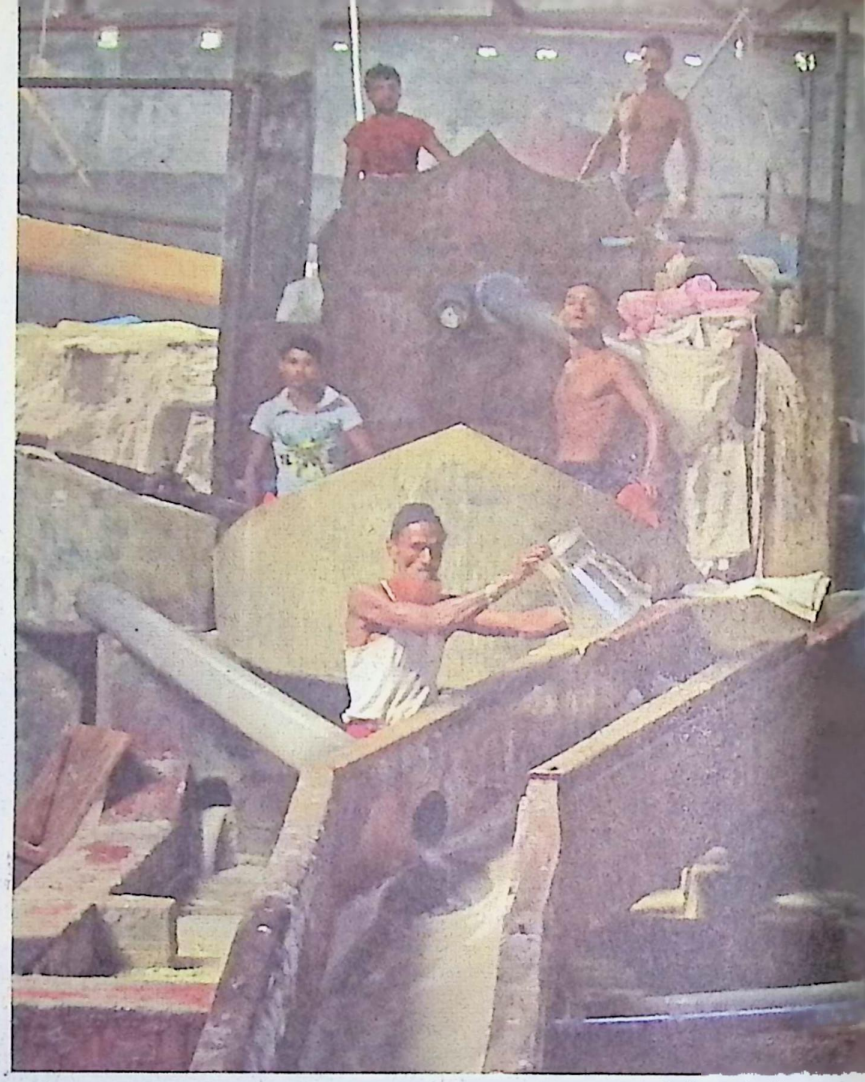
"The industry is very competitive in transport costs," says Salauddin Ahmed Salak, president of the Jhalakathi Chamber of Commerce, "People used to come here to buy salt but now they don't need to because of transport."

Jhalakathi still has upwards of ten salt mills and several small-scale flour mills – Salak recently purchased Gazi Salt, the largest mill. But he's kept busy actively seeking out consumers for his product.

"There are salt mills in Chittagong, Narayanganj and Chandpur," he says, "Jhalakathi is now third or fourth largest producer. We used to supply North Bengal and the Khulna belt but now there is an ultra-modern mill in Khulna. They've installed an electric machine imported from India and can whiten the salt using gas, which consumers like. It's not possible here at present."

Another problem is that salt is purchased in bulk, transported by road to Faridpur and on-sold in counterfeit packets that take benefit from established brand names.



Salt production

Despite Salak's prediction that the days of Jhalakathi's famed salt being used for household cooking will discontinue, he is optimistic. "The future is in industrial salt," he says, "used in medicines and leather processing." It doesn't need the fine, white texture of its domestic cousin.

Besides, for all the value of the Gabkhan Bridge, Jhalakathi still takes the advantage of river-and-sea. "It costs 60 poisa per kilogram to transport flour from Chittagong by boat," Salak says by way of example, "By road the cost is 1.5 taka."

Meanwhile across the Sugandha in Nalchity Bazar the locals are quick to gather around her grave, eager to share knowledge of the Chinese woman, N. She's clearly been the subject of many hours of *adda* – there can be few places in the world where local heritage is the source of such curiosity, as it is in Bangladesh.

One onlooker volunteers, "I'm 86 and the grave was here before I was born." Others tell of an unsuccessful grave robbery in 1983 – the would-be thieves were caught by a night guard. Across the road is the field known as *China Maath*, China Field, and any enquiry will likely meet the response that it is *her* land – still village-recognised a century on.

But where did she come from? "There were some Chinese who lived in South Bengal, centred in Chittagong, since the Ming Dynasty 600 years ago," says Li Haiwen, Lecturer of Chinese Language & Culture at Dhaka University's Institute of Modern Languages. Alternatively, she may have arrived from Kolkata where, by the early twentieth century there was a prosperous China Town full of Chinese grocery stores and restaurants. China had even established a consulate in Kolkata.

"It was a tradition that early overseas Chinese lived on business," says Li, "She must've been rich to buy land in a foreign country. It would've been almost impossible for a girl to marry a local rich man at the time."

The majority of Chinese emigrant families came from South China and her grave is in the South Chinese style, where the philosophies of