food their first choice is to go for Indianized Chinese.

Food is how we pass on our heritage, it’s how we form a relationship to the place we live in. It’s an artifact of culture, a social space where perceptions of the other are negotiated, understood, and misunderstood. Food makes us cry not only because we’re hedonists and it tastes good, but because it roots us somewhere, and this feels good. “Do you think Indian-Chinese people eat the same kind of food at home as they cook in their restaurants?” Shreeja asks. I know this is her way of asking a larger, more complicated question, which has to do with the ways in which immigrant minorities shape and are shaped by a majority culture—the ways in which they rearrange who they are in an effort to belong, to find a home in exile, to make a living, to survive, to simply live better. She’s quiet, waiting a few moments before she says, “I’m just thinking of the intergenerational conflict of not being able to pass those flavors along.”
After dinner with Shreeja, I take a tuk tuk back to my hotel, and during the ride I think of how eloquent she was, like a poem come to life, how she spoke with such rapid precision that I felt very little need to interject and mostly just nodded along and said words like, *hm* or *I see*. I fixate on something she said over and over in our conversation: *good-bad*.

The words “good” and “bad” are value judgements, albeit vague ones. When it comes to writing, most would agree that they are, in themselves, bad words. (Strunk and White would call them weak; Orwell: uselessly unspecific, dangerous even). In a game of Scrabble, they’re frankly embarrassing. They’re the kind of words that don’t weigh a lot and fit in our pockets nicely, so we carry them with us wherever we go. They’re also what we would call “loaded words”: carapaces that house a collection of more vivid, evocative words that are always trying to find a way out. Bad always means more than it lets on. Good always hides something deeper, denser. They are merely the shell of the thing itself.

What’s most astonishing about the phrase “good-bad” is the way two adjectives have collapsed into one. It’s both a debasement and a compliment, hinting at some inherent wrongness or transgression while simultaneously affirming its redeemable, lovable quality. It spins me in circles. When I see “From the Wok” on a menu, followed by a list of generic Indian-Chinese dishes, I can’t discern if this a sign of adoration or otherization? Is it possible that it’s both?

The first time I try good-bad Chinese food is at a street vendor in Varanasi. I order a Manchurian egg roll (an Indian-Chinese version of a Bengali kati roll); a plate of chilli chicken; and a peculiar amalgam of stir-fried vegetables and paneer makhani. It doesn’t feel like I’m eating “fusion food” because it’s not apparent that the two cuisines are in profound conversation with one another. Rather, it feels as if they spent a long time in close proximity and eventually just rubbed off on each other, like two prison inmates that start off cold but gradually become
friends. It’s immediately obvious that what I’m eating is neither fully Indian nor fully Chinese, yet indigenous to both; and while I’m aware that forces of migration and boundary-making have played equal parts in its creation, I’m unsure how and to what extent.

Chinese food in India is like the sound of honking horns: inevitable, inescapable, often relegated to the background and easily tuned out if you focus on something else. People call India “noisy,” but isn’t that the point? Isn’t that the beauty of it? People claim that Indian-Chinese isn’t “the real thing,” but, again, isn’t that the point? It has never been, can never be, the “real thing.” It is its own distinct third category. And when you crack this category open, we are allowed a brief trespass into the lives of Chinese immigrants, who settled in India hundreds of years ago, who appeared ethnically Chinese in every regard except for when they opened their mouths and spoke fluent Bengali, Hindi, and English; who attended Indian schools and were Indian citizens under the law; who were too Chinese to be fully Indian and too Indian to be fully Chinese; who to this day are seen as whatever the opposite of desi is. More than anything it tells us something about their lives, which were filled with good times and bad times, both.

**Chinese food didn’t** just appear in India out of nowhere, nor did it parachute into the country like the Internet or Netflix: it was born inside India, which is why Shreeja was careful to call it Indian-Chinese food. The first wave of Chinese immigrants came to India in the late 1700s, when the country was under British rule. They were mainly unaccompanied men who left home without their wives or families in search of work. Most of them settled in Kolkata, or Calcutta as it was spelled then. (In 2001 the city shed its anglicized coat and officially became Kolkata, with a softer, circular, more Bengali pronunciation). Kolkata was the capital of the Raj at that time and thriving economically. Census records show that by 1901, 1,640 Chinese migrants were living in
the city, the majority of which were from Guangdong province. China’s civil war, which lasted over two decades, caused the last and largest push of migrants into India. By the time the war ended in 1949, the Chinese diaspora had peaked at around 27,000 people.

Newly landed men spoke neither Hindi, Bengali, nor English, so they took up jobs as carpenters or leather tanners or shipbuilders. My grandfather, I’ve been told, worked in a lightbulb factory. Some men became cooks.

They made do with what they had. They worked and brought their families over, and eventually two distinct Chinatowns in Kolkata formed: Territy Bazar in the city centre and Tangra in the eastern outskirts. (Today they are considered Old and New Chinatown, respectively). Kolkata’s first Chinese restaurant, Eau Chew—meaning “Europe” in Mandarin—opened in the early 1920s (the Huang family, the original and current proprietors of Eau Chew, aren’t certain about the date). They Huangs served cutlets and pork chops for their British clientele, as well as dishes like Chimney soup (a variation on egg drop soup, with vegetables, chicken, fish cubes, prawn, and pork), and steamed fish in soy sauce. Eventually, more immigrants opened restaurants, and they invented now infamous dishes like Manchurian chicken and Hakka noodles.

Indian-Chinese food was never an art form but rather a way of life. The chefs working in steamy, cramped kitchens were pushed hard by circumstances, and they cooked what they thought Bengalis and Brits would accept. They made new, culturally specific realities because they had to. They didn’t have the comforts of home—no hand pulled noodles or bok choy—but they had jobs.

In 1962, a war broke out between India and China over a disputed Himalayan border. The war, known as the Indo-China war, lasted over a month, and while the Chinese eventually won, a
growing atmosphere of distrust emerged in India. In 1962, the Indian government passed the Defence of India Act, which allowed authorities to arrest and detain—without explanation or the right to representation—any person suspected of being “of hostile origin.” At that time, the simple act of having a Chinese surname was cause for suspicion, and thousands of Chinese residents (many of whom were born and raised in India) were detained and sent to an internment camp in Deoli, Rajasthan, where they stayed for years without trial. Thousands of others fled to Canada, the United States, or Australia.

My great-grandfather came to India from Guangdong province, though no one in my family is clear about the details. What we do know is that my ancestors lived in India peacefully for many years. They raised families. They spoke Hindi and English fluently, Cantonese loosely. Before being Chinese, they considered themselves first and foremost Indian.

Two years after the war broke out, my father and his family boarded a plane bound for London and then Toronto. They left one of the oldest countries in the world to settle in one of the newest, where the then-Prime Minister, Pierre Trudeau, was opening up Canada’s borders. Eventually, my great-grandparents were brought over as well. Not a single member of his family has been back to India since.

Having lived in Canada for over fifty years now, my father is indifferent and unsentimental about India. It sometimes feels as if, at twelve years old, he folded everything that made him Indian into his suitcase and boarded a plane, only to find upon arrival that the airline had lost his luggage, and instead of fighting for it back he just shrugged his shoulders and said, *oh well.* I’ve privately diagnosed him as “irrevocably assimilated.” This is me, spinning my own explanation for why not a single shred of his Indianness was passed down to my brother or I—not language, not religion, not even a recipe. (After my brother returned home from his first trip to India, my
father bought him *India: the Cookbook* by Pushpesh Pant and said, “Because you speak so fondly of the food there.” My father will show an interest in his home country only if it’s filtered through the eyes of his children, never his own memories). When he tells me that he will never visit India again, it’s with such implacable sharpness that I feel briefly shocked, as if he’s an electrical socket that I jammed with a metal fork. I probe him about his childhood, but his narration is always the same: he flew a lot of kites; he ate a lot of jalebis; he often picked up his cousin from school and walked him home. Kolkata is only ever depicted with verbs, never adjectives. He has forgotten the vocabulary that could describe the city back to life.

I once read that people with Alzheimer’s remember their early childhood (if they remember anything at all) more vividly than any other period in their lives. I have a piercing fear that if my father ever lost his memory, if his brain was wiped clean save for those first ten years of jalebis and kites, that I would no longer recognize him or know what to say, because that layer of his life has always been closed to me. I suppose this is one reason I’ve come to see it all for myself.

**Kolkata, the City** of Joy as it’s nicknamed: India’s first modern metropolis under British rule. Today, in Modi’s India, it’s in a state of simultaneous decay and modernization, a paradox made manifest by the human-pulled rickshaws that are still legal here. It’s not uncommon to see a businessman, dressed comfortably in slacks and a button up shirt, being carted to his air-conditioned office by another man, much scrawnier and sweatier, who’s wrapped his shirt around his forehead like a turban to stop the sweat from dripping into his eyes.

That Indian-Chinese food was invented here seems almost preordained: it’s always been a city fighting against its own polarities—Calcutta and Kolkata; British and Indian; sovereignty and subjugation; East and West Bengal. At one point in its history, the British split the city into
“White Town,” which was predominantly English and located in the city center, and “Native Town,” which was slightly north and exclusively Indian.

It’s monsoon season while I’m here, so the air is thick and hot and temperamental, like a teething infant that cries viciously for ten minutes every hour, breathless for air at the end of its tantrum. I tell my Airbnb hosts, Tathagata and Indrani, that I want to take the metro to Old Chinatown, and ask where the nearest station is. “Be careful,” Tathagata warns me, before proceeding to tell me the tale of a man who, just last week, stuck his hand in between the subway doors so he could make the train. Before he knew it the subway doors closed, like a clenched jaw, and he was “dragged to his death.”

“Just keep your hands to yourself,” he says.

Right. “In terms of experience, Calcutta must be the richest city on earth,” wrote Kate Wheeler in an essay for the New York Times. “Things function as if to define the teetering edge of chaos.” I decide to take a taxi. Outside, the clouds are auspiciously dark, and I know that I have only a few minutes before they will become so heavy with water that they burst like an overfilled balloon.

I walk toward a cluster of men on the side of the road. Some of them are sitting and smoking, some of them are asleep in their tuk tuks. When they see me approaching, they perk up and start yelling on top of each other, as if at an auction. Taxi ma’am? Tuk Tuk? 200 rupees. I choose the first driver that agrees to a 150 rupee fair (the difference for me is less than a dollar, and while such unnecessary penny pinching definitely doesn’t feel good, for reasons I cannot explain I’ve become a merciless bargainer in this country).

I tell the driver to take me to Territy Bazar, old Chinatown, which is tucked precariously inside Bowbazar, one of Kolkata’s busiest districts. If you didn’t know what you were looking
for, you could easily miss Territy: unlike established Chinatowns in San Francisco or New York, there are no external markers to let you know you’ve crossed into a new social and cultural space—no red awnings, no lanterns hanging from lamp posts, no dragon iconography.

Instead, Territy exists as if it doesn’t want to make too much of a fuss. Where it was once a vibrant neighborhood, it has been reduced to a handful of Chinese restaurants and five Chinese temples, which are all slowly being choked out by Muslim and Hindu-owned businesses. An apartment building that once housed Indian-Chinese families has been converted into a school. A government-run garbage dump was recently built beside Toong On Temple, and in order to walk through the front door you must first pass by a neighbourhood of crows, flies, and stray dogs. The streets smell alternatingly like fermenting mango and hot cow dung. If you’re unlucky, you smell both at the same time. If you’re lucky, you smell nothing but a miasma of burning trash.

Residents tell me that only 3000 Indian-Chinese people remain in Kolkata, though some guess the number is closer to 1,500. Most people I meet are above sixty years old. Their children, they tell me with a mix of grief and bottomless pride, have left India and are living, working, or studying in Canada. When I tell them that I was born in Canada, that my family left Kolkata after the war, that I’m doing my master’s degree and that’s why I’m here right now, they seem happy for me. One woman—who is so old that her eyes have either fallen out of her skull or retreated so far inwards that I can no longer see them—asks: Who was your grandfather? What is your father’s name? Maybe I knew them. Others ask: Where did your family live? Maybe we were neighbors. I get this a lot, too: My granddaughter, she’s in Toronto, becoming doctor—so cold there! What goes unsaid are several overlapping truths: that Territy was once a place where neighbors knew each other and people stuck together; that Canada offers a life that India once
promised; that the pull of prosperity is simply too great, especially for young people, and with no one to replenish the aging population, eventually there will be no Indian-Chinese people left.

Life in Old Chinatown is quiet. Not in terms of decibel level—it’s as noisy as any other city in India. But the natural pace of life here is unhurried and unfussy. I walk into Nam Soon Church on Damzen Lane and meet a group of retired Indian-Chinese men smoking and playing mahjong. (In Territy, churches or temples are less religious spaces and more “clubs” for retirees to gather). The president of the club, Ahtat, tells me that he and his friends come here every afternoon at two. They offer me whiskey and a seat.

Outside Nam Soon Church, a cluster of street dogs are asleep atop a pile of garbage. To the left of them a shop-keeper selling metal pots and pans is napping, his head propped up by a bag of rice. Those who are not asleep move as slow as molasses, lulled by the effects of gutkha (Indian chewing tobacco) and the summer heat. The humidity from this morning’s rainstorm only exacerbates the feeling that we’ve all been gently anesthetized.

The only time that I can really “see” Kolkata’s Chinatown—that is, when it makes its presence known—is on Saturday and Sunday, during the famous Cheenapara Breakfast (Cheena meaning “people from China” in Bengali, para meaning neighborhood). From 6 am to 9:30 am (or whenever the food sells out), it feels as if the inner life of the Indian-Chinese community literally spills out onto the street.

I arrive at Cheenapara Breakfast one Sunday morning at around 6:45 am. None of the surrounding Muslim or Hindu restaurants are open yet, and the sidewalk fruit-sellers are slicing open their first mangos of the day. Even the sound of honking horns is thinner than usual. Kolkata is just beginning to open its eyes.
Cheenapara breakfast, however, is in full swing. There are several vendors along the sidewalk with portable plastic tables and tiered aluminium vessels filled fish and chicken momos, steamed pork baos and wontons, chicken spring rolls, sweet sesame balls, fish ball soup, and sticky rice wrapped in banana leaves. About half of these vendors are Chinese, while the other half are Bengali. The crowd is equally as mixed: the majority of the customers are Indians, but I see a lot of Chinese families enjoying their breakfasts as well.

At around 7:30 am, when the market is at its busiest, a small woman carrying several heavy-looking bags rides in on a motor-scooter. Her name is Mrs. Lui, I’m told, and she comes only on Sundays. A crowd of people swarm her, “lining up” in what I’ve observed is a typical Indian queue: a triangle, where the pointy tip faces away from whatever is being sold. The crowd reaches inside their pockets for cash, and she reaches inside her bag for steamed wontons, pork and chicken bao buns, blocks of silky tofu. I’m told that you must order from Mrs. Lui a week in advance. Whatever pre-ordered food is not claimed, she sells on the spot. I’m lucky enough to grab the last pork bao, which is fluffy and light, like savoury cotton candy.

Across the street is another stall, where a young, visibly Chinese man is selling his own versions of steamed wontons and pork bao buns. He tells me his name is Nicholas. He has glasses and a round, warm face, and is wearing a fanny pack stuffed with paper napkins and cash. He looks to be in his early thirties, making him the youngest Indian-Chinese person I have met by about a quarter century. At 6 am every Saturday and Sunday, he and his father, whom I know only as Mr. Hsiung, stand here until they sell out of food.

I buy a steamed pork dumpling from Nicholas for twenty rupees—around 28 cents. In my hand it looks like a very large, wet, beige raisin. It tastes deliciously plain, and the dough is toothy and dense. It achieves what every dumpling sets forth to achieve: an initial fighting back
when you bite into its casing, followed by a gentle giving in when you reach the meaty inside. 

By the time I finish it, a crowd of young Bengali men have huddled around Nicholas. They order three pork bao buns each, followed swiftly by another round of six chicken momos. The men, I notice, speak to Nicholas in English and not Bengali.

“Hey, where’s your passport?” one of them says to Nicholas, who says nothing back, choosing to busy himself by consolidating the pork and chicken baos into one container. “Are you really Indian? Show me your passport.” The man is smiling when he says this, and his tone is self-congratulatory and smug. His friends behind him smirk. They continue on like this, stuffing their faces meanly, and I realize I am witnessing the central conundrum of Indian-Chinese food, which is that eventually India’s desire for foreignness becomes entangled with its precise distaste for it. Perhaps good-bad Chinese food is labeled as such because it reveals both the good of this country—its intense and abiding devotion to food—and the bad—the historical and present day treatment of religious and ethnic minorities.

Nicholas remains equanimous, and even though I’ve known him for only a few minutes, I sense that it is simply not in his nature to retaliate. Eventually, an older, also visibly Chinese man comes over and starts swearing in Bengali, and the group disperses. “I don’t understand why they have to be so rude, why they think they can talk to him like that,” he says to me, palpably furious. “I’ve been living in this country longer than they’ve been alive.”

I ask the man about a food stall to the left of us, where a middle-aged Bengali man is serving fried dumplings and boiled siu mai. In bold capital letters the sign for his stall reads: CHINESE BREAKFAST IN KOLKATA. I appreciate the sign’s confidence; it feels like I’m about to be told a story rather than be served dumplings on a styrofoam plate. “Oh him?” he says. “He’s been here forever. Long time ago he used to work for a woman named Chung Yun Chow.” Chow
would make siu mai at home and the man would sell it at the market for her every weekend, earning commission. Eventually, Chow retired and sold him the business, passing on her traditional recipes and techniques. “Same with that Bong woman over there selling fish ball soup” (Bong is the colloquial term for Bengali). “She married a Chinese man, Jong Hong Kim. His sister taught that woman how to cook Chinese food.”

That a Bong man is in fact the person cooking your plate of food, and not an octogenarian Chinese woman, inspires a sense of cognitive dissonance, even suspicion, among people: How authentic could this siu mai be? Can we trust it? The irony is that it while it may seem inauthentic, it reveals something true, which is that Nicholas is an anomaly in Territy. Most children are in no position to take over the family business: they’re either working less physically demanding jobs in tech or finance, or living across the world.

By nine am, the market is shutting down. Nicholas starts to pack up his things. It’s been a good day—they’ve sold nearly everything they made. Only a few dumplings lie orphaned in their plastic containers. Nicholas hands me one. “Here,” he says. “For you.” I smile and say thank you. “My aunt will be preparing lunch now at our home. Would you like to join us?” I say that I would like that very, very much.

When we arrive outside their home, I realize Nicholas and his family (which consists of his father, his aunt, and his grandmother) live inside the former apartment building that was converted into a school. Had they moved out with the rest of the tenants, their apartment would now be a classroom. They refused to sell, which makes me smile, and as I sit in their apartment I can hear the shrill ring of school bells and screaming children.

For lunch, we do not eat Manchurian chicken or chilli paneer or anything of the sort. We eat fried pork with black bean sauce and a red rice-vinegar chicken soup. We eat Jasmine rice. We
also eat Indian dahl and roasted okra, and we finish our meal with chai. Before me, two cultures are fusing together, multiple instruments are playing at once. It doesn’t sound noisy at all.

**The first time** I meet James Lee is at his restaurant, Sei Vui, in Territy. When I walk in, he’s sitting behind a counter with headphones on, staring blankly into a computer. He peers up at me from behind his barricade, looking slightly irritated, like I’ve disappointed him for visiting his restaurant during business hours. I ask if he’s open and he says “Yes, yes! Take a seat.” He takes out his headphones and closes his laptop. “Sorry, I thought you were lost. I was just watching the Lion King.”

I sit down at a table. There are no patrons in the restaurant except one man in the corner. Two Indian boys wearing yellow shirts and red aprons walk towards me. They appear to be no older than eighteen. One places a cup on the table, one pours me tea. James hands me a menu, and on the front cover is a disclaimer, spelled out in all caps: NO BEEF NO PORK HALAL. It’s a sprawling menu, with at least one hundred items on it. They include the standard Hot and Sour Soup, Singapore prawns, Hakka stuffed fried tofu, and Mongolian chicken. There are also some outliers that I’ve never seen before, like “Triple Szechwan (Chicken/Prawn),” “Drums of Heaven,” and “Coriander Burn Garlic Fried Rice.” There are no descriptions for the items; we are to intuit the difference between “Assorted Veg with (Chicken/Fish)” and “Mix Veg with (Chicken/Fish/Prawn).”

I ask him to describe Hunan chicken versus Hong Kong chicken, and he says one is from Hunan and one is from Hong Kong. I ask what the difference is between Manchurian chicken and chilli garlic chicken (I was under the impression that Manchurian sauce was chilli garlic sauce). Then I ask what on earth “Fish Finger” is. He looks at me as if I’ve just brought a guest
to his party that he purposefully didn’t invite—like: why are you doing this to me? I’ve come to realize that prefixes like Manchurian or Hunan or even chilli are so ubiquitous in India that they’ve lost all specificity; instead, they’re catch-all phrases that describe something ambiguously ethnic and saucy, not unlike the way we throw around the word “General Tso” or “curry.” What does these words mean? It doesn’t matter. I ask James because I want to know what they mean to him.

James and I get to talking more, and he asks if he can sit down and share some tea with me. He’s a small, unassuming man in his mid-fifties who worked as an engineer before opening this restaurant with five other men. Now he works six days a week, from twelve in the afternoon to ten at night. “I was so bored today,” he says. “It’s been very slow.” He explains that the Hindu festival Janmashtami is happening right now, so most Hindus eat only at strictly non-veg restaurants, if they eat out at all.

Because Territy is now a predominantly Hindu and Muslim neighborhood, James is extra cautious about respecting religious dietary rules. He’s made the restaurant beef and pork-free, and he orders from only Halal vendors. In the kitchen, he’s hired muslim chefs and keeps a separate wok for veg and non-veg customers. “India is a dangerous place to play with religion,” he tells me. “I can’t rely on Chinese customers anymore, because there’s no more of us. It doesn’t make sense that a Chinese restaurant doesn’t serve pork, but if I don’t do this, I won’t make any money.”

I ask him if he serves the same kind of food in his restaurant as he cooks at home, and I say it in a serious tone because I want him to be completely candid. “No,” he says, and I ask him why. “My customers, they tell me mainland Chinese food is bland, so I add spices. They tell me
they want more sauce, so I add more sauces. Indians won’t accept Chinese food unless it’s been accommodated to their tastes.”

Since the Indo-China war, I get the sense that the Indian-Chinese community has never felt fully accepted in India. There’s a general feeling of insecurity—a chronic thrumming of doubt about their place here—and food seems to be the first and perhaps only site onto which they’ve grafted these insecurities. Anne Lee, who was born in the Deoli internment camp in Rajasthan, tells me over lunch one day that she’s been fearful her whole life that the government will turn on her family again. Her and her husband own an astonishingly successful sauce company called Pou Chong, which specializes in selling Indianized Asian sauces all over the country. For Ann, the only way to overcome her insecurity was by becoming widely financially secure.

I look around Sei Vui. There are red lanterns hanging from the ceiling, and on the back wall is a large painting of the Great Wall of China. Indian-Chinese food is a source of complicated pride for the remaining residents of the diaspora—an assertion that yes, we are here—yet it’s also a stark reminder that full integration and acceptance is not possible, that even though Indian-Chinese food might be served in over a third of the restaurants in India, it will always be relegated to its own corner section of the menu.

It is a terribly time-consuming thing being an immigrant. Probably because the act of migrating never ends. The actual packing and landing and setting up a new life—that’s just the beginning. The unspooling of your past is always happening. Cooking and eating are perhaps the easiest and most intrinsically pleasurable ways we let the past unspool into the present—literally onto our plates, so we have the energy needed to wake up, get ready for work, dress the children, throttle them out the door and into a world that is nicer and softer than the one we left. The noble hope is
that they’ll go to university, perhaps move to an even better country where life is easier and happier still.

After the Indian parliament passed the Defence of India Act in 1962, my grandparents grew tired of feeling like immigrants “of hostile origin” in their own country, so they left and moved somewhere where nearly everyone is an immigrant. Over half a century later, a different Trudeau is the Prime Minister of Canada, and in India, Narendra Modi rules with terrifying supremacy. Late last year, The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) passed the controversial Citizenship Amendment Bill, which explicitly prohibits Muslim immigrants from Afghanistan, Bangladesh and Pakistan from becoming Indian citizens.

Modi’s dream for India is one of Hindu purity and homogeneity. He is uninterested in the possibility that people’s identities may fit into more than one category. I wouldn’t be surprised if he’s the type of man who thinks jazz is noisy, who cannot hear the beauty of multiple instruments doing their own thing at the same time.

One evening, in Varanasi, I’m out for dinner with a man from Amritsar whom I met back at my hostel. We’re sitting on the side of the road eating puchkas from a busy street vendor. He has a warm face and a large tattoo on his arm. “It’s a temporary tattoo,” he says, and I think this is weird but I don’t say anything. He tells me that he’s trying to immigrate to Toronto, that he’s waiting to hear back from the Canadian government about whether or not he scored high enough on his English proficiency exam. I tell him I think this is an arbitrary and unfair metric for judging someone. He shrugs. I say something stupid like, so what do you think of Modi? and he lets out an exasperated laugh. “You’re so not from here. I wouldn’t talk about him in public like that, especially not in Varanasi. Do you want to get yourself killed?” I’ve overlooked the fact that Varanasi is the holiest place in the world for Hindus, and also Modi’s constituency. Right. Shit,
sorry. “Let’s talk about something less political,” he says. “How about food? Tell me about the food in Canada.”