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## Still Guest People: The Reproduction of Hakka Identity in Kolkata, India<sup>1</sup>

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*This article is based on fieldwork conducted during the 1980s in a community of Hakka Chinese who had found a profitable niche in Kolkata's leather industry. It examines the way Kolkata's ethnic economy, in which different caste, language and religious groups each inhabit different economic niches, furthered the Hakka's continued identification of themselves as 'guest people'. The Hakka distinguished between themselves and a variety of others, not only other Indian groups, but also the Cantonese and Hubeinese Chinese.*

A *small number* of Hakka Chinese immigrants to Kolkata entered into the manufacture of leather during the World War I era. This occupation, considered to be polluting by high-caste Hindus and normally left to the untouchables or Muslims, proved to be a lucrative source of income. Although the entire Chinese population of Kolkata consists of no more than 8,000 individuals, the Hakka now own and operate the vast majority of tanneries there and their contribution to the Indian leather industry is far from negligible on a national scale. Kolkata is one of three major centres of the tanning industry in India, exceeded only by the cities of Chennai (earlier Madras) in the south and Kanpur in the north.

The Hakka do not comprise Kolkata's entire Chinese population. Cantonese from Guangdong and immigrants from Hubei have also settled in Kolkata. The Cantonese, Hubeinese and Hakka have each retained their native language and each occupies a different economic niche. The Cantonese are primarily known as carpenters, while the major business of the small Hubeinese community is dentistry. The Hakka, in addition to their involvement in tanning, own and operate shoe shops, hairdressing salons, and restaurants. But the tanning industry still engages the largest number of

<sup>1</sup> This article was published in 1996 in *Guest People: Hakka Identity in China and Abroad*, edited by Nicole Constable (University of Washington Press).

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Kolkata's Hakka population and the Hakka community as a whole is by far the largest of the three Chinese subgroups (see Jennifer Liang's essay in this volume for occupational specialties among Chinese Indians).<sup>2</sup>

The Chinese tanning area is situated on the eastern periphery of Kolkata in an area known as Dhapa (also sometimes referred to as Tangra or Tapsia since it straddles two districts of those names). Approximately 300 tanning businesses, the majority employing between five and fifty workers each, are found there. Housed in large concrete buildings of two and three stories, or small one-story structures with tile roofs, these factories are connected by a maze of unpaved, frequently muddy paths as well as open sewers through which the by-products of the tanning process flow. The tanneries in this rust-coloured industrial environment serve as both residences and factories for the Hakka.

This article investigates the constitution of Kolkata Hakka ethnic identity, utilising as a starting point Orlando Patterson's definition of ethnicity as 'that condition wherein certain members of a society, in a given social context, choose to emphasize as their most meaningful basis of primary, extrafamilial identity certain assumed cultural, national, or somatic traits' (1975: 308).

I would add to Patterson's definition of ethnicity an insistence that ethnic identity is not simply a matter of how a group chooses to define itself, but also a question of the identity that others ascribe to it. The manner in which others view an ethnic group may play into the group's self-perceptions in a variety of ways. Group members may incorporate, reject, invert or ignore the images others have of them. And the images others have of an ethnic group will in turn colour the attitudes group members hold toward these others.

Ethnic identity is viewed here as dialogical or reflexive, in the sense that it is created, maintained and reaffirmed through a continuous set of oppositions between one's own group and others.<sup>3</sup> To use Fredrik Barth's (1969) language, ethnic interaction creates ethnic boundaries but the 'stuff' these boundaries enclose, the particular diacritics utilised as ethnic boundary markers, can be discovered only by looking at particular contexts of interaction.

In the case at hand, three elements seem important in establishing and maintaining Kolkata Hakka identity: state and national politics; an ethnically differentiated and

<sup>2</sup> Although the Kolkata census has never broken down the Chinese population on the basis of language, the numerical dominance of the Hakka is evident. There are two Chinese schools for Hakka students and only one for Cantonese. Furthermore, the Hubeinese and Cantonese are frequently able to converse in Hakka, while few Hakka learn Cantonese or Hubeinese. Cantonese and Hubeinese informants assert that this is due to the fact that the Hakka now dominate Chinese life in Kolkata. Finally, the number of tanning businesses (approximately 300 in 1980) clearly establishes tanning as the most important occupation of the Hakka. Only shoe shops come close (150 in 1980).

<sup>3</sup> Where one of these others is the state, as Stevan Harrell has so trenchantly demonstrated in a paper on Yi communities in Southwest China, the process by which groups create self-definitions is exceedingly complex (Harrell 1990).

stratified economy; and a host society with a religious system based on the symbolic opposition to purity and impurity.<sup>4</sup>

I should make it clear at the outset that although this article emphasises the interactive nature of ethnic identity, it also acknowledges that the process of ethnic identity creation is a historical one. In other words, an emphasis on interaction need not lack historical depth. Ethnic identities reproduce 'differentiated social formations' (Bentley 1987: 42), but changes in social conditions over time may create the need for either investing ethnic identities with new meanings or for dissolving certain ethnic categories altogether. Bentley, in a recent article on ethnicity and practice, says,

As individuals develop new ways of dealing with a changing world, old truths erode; as what was formerly inconceivable becomes commonplace, degrees of sharing and affinity, hence ethnic identities, become problematic. At the least, under these conditions ethnic symbolism is likely to take on different meanings for differentially adapted segments of a population. (ibid.: 43)

Keeping in mind this potential of ethnic identities to transform themselves in response to changing conditions and also remembering that the articles in this volume ask what it means to be Hakka, I conclude this article with some questions about how the meaning of being Hakka may change for Kolkata Hakka who emigrated to Toronto.

#### OCCUPATION AND ETHNICITY IN KOLKATA

Even before I came to Kolkata to do fieldwork, I was aware that it is a city in which ethnicity is a critical social, cultural and economic force. Located in West Bengal, the great array and diversity of ethnic, religious and caste groups that comprise Kolkata's population is due partly to its role as the pre-eminent city of Northeast India. Despite its teeming population and well-publicised urban problems—poor sewage, overcrowded and polluted slums (*bustees*), multitude of pavement dwellers, public transportation that is bursting at the seams—and despite the fact that Kolkata has now been overtaken by Mumbai (earlier Bombay) as a centre of industry, the city continues to be a magnet that attracts migrants from not only the surrounding Bengali countryside but also from the neighbouring states of Bihar and Orissa, from more distant states within India (such as, Gujarat, Punjab, Rajasthan and Tamil Nadu) and from

<sup>4</sup> There is vast literature that debates the origins of these distinctions themselves. Some argue that they serve to organise exploitative economic relations and others that they are based on fundamental symbolic oppositions (e.g., Dumont 1970, Kolenda 1985, Mencher 1974). For our purposes here, we will simply note the influence of beliefs about purity and impurity upon Kolkata's Hakka. The debate about the origins of this system itself is far beyond the scope of this article.

Bangladesh and Nepal. At one time Kolkata hosted a sizeable Jewish community and a smaller Armenian one. This continuous migration to Kolkata has been augmented by the great human waves associated with the partition of India in 1947 and by subsequent wars with Pakistan, culminating with the formation of Bangladesh in 1971, when millions of refugees poured into West Bengal and Kolkata. Indeed, in the years between 1881 and 1961, immigrants from outside West Bengal continuously comprised over 50 per cent of the city's population (Chakraborty 1990: 11).

Founded at the close of the eighteenth century by traders belonging to the East India Company, Kolkata eventually served as the capital of British India until political agitation and unrest forced the British to relocate the capital to Delhi in 1911. Kolkata's predominance as a major port and centre of trade, finance and industry has continued since the days of the East India Company (Lubell 1974: 3) and indeed the Kolkata region preceded other parts of the country in the process of industrialisation (ibid.: 14). Greater Kolkata is still the most populous city in India (Geib and Dutt 1987: 32); in 1981 the population of its metropolitan district was 9.2 million, making it one of the ten largest metropolises in the world (ibid.: 132). Furthermore, unlike Mumbai and Delhi, no other major urban centres are found within hundreds of miles of Kolkata (Lubell 1974: 2). Although the growth of the city is now said to be 'merely' 25 per cent per decade or the same rate as India as a whole (Stevens 1983: 3), the ethnic, caste and religious diversity of the city continues to be a pre-eminent feature.

When I refer to ethnicity in Kolkata I refer to several types of groups. First, there are immigrants from outside South Asia, such as the Chinese and the Armenians. Second, there are people from South Asian countries other than India, such as Nepal and Bangladesh. Third, there are people from other Indian states who speak languages other than Bengali. In addition, many of these groups, all of whom can be referred to as 'ethnic' groups within Kolkata, are subdivided along caste and religious lines. Hence, Hindu Bengalis, as well as Hindu immigrants from other states in India, have a multitude of caste affiliations. Not only are most of these groups endogamous with respect to marriage but, in addition, many are also associated with distinct occupational niches. Religion also divides the migrants. Migrants to Kolkata from the state of Punjab, for example, include Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs. The differentiation of groups in Kolkata is, therefore, based on several cross-cutting categories including language, religion, caste, class and regional origin. And each subdivision created by the combination of one or more of these categories tends to be associated with clusters of particular occupations. For instance, Hindi-speaking people include groups as varied as migrants from rural areas in Bihar and Marwaris, a trading people with origins in central India. While Biharis are industrial labourers and pushcart and rickshaw operators, Marwaris are industrialists and business people. South Indians, on the other hand, are commonly associated with clerical and administrative work (Bose 1968: 39), while Sikhs are found in large numbers in the transport business (ibid.: 38). Amongst Bengalis, who

share language and ethnic affiliation, occupational differentiation is organised according to caste categories and/or regional origin. (Since Bengalis are native to Kolkata, one would expect a greater differentiation of roles within their group than among immigrants.)

Even the leather business is organised according to linguistic, caste, religious and/or regional categories. The Hakka buy rawhide from North Indian Muslims; they employ scheduled caste<sup>5</sup> Bihari migrants as labourers and Nepalese as guards; and, they sell their leather to Punjabi Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs.

While such ethnic variability might remind one of the ethnic diversity of American cities, such as New York, there is an important distinction. Although ethnicity is certainly a major component of socio-economic status in American cities, particularly in the case of African American and Hispanic populations, there is a wide spread of income within each ethnic group. In Kolkata, however, as Berry and Rees point out in their study of the city's factorial ecology, the occupational differences between ethnic groups are greater than those within them. The only exception to this is among Bengalis, where castes are connected to occupational roles (1969: 490).

One reason for the continuing importance of ethnicity in the social structure of Kolkata is the city's economy of scarcity. As Nirmal Kumar Bose stated, in reference to Kolkata,

Because there are not enough jobs to go around everyone clings as closely as possible to the occupation with which his ethnic group is identified and relies for economic support on those who speak his language, on his coreligionists, on members of his own caste and on fellow immigrants from the village or district from which he has come. By a backwash, reliance on earlier forms of group identification reinforces and perpetuates differences between ethnic groups. (1966: 102)

To some extent, therefore, the Chinese are simply one of many groups in Kolkata affiliated with a particular economic niche. As with most ethnic, caste and religious groups in this diverse city, the Chinese not only occupy particular economic roles

<sup>5</sup> The term 'scheduled' caste is usually used to designate those groups who are known as 'untouchables', i.e., with whom contact is considered especially polluting within caste ideology. The sociologist R.A. Schermerhorn points out that the term originated during the 1930s when the British desired to categorise for census purposes those castes with whom contact "entails purification on the part of high-caste Hindus," a *de jure* definition. Lists or schedules of such castes were drawn up for the purpose of singling out those groups suffering civil and religious disabilities' (1978: 29). There are problems with this definition; since all castes are hierarchically ranked and contact between a relatively higher group and a relatively lower group—no matter what their particular identity—always entails the possibility of pollution for the higher group. Even among groups defined as untouchable, for instance, there is a hierarchy of relative purity. Nevertheless, the term is generally applied to those groups who in a particular region are defined as 'the most defiled of all, the ones who can pollute all others' (ibid.: 30).

but are endogamous with respect to marriage and social life. On the other hand, their status as foreigners associated with a country that has been engaged in hostilities against India, combined with their association with a particularly degraded occupation (leather making), lends a certain uniqueness to their role and gives them an outsider status greater in degree than that of other immigrants to Kolkata.

### THE DISTINCTION BETWEEN CENTRE AND PERIPHERY

Ethnic, caste and religious distinctions play important roles in both the Indian leather industry and Kolkata's economy. However, in addition to the strong association between occupation and ethnicity, Kolkata also adds a geographic demarcation. Nirmal Kumar Bose (1966, 1968) examined this phenomenon extensively and charted in a series of maps the social, ethnic and religious composition of Kolkata. He demonstrated that there was a tendency for higher caste and class groups to be associated with the centre of the city, and for lower caste and class groups to be associated with the periphery.

The primacy of the central area in Kolkata has continued since British times and results from the interaction of both political and economic forces. When the British founded Kolkata, they built an imperial stronghold, Fort William, near the river and surrounded it with a large open area called the *Maidan*. They did so as a defensive tactic. The fort was so strategically placed that although British troops inside could easily see attackers (Lelyveld 1975: 12), outsiders attempting to close in could not observe the fort until they were within firing range. The British residential quarter adjoined this protected area. Presently, the *Maidan* functions as what the journalist Joseph Lelyveld calls 'the city's lungs' (ibid.: 12), the only open green space left. This area and bordering sections of the old native quarter continue to be prime real estate, partly because of their proximity to the open space of the *Maidan*, and partly because the major shopping district is located in this central area. Therefore, the high value of the centre in Kolkata is closely linked to its original importance in securing British military, political and economic power and to its subsequent desirability for both residential and commercial use.

What is significant is that both spatial and occupational demarcations distinguish ethnic, caste, language and religious groups in Kolkata. And these distinctions are reflected in and help maintain social separation. Kolkata is not a melting pot. Instead, each of the many groups maintains its separation from the others, rarely intermarrying and conservatively guarding its own customs and ways of life. For instance, Kolkata's schools cater to groups according to the language spoken. One finds Bengali, Hindi, English, Gujarati and Chinese schools. Furthermore, many groups have their own associations and few associations are based on a cross-ethnic membership (Tysen 1971). Indeed, in Kolkata questions of assimilation and acculturation are irrelevant. If the Chinese were to assimilate, for instance, with which group would they do so?

The existence of these relatively endogamous, occupationally demarcated and geographically clustered subgroups, as well as the contrast between centre and periphery, bear some resemblance, on a larger scale, to the organisation of Indian villages. But, while in villages there is a division of labour based primarily on caste, in Kolkata the basis for this division has extended to include not only caste but, also language, religion and regional origin.

As in a village, however, the economic interactions of groups have not broken down the barriers among them, which are reproduced through social and domestic organisation. Indeed, the multitude of groups in Kolkata resemble the collectivities alluded to by Barth in his work on ethnic boundaries: 'Their agreement on codes and values need not extend beyond that which is relevant to the social situations in which they interact' (1969: 16). While many of these groups interact in the economic sphere, their separate ethnic identities remain unscathed.

Most striking, both the ethnic organisation of Kolkata and the caste differentiation of Indian villages are reflected in an opposition between centre and periphery. Just as low castes and classes are associated with the peripheral areas of Kolkata, in many Indian villages the untouchable outcasts are found in distinct quarters outside the village proper.<sup>6</sup>

### CHINESE TANNERS: PERIPHERALITY AND IMPURITY

One must be cautious not to stretch the analogy between villages in India and Kolkata too far, for the historical reasons behind the opposition of centre and periphery differed in these two locations; the establishment of British military and commercial power was not a factor in the centre/periphery distinctions in Indian villages as it was in the colonially created city of Kolkata. In both cases, however, knowledge of the values embedded in caste society is critical to understanding the contemporary social significance of these spatial oppositions, particularly the tanning community's location on the eastern periphery of the city.

The ideology underlying the Hindu caste system is based on a distinction between purity and impurity. Organic waste products are impure and so, therefore, are activities, such as eating, sex, defecation and menstruation. Furthermore, all people, animals and things may temporarily undergo states of pollution through engaging in such polluting activities or through contact and interchange with others who are in a polluted state (see Kolenda 1985). All beings and things can be polluted and may be hierarchically ranked according to their relative degree of pollution. Occupation is

<sup>6</sup> Neither Indian cities nor villages are unique in terms of the significant symbolic role played by space within them. As Walter Firey pointed out in a path breaking study, undertaken over forty years ago, of the city of Boston, 'Space may be a symbol for social values' (1980 [1947]: 169).

an important component of such ranking, since certain occupations, by their very nature, expose their practitioners to greater contact with pollution. For instance, those who deal with human waste—such as sweepers, barbers and launderers—are always in a more impure state than those whose occupations involve less contact with pollution,<sup>7</sup> such as priests.

Significantly, none of the occupations engaged in by Kolkata Chinese—whether it be the hairdressing, restaurant business, tanning and shoemaking of the Hakka, the carpentry of the Cantonese or the dentistry of the Hubeinese—is associated with high-caste activities in traditional Hindu thought. In a system in which status of groups is determined by the relative purity or impurity of their occupations, there is no doubt that tanning is viewed as one of the most supremely impure tasks. This is due to its association with dead cattle and the necessity of working with hides; death pollutes by making the entire body a waste product and the association with slaughter of the sacred cow adds to the impurity.

It is not uncommon for immigrant minority groups throughout the world to engage in occupations that are denigrated by their host societies or at least by the higher-status members of those societies. The Chinese specialisation in vocations in India that are associated with lower castes—even untouchables—adheres to this pattern. What is fascinating, however, is the manner in which Indian society has incorporated the Chinese tanning community. The peripheral geographical position of the Chinese within Kolkata's urban space is in many ways analogous to that of an untouchable community within an Indian village.

The Chinese tanning community is in the eastern corner of Kolkata, adjacent to the city dump. The Indian residents of the areas surrounding it (Tiljala, Tangra and Tapsia) come primarily from the *chamar* caste, a group traditionally considered untouchable and whose customary occupation was leather work (Bandyopadhyay 1990: 79). The peripherality and isolation of the tanning district, as well as the association with an impure task, bring to mind the definition of untouchability employed by Louis Dumont:

We shall define untouchability in the way that is most current by the segregation into distinct hamlets or quarters of the most impure categories. This feature is pan-Indian, as is the association with a religiously relevant distinction (quartering of

<sup>7</sup> There is a broad and vigorous debate about the nature of the caste system in India and the extent to which it is ideologically based. Some scholars, such as Dumont (1970) assert that the ideology of purity and pollution underlies and orders the social relations that can be observed among castes. Others, such as Mencher (1974), argue that this ideology is not shared by all castes. Still others, such as Marriott (1968), argue that the ranking of castes within villages cannot be explained solely in terms of relative purity and pollution but must be derived by an analysis of transferal of different categories of food among castes. But, while the degree to which the ideology of purity and pollution is universally shared and the degree to which all occupations can be ranked according to it has been disputed, no one would deny that work with rawhide and leather is considered within caste ideology to be an impure occupation associated with castes traditionally placed in the category of untouchable.

dead cattle and consumption of meat, leather tanning, role in incineration or cleaning of rubbish and excrement, pig rearing and consumption of pork). (1970: 134)

Of course, considerations of purity and impurity are not the only factors that prevented the Chinese from setting up their tanning operations nearer to the centre of the city. The Chinese themselves emphasise other considerations in the selection of Dhapa as their site for tanning. Dhapa, formerly a marshy and swampy area, had the requisite amount of available water, an essential for tanning. Furthermore, although close enough to the city to do business with buyers and suppliers, it was still relatively uninhabited and real estate was cheap. Conversely, Chinese shoe shops, whose original clientele was largely European and high class Indian, had to be situated in the centre of the city near the major shopping areas these groups frequented.

While several explanations can be found for the tanning community's peripheral location, there is no doubt that this geographic marginality and their degraded occupation have served to isolate the Chinese tanners even more than other Chinese subgroups in Kolkata.

#### INDIAN VIEWS OF THE HAKKA

It is important to point out that Indians, including Bengalis, are not aware of language differences within Kolkata's Chinese community. They usually refer to the Chinese as one group and their attitudes seem to be influenced primarily by the Hindu religious ideology described above and by national politics, specifically by the fact that India and the People's Republic of China went to war in 1962.

There is no doubt that the Sino-Indian conflict has been critical to Indian attitudes toward the Chinese. A common remark is that India was 'stabbed in the back' by China, a reference to the fact that prior to the outbreak of hostilities, relationships between the two countries appeared congenial. While some individuals clearly differentiate between the Chinese who live in India and the People's Republic of China, others do not. One woman, for instance, told me that ever since 1962 she has regarded all Chinese as her enemies. And even those who were not alive at that time or not old enough to remember the events, still seem to be affected by the conflict. Said one young man, 'Everybody knows that China stole Indian territory, so Chinese can't be trusted.'

At the time of the conflict, many Chinese residents of India were stripped of their Indian citizenship (this was done by a legally dubious promulgation declaring that no one could be an Indian citizen if their ancestors were citizens of a country engaged in hostilities with India). Chinese Indians who had become citizens of China when relationships between India and China were good were now even more exposed, since they were suddenly citizens of an enemy country. Several thousand Chinese

Indians were rounded up and placed in a detention camp in the Rajasthan desert, where many remained for several years. An equally large group was deported to China.

However, while the loss of rights many Chinese experienced at that time is often one of the first items of conversation mentioned by Chinese, many Bengalis, as well as other Indians whom I met, claimed that they were not aware that the Chinese were deprived of their citizenship rights on account of the hostilities. When I raised the issue, some insisted that I had my facts wrong, or tried to explain it by saying that those who had lost their citizenship must have done something wrong. There were good Chinese and bad Chinese, one acquaintance argued, and if you were a good Chinese you would definitely be allowed to be a citizen.

But political history was not the only factor that influenced the way Indians, and particularly Bengalis, talked about the Chinese. Dissimilarities in diet were also frequently alluded to. In India diet is an especially significant marker of caste, ethnic and/or religious affiliation. Chinese are set apart from both Hindus, who generally abstain from beef, and Muslims, who abstain from pork. In a situation in which diet is such a critical concern and symbol, it is not surprising that it is one of the most frequently mentioned items when ethnic groups discuss and define each other. The apparent Chinese willingness to eat almost anything was often cited as proof of their peculiarity. As a Bengali acquaintance put it, 'They do eat rice [a staple of the Bengali diet], but I also heard that they eat frogs and snakes!'

To this focus on the impurity of food intake, a trait common to all Chinese from the standpoint of many Kolkatans, a view of the tanning area as particularly unclean was frequently added. While I was doing my fieldwork and my sister came to visit me for two weeks, she fell ill for a few days. This was a rather common occurrence for travellers but many of my Indian friends were sure that these health problems resulted from being in the tanning district. Later, one of my friends wrote in a letter to my sister, 'Next time you come . . . stay with us. It is difficult to stand TANGRA [Dhapa] environment. Ellen has developed a bit of immunity.'

In fact, for most Kolkatans, the tanning area is a place to avoid—a slightly mysterious, even dangerous location. One young college student, for instance, told of his reactions every time he passed the area on a bypass road bordering it.

Tangra is considered a rather unsafe area for a variety of reasons . . . the moment somebody mentions Tangra the two things you think of are Chinese, and you don't want to be there . . . and people are rather intrigued by the Chinese because they have, you know, they have their 'walled city' [an allusion to the appearance of the tanneries from afar] . . . there are these huge walls, and you can't see inside . . . people think it's mysterious, you don't know what is going on, you kind of wonder what happens there.

Although a range of feelings about the Chinese and particularly, about the Chinese tanning community are expressed, such comments indicate that attitudes of hostility,

avoidance or at the very least, befuddlement are not uncommon. The conflict between India and China, Hindu ideas about purity and pollution and the structure of ethnic relations in Kolkata, a city in which economic role and ethnic identity are closely correlated for all groups, all contribute to the maintenance of these ideas.

### HAKKA VIEWS OF OUTSIDERS

The suspicion with which Indians view the Kolkata Chinese is reciprocated by an equally mistrustful attitude on the part of the Hakka towards outsiders. From the vantage point of the Kolkata Hakka, Indians, Westerners and, to a marked but somewhat lesser extent, non-Hakka Chinese are outsiders, and these distinctions are clearly revealed through Hakka terms for these groups. In fact, these terms are used in situations that, for an outsider, sometimes create almost ludicrous juxtapositions.

Several years after my introduction to the Kolkata Hakka community, when I was conducting research in Toronto, I met two sisters from the community who had recently immigrated to Canada. We got together on a Sunday afternoon for a reunion and decided to visit the CN Tower, the tallest structure in the city. I had my camera with me and we all thought it would be nice to have a picture of the three of us in the vicinity of the famous structure. As a middle-aged, Caucasian man passed by, one of my friends shouted in Hakka to her sister, 'Oh look, there goes a *fangui* [literally, "barbarian ghost" or "foreign devil"]. Let's ask him to take a picture for us!' The *fangui* in question assented to our request and my friends thanked him cheerfully, remarking afterwards how nice it had been for him to help us out.<sup>8</sup>

Westerners are frequently called *fangui* in the colloquial speech of the Hakka of Kolkata. Ghosts (*gui*) have frequently been associated in popular Chinese religion with outsiders and undesirables, such as bandits and beggars (see A. Wolf 1974). Yet the term *fangui* is used not only when consciously denigrating a foreigner but also in neutral or even positive situations such as the one discussed earlier. Like the residents of the immigrant Chinese community in California, described by Maxine Hong Kingston (1975), the Kolkata Chinese use the word *gui* frequently when referring to community outsiders. Indeed, the Kolkata Hakka use the word for 'person' (*ren*), only in reference to Chinese people. Thus, Chinese are called *Tang ren* (literally 'people of the Tang [dynasty]').

Yet when specific subgroups of Chinese are referred to, as opposed to the Chinese people as a whole, the Hakka also make important distinctions. When talking about themselves, they continue to use the appellation *ren*. Indeed, they usually refer to themselves as 'people of Meixian', thereby, distinguishing themselves not only from

<sup>8</sup> I usually spoke in Mandarin with my informants, many of whom had attended the local Chinese school, where Mandarin was the medium of instruction. Therefore, I use Mandarin transliteration for Chinese words in this article.

other Chinese but even from Hakka who do not come from Meixian or Guangdong, from which all Kolkata Hakka originate. But the Kolkata Hakka use the word *lm*, translatable as 'fellow'—a word connoting a vulgar person, a hillbilly or hick—when referring to the Cantonese or Hubeinese. Thus, a Cantonese is referred to as a *Guangfu Lao* rather than a *Guangfu ren*.

The Hakka distinguish between themselves and other Chinese groups in other ways as well. From their perspective, the Cantonese do not work as hard, are not as frugal and depending on the speaker, are either more Indianised or more Westernised than the Hakka; in all cases, the Hakka are portrayed as more loyal carriers of Chinese tradition than are other Chinese subgroups. 'Those Cantonese,' asserted one young Hakka man to me in denigrating tones, 'they mix Hindi and English in with their Chinese.' My first landlady in Dhapa, Mrs Jia, liked to compare Cantonese and Hakka working habits and would imply that Cantonese in Kolkata were less successful financially than the Hakka because they were overindulgent. 'When Cantonese make money,' she informed me, 'they get lots of servants, eat with ivory chopsticks, and use tablecloths, . . . but Hakka keep working hard.'

The distinctions Hakka make between themselves and other Chinese in Kolkata are replicated in social organisation. Lawrence Crissman (1967) has drawn attention to what he calls the 'segmentary structure' of many overseas Chinese communities. These societies are divided into progressively segmenting subdivisions based on language, native place and surname. It is only vis-à-vis non-Chinese that they present a united front. In the internal social structure of the Kolkata Chinese community, non-Hakka Chinese are definitely viewed as a category of outsider.

In referring to all other categories of outsiders, however, a much sharper distinction is made by the Hakka, since in these cases the word *gui*, rather than the less negative appellation *lao*, is used. Westerners are called *fungui*, while Indians are usually referred to as *wu gui* (literally, 'black ghosts' or 'black devils'). When referring to an individual Indian man, speakers will frequently append the word *gui* to his surname. Thus, Mr Sen becomes *Sengui*.

In their speech, therefore, the Kolkata Hakka differentiate themselves from two levels of outsiders: first, other speech groups among the Kolkata Chinese; and second, Indians and Westerners.<sup>9</sup> While Westerners are no longer highly visible or numerous actors within Kolkata's ethnic landscape and therefore, Hakka ideas about them are not constantly reinforced through interaction, this is not true of Indians.

<sup>9</sup> The definitions of Westerner and Indian are primarily cultural and contextual, rather than purely biological. This is illustrated by the fact that Chinese families that have had no sons will sometimes adopt babies of non-Chinese descent in circumstances in which it is not possible to find a baby of Chinese descent. These children are raised as Chinese and considered Chinese. On the other hand, the children of mixed Chinese-Indian marriages are not necessarily considered Chinese, even though they have some Chinese ancestry. They are usually classified, instead, according to the language they use at home.

Chinese interactions with Bengalis, for instance, often occur in settings that, for the Chinese, reinforce negative stereotypes. Chinese are most likely to encounter Bengalis when they have dealings with government bureaucrats. Because many Chinese are still classified as foreigners, such contacts are not infrequent, Registering yearly with the Foreigners Office or making repeated applications for citizenship requires numerous meetings with government officials and such interactions are seldom pleasant experiences. Indeed, one of the most frequent grievances I heard was that the only way to get anything done was to bribe an official. Less prosperous community members complained that because they did not have enough funds at their disposal to bribe effectively, they were at a perpetual disadvantage in securing citizenship papers or in getting permits related to the conduct of their business, such as export licences.

Bengalis also meet with government bureaucrats and they are not, of course, strangers to unmotivated, inefficient or even corrupt officials. But since the officials are usually from the ethnic group to which they themselves belong, Bengalis will not conceptualise such interactions in ethnic terms. Rather, such behaviour is often seen as a sign of the times (*shemoi kharap*, 'times are bad') or as a symptom of bad government, in general.

When Chinese encounter difficulties in their dealings with bureaucracy, however, they often blame the Bengali bureaucrats themselves, claiming that Bengalis are lazy and that the Bengali government workers will provide services only in return for bribes. Furthermore, they assert that because they are Chinese, they can be taken advantage of more than other groups. After a disappointing inquiry about a delay in the processing of his papers for a passport application, one Hakka acquaintance complained that you could get it done very quickly if you gave extra money to the official in charge. 'They all need money for their daughters' dowries . . . and they know we can't object because we are Chinese.'

The feeling that Chinese will never be treated fairly only because they are Chinese is quite pervasive. One year before I arrived, a band of *dacoits*<sup>10</sup> attacked a tannery. Three people were killed before the *dacoits* fled across the marshy area bordering Dhapa. Most Dhapa residents felt that the police had done nothing about the incident and had not tried to apprehend the culprits because the victims were Chinese. Ultimately, the police did apprehend some people who they alleged were the perpetrators. Most Dhapa Chinese claimed that the matter was pursued only because they had complained to the Chinese Embassy in New Delhi and the embassy had interceded with the police on their behalf.

While Hakka interactions with Bengalis tend to occur in the bureaucratic sphere, their interactions with most other Indian groups are usually economic or commercial. Hakka tanners sell their leather primarily to Hindu, Muslim and/or Sikh Punjabis, and they buy their rawhide from Muslims from Uttar Pradesh and/or Punjab. Most of their employees are Biharis of the *chamar* caste, as well as a smaller number of

<sup>10</sup> *Dacoit* (armed robber) is a word commonly used in Indian English.

Nepalese and North Indian Muslims. Bihari women are employed as servants to wash clothes, do household work or watch over small children (they do not cook since they are unfamiliar with Chinese cuisine and their Chinese employers do not seem anxious to teach them—one of the many ways in which the ethnic boundary is maintained).

In short, Hakka interactions with Indians occur primarily in bureaucratic or economic contexts, where Indians are officials, workers, suppliers, servants or customers. These contacts also require that the Hakka be conversant in a number of languages. In their interactions with tanning workers, rawhide merchants and leather buyers, their primary language is Hindi. Hakka who run shoe shops in the centre of the city may also need to know some Bengali. Those who run restaurants or beauty parlours may use a combination of Hindi, English and Bengali. There are also generational differences with respect to these language competencies. Younger community members, who have attended English-medium schools, are more likely to be competent in English as well as Hindi. Older individuals, whose schooling was primarily in Chinese-medium schools, are still likely to know Hindi, which they speak with their employees but they are unlikely to be competent in English.

Of course, the fact that Chinese interact with Indians primarily in the economic sphere does not mean that such interactions are totally impersonal or cold. For instance, in order to secure credit on favourable terms, the tanners go to considerable lengths to demonstrate their trustworthiness to their suppliers, particularly the rawhide merchants. Occasionally, an extremely important supplier or buyer will be invited to a wedding feast. But attendance at a large life-cycle celebration, at which there are hundreds of guests, is the usual limit to the social intimacy that would occur between a Chinese and an Indian who had important business connections. Few outsiders ever have a chance to enter into close personal relations or interactions with the Chinese.

It is only in the English-medium schools, to which more and more young Chinese are being sent, that interactions that are not primarily economic or bureaucratic take place with different Indian ethnic groups. But even in these settings there is a tendency for Chinese to segregate themselves or to feel that they are excluded by others. One resident of Dhapa reflected on his years in an English-medium boarding school in this way:

There would be a lot of name calling. . . even in teamwork you are more or less left to the last . . . mind you there were some pretty good [Indian] friends that I still keep in touch with now. . . It's interesting. . . I would get along better with another minority, such as Anglo-Indian, you know, or somebody they would consider different, such as an Armenian.

While other young people from Dhapa talked of their experiences in English-medium schools in a more positive way, many emphasised that even if they had

Indian friends they would not bring them home. I observed that only on rare occasions did Indian school friends visit.

### AN ENTREPRENEURIAL ETHIC

Hakka separation from other ethnic groups is facilitated by the interaction of caste, ethnic, religious, spatial and economic organisation in Kolkata. This separation is reflected not only in patterns of interaction and in Hakka attitudes towards outsiders but also in the fact that Indian society has exerted so little influence on the substantive aspects of Hakka cultural values. Most non-Hindu minorities in India have been powerfully affected by the caste system. For instance, many tribal groups from the Indian subcontinent have been incorporated into the surrounding society as castes. They have attempted to raise their status not by rejecting Hindu practices but by imitating higher-caste customs, such as abstention from eating beef. In so doing, they have indicated their acceptance of the basic premises of the caste system (Srinivas 1966: 6). Furthermore, Indian Christians and Muslims, whom one might expect to have renounced caste as a result of their ideological traditions, have caste-like divisions within their populations (Dumont 1970: 206–7, 211). Even groups, such as Parsis and Jews, who have immigrated to India from other countries, have come to replicate some elements of caste within their own group structures.<sup>11</sup>

Despite the all-encompassing nature of the caste system, however, none of the Cantonese subgroups in Kolkata has fallen into the patterns described above. They explicitly reject caste ideology in favour of a status system almost exclusively based on wealth. Thus, unlike certain Indian merchant communities (see Bayly 1983), the Kolkata Chinese have not tried to convert their wealth into higher status by entering into business activities that would be judged as more pure from the standpoint of the caste hierarchy. As pariah entrepreneurs, the Chinese have succeeded economically precisely because they have not assimilated caste ideology. One member of the community explained this to me in starkly sociological terms during the first few weeks of my fieldwork when he stated, 'We don't have castes. Your blood doesn't matter. We have classes. What matters is how much money you make.' Indeed, in this community,

<sup>11</sup> Parsis not only adopted caste notions about commensality but also assimilated Hindu notions of purity and pollution. In 1903, for instance, a Parsi judge expressed his opposition to the idea that Parsi priests could admit lower-caste Hindus into the Parsi community without first 'making them give up their unclean professions' (Fischer 1973: 94). Among some groups of Indian Jews, caste-like patterns were also present (I use the past tense here because most Indian Jews have now emigrated to Israel and other countries). The Cochin Jews of the South Indian state of Kerala, for instance, were internally divided into caste-like divisions with prohibitions on intermarriage (Mandelbaum 1939: 424) and on entering each other's temples (Strizower 1962: 112–13). And the Bene Israel, a Jewish community centred in Mumbai, had endogamous subdivisions, one of which was considered particularly polluted in the sense that both commensality and intermarriage with them was forbidden (*ibid.*: 30).

wealth is the chief measure of status and owning one's own business is viewed as the best means of acquiring wealth.

This fact was clearly illuminated for me one day, shortly after I had settled into my Chinese landlady's house, when her nephew took me to visit and introduce myself to some families in Dhapa. On the way home, he told me that under normal circumstances he would not even speak with the families we had just met. 'They might know me as my father's son,' he remarked, 'because my father taught at the Chinese school for so many years. But they're rich people, and they only talked with me today because I brought you along.'

This high priority accorded to the achievement of wealth as a measure of status is not atypical of other overseas Chinese societies. G.W. Skinner (1968) has discussed the importance of wealth in Southeast Asian overseas Chinese communities, as a criterion for leadership as well as a measure of status. As he points out, one reason that wealth is the primary component of status in these communities is that most Chinese emigrated in order to better their economic positions. Skinner says,

Unlike the Jews, the Chinese went abroad in the first place specifically to make money, and unlike the Jewish *diaspora*, that of the Chinese excluded the traditional elite of their homeland. In consequence status for overseas Chinese was almost a direct function of wealth. (ibid.: 195)

What is most critical here is that since status within the Kolkata Chinese community is based almost exclusively on wealth, there is no concept, as in caste ideology, that certain occupations or social groups can be compared in terms of relative purity and impurity. Nor is there any sense that social status can be inherited and is not dependent upon one's present social situation. Caste ideology ranks a multitude of endogamous groups in terms of their relative purity and pollution. Furthermore, one inherits one's caste; no matter how one may change one's life situation, one cannot change caste. Unlike other minority groups in India, the Kolkata Chinese have not adapted elements of caste ideology or practice.

Indeed, from the point of view of the Kolkata Hakka, any job is worthwhile if it is a profitable source of income. While tanning is viewed within caste ideology as a polluting occupation, one performed only by a particular untouchable caste, Dhapa Chinese consider tanning a good business because it is so lucrative.<sup>12</sup> Tanning is also

<sup>12</sup> The differences between the Kolkata Chinese view and the stance held by those who accept the premises of the caste system was made clear to me in an interview I conducted at the Leather Research Institute in Kolkata. One of the officers of the organisation pointed out that although a certain percentage of seats at the leather technology institute are reserved for *chamars*, few members of this caste apply, despite the fact that admission to a leather technology institute would mean a good paying job, after completion of coursework, with a large leather manufacturer. Since the basis for the stigma that the *chamars* suffer is the polluting occupation they have traditionally followed, those who are in a position to apply to an institute of higher education are unlikely to choose such a field. Chinese have not become

viewed as far superior to white-collar desk jobs, where salaries rarely amount to more than a fraction of the earnings possible in even modestly successful tanning businesses.

In fact, running one's own business (in whatever line presents the most possibilities) is viewed by the Kolkata Hakka as the ideal economic activity and, unless circumstances make it absolutely impossible, as far superior to salaried employment. Not only do they see this as providing a greater income but, in addition, they feel that one has more control over one's life. That business means family business is an assumption so deep that it is rarely discussed. But one need only look at the evidence to see that this is the case; of the 297 tanning businesses in Dhapa in 1982, only two were partnerships involving non-related individuals.

The high value placed on entrepreneurship as a way of life was one of the themes that was most frequently and explicitly articulated to me. For instance, one of my good friends and best informants, Mr Zhou, was always perplexed as to why I would want to return to the United States to teach. One day, while discussing the advantages of business as opposed to salaried employment, he asked me, 'If you wanted to start a business what would you do?' 'Well, I would borrow money and invest it,' I replied. 'There you go, it's taking you so long to do your research, but you would know exactly what to do to go into business.' As he shrugged his head, he added, 'You'll never do well when you work for others!'

Indeed, for Mr Zhou, it was difficult to understand why one would choose work other than business if given the option. In his view, salaries were fixed and limiting while business opened up the possibility of multiplying one's resources exponentially through the application of one's own efforts. One of his favourite sayings, composed of four, four-character phrases, was that there were four types of people: those who harmed themselves and others (*hai ren hai ji*); those who helped themselves but harmed others (*hai ren li ji*); those who harmed themselves to help others (*li ren hai ji*); and, those who helped themselves while helping others (*li ren li ji*).<sup>13</sup> And, as if taken straight from Adam Smith and Jeremy Bentham, Mr Zhou would then proceed to expound on the evident superiority of the fourth type—those who help themselves and thereby benefit others. This happy outcome, he would add, can most easily be achieved by engaging in one's own business.

A corollary of this preference for business was the assumption that no one with intelligence would wallow for long in the shadows of an employer. 'You can never keep a good foreman,' one factory owner told me, 'because if he is any good, he'll start a business of his own.'

involved in tanning as the result of training by institutes. These practices make evident the difference between evaluating tanning from within the caste system, as a polluting and stigmatising occupation, and from without, as a potentially lucrative one.

<sup>13</sup> The use of such four-character phrases is pervasive in everyday Chinese speech as well as in written texts. They are used for many purposes including greeting, congratulating, enjoining and describing recognizable traits or situations. Their compactness and economy of expression are usually lost in translation.

Clearly, for both Mr Zhou and other members of the Dhapa community, one goal of such business activity was to increase the material well-being of oneself and one's family. But it is not only the pursuit of a more comfortable life that makes wealth desirable in Dhapa—it is also the status that accompanies it and the ability to influence and to be respected by others.

The importance of wealth can be felt in many ways in the Hakka community. Whether an individual or family is *hen you qian* (very wealthy) or *mei you qian* (poor) is usually the first item mentioned in any discussion about them. The in-betweens excite very little comment. It is the wealthy who serve as community leaders, for example, as heads of business associations. Furthermore, community social life is focused on the ceremonies and celebrations that surround major life-cycle rituals, providing numerous opportunities for wealthy individuals to validate publicly their financial success. The wealthiest families stage more lavish and larger weddings and birthday celebrations than do other families, and the number of tables at a reception (ten people to a table) may be the talk of the town for several days before and after it is held (more than fifty tables is usually cause for extended comment). Likewise, the funerals of wealthy individuals are attended by larger numbers than are those of less prosperous individuals, even though the criteria that supposedly determine who should attend such functions are constant.

Indeed, because wealth is so critical to status, I had to quickly change my graduate-student ways of relatively frugal and simple living. When I first moved to my landlady's house, for instance, I walked to the local Chinese school where I taught English every morning. It was not far, not even a twenty-minute walk. But several Hakka acquaintances kept urging me to take a rickshaw or buy a bicycle or motorscooter. Much to their relief, I finally bought a bicycle. They had worried that because I walked, people would think I was poor and would look down upon me. Later, when my parents came to visit me in Kolkata, my landlady constantly reminded me to let people know that they were staying in the best hotel in Kolkata.

This emphasis on wealth does not exclude other characteristics from garnering status for a family or individual within the community. Nor does it mean that in all cases a wealthy individual will truly be respected. If community members feel someone gained wealth through cheating or some other unfair means, they will certainly call him a 'scoundrel' (*jian zei*) behind his back; and, a person who is not rich but who works loyally for his or her family will be granted a certain degree of respect. But no one denies the importance of achieving wealth as an ultimate goal and many other qualities are valued precisely for the part they play in enabling a family to achieve prosperity.

We must not forget that in Chinese society, both on the mainland and overseas, monetary thinking and commoditisation have a long history. As Hill Gates points out, late imperial Chinese society 'included important capitalist elements. . . . The Chinese treated the major factors of production—land, labor, and capital—as commodities, with well developed markets for each' (1987: 260). Gates states that capitalism

did not play a hegemonic role in late imperial China because 'capitalist elements were always subordinated to state control' (ibid.). Nevertheless, 'a constrained but powerful capitalist worldview was reproduced constantly by the Chinese populace as an alternative to the bureaucratic/feudal vision enshrined in the formal structure and practice of the state' (ibid.: 261). That is, capitalism, in its more accessible petty-capitalist or small-scale owner production variant, appeared as an attractive alternative for working people, since it 'offered a social model of upward mobility based directly on wealth rather than on connection with the state through the highly limited channels of degree- and office-holding' (ibid.).

Indeed, Chinese society has been monetised to increasing degrees since the eleventh century (Elvin 1973: 149). It is a society in which even rural areas have been linked with a national market in some items for almost a thousand years (ibid.: 106) and in which 'increased contact with the market made the Chinese peasantry into a class of adaptable, rational, profit-oriented petty entrepreneurs' (ibid.: 167).

Stevan Harrell argues that there has long been a 'Chinese entrepreneurial ethic, a cultural value that requires one to invest one's resources . . . in a long-term quest to improve the material well-being and security of some group to which one belongs and with which one identifies closely' (1987: 94).

Even popular Chinese religious practices reflect a worldview thoroughly influenced by monetary thinking. After the introduction of Buddhism into China, the belief that a person's soul is reincarnated in another being after death became inset in popular Chinese religious thought. But in a Chinese variant, this belief took on a curiously monetary expression; souls are not just reincarnated, they need funds to do so. The urban Taiwanese, whom Hill Gates studied, for instance, explained to her that souls en route to reincarnation borrow large sums from celestial treasuries. This money is

used to purchase a body for reincarnation, the rest defrays the cost of the individual's particular lot in life, a matter determined prior to birth. Some[,] indebted for large sums, will receive wealth, high rank, and other blessings in life while those who give less must live with correspondingly straitened means. (Gates 1987: 268)

As a result, individuals are constantly attempting to pay off these debts throughout their lives. Burning paper money (paper representations of cash, not actual currency) as offering to the gods is one way of paying off this debt and even after one dies, one's relatives burn large amounts of paper money, for, as Gates explains, one needs to 'pay off the account. . . if the spirit is to enter unencumbered into a new and presumably more fortunate incarnation' (ibid.). Thus, 'we see the human body, the length of its life, and the quality of that life equated to specific sums of money—as extreme an example of the penetration of a money economy into human existence as metaphor can express' (ibid.: 270).

Such religious practices are also quite common in the Kolkata Chinese community where monetary symbolism is a pervasive part of ritual life. Indeed, among the Kolkata

Chinese, the entire process of reincarnation is conceptualised in rather concrete terms in which large amounts of money and material goods are necessary for a fortuitous journey to reincarnation. In order to ease the heavenly travels of the recently deceased, paper replicas of the expensive accoutrements of modern living appear prominently among objects burnt as offerings (on one occasion that I witnessed this included a life-size three-dimensional paper Fiat car). The need for cash is emphasised as an essential element in almost all aspects of the afterlife.

'Suppose you live in India now, but after you die you come back as an African,' my first landlady explained to me one day. 'How will you get to Africa? By boat? By car? The best way is by airplane, but for that you'll need money, because the ticket is so expensive!'

Thus, in the case of the Kolkata Hakka we have a situation in which a high priority is placed on entrepreneurial thinking for reasons implicit in both their ethnic role in India and in a cultural ethos carried with them from their country of origin and perpetuated in their overseas environment.

This entrepreneurial ethic contrasts markedly with the values evident in some of the other Hakka communities described in Nicole Constable's volume on Hakka identity (1996). For instance, in the Malay Hakka community described by Sharon Carstens, people described themselves as having 'no head for business', and the Hakka in Malaysia were weak economically relative to other Chinese groups. Similarly, Elizabeth Johnson cited Blake's description of the Hakka's 'legacy of poverty' and comes to similar conclusions about the Hakka in Hong Kong (1996).

Both Johnson and Carstens also suggest that the Hakka among whom they did fieldwork held an egalitarian ethic and that this may be connected to their poverty relative to other Chinese groups in the area. While Carstens suggests that Hakka experiences of poverty relative to other groups on the Chinese mainland may have influenced their adaptation to their overseas environment, my data on the Kolkata Hakka indicates that any notion of shared Hakka orientations embedded in deep-seated historical memory must be balanced by an awareness of the impact of the local context in which the particular Hakka community resides.

#### HAKKA IDENTITY AND WOMEN'S ROLES

Interestingly, the entrepreneurial ethic of the Kolkata Hakka has also influenced another feature of Hakka social organisation that has been addressed by several of the other articles in this volume—the sexual division of labour. Carstens, Constable and Johnson, all note the prominent economic role played by Hakka women in their communities. This role, they state, is frequently mentioned as a distinctive feature of

Hakka culture by Hakka themselves, who often use it to contrast themselves with other local Chinese communities. In the Kolkata Hakka community, women's economic roles in the form of their active participation in the work of running family enterprises are notable. And, as in the other cases, this is frequently commented upon by the Kolkata Hakka themselves, contributing to their own sense of a distinct identity.

However, unlike women's economic roles in the other Hakka communities discussed in Constable's volume on Hakka identity (1996), those of the Kolkata Hakka vary with the family's economic status. Women in families that own larger firms are much less likely to participate directly in the daily operation of their family businesses than are those in families with smaller firms. Furthermore, their access to property and income is not dependent on the degree to which they participate in family enterprise. For instance, in some families, women control the income generated by the sale of tanning waste products, but there is no correlation between this and their participation in the family business.

A woman who works hard in her family enterprise will enjoy the esteem and respect of her community and family. If her family's business is large and successful, she also has status as a member of a wealthy family and she has access to certain resources within the business.<sup>14</sup>

Thus, the extensive role played by Hakka women in income-producing activities is also influenced by context. In this case, business participation decreases with financial success, suggesting that both Hakka identity and economic resources influence women's roles.

#### CONCLUSION: WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE HAKKA?

Most of the material I have presented in this article can be understood in terms of a contextual, interactionist approach to ethnicity. For instance, language differences, one of the most irreducible mechanisms of maintaining ethnic distinctions, are reinforced by Kolkata's ethnically variegated economy and society, one in which there is only the organisation of difference and never a dominant group to which others can assimilate either linguistically or culturally. The fact that Cantonese and Hakka occupy separate occupational niches in Kolkata, for instance, certainly helps to maintain their differences. Likewise, the political situation and dominant religious ideology have deeply influenced Indians' ideas about their overseas Chinese population, and in turn, these ideas have indelibly affected Hakka attitudes toward outsiders.

<sup>14</sup> For a more detailed discussion of the sexual division of labour among the Kolkata Hakka, see Basu (1991).

A number of scholars who have written about ethnicity, however, have criticised this context-oriented approach, stating that it ultimately reduces ethnic groups to mere interest groups and that it underestimates the effective power of ethnic-group identity (see Glazer and Moynihan 1975: 19). These scholars point out that 'primordial' identifications based upon shared physical and cultural traits as well as upon shared descent, often bind members of an ethnic group together (e.g., Isaacs 1975).

Recently, however, the dichotomy between these approaches has itself been questioned. G. Carter Bentley utilises Pierre Bourdieu's notion of 'habitus' to explain the affective power of ethnic attachments. Habitus, he explains, is comprised of conscious and unconscious inclinations and outlooks inculcated and internalised from the earliest years of a person's life, and ethnic identity is integral to these. Bentley shows that it is precisely because of their power, because they are part and parcel of one's most strongly internalised behaviours, outlooks and obligations, that ethnic bonds are so profound a force in the reproduction of social formations (1987: 42).

Because ethnic identity is so fundamental in the formation of people's conscious and unconscious understandings of the world, Bentley asserts, individuals may experience 'crises of ethnic identity' when they undergo changed social circumstances (ibid.: 43). In such cases they may respond with new formulations of ethnic identity or they may reinvigorate existing notions (ibid.: 43). For instance, in making sense of their situation, the Kolkata Hakka often draw upon the label that was originally applied to them by the Cantonese in Guangdong—that of 'guest people'.

'You know, we are the guest people, and we keep moving from place to place. We even did that in China,' one friend in Kolkata told me. It was a refrain I heard frequently among residents of the tanning community.

But this term has continued potency for them not because of some primordial identification with past experiences, but because it describes their present situation in which they are clearly an ethnic minority and still on the move. Indeed, beginning in the late 1970s, many Hakka began to emigrate from Kolkata to Europe, Australia and particularly to Toronto. Emigrants point to a fear that new tensions between India and China will again threaten their security in India, and to a desire to diversify the economic activities of family members as reasons for their decision to leave India.

As one Hakka friend who had migrated from Kolkata to Toronto told me,

We look at what happened to the Sikhs [referring to Indira Gandhi's assassination in 1984 by a Sikh and the subsequent attacks upon and killing of Sikhs by angry mobs] and we think we are just as noticeable. If China goes to war with India again, it could happen to us.

In Toronto, the Kolkata Hakka once again find distinctions between both Chinese and non-Chinese others to be socially significant. Toronto's urban geography, with its huge Chinatown and numerous Chinese-run businesses scattered throughout the

city, serves as a daily reminder to the immigrants of their own aspirations to succeed in business and of their present inability to do so.

For although the Kolkata Hakka are successful entrepreneurs in India, their Indian assets do not amount to much when converted to Canadian currency. Most end up working in factories, having—at least for the short term—postponed their entrepreneurial aspirations until they can acquire more capital.

Thus, in addition to comparing themselves with the multitude of non-Chinese groups in Toronto, Hakka from Kolkata, frequently and sometimes resentfully, contrast their situation with that of other Chinese immigrants. Wealthy immigrants from Hong Kong, in particular, are frequently the target of their comments.

But how will the Kolkata Hakka identify themselves and be identified as the length of their residence and their numbers increase in Toronto? Will the next generation still refer to themselves as 'people of Meixian'? Or will they instead see themselves as descendants of Chinese Indians or as members of a more vague and amorphous category of Chinese Canadians? Will they speak Hakka at all? One Kolkata Hakka who had immigrated to Toronto hinted at the potentially shifting nature of Hakka identity when he said to me in the summer of 1986, 'When we talk about home, we talk about Kolkata—it's still our root. For our father it's China, and for my children, it's Brampton [an area of Toronto].'

Given the extremely different realities of employment, education and politics, one might hypothesise very dissimilar trajectories for Hakka identity in Toronto and Kolkata. The signs that this will be the case are already in place: the Kolkata Hakka immigrants in Toronto are employed in a variety of occupations rather than in a specialised ethnic niche associated with a degraded occupation; they reside in areas dispersed throughout the city, rather than in an isolated community at the periphery; and, their children, who are educated in Toronto's public schools, are beginning to use English rather than Hakka in interactions with their parents.

As Eric Wolf has stated in an analysis of labour immigration under capitalism,

Ethnicities rarely coincided with the initial self-identification of the industrial recruits, who first thought of themselves as Hanoverians or Bavarians rather than as Germans, as members of their village or parish . . . rather than as Poles, as Tonga or Yao rather than as "Nyasalanders". The more comprehensive categories emerged only as particular cohorts of workers gained access to different segments of the labor market and began to treat their access as a resource to be defended both socially and politically. Such ethnicities are therefore not "primordial" social relationships. They are historical products of labor market segmentation. (1982: 381)

The trajectory of Kolkata Hakka identity in Toronto, however, is the subject of another essay.

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