The 'Enemy' Within

Chinese-Indians were interned in their own country during and even after war with China in 1962. While many emigrated, **Makepeace Sitlhou** catches up with some who stayed

ON THE MORNING that we spoke, via WhatsApp, Andy Hsieh had already met Bobby Wang and Moses Cheng in a café in Toronto, as they had every Sunday for the last 16 years. The three men, now in their mid-seventies, have more in common than just their Chinese roots—they were all born in India. They still identify as Chinese-Indians to anyone who asks, as they always do in North America.

Almost 50 years since migrating to Canada in the hope of a better life, Hsieh remains strongly connected to his years in India, especially his teenage ones in Assam. In 1959, he started studying in the Don Bosco School in Shillong while his father ran the only Chinese restaurant in the oil refinery town of Digboi.

"I still remember catching the train to Tinsukia every week with my father to buy chicken for the restaurant," he said, of the vacation days spent in Digboi. In Shillong, whenever he got the chance, he'd rush to Police Bazaar to catch a movie or eat at one of the many Chinese restaurants. But underneath this nostalgia lurks the memory of the day, in 1962, when armed policemen picked up Hsieh, his older brother from St Xavier's College, and his younger sister from St Mary's school after war with China was declared. The brothers were held like criminals in the Shillong jail for almost a week. They were later reunited with their family at Guwahati railway station, from where a long and arduous train journey took them to an internment camp, more than 2,000 kilometres away in Rajasthan. Little did he know then that four years of his youth would be wasted within the confines of India's first detention centre.

Hong Kong Restaurant stands as the most visible marker of Chinese-Indians in nondescript Tinsukia

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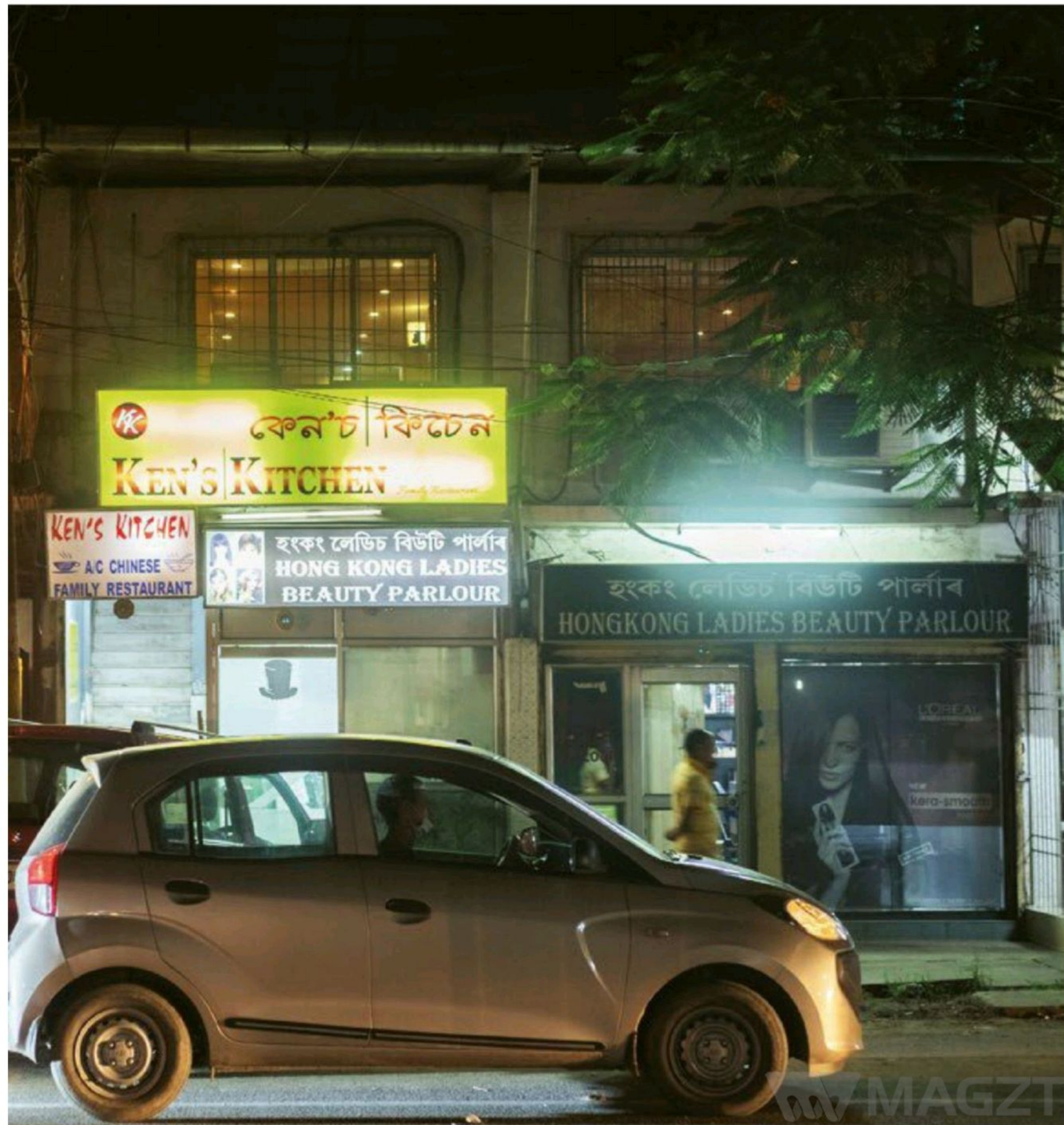

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Namoi Yean, whose father married an Assamese woman, grew up alongside the 'tea tribe' in Tinsukia

On October 20, 1962, China went to war with India, during which the former emerged victorious, conquering deep into the erstwhile North East Frontier Agency (now Arunachal Pradesh). The Peking forces had reached up to Bomdila, less than 100 kilometres away from the border of Assam, before they called for a ceasefire on November 21. Although brief, the Indo-China war was a result of mounting tensions between the two major powers in Asia due to disagreements over the exact boundaries of the McMahon Line separating the two nation states.

From November that year, India summarily began detaining thousands of Indians of Chinese origin at an internment camp located in the sleepy town of Deoli in Rajasthan. They were picked up on little more than the vague suspicion that their Chinese ancestry meant they could be acting as spies or were sympathisers with the Chinese cause. Most of the internees lived in frontier towns like Darjeeling and Kalimpong in West Bengal and parts of Assam, where they had been studying or running a business for years. By the end of 1962, even though a ceasefire had been called, up to 3,000 Chinese-Indians were held in the five winged barracks of the Deoli camp.

Was the mass internment based on credible intelligence reports or racial profiling alone? What is indisputable is that the detention was perfectly legal once India amended its Foreigners Act, 1946 on November 13, 1962 to read:

> In view of the present emergency, it is necessary that powers should be available to deal with any person not of Indian origin who was at birth a citizen or subject of any country at war with, or committing external aggression against, India or of any other country assisting the country at war with or committing such aggression against India but who may have subsequently acquired Indian citizenship in the same manner as a foreigner. It is also necessary to take powers to arrest and detain and confine these persons and the nationals of all such countries under the Foreigners Act, 1946 should such need arise.

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Hsieh, just 17 years old then, met Cheng and Wang at the camp, and the three kept in touch despite going their separate ways. Wang's family returned to Shillong in 1965 and, in the same year, Cheng's family opted to leave the camp and go to Calcutta. The last to leave the camp, like the Hsiehs, were those who preferred to go back to Assam (including Shillong, which was the state capital before Meghalaya was formed in 1972). The internees from Kalimpong and Darjeeling, where Cheng was from, were not allowed to return as these were considered 'sensitive areas', his younger brother, Michael told Joy Ma. A California-based writer, Ma has been documenting the stories of ex-internees like Cheng, Hsieh, and her own mother for eight years now.

Decades later, after all of them had emigrated to Canada, they caught up with each other. The Association of India Deoli Camp Internees (AIDCI) was born in 2010 and Hsieh became its first president. Two years later, they organised their first reunion in Toronto, on the 50th anniversary of the internment, attended by 300 ex-internees including Ma, who was born in the Deoli camp in 1962. Since 2012, around 150 AIDCI members have met up every year. "Many of the little ones are now grandparents," Hsieh said. But, like everything this year, the AIDCI reunion, normally scheduled for September or October, has been derailed by the coronavirus.

By the time Hsieh's family moved to Digboi, John Wong's family had been settled in a place less than 30 kilometres away in Tinsukia district for almost 20 years. His father, Wong Su Chin, ran the Lee-Hing sawmill in Chinapatty along Makum Road, which once had a thriving community of Chinese-Indians

Naturalised in Assam

By the time Hsieh's family moved to Digboi, John Wong's family had been settled in a place less than 30 kilometres away in Tinsukia district for almost 20 years. His father, Wong Su Chin, ran the Lee-Hing sawmill in Chinapatty along Makum Road, which once had a thriving community of Chinese-Indians numbering at least a few thousand. The sole surviving relic of that era, the Chinese school established in 1947 where Wong's father was a headmaster, also saw a dramatic transition after the war. Rebranded as Hindi Vidyalaya, the main building was undergoing renovations when I visited as classes had shifted online due to the pandemic. "Those trees you see there," Wong said, "they were planted when I was studying here. The saplings were brought from China."

By most historical accounts, the Chinese were brought to Upper Assam in 1838 to work in the experimental tea gardens run by the British East India Company. The successful import of tea plantations led to a growing demand for organic black tea from the area. The Chinese workers were soon to be joined by tribal communities from the Chota Nagpur Plateau, who were also forced into indentured labour in the gardens. Many of the Chinese, who were skilled in wood, leather, and ironwork, gradually moved out of the gardens and set up their own businesses. Others like Wong's

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grandfather had arrived in Assam as business contractors during World War II.

Ever since the author Rita Chowdhury wrote about the Chinese community in Assam in a 2010 Assamese novel, *Makam*, many journalists and research scholars turned up in the hope of finding a Tangra-like Chinatown, as in Kolkata, with its red lanterns and Chinese script signage. Born in 1960, Wong remembers very little of the better times that his family and the community had seen in Chinapatty. "Un dino, Makum ka DC bhi mere papa ko salaam thokta tha (Those days, even the District Commissioner of Makum would pay his respects to my father)," he said. After they were released in 1966 from the internment camp, where Wong lost his sister and his mother birthed twin daughters, they came back to their house that had been seized and sealed off as 'enemy property'.

Hsieh applied for immigration to Canada to complete his education while he was still at the camp. He received his rejection letter two years after he and his family had left the camp and moved to Calcutta. By then, Hsieh was not finishing high school but working as a steward at the Waldorf restaurant in Park Street

Wong met me on the condition that I wouldn't dredge up old, painful memories that had already been written about. Given the heightened atmosphere following the border stand-off between India and China at the Galwan valley, I was told that Chinese-Indians were now hesitant to speak to the press. I had to convince at least three people in Makum just to get Wong to take my calls. When I finally met him, Wong made no mention of the ongoing border skirmishes. Instead, he told me he had no gripe with the Indian government especially since his parents had become naturalised in 1991. "We're all Indian citizens. Our names have also made it to the National Register of Citizens," he said, adding that they had land documents that went back to 1956 to prove they had been living in Assam. The NRC, a controversial exercise initiated in 2014 to identify illegal immigrants residing in Assam, excluded four million applicants in its first draft list in July 2018. Some of Wong's family members had also been excluded due to a minor issue of submitting black and white copies of a land certificate issued by the District Commissioner. "We spent the extra 100 rupees for colour printouts. Now, all of us are in," he said. A year later, the final list released in August excluded nearly two million applicants.

The Good Immigrants

Hsieh was 18 years old when he met the then Home Minister Lal Bahadur Shastri, who visited the Deoli camp in 1963, ostensibly to inspect the living conditions of the internees. As documented in Joy Ma and Dilip D'Souza's recent book, *The Deoliwallahs*, Hsieh said, "Mr Shastri, I'm eighteen now. I'm supposed to be in high school. Right now, I can't study anymore. Can you do something? Can we study in the town during the day and come back to the camp?" Although Shastri said he would bring these concerns up when he returned to New Delhi, Hsieh never heard back from him. As more families started leaving the camp, and his friends moved out, boredom

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Hong Kong Ladies Beauty Parlour, which is now run by Sweety Wong Gurung

started setting in. "There was no proper education, especially for the older kids, at the camp, or any reading material," he said, save the daily newspaper, with the clippings on China and the US cut out. "All news on political affairs was censored."

Hsieh even applied to the High Commissioner in New Delhi for immigration to Canada to complete his education, while he was still at the camp. He received his rejection letter two years after he and his family had left the camp and moved from Digboi to Calcutta to start their life anew. By then, Hsieh was not finishing high school but working as a steward at the Waldorf restaurant in Park Street. Hsieh's proficiency in English came in handy in the service industry, which also exposed him to the world of glamour. He remembers meeting Bollywood stars like Vyjanthimala, Kishore Kumar, and Sharmila Tagore, who were regular patrons. But there wasn't a single day when Hsieh didn't yearn to go back to school. Still, because of his earnings, his younger siblings could complete their schooling.

Meanwhile, after their return from Deoli in 1966, Wong and his siblings attended Assamese-medium schools as their father struggled to keep the family afloat. Setting up the 'Hong Kong' restaurant in 1970, which filled the demand for Chinese food in Tinsukia after the few restaurants and the club had

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folded, helped the family get back on its feet. "It was my mum's idea to set up the restaurant, actually," said Wong. "We would have been celebrating our golden jubilee had it not been for Covid." Neither the pandemic nor his age has stopped Wong from venturing into the Dehing and Brahmaputra river every evening to fish for the catch of the day.

The Hong Kong Restaurant stands as the most visible marker of the community's presence in a nondescript town like Tinsukia. Three beauty parlours that Wong's wife and his sisters run independently flank the restaurant. The women in the family started with Hong Kong Ladies Beauty Parlour, which is now run by his sister, Sweety, one of the twins born at the camp.

Sweety Cheng Gurung, who married her father's Nepalese friend's son, was the first to go to Calcutta in 1984 to train in the salons of Tangra. For the first time in her life, she said, it felt like living in an actual Chinatown. "During the Chinese New Year, the community in Kolkata would go there and celebrate with great show and pomp. Quite unlike in Makum, where the few Chinese families here just light up a candle and pray at home," she told me. In her four years of training as a beautician, she also witnessed the gradual disappearance of the Chinese-Indians from Kolkata, many of whom immigrated to countries in the West and Southeast Asia. "My parents had to really struggle to send me to Calcutta and for me to live there for four years," said Sweety. "Humari itni aukad nahin thi ki hum India ke bahar jaane ki soch sake (We did not have the kind of money to think about leaving India)."

Until Chowdhury's *Makam* was published, the younger generations in Wong's family were largely unaware of their family's painful past and the history of the place in which they had grown up. "The book was such an eye-opener for me because we never had these conversations in my family," said Sweety. Wong's son, Tian Ann, said that he and his siblings didn't know enough to talk about the dark chapter in their parents' lives. "I have had a good life. I was given everything I wanted from a very young age, whether my own car, the freedom to study outside, or travel abroad," he said. But when the pandemic struck India, their ethnicity once again made them a target. His younger sister working in Mumbai faced racial discrimination.

He shows me his sister's post on Instagram, which has her holding a poster that says, 'I am not a virus'.

Never Too Late for an Apology

Type in 'Central Industrial Security Force Training Centre' on Google Earth, and you get a satellite view of the five wings that held the internees for one to five years after the month-long conflict with China. The salmon-pink paint of the newly reinforced rooftops stand out amidst the dull cluster of houses and buildings in Deoli. The popular student-coaching town of Kota is just an hour and a half away.

When Ma tried to visit the training centre in 2012, hoping to see what the place of her birth now looked like, the officer who promised to take her on a tour ghosted her. When she returned to India in 2015, along with Yin Marsh—who by then had self-published her memoir *Doing Time with Nehru*—Michael Cheng and Steven Wan, they addressed audiences in universities and other public forums. It was the first time they (or anyone in India) had spoken at length about what had been

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done to the Chinese-Indians in 1962.

Marsh, who was only 13 when she was picked up along with her grandmother from Darjeeling, had started writing her book four years before the golden jubilee gathering in Toronto. "It was really weird because, growing up, I could never cry. My kids never saw me crying. Nothing would disturb me because I had gone through enough," she told me. "But when I started writing, tears just kept flowing. It was the first time I was alone and getting it off my chest." An editor at a major publishing house turned the book down. "I quickly realised that even after 50 years, people didn't want to be talking about this," she said. "I wasn't surprised but disappointed." Zubaan Books, a feminist publishing house in India, republished her book in 2016.

During her 2015 tour in India, Yin Marsh said that at a school where she had spoken about her internment "the principal himself got up and said, 'On behalf of Indians, I want to apologise.' The people themselves wanted to apologise, which was touching"

Makam, which was translated into English in 2018 as *Chinatown Days*, was unsparing in its details and criticism of how the Nehru government had treated the Chinese-Indian community. Although written as fiction, the Chinese-Indians in Assam said the novel was extensively researched and factually accurate as far as historical events were concerned.

John Wong, careful not to criticise the Indian government, argues that internment "was a bad dream... [but] we're fine the way we are and don't have any fight with the government."

It isn't unusual or unprecedented for governments to apologise for historical wrongs. In 1988, Ronald Reagan, then US president, for instance, acknowledged the mass incarceration of Japanese-Americans in 1942 after Japanese forces attacked Pearl Harbor during World War II. The first formal action of the AIDCI after it was set up in 2010 was to send a letter to India's then prime minister Manmohan Singh, asking for an apology. "I never got a reply from New Delhi. I don't know what they did. They could have thrown it in the bin," said Hsieh. Seven years later, 51 members landed up at the Indian High Commission in Ottawa, where they held a peaceful demonstration and handed over a letter addressed to prime minister Narendra Modi asking for an apology.

During her 2015 tour in India, Marsh said that at a school where she had spoken about her internment "the principal himself got up and said, 'On behalf of Indians, I want to apologise.' The people themselves wanted to apologise, which was touching." More than 3,000 persons, most of them of Bengali origin, have been sent to detention centres in Assam since 2009 for 'failing' to prove their citizenship in a quasi-judicial court. Sixty years after Deoli was discontinued as an internment camp, a new detention centre is almost ready in Assam with the capacity to hold the same number of internees, until they are deported or opt to live as second-class citizens. "This is why these stories have to be told," says Marsh. "It's happening again but it shouldn't be." ■

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