

---

*Research Paper*

# Vitality of ethnic migrants in the neighbourhoods of Indian cities

## A case study of Chinatown, Kolkata

Purbita SAMANTA, Indian Institute of Technology Kharagpur, India

Subrata CHATTOPADHYAY, Indian Institute of Technology Kharagpur, India

### Abstract

*This paper aims to analyse the vitality and wellbeing of the Chinese community in Kolkata, India. Kolkata's Chinatown has a settlement history of 250-years in the city. The rapid urbanisation in the city are posing threats to the homogenisation of the culture and identity of the Chinese community in the city. This ethnic community needs intervention to boost its local economy while ensuring diversity and inclusiveness with the native community.*

*This article explores the socio-cultural and economic components of the Chinese community and how they contribute to their survival in the city. Despite the expressive fears about the xenophobic attitude of the natives towards the ethnic minorities, our findings indicate that close interethnic relationships are not uncommon in the urban setting. The results indicate that the Chinese community has adapted socio-culturally in the city that has led to cultural intertwining with the natives of the place. The analysis also show that Chinatown of Kolkata possess the socio-cultural resilience that has helped to maintain its ethnic identity even after a pandemic outbreak. However, the economic resilience of the community is at stake due to the marginalization of the jobs performed by this community.*

### Keywords

*Chinatown, Kolkata, urban vitality, ethnic migrants*

## 1. Introduction

The Indian cities are rooted with deeply ingrained cultural values into its urban fabric. The cities have evolved gradually through the amalgamation of culture and need of its inhabitants. They also experience urbanization due to the influx of huge population in search of better livelihood and lifestyles. The decision of migrants to settle are influenced by their ethnic identification and the cultural characteristics of the city (Zhang, Drujven and Strijker, 2017). The settlement of these migrant population follows a distinct pattern that leads to cultural concentration (Saha, 2022). Both internal and external migration hugely contributes to the diasporic attribute in Indian cities. Over the years, multiple foreign ethnic communities like the Jews, Armenians, Parsis, Chinese, Tibetan and Burmese have settled in India. The communities have settled down in different parts of the country and exhibited distinct ethnocultural features. Some of the communities have assimilated many of the local traditions through cultural diffusion. The ethnic communities are shaped by their own cultural and traditional values which have implication on the use of the urban spaces and on the native population (Raman and Dempsey, 2012). The urban spaces are appropriated by the residents into ways that are insurgent to the original design.

Therefore, better integration of ethnic migrants in cities is necessary for sustainable urban growth, based on cultural variety, social cohesion, and human rights.

The various distinct communities produce notable miniature representations of their cultural practises that ensures vitality of the megacities (Saha, 2022). The idea of urban vitality is associated with dense urban areas (Ye, Li and Liu, 2018). The communities that are resilient to external challenges, innovative and adaptive in nature, are recognized as “vital communities” (Dale, Ling and Newman, 2010). Resilient communities are vital when facing adversity and absorbing different types of shocks (such as pandemics, economic crises, natural disasters, social, cultural, and digital challenges, and more) and recovering. Vitality also ensures adaptability and a capacity to transform as a mechanism to combat the barriers and shocks. Therefore, the aim of this paper is to analyse the extent of vitalism of ethnic communities in a megacity. The paper focuses on the adaptability nature of the community from the socio-cultural and economic perspective. For this purpose, the old Chinatown of Kolkata in India has been taken as a case study to understand the vitality of the community in the city. The Chinese community traces a long history in the city and has shown multiple layers of its survivability.

## 2. Vitality of ethnic migrants

Urban vitality is used as an essential tool to identify the relationship between urban space and society. It is a “performance” aspect of urban design. It is thought to be the energy of urban growth (Landry and Bianchini, 1995) representing the degree of human activity in different parts of the city at different times (Li and Liu, 2016), ensuring the vitality of urban space and promoting the survival and development of urban functions (He *et al.*, 2018). The synergy between public activities and the built environment is the essence of urban vitality (Dong, Peng and Guo, 2021).

Jacobs (1961) defined urban vitality as a dense concentration of people created by well-organized urban spaces that promote social engagement. Six conditions were mentioned by Jane Jacobs as indicators of urban vitality in her seminal essay *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*: sufficient mix of land uses, small blocks, retaining old buildings, dense concentration of people and high degree of accessibility. Jane Jacobs argued that the diversity of city life is made up of interconnected human activity and life places, and the vitality is the performance of that diversity (Jacobs, 1961). Kevin Lynch believed that vitality is the most important criterion for assessing the quality of urban space, which is defined as a settlement (the dimension of urban morphology) that facilitates essential functions (the dimension of urban function), as well as human biological requirements and capabilities (the dimension of urban society), as well as how to ensure the species' survival (Lynch, 1984). Urban vitality, according to Lynch (1984), is an urban system's ability to sustain, achieve growth, and development as a result of an appealing urban design. To summarise, the people who engage in varied activities in an urban space are at the heart of spatial vitality, while the physical environment of the space enables individuals with a place to perform and has an impact on their activities (Zeng *et al.*, 2018). Raman and Dempsey (2012) explained that it is crucial to look at the social, cultural, and historical contexts in which a spatial system emerges, as well as the dynamics of such systems as they develop, in order to comprehend the relationship between society and its physical form. Thus, the ethnic migrants plays a crucial role in the vitality of an urban area. (Zhang, Drujiven and Strijker, 2017) used the term "multi-ethnic migration" to describe the migrants coming from a variety of ethnic backgrounds. Migration to and resettlement in cities has historically been a way for individuals to overcome poverty and seek better opportunities, particularly for minorities who are more prone to escape economically disadvantaged areas. Furthermore, they face significant challenges during the settlement process, since migrants must not only overcome rural-urban divisions, but also deal with the challenges given by ethnic diversity, such as

cultural adaptations. In addition to age, gender, and ethnicity, the influx of people from varied origins has an impact on the organisation of metropolitan communities.

According to research by (Tacoli and Chant, 2014) on migrant settlement patterns, some migrant groups are more inclined to settle in areas of cities where conditions are deemed to be better than in their home country. As a result, they prefer to live in areas of the city where other people of their ethnicity also dwell or may favour them. Therefore, regions of cities are dominated by migrants, who are often referred to as "minorities" (Asibey, Poku-Boansi and Adutwum, 2021). (Philip, 2007) investigated that the migrants' ethnic identities can be prominent in one cultural environment but less so in another. Ethnic enclaves are places of cultural identity, community, and economic activity for the ethnic groups (Bakri *et al.*, 2014). A few instances of ethnic enclaves that have become a part of the cityscape are Penang's Little India, New York's Chinatown, Little Tokyo, Japanese and Korean enclaves in California, Cubans in Miami, Jewish enclaves in Manhattan, and Little Saigon. Poverty, economic catastrophe, political instability, and a lack of employment opportunities are among the elements that prompted the migration movement (*Ethnic Enclaves - Sociology - Oxford Bibliographies*, 2021). These people moved for a myriad of purposes, and ethnic enclaves are seen as a source of support in their new home.

### 3. Methodology

The paper aims to analyse the vitality and wellbeing of the Chinese community in Kolkata, India. To understand the vitality aspects of the study area, a perception survey of the old Chinatown neighbourhood was conducted. The survey was conducted with 138 participants who are the residents of the neighbourhood. Within this survey, we measured the assessments of the residents living in the neighbourhood regarding the cultural and economic activities of the Chinese residents using a 10 point Likert's scale.

### 4. Chinatown

Chinatown is a Chinese ethnic enclave outside of mainland China, Hong Kong, Macau, Singapore, or Taiwan, usually in an urban environment. The Chinatowns are a result of the Chinese migration from the mainland of China due to several internal and external events (Roy, 2018). Chinatowns can be found all over the world, in Europe, North America, South America, Asia, Africa, and Australasia. Most Chinatowns arose through mass migration to areas where there were no or few Chinese population. Chinese communities have historically formed in response to social exclusion (Shircliff, 2020).

### 5. Study area: Chinatown in Kolkata

Since the colonial era, the colonial capital and port city Kolkata has attracted migrants from nearby states (Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Odisha), as well as from different countries (Nepal, China, Bangladesh), seeking a better quality of life and economic prospects. Kolkata has a history on the migratory waves of Chinese in the city. The Chinese in Kolkata are the ethnic immigrants who had migrated in majorly three phases (Liang, 2007). The first stream of migration happened in the nineteenth century with the influx of skilled labours and traders. The next wave of migration occurred due to the political unrest in China during 1920s and 1930s. The third flock of immigrants from China arrived in Kolkata after World War II, and permanent Chinese communities were established.

The first Chinese settlement was established in India at Achipur, Budge Budge of the South 24 Parganas in West Bengal in 1778. Cantonese businessman Tong Atchew first came to Bengal with the intention of doing business. The first group of Chinese immigrants to India were able to support themselves because

of their cordial relations with the British. The first sugarcane mill and the first Chinese Temple was built at Achipur. After the death of the first Chinese immigrant Atchew, the property owned by him was deceased by the British. The successors of Atchew moved to the Ezra Street of Kolkata (city core) and started spreading their community that came to be known as Cheenapara or the old Chinatown (Tiretti Bazar). Nearly two-thirds of the early Chinese immigrants resided near Lower Chitpur Road, Bowbazar Street, Bentinck Street, Elliot Road, Phears Lane and Chatawallah Gulli of Kolkata that formed the Cheenapara (Old Chinatown). Later on, a part of the Chinese living in the Cheenapara moved from the city core to the city peripherals in Tangra, Topsia and Tiljala.

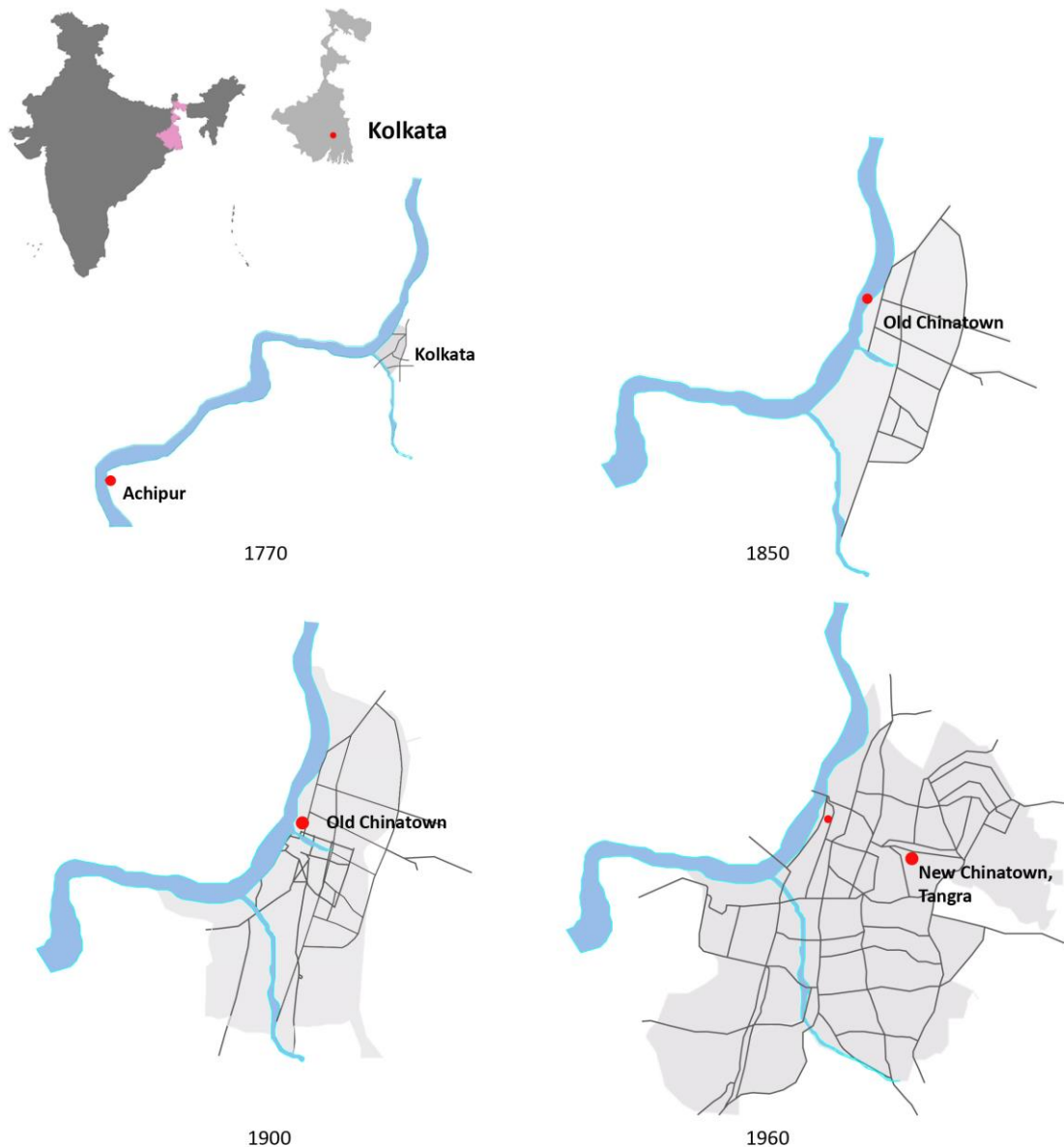


Figure 1: Evolution of settlement of Chinese in Kolkata, India. Source: Author

### 5.1. Spatial characteristics of Chinese community

The first spatial segregation of the Chinese started after the 1962 Indo-Sino war (Pulugurtha, 2012). The Chinese from Kolkata were translocated to Rajasthan’s Deoli concentration camp that led to the mass emigration to North America, Europe and Australia. The displacement of the Chinese community began



to occur after 1960 as a result of a combination of factors that aided Kolkata's rapid urbanisation (Saha, 2022). The old Chinatown is presently a part of the larger Muslim dominating neighbourhood. At present, approximately 15 Chinese families live in the Old Chinatown. The Cantonese Chinese predominates the other Chinese groups in this area. The Hakka Chinese have left to reside in the city periphery and a majority have left the city. The racial segregation based on caste and ethnicity led to the migration of the Chinese from the city core to the peripheral areas like the Tangra, Topsia and Tiljala (the 'new' Chinatown on the eastern fringes of Kolkata).

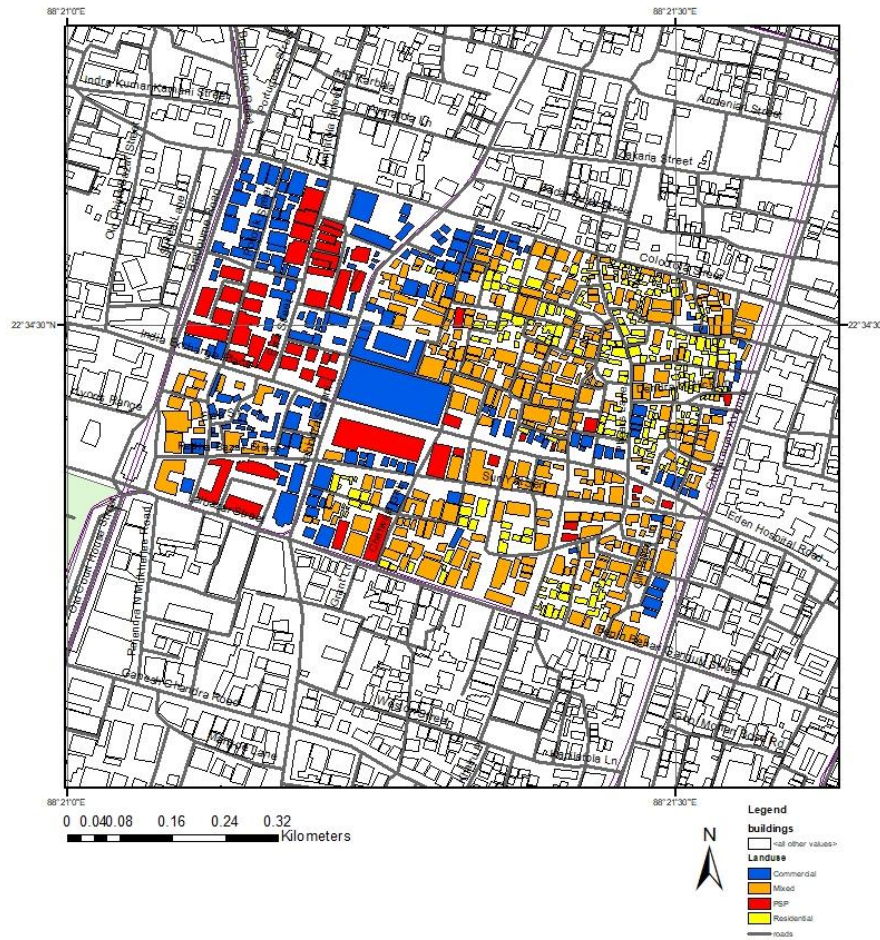


Figure 2. Building use map of old Chinatown. Source: Author

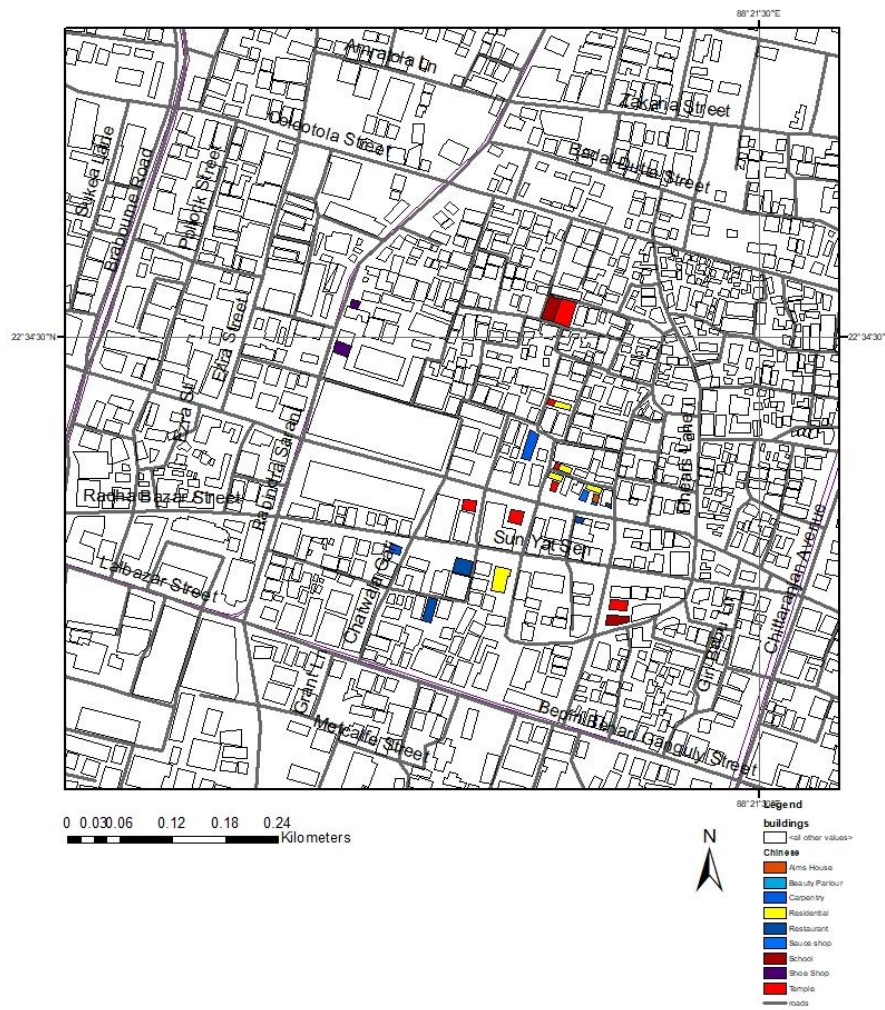


Figure 3. Chinese buildings in old Chinatown. Source: Author

The Chinese residential units are two to three storied. The houses originally belonged to the Bengali owners which were later bought by the Chinese. Thus, the built forms exhibit a unique mix of North Calcuttan architectural feature like the louvered windows, balconies with cast iron balustrades along with Chinese motifs inscribed later. Presently, the houses are dispersed in various parts of the old Chinatown due to the lesser Chinese population. The area has been exposed to rapid growth and multi-storied commercial buildings have engulfed the low rises.



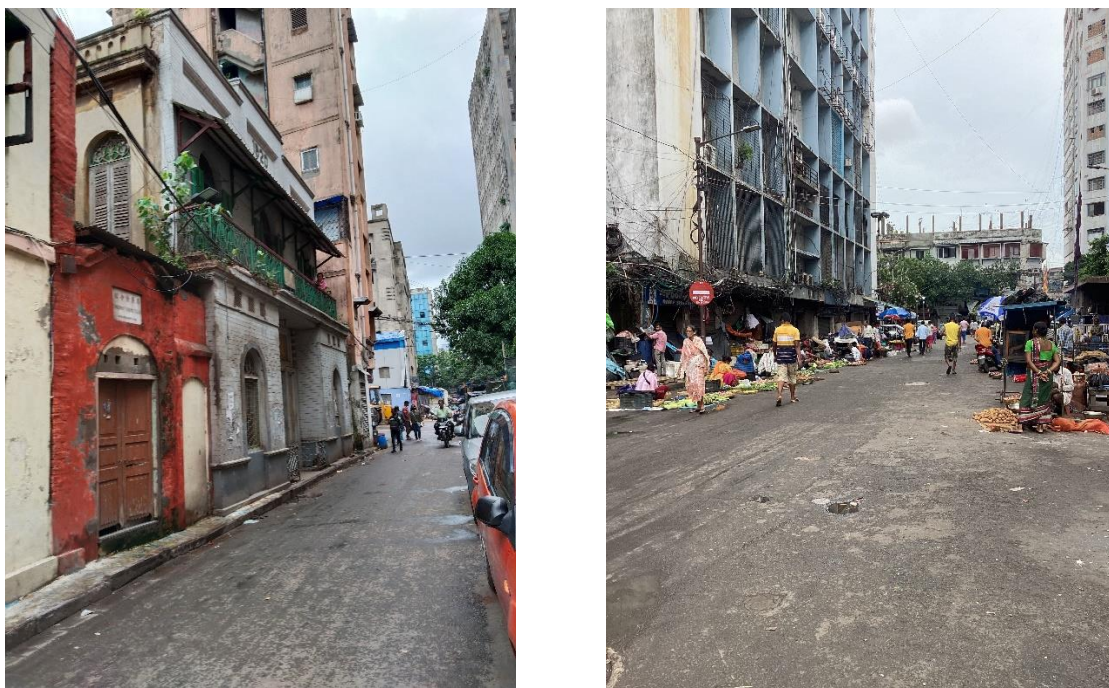


Figure 4. Multi-storied commercial buildings engulfing the low-rise Chinese built spaces. Source: Author

## 5.2. Socio-cultural vitality of Chinatown in Kolkata

Cities are characterized by a high density of human interaction, and culture is a phenomenon that frequently has very local characteristics (Montalto *et al.*, 2019). Cantonese, Hakka, Sanghai, and Hubei are the four subethnic Chinese communities that lived in Kolkata (Bose, 2013). These Chinese-concentrated regions were close to the Muslim and Anglo-Indian neighbourhoods. This might have been caused by the Chinese people's eating habits and their line of work (Liang, 2007). The close knitted nature of the community has enabled them to preserve their ethnic identity and are connected to their people through the celebration of festivals and social clubs. These social clubs are a part of the existing Chinese temples in the Cheenapara. There are seven prominent Chinese temples namely Gee Hing Church, Sea Ip Church, Toong On Church, Sea Voi Yune Leong Futh Church, Choonghee Dhong Thien Haue Church, Nam Soon Church and Ling Liang Church. The festivals celebrated by the community includes the Chinese New Year or Spring Festival along with other smaller celebrations. The New Year brings back the Chinese from different countries (e.g., Canada, Australia). The absence of open spaces in the area have led to the celebration of festivals on the street. In spite of the strong cohesive nature of the Chinese community, the multi-level cultural diversification is evident from their daily routine. They can speak in both Hindi and Bengali. However, the younger generation although can speak in Chinese, most of them cannot read or write their native language.

The perception survey reveals that the Chinese believes that one of the primary reasons for their quick adaptation in the city is the similarity in staple food (rice and fish) and climate from their native place. The Chinese cultural expressions are also evident in the architectural features of the residential units and the temples. The lintels and doorposts are another example of the preservation of the Chinese culture.

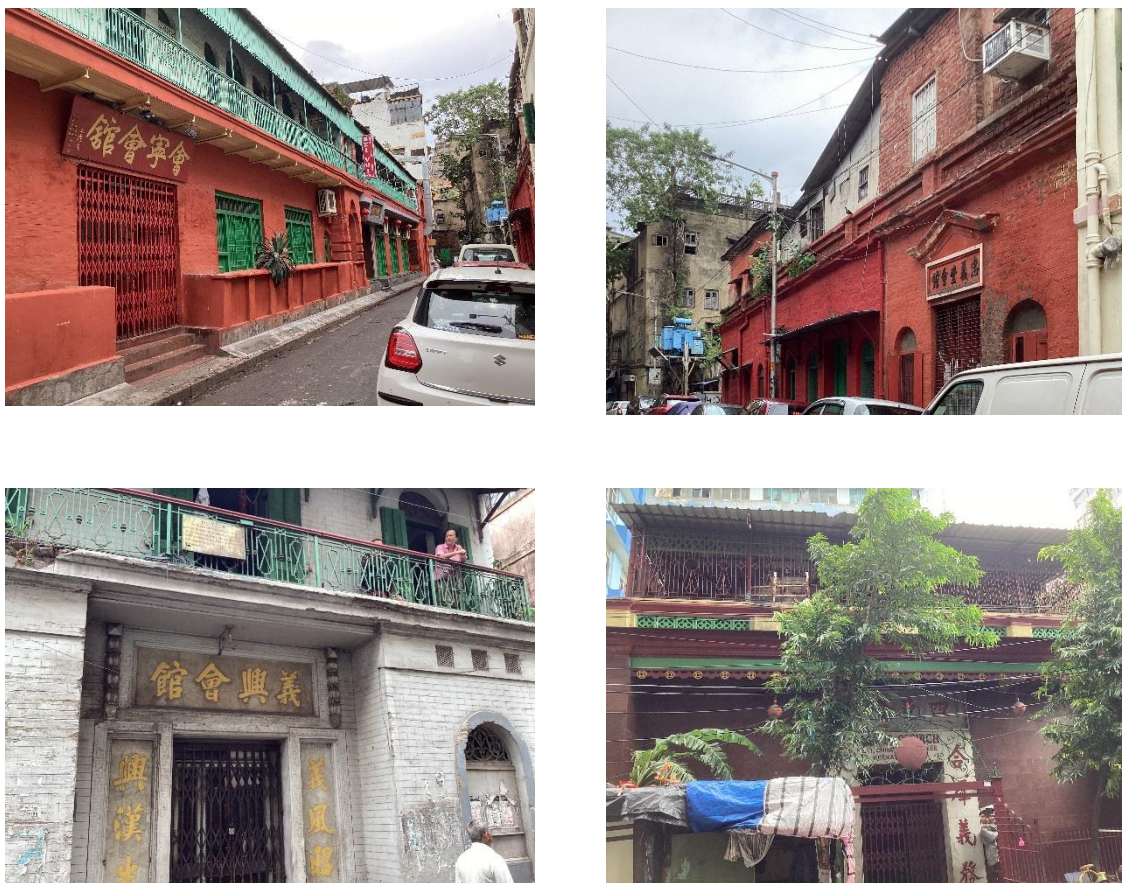


Figure 5. Architectural features representing the Chinese culture. Source: Author

The community have strongly retained their ethnic identity. However, with the dilution in the Chinese population and the increase in other minorities in the area, the remaining Chinese members are worried about the preservation of their culture in the city. Although a larger part of their community has shifted to the city fringes, they are anxious about the extinction of the oldest Chinatown in the country.

Table 1: Key findings on socio-cultural vitality of Chinese community. Source: Perception survey

Socio-cultural indicator	vitality	Average points	Key findings
Notional boundary of Chinese enclave	4.25		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Dispersed Chinese houses</li> <li>Migration from the city core</li> </ul>
Ethnic identity	8.72		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Cohesive community</li> <li>Prominence of social clubs exclusively for Chinese</li> <li>Speaks in Chinese among themselves</li> </ul>
Prominence of festivals	8.20		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Celebration of Chinese New Year with the other community</li> <li>Celebration of native festivals by the Chinese</li> </ul>
Quick adaptation	6.25		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Fluency in languages of the host population (Bengali and Hindi)</li> </ul>
Social segregation	3.20		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Absence of social segregation</li> <li>Better assimilation with other minorities like Muslim</li> </ul>



and Anglo-Indians

5.3. Economic vitality of Chinatown in Kolkata

Somashekhar (2019) explained ethnic economies as the business clusters in which a common ethnic identity makes it easier to raise start-up financing, find work, find suppliers, and gain trade skills. The ethnic economies are vital towards the sustainability of the ethnic migrants since it helps in building a close network within the city. The Chinese, after settling in Kolkata, had developed their own economic clusters which contributed to their sustenance in the city. The Chinese in Kolkata comprising of the Cantonese, Hubeinese, and Hakka, all speak their native languages and are economically distinct from one another (Oxford, 2007). The small Hubeinese community's core occupation is dentistry, but the Cantonese are largely renowned as carpenters. In addition to tanning, the Hakka also own and run restaurants, shoe stores, and hair salons. Despite being low-paying jobs frequently performed by members of the "untouchable caste," shoemaking and leather production provided the Chinese with economic opportunities. Due to the racial segregation, the Hakka Chinese created an ethnic niche outside the old Chinatown. The Cantonese, Hubeinese and Shanghai Chinese who were left back in the old Chinatown, started to diminish.

Presently, the Chatawallah Gulli of the Cheenapara still hosts the morning breakfast that consists of different authentic Chinese food. Post Covid-19, the morning breakfast is available only on Sunday morning, contributing to the declination of the economic sustainability of the people involved. The presence of Chinese led restaurants like Tung Nam, Pou Hing, Hap Hing and sauce shops like Sing Cheung and Pou Chong Bros are the only remains of the Chinese entrepreneurship in the Cheenapara. The Chen Carpentry and shoe shops like the Ahon Bros and Wann Tong Shoes are the few remaining Chinese commercial centres in the area.



Figure 6. Commercial activities in old Chinatown. Source: Author

Table 2: Key findings on economic vitality of Chinese community. Source: Perception survey

Economic indicator	vitality	Average points	Key findings
Participation in high paying job	high	2.75	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Mostly younger generation is involved in high paying jobs</li> </ul>
Participation in low paying job	low	1.22	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Lesser involvement in salaried jobs</li> </ul>
Participation in entrepreneurial activity	in	8.40	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Involvement in own business is high</li> <li>Skill-based work is passed on through generations</li> </ul>

- Younger generation has lesser skills and less interested in entrepreneurial activity

## 6. Discussion and conclusion

The spatial, cultural and economic vitality dimensions of the old Chinatown are intertwined with each other. The Chinese in the Old Chinatown, in spite of a thriving economy with shoe making shops and restaurants in the mid-1900s, had to migrate to the city periphery owing to their occupational niche that was considered 'untouchable'. Gradually, the carpentry shops also declined along with receding Chinese restaurants as well. This shows the vulnerability of the Chinese-owned economy in the city. The major reasons identified are the lack of opportunity in the business that was slowly taken over by multinational companies, preference of machine-made product over hand crafted products and the rapid change in urban fabric. The other factors also include the lack of skill by the younger generation and their lack of interest to continue the legacy of occupation that was marginalized by the ethnic majorities.

The Chinese exhibited their socio-cultural sustenance by maintaining the integrity of their cultural practices. The strong cohesive nature of their community has resulted in their cultural vitality. The social clubs are taking steps to keep their legacy of Dragon festival and abacus reading alive through the conduction of workshops. However, lack of public places and social infrastructure is leading to cultural dissolution of the community. This is evident from the younger generation due to their lesser knowledge about the Chinese language and culture.

As the number of Chinese in Calcutta slowly declines, the old Chinatown has just come to a standstill. The territorial homogeneity of the Chinatown is presently non-existent. The role of the state government in this context is very crucial. The recognition and promotion of the oldest Chinatown of India is the need of the hour. Identification of the Cheenapara as the city's cultural heritage shall increase the economic functionality of the community.

## 7. References

Asibey, M. O., Poku-Boansi, M. and Adutwum, I. O. (2021) 'Residential segregation of ethnic minorities and sustainable city development. Case of Kumasi, Ghana', *Cities*, 116(May), p. 103297. doi: 10.1016/j.cities.2021.103297.

Bakri, A. F. *et al.* (2014) 'The physical and cultural attributes of ethnic enclave: A basis for conservation', *MATEC Web of Conferences*, 15, pp. 1–8. doi: 10.1051/mateconf/20141501006.

Bose, A. (2013) 'Kolkata's Early Chinese Community And Their Economic Contributions', *South Asia Research*, 33(2), pp. 163–176. doi: 10.1177/0262728013487634.

Dale, A., Ling, C. and Newman, L. (2010) 'Community vitality: The role of community-level resilience adaptation and innovation in sustainable development', *Sustainability*, 2(1), pp. 215–231. doi: 10.3390/su2010215.

Dong, Y., Peng, F. and Guo, T. (2021) 'Quantitative assessment method on urban vitality of metro-led underground space based on multi-source data: A case study of Shanghai Inner Ring area', *Tunnelling and Underground Space Technology incorporating Trenchless Technology Research*, 116(June 2020), p. 104108. doi: 10.1016/j.tust.2021.104108.

*Ethnic Enclaves - Sociology - Oxford Bibliographies* (2021). Available at: <https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780199756384/obo-9780199756384-0257.xml> (Accessed: 28 March 2022).

He, Q. *et al.* (2018) 'The impact of urban growth patterns on urban vitality in newly built-up areas based on an association rules analysis using geographical "big data"', *Land Use Policy*, 78(May), pp. 726–738. doi: 10.1016/j.landusepol.2018.07.020.

Jacobs, J. (1961) *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*.

Landry, C. and Bianchini, F. (1995) 'The Creative City (London: Demos/Comedia)', *Reshaping Planning with Culture.*, p. 204. Available at: <https://www.scopus.com/inward/record.uri?eid=2-s2.0-85108098595&partnerID=40&md5=3d81ae71fd61a0025ca1042cbf9eaae4>.

Liang, J. (2007) 'Migration Patterns and Occupational Specialisations of Kolkata Chinese: An Insider's History', *SAGE journals*, China Repo.

Lynch, K. (1984) *Good City Form*. MIT Press (Architecture, urban studies). Available at: <https://books.google.co.in/books?id=fIJdgBoKQHQC>.

Montalto, V. et al. (2019) 'Culture counts: An empirical approach to measure the cultural and creative vitality of European cities', *Cities*, 89, pp. 167–185. doi: 10.1016/j.cities.2019.01.014.

Oxford, E. (2007) 'Still guest people: The reproduction of Hakka Identity in Kolkata, India', *China Report*, 43(4), pp. 411–435. doi: 10.1177/000944550704300403.

Philip, C. (2007) *Asian American identities: Racial and ethnic identity issues in the twenty-first century*. Cambria Press.

Pulugurtha, N. (2012) 'Translocating identity in Sino-Indian diasporic literature: Kwai-Yun Li's The Last Dragon Dance', *Asiatic*, 6(1), pp. 63–72.

Raman, S. and Dempsey, N. (2012) 'Cultural Diversity and Spatial Structure in the Indian Urban Context', *Journal of Urban Design*, 17(3), pp. 425–447. doi: 10.1080/13574809.2012.683399.

Roy, K. (2018) 'Indian Journal of Spatial Science A Geographical Appraisal of the Ethnic Enclave Economy of the Hakka Tanners of Kolkata, West Bengal', (2), pp. 14–19.

Saha, A. (2022) 'Sustaining multicultural places from gentrified homogenisation of cities', *Cities*, 120(July 2021), p. 103433. doi: 10.1016/j.cities.2021.103433.

Shircliff, J. E. (2020) 'Is Chinatown a place or space? A case study of Chinatown Singapore', *Geoforum*, 117(November), pp. 225–233. doi: 10.1016/j.geoforum.2020.10.006.

Somashekhar, M. (2019) 'Ethnic economies in the age of retail chains: comparing the presence of chain-affiliated and independently owned ethnic restaurants in ethnic neighbourhoods', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 45(13), pp. 2407–2429. doi: 10.1080/1369183X.2018.1458606.

Tacoli, C. and Chant, S. (2014) 'Migration, urbanization and changing gender relations in the south', in *The Routledge handbook on cities of the global South*. Routledge, pp. 608–618.

Ye, Y., Li, D. and Liu, X. (2018) 'How block density and typology affect urban vitality: an exploratory analysis in Shenzhen, China', *Urban Geography*, 39(4), pp. 631–652. doi: 10.1080/02723638.2017.1381536.

Zeng, C. et al. (2018) 'Spatially explicit assessment on urban vitality: Case studies in Chicago and Wuhan', *Sustainable Cities and Society*, 40(April), pp. 296–306. doi: 10.1016/j.scs.2018.04.021.

Zhang, B., Drujiven, P. and Strijker, D. (2017) 'Does ethnic identity influence migrants' settlement intentions? Evidence from three cities in Gansu Province, Northwest China', *Habitat International*, 69, pp. 94–103. doi: 10.1016/j.habitatint.2017.09.003.

## 8. Funding acknowledgement

This research was supported by the Prime Minister's Research Fellows (PMRF) Scheme, Ministry of Education, Government of India and Indian Institute of Technology Kharagpur.