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THE CHINESE FILIPINOS AS MANILANS

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In the past decade, especially after the introduction of the open-door policy in China and the influx of investments from Chinese all over the world into China, there has been an increasing interest in the phenomenon of what many writers call the "overseas Chinese" or the "Chinese overseas." A number of international conferences focused on the topic has been held, especially in the last decade and voluminous academic papers have been produced out of these conferences. Likewise, a plethora of publications about the Chinese outside of Mainland China, especially about the Chinese in Southeast Asia has emerged. The government of Australia has even commissioned a study on *Chinese Business Networks in Asia*¹ one of the better researches done on the topic. The interest, albeit a much welcome one, can also have dangerous implications especially for the Chinese in Southeast Asia. There seems to be an increasing trend to lump all

¹This paper was first presented at this conference on Ethnic Chinese as Filipinos and later expanded to include data from a survey the author conducted and later presented at the conference on the Ethnic Chinese as Southeast Asians sponsored by the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS), in Singapore (April 26-27, 1996) and published in Leo Suryadinata, ed. *The Ethnic Chinese as Southeast Asians* (Singapore: ISEAS, 1997), pp. 158-202.

the ethnic Chinese together into a grand conspiracy to form a so-called “Third China” powerful enough to tip the economic balance scale against the United States and Japan. One example are titles such as Sterling Seagrave’s *Lords of the Rim: The Invisible Empire of the Overseas Chinese*.² Others use languages such as “borderless empire, Chinese diaspora” and the like. In fact, the use of China-centric terms such as “Chinese overseas” or “overseas Chinese” is often an unwitting but sometimes a deliberate throw back to the cold-war era when these Chinese are also considered “yellow perils” or “red menaces.”

Convening a conference with a theme such as “The Ethnic Chinese as Filipinos” is most timely. Serious scholars on the study of ethnic Chinese in recent years have posited the qualification that the Southeast Asian Chinese are no longer *hua qiaos* or sojourners, much less are they “overseas Chinese” or “Chinese overseas.” They are, in fact, Southeast Asians, albeit of Chinese origin. The sojourners of the past have now emerged to become Thais, Malaysians, Singaporeans, or Filipinos. They are each unique in their own ways, influenced by their own histories, cultures, and background. To theorize that through their business networks they would one day conspire to form a powerful “Third China” is to incite unwarranted, unsupported but dangerous thoughts. As for the Chinese in the Philippines, they can be Ilocanos, Tausugs, Bicolanos, Samals, Manilans, etc. without discarding the truth that they are of Chinese origins and recognizing the unifying factor that they are all Filipinos too. I am to talk about the Chinese Manilans as Filipinos.

Manila as the Center

Historically, the largest concentration of ethnic Chinese has always been in Metro Manila, or in Manila specifically. Out of the 800,000 to 850,000 ethnic Chinese all over the Philippines, more than half can be found in Metro Manila and another half of this number are concentrated in the areas bounded by Binondo and a part of the congested districts of Tondo, San Nicolas, Sta. Cruz, and Quiapo. Added to this heavy concentration of ethnic Chinese in Metro Manila is the fact that the greater number of Chinese associations—whether hometown, family or clan, alumni, arts, literary, or religious—are also concentrated in Manila. Hence, when

people talk about the ethnic Chinese in the Philippines, they would often refer actually to the Chinese Manilans. In short, the Chinese Manilans are considered to be the representatives of the entire ethnic Chinese population in the country. Moreover, the definition of ethnic Chinese, by practice, is further narrowed down to refer mostly to the traditional leaders of the Chinese community—the so-called *qiao ling* who come predominantly from the leadership ranks of traditional Chinese organizations. When referring to the Chinese community or events in the Chinese community, people often practically jump to the conclusion that these involve only the so-called *qiao ling* and their activities. Likewise, most researchers or scholars have also focused their studies mostly on the Chinese in Manila and often these studies are made to reflect the situation of the entire ethnic Chinese population in the Philippines.³

But the truth is, the Chinese Manilans, much less the group made up only of the *qiao ling*, can hardly represent the entire Chinese population in the Philippines. As we explore the one unifying identity of the ethnic Chinese as Filipinos, it behooves us to bear in mind that there exists a vast continuum of differences and uniqueness among the ethnic Chinese in different parts of the country. The papers in this conference which would dwell on the ethnic Chinese as Cebuanos, Ilonggos, Ilocanos, Pangasinenses, Zamboangueños, and others would certainly bring out the pitfalls of generalizing about the Chinese in the Philippines.

Diversity and Complexity

In fact, even among the Chinese Manilans, there also exist vast differences. Just take citizenship as an example. There are those who already obtained Filipino citizenship and can be legally considered Filipinos or Filipino citizens. However, there exists a pocket of Chinese who are still non-Filipino in citizenship. Are they included in the topic “the ethnic Chinese as Filipinos” or should they be left out? If they are left out, how then should the non-Filipino citizens who cannot even speak Chinese, who grew up only in Filipino neighborhoods, have only Filipino friends and for all intents and purposes are like any other Filipino except for the lack of citizenship, be categorized? Is it fair to consider them aliens and not as Chinese Filipinos? An example for this is the case of the scholar of a Rotary

Club in Cotabato who was sent to the United States on a one year exchange scholarship. Upon arrival back at the Manila International Airport after a year, she was detained by the Immigration and refused entry to the Philippines because she did not have a re-entry permit. The poor girl never knew that as a Chinese passport holder, she is considered an alien in the only country that she knows and she needs to apply for a re-entry permit to come back to her country. Even the Immigration agents were at a loss on what to do with her. They wanted to deport her to Taiwan but the girl doesn't know anybody there, she doesn't even speak Chinese and never had any Chinese-language education. In fact, she only learned that she is a Chinese citizen (by virtue of her father being Chinese) when she was applying for a Filipino passport and was denied one. She was detained by the Immigration for several days while the Rotary Club pulled strings to prove that she is a permanent resident in this country.

On the other hand, among those who possess Filipino citizenship, the degree of Filipinoness against their Chineseness also vary greatly. Added to this, the dimension of the new immigrants from China, Hong Kong, or Taiwan must also be considered as the theme of the Chinese as Filipinos is discussed. To what extent and what criteria can be used to consider the latter group as Chinese Filipinos? Are they part of the scope of our study on the Ethnic Chinese as Filipinos? This illustrates the fact that it is really quite difficult to use citizenship solely as a criteria to make generalizations as to who are Chinese Filipinos. This is particularly true if we factor in the corruption in our bureaucracy and the reality that there are many ways, legal and extra-legal, by which Filipino citizenship can be obtained, especially among the new immigrants.

Just the issue of citizenship alone would drive home the complexity and difficulty in doing research on the subject matter—the Chinese Manilans. It would definitely be more complex than studying the Chinese in the provinces who are fewer in number and have lesser idiosyncracies among them. We are constrained to bear in mind that the Chinese Manilans are not truly representative of all the Chinese in the Philippines; much less can they be lumped together with the ethnic Chinese in other parts of the country, especially in the provinces and in the rural areas. On the other hand, the complexity also serves to emphasize the need to explore

in depth the uniqueness, the differences and the varying levels or degrees of being Filipinos. These differences can be seen in age or generation, levels of education, cultural background, degree of language proficiency, social and economic status, personal experiences, lifestyle, attitudes and orientation, and most importantly, in their sense of identity and belonging. To many Filipinos and foreigners, the Chinese community in the Philippines appears to be a homogeneous one, instead of the complex and diversified population that it really is.

Diversities among Chinese Manilans

Let me highlight first some major points of diversity:

- Based on citizenship, as mentioned above, the main difference is among those who are Filipino citizens and those who do not have Filipino citizenship.
- Among those who do not have Filipino citizenship, some hold China's (PROC) passport, Taiwan (ROC) passport, Hong Kong passport, or British identity card. Aside from these are those who hold U.S., Canadian, Australian, or Singapore passport.
- Of the holders of PROC or ROC passports, the new comers and older immigrants, the local born and China born must be further differentiated. Of the China born, those who came in before the 50s or before the Pacific war are certainly different from those who came in later in the 70s, 80s, or 90s in terms of sense of identity and belonging. Then again, they are also different compared to the Chinese passport holders who were born in the Philippines and grew up in the Philippines. Among the Taiwan (ROC) passport holders, there are those who have dual nationalities. Included here are the overseas contract workers, who, for convenience in working in Taiwan, also applied for Taiwan citizenship despite their already holding Filipino citizenship. Recent reports showed that there is danger here of these Filipinos' ending up being stateless.
- Among those who have Filipino citizenship there are also differences. Some are natural born Filipinos (both parents or the father or mother are Filipino citizens at birth); some are naturalized citizens (including those who applied under judicial means and those who applied under the administrative decree of Marcos in 1975). Aside from these are those who obtained Filipino citizenship fraudulently but who are, however, already considered legitimate Filipinos.

- Based on educational level and cultural background, whether or not one is a Filipino citizen, those who were educated in the Philippines are naturally influenced more greatly by the Philippine environment and their sense of belonging and attachment to the Philippines will be deeper compared to those who were educated in China or outside the Philippines. In fact, studies have pointed out that these native born ethnic Chinese who are educated in Philippine schools are no different from Filipinos.⁴ In contrast, those who were educated in China, Taiwan, or Hong Kong are naturally much more sinified.
- Based on age or generational differences, except for some isolated cases or influences, generally, the younger the generation, the more Filipino one becomes. The older the generation, the greater the Chinese influence and vice-versa.
- Based on geographical location, there are differences mainly between the Metro Manila and the provincial Chinese. Those who live in Metro Manila are further differentiated between those in the so-called Chinatown area and those in the suburb. Even for the provincial Chinese, those who come from Cebu, Iloilo, Bacolod, Davao, and other bigger urban areas with larger Chinese populations are different from those who come from rural villages where there are very few or no other Chinese neighbors at all. The degree of interaction and relation with Filipinos would naturally influence their affinity with the Filipinos as well as their sense of identity as Filipinos.
- Based on social and economic status, business or profession, the differences also affect the degree of interaction and relations with Filipinos which in turn also influence their identities as Filipinos. The elites and the lower classes who have closer relations with Filipinos are generally more Filipinized compared to those who socialize or interact only with fellow Chinese.
- Based on social activities, those who are members of Chinese organizations and are active in the affairs of these associations are quite different from those who are members of Filipino civic groups and organizations and are active in the civic pursuits of these groups.
- Based on hometown origins, the Fujianese are different from the Cantonese although the cultural differences are not very distinguishable among outsiders. Some have observed that among the younger generation, the cultural divide between Filipinos and Chinese are sometimes narrower than that between Fujianese and Cantonese.

Identity and Integration

Whatever the differences or diversities are, the most important criteria for gauging the Filipinoness of the Chinese or the degree of the ethnic Chinese being a Filipino would be their sense of identity and the degree of their integration into Philippine society. This can be viewed from the standpoints of socio-cultural, economic, and political integration. I have discussed these points thoroughly in several of my past papers.⁵ My central thesis is that integration has happened among the Chinese in the Philippines, dramatically so among the younger local born generation. This is so among the Chinese Manilans but more so among the Chinese in the provinces.

The evolution of the Chinese from the itinerant traders and seafarers to become sojourners or *hua qiaos* and later to the immigrant permanent residents of the past has been a long, difficult, historical process. The dramatic changes that happened among the younger generation born in this country after the Pacific War may have happened in a shorter period historically but in terms of significance and impact, they are certainly more far-reaching and long-lasting.⁶

Socio-culturally, the Filipinized ways of the younger generation has always been their elders' bane. Much has been done to improve Chinese language education and to give impetus to cultural renewal and invigoration. The influence of the environment, however, proves to be too strong. The younger generation are at home in both cultural milieu. The ethnic barriers that separated their parents from their Filipino peers are no longer as visible as before. In fact, it has been noted that among the younger generation, they are more comfortable in interacting with their Filipino friends than with their Chinese elders.

Economically, the integration of economic interests is something inevitable because most of the businesses of the ethnic Chinese are domestic businesses. Unlike multinational companies, which have mother companies in other parts of the world, most of the companies of the Chinese Filipinos remain local or domestic companies whose profits are plowed back into the Philippine economy. Regardless of citizenship, local businesses owned by the ethnic Chinese can be considered only as Filipino businesses, subject to and affected by local laws, sustained by Philippine

economic growth or overwhelmed by Philippine adversities and calamities. In short, whatever affect Filipino businesses affect them and vice-versa.

In addition to this integration in economic interests, a significant change in the choice of careers and profession has also taken place to prove that integration has really moved much further forward compared to two or three decades ago. Many of the younger generation are moving out of the traditional business fields into professions such as social work, literature, communication, anthropology, journalism, arts, etc. These careers or courses are chosen only by people who have wholeheartedly accepted their being Filipino and that all their lives will be lived in the Philippines.

Politically, after the citizenship decree of 1975 which allowed majority of the ethnic Chinese to gain the legal distinction of being Filipino citizens, the last barriers to political integration have been broken down. In the recent elections, many local Chinese exercised their political rights not just as voters but as candidates themselves. Issues of national concern are known to them and affect them as greatly as they affect other Filipinos. In contrast, concerns in China affect them only peripherally or indirectly. There is a clear dividing line between the older China-oriented or Chinese-community centered generation and the younger Philippine-oriented generation. This can be seen in the conflicts among the older generation between the pro-Taiwan and pro-Beijing factions which continue to rage in the community but are fortunately confined only to a small sector of leaders of traditional organizations. To the younger generation, however, the conflict is an irrelevant non-issue because their concerns are with their future in the Philippines.⁷

From the legal standpoint, majority (85 percent to 90 percent) of the ethnic Chinese in the country are already Filipino nationals and thus can be considered Filipinos. Therefore, whatever contributions they have made in the economy, politics, society or culture, legally speaking, can be said to be their contributions or obligations as citizens of the country. Some may be conscious of this fact only subjectively but the objective conditions are such that being Filipino citizens, there is no choice but to consider their labors and profits as benefits accruing to Philippine society and not to China, Taiwan, or elsewhere.

A Question of Acceptance

We must also point out that the process of being ethnic Chinese and becoming Filipino is not a one-sided process. It is not as simple as asking the Chinese Filipino to declare that he is a Filipino and that ends the argument. This process still has the other equally important facet—the Filipinos' or Philippine society's acceptance of one's being a Filipino and belonging to mainstream Philippine society. Only after this full acceptance and recognition is given to the ethnic Chinese would they be able to fully contribute to the country and participate fully in the concerns of Philippine society as Filipinos.

There have been a number of social distance studies undertaken in the past, especially in the 50s and the 60s, and up to the early 70s. These studies have highlighted the wide degree of social distance between Chinese and Filipinos. Three decades ago, the postulate "the ethnic Chinese as Filipinos" may shock a number of people. The past two decades, however, have brought about dramatic changes in the composition, orientation, and status of the ethnic Chinese. Are they now more readily or easily acceptable as Filipinos and as equal partners is a question that must be seriously explored. My recent studies have shown that there still exist some undercurrents of racism and latent hostilities but these are borne mostly out of some isolated, unfortunate, personal experiences. I would theorize that unless these latent hostilities are exploited by unscrupulous persons for their own personal agenda, then, there seems to be little danger now that the issue of racism would again explode to the extent of what happened in earlier years and especially in the nascent years of Philippine independence.⁸

But, the initiative for an ethnic Chinese to be considered a Filipino must come from the Chinese himself. There must be a complete identification with the Philippines and affinity with the concerns of the Filipino people. In thoughts and in deeds, he must be completely Filipino, fully attuned to Philippine life, legally, emotionally, and mentally. If this happens, then unless there is a secret political agenda to deliberately ostracize the ethnic Chinese, then, I see no reason why they cannot be accepted as such by his brother Filipinos. In a conference in Hong Kong two years back, the author was asked this question: "There seems to be no tradition

of nationalism among the Filipinos. There is no civic consciousness, no sense of sacrifice for the nation and no tradition of intense love of country as the Chinese have known. How then, can you expect the Chinese to love the Philippines if the Filipinos themselves do not love their country?" The answer then, as it is now, is that the best test of nationalism is when you still love the country when others have given up on it.

While there may still be pockets of stubborn China-oriented, Taiwan-oriented or Chinese-community-centered people that often bring about problems in majority-minority relations, the greater number and the more dynamic group of Chinese Manilans are those who have been successfully integrated into Philippine society and whose identity and orientation therefore would be one of commitment and loyalty to the national life of the country of their birth.

ENDNOTES

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