

The Chinese of Siasi: A Case of Successful Integration

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Introduction

This essay is a preliminary effort to analyze Chinese integration in a locality literally isolated from the complex processes of highly urbanized areas, particularly from the Metro Manila society. Although the illustrative thrust is confined to only one Chinese family, general observations are derived from other families on the basis of personal experience and oral historical data.

One of the recurring issues of the Chinese question in the Philippines and, also, in the world, where the Chinese are a numerical minority, is integration. The impression one gets from those who have studied and written on this issue is that the pattern, until the more recent past, had been limited to the integration of the Chinese into the economic aspect of national life leaving, consciously or unconsciously, the other areas of integration virtually unaffected. Prominently articulated by those who tend to be critical of Chinese integration are the persistent communal tendencies of Chinese in what is often called "chinatowns", *parians*, and other aggrupations. This communal pattern is somehow associated with the establishment and maintenance of separate Chinese schools, the continued use of the Chinese language for communication, the organization of exclusive or Chinese-dominated associations, and the virtual non-involvement of Chinese in the non-economic areas of national life except as a token of their presence in the archipelago.

But I submit that this stereotyped categorization of Chinese in the Philippines is an unfortunate effect of the over-centralization of national focus on the Capital Region which has historically dictated what constitutes the substance or meaning of Filipinism or nationalism. It is therefore not surprising that the nature of Chinese activities

or involvement in Manila should be generally applied to Chinese outside the Capital Region. Like the costly errors of state policy thrust in determining the development needs of the local areas, the perception of the Chinese issue, in terms of what goes on in Metro Manila, has unduly minimized the extent of real integration of Chinese in the outlying areas of the country. A case in point is the Chinese of Siasi, Sulu, whose absorption in the local society and all its aspects of development demonstrates in a way that the basis of national integration cannot be patterned after the like of Manila and its kind. It can best be pursued in line with the concept of decentralization which the State has just begun to appreciate as an approach to the Muslim problem and other numerical minorities in the country. Thus, an analysis of Chinese integration in Siasi reinforces the fact that the so-called "Chinese problem", as perceived by the national leadership since the Commonwealth era, can best be treated by the local society of which they are a part.

The Siasi early settlement

Located on the northwestern shore of Siasi Island is Siasi town whose more ancient name in local traditions is Muddas. Its frequent references in historical sources are related to the place it occupied in colonial processes, starting from the Spanish successful establishment of its presence in the island. Its popular name—Siasi—might have been derived from the name of a Spanish priest who visited the picturesque area in the 19th century before the establishment of a Spanish garrison there. A French naturalist, Alfred Marche, reported in 1882 of his visit to the small Spanish settlement in Siasi. He noted that it was headed by a governor, two lieutenants, and twenty soldiers and their wives. His impression of the village was one of peace and order, and the Sama people maintaining friendly relations with the governor and his men. But relevant to the issue of Chinese integration is Marche's note that there were already Chinese in the settlement exercising a good control of internal trade and commerce which were marked by an interdependent economic system in which the natives happily and readily exchanged their pearls, shells, shark fins, and marine products for Chinese and/or European items including guns. In addition, the Chinese provided a kind of convenient credit system in which the

natives mortgaged their guns and other valuables including their women. The latter apparently referred to the common practice of allowing native women to render services in the Chinese establishment or homes for the value of the credit or loan. There was no mention of Spanish problems with the system. There was an obvious mutuality and reciprocity of interests in the practice.

In addition to the Chinese-native symbiosis, the Chinese and the Spaniards had also good relations unlike in Luzon where an anti-Chinese attitude often led to exclusion measures and relative violence such as portrayed by several Chinese revolts. The only serious problem noted was a Spanish corporal and four other companions who ran away with their guns, but who were later killed by the villagers on orders of the governor. Otherwise, there was no inter-sectoral or inter-ethnic conflict which was common and endemic in the Christianized communities of the Luzon, Visayas and Mindanao. In brief, there was some kind of functional integration although racial or ethnic distinction continued to influence behavior and action. This integration of interdependent, not conflicting, functions was reinforced by intermarriages between Spanish men and natives as also between the latter and the Chinese. This was to be expected since Spanish and Chinese women seldom were found in colonial ventures or in Chinese trading activities.

The Sama, Chinese, and colonial elements, that constituted the Siasi social milieu, was later affected by the establishment of a Tausug presence in the settlement following the use of the island by the Sulu sultan as a sort of "secondary capital" next only to Jolo in importance. This became quite apparent by the close of the 19th century when internal rivalries and conflicts between claimants to the Sultanate resulted in four sultans establishing their capitals in Patikul, Buwansa, Maimbung, and Tawi-Tawi. One of the Sultans spent some time in Siasi and Laminusa before proceeding finally to Dangun in Tawi-Tawi. The successional turmoil in the Jolo island brought the centrifugal movement of Tausugs more rapidly into outlying areas like Siasi, thus increasing and strengthening the Tausug base in Central Sulu, otherwise known as the Siasi Island group, by the beginning of the 20th century (American period), and, later, in Tawi-Tawi. The Sultan must necessarily be accompanied by his retinue of relatives and supporters, some of whom would decide to settle in Siasi.

By the time the political issue was virtually resolved with the establishment of the Kiram Sultanate in Maimbung, subsequently recognized by the incoming American government in the Bates Treaty of 1899, the Siasi settlement had grown considerably with the Tausug elements succeeding to the political vacuum left by the withdrawal of the Spanish garrison from the island. But the rise of Tausug influence did not affect the Chinese integration in the predominantly Sama society. In fact, a new dimension of integration was developed for the Chinese by the politically conscious Tausugs. There was no difficulty for the Chinese to relate with the Tausugs whose economic role, being farmers and inland dwellers, was conveniently confined to the cultivation of abundant lands, literally untouched by colonial exploitation and, therefore, did not compete with the commercial and trading role of the Chinese, as well as with the Sama monopoly of marine harvests. In other words, the complementarity and interdependence in Siasi's economy promoted the kind of social integration based on equal and mutual importance and, consequently, brought social peace, harmony, and progress. In fact, the centuries of Chinese-Sulu historical relations from the 15th century tribute embassies onward provided unmistakably the strength of Chinese importance in Sulu society.

The impact of 20th century modernism

The change from Spanish to American control brought new changes in the Sulu area affecting eventually the pattern of local development. In Siasi, this was the case. Although the late 19th century integration continued to bring Sama, Tausug, Chinese, and colonial Christian elements together by mutually complementary role performances, American liberal democratic policies began to stimulate the beginnings of new processes. Demographic movement brought in more people increasing the number of non-Sama residents. This was quite clear in the increase of Chinese, Christian, and Tausug residents. In the case of the Chinese, the early decades of American rule saw the appearance of Chinese families represented in such contemporary generations as the Kongs, the Tans, the Teos, the Lims, the Yaps, the Ngos, the Ques, and the Ongs. The first four are numerically dominant and earlier in origin. But only the first two can be dealt with in this preliminary essay, and of the four, the Kongs is the main focus because

of its network of alliances.

According to the Kong matriarch, Latia Jaham, a woman from the local elite of Malanta, her ancestry has claims to ancient origin and even to the earliest contact with Islam. She married Kong Bu Wa, an intrepid Chinese trader from Amoy who, like many Chinese adventurers, dares the fabled perils of the Moro world. He came to Siasi during the first decade of American rule and decided to start a retail business. After marrying Latia, he acquired lands in Malanta thru the homestead system encouraged by American land policies. Before long, the Kongs had become one of the landed interests not only in Malanta but also in some other areas of Siasi. In this economic growth, the role of his native wife was vital, her being a member of the local elite with ancestral support from the Tapul-Lugus Tausug kin groups. From their union several sons were born and, later, a daughter; thru this daughter the Kongs' link with the Tans would be established. Through the sons' marriages to native women and Chinese mestizas the Kongs developed a network of kinship with Tausug, Sama, and Christian families, thus gradually eroding the Chinese character of the family. Except for the second son, Kong Kim Hin, the most astute in the family, the Kongs adopted more of the Tausug and Sama, and, subsequently, Christian elements, owing to the early demise of the patriarch, Kong Bu Wa. This left the matriarch, Latia, a native, the central figure of the clan.

Latia was more a symbol than a power in the clan. Being educated and astute, Kim Hin came to dominate the family. He kept the Chinese tradition vibrant by imposing on his children the use of the Chinese language in addition to the local Tausug and Sama. He gave his and other children in the clan Chinese names. His contact with all the local Chinese was constantly maintained and strengthened and, consequently, he emerged as one of the richest men in Siasi. His Chinese connection provided him insurance to commercial success in an economic system where the Chinese role was dominant and decisive. In the Kong clan, he was the only one that had an enviable link with the Chinese *tauks* who literally dictated the pattern of commerce and trade not only in Siasi but also outside. The *tauks* were the trade or financial tycoon in the Chinese community recognized not only for his rich financial resources but also for his control of economic activities. No one who had lost the confidence and trust of the *tauks* could hope to succeed. But to develop a trustful relationship with them required

more than just honesty and integrity. It required proficiency in the Chinese language and clearly perceived identification with Chinese customs and traditions. Remarkably, Kim Hin succeeded in creating this role for himself among the Chinese until he became a leading figure in the *Kungsi*, an association of local Chinese residents. In short, he became a *tauke* himself.

But unlike the other *tauques*, Kim Hin did not overlook the importance of the native connection which had been increasingly pursued by other members of the Kong clan. His own marriage to a native of Malanta-Tindong, by name, showed his own transformation which subsequently provided him access to agrarian potentials in addition to what the Kongs had acquired thru the matriarch, Latia. At the same time, Kim Hin's nativization strengthened his own ties with the rest of the Kongs whose marriages into the native society had taken an unmistakable turn further away from their Chinese roots. With the death of Latia in the late sixties, Kim Hin unquestionably took the clan's mantle, being the next to the eldest who died earlier during the last war. Expectedly, the Tausug-Sama part of the Kong process took a decisive influence in the social integration of the family and its extensions and, consequently, also altered the economic base of the clan from commerce and trade to agriculture and politics. The *Kungsi* link had ceased except in memoirs of the late Kim Hin and the *tauke* tie-up had ceased to function effectively. Thus, the Kongs, except for the family name which they zealously maintained, became completely absorbed into Tausug-Sama society and culture, and many have become Muslims.

The rest of the Chinese kinship groups have shown clear and gradual gravitation to this type of integration exemplified by the Kongs. Notwithstanding the conscious efforts of the elder generation to keep Chinese values and institutions alive, the process towards nativization continues. The reason for this is the lack or absence of basic Chinese institutions that have been the effective conduit of Chinese culture. For instance, it is difficult to strengthen Chineseness without the buttressing role of the Chinese language, inter-Chinese marriages, and especially the establishment of Chinese schools. In Siasi, there have been no Chinese schools. The nearest is in Jolo 25 nautical miles away and reachable only through inter-island boats. Besides, the expense, inconvenience, and dangers of maintaining their children in far away schools have kept the Siasi Chinese resigned to

what they could give their children through daily informal education, mainly connected with storekeeping chores. The education of the Chinese children was left completely to public and private schools, including those ran by religious missions, and the *madaris*.

Meanwhile, the modernizing values and influences of liberal democracy have provided the most effective means of neutralizing traditional processes. The freedom encouraged by American rule had given the younger generations of Siasi Chinese a variety of options and choices which were constricted in Tausug, Sama, or Chinese tradition. The American educational system offered excellent opportunities for modern self-development which the informal learning systems could not provide. As mentioned earlier, there were no Chinese schools to neutralize this. The *madrasah* system was everything but organized and institutionalized. The modern public and, later, private schools had the exclusive educational influence on the young outside the home. Social activities, well-preserved in Tausug-Sama society, provided the only means of social exposure and interactions for Chinese youth and children, the traditional Chinese activities being confined to the few Chinese occasions during the year and barely touching the more pervasive native traditions. The medium of communication in society was either Tausug, Sama, or English. The Chinese mestizos have emerged in greater numbers as a result of mixed intermarriages, and they have assumed multiple social roles, including political ones.

In fact, it was the political process, encouraged by the liberal democratic system, that gave the Chinese mestizos access beyond the economic power enjoyed by the older Chinese generation. With their free involvement in the folk Islamic traditions of Siasi, their participation in local politics made their integration into local society complete. In contemporary times, this reality has been achieved. Without exception, the various Chinese groups, thru the mestizo generations, have now become a visible and dynamic part of local politics. This is particularly true of the Kongs whose ties have been extended to the Annis, Tillahs, Taups, Hans, Teos, Tans, Lims, Ques, Yaps, etc. and, to a certain extent, with political families like the Jamasalis of Pandami and the Loongs of Jolo.

The Chinese of Siasi: *quo vadis?*

As a concluding thought, the question might now be asked: where is Chinese integration heading in Siasi and Central Sulu? From the facts and data expounded in the foregoing pages, it is clear that the generation of pure Chinese in the local area is vanishing into history with no indication that migrations of this type are actually taking place. In fact, the Chinese of Jolo, who were uprooted economically or otherwise by the MNLF outbreak in 1974 and the consequent burning of the town, have moved north to Mindanao mainland, Visayas, and Metro Manila. There have been no new additions to the older generation of Siasi Chinese.

Consequently, the new generations of Chinese mestizos represent the only remaining link with the Chinese of the early Siasi settlement. Today, with the exception of their names and occasional festivities, the Chinese elements are gradually diminishing.

The implication of this preliminary observation points to the two types of Chinese integration. One is a dichotomy which allows two distinct traditions (Filipino and Chinese) to co-exist and develop along parallel lines, somehow linked to each other by a mutually shared and limited vision for the country. The second type is the dynamic blending of the two traditions eventually ending in a clear synthesis of culture truly reflective of the integration process that had marked the early centuries of Islam and Christianity in the Philippines. Which of these two directions is best for the country is a question that can only be asked today.

The Chinese in Kabikolan: Some Notes on the Role They Played in Kabikolan's History

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The archeological and archival background

Archeological and archival proofs suggested that the Chinese had been to many places in the Philippines several centuries ago. O.W. Wolters noted that as early as 300 A.D. "islanders in the Philippines were sailing 800 miles and more across the open sea to Funan¹ while three centuries earlier, Chinese envoys had made their way to the Malay peninsula by means of "barbarian' ships".² Locsin's study of oriental ceramics unearthed throughout the Philippines showed that Philippine inhabitants were already participating in ceramic trade with mainland Asia as early as the Tang Dynasty (618-906 A.D.).³ Wang Teh-ming's study of various Chinese annals confirmed the existence of centuries of Sino-Filipino ties.⁴ He found out that mention of the Philippines by many Chinese annals became frequent by the 3rd century A.D. Accounts naming this period named the Philippines according to the distinguishing features noted by the Chinese chroniclers about the country. They called the Philippines *Hey-Chiy-Kuo* (Black-Teeth Country) because some of its inhabitants already practiced teeth blackening as a form of adornment, and "Gold Country" because the natives were already trading gold with China. During the 5th century A.D., the Liang Annals (502-577 A.D.) called the Philippines *Tchih-Jan-Ta-Chow* (Self-Burning Great Island) and mentioned *chiaux*, describing it as a kind of banana plant whose fiber was woven into cloth. The Sui Annals (581-618 A.D.) and the Tang Annals (618-907 A.D.) called the Philippines *Huo-San* (Fire Mountain or Volcano Country). These terms used by the Chinese chroniclers are highly suggestive that they refer to the Bikol region because of the following considerations: Bulusan and Mayon Volcanoes are prominent Bikol