From Sangley to Tsinoy: Changing Identities among Ethnic Chinese in the Philippines[1]

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Introduction

Hua qiao (pronounced *hua chiao*) is the Chinese term used to refer to overseas Chinese. Dispersed throughout the world, across all continents, these overseas Chinese inevitably leave their mark on the local host society, as well as on China itself.

The ethnic Chinese in the Philippines comprise a small minority, estimated at 2 percent of the population,[2] but they have had strong economic, political and cultural impact on the country. Relationships between the ethnic Chinese and the majority population of the Philippines have not always been easy, and include sporadic conflicts, from raids and massacres of the Parian Chinese community in Manila during the Spanish colonial period to the banning of Chinese signs in the city of Manila during the term of Mayor Arsenio Lacson in the 1950s.

This study presents an overview of the Chinese communities in the Philippines, with a focus on ethnicities and ethnic relationships. In recent years,

as has been shown in numerous examples throughout the world – Bosnia, Rwanda, and close to home, Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia – ethnic relations have been shown to be major social fault lines, with concerns that the tensions could erupt into violence. This has not happened in the Philippines in the last century, but violence directed against the ethnic Chinese is not uncommon, reflecting the continuing, smoldering emotions.

This paper will focus on the evolving identities among the ethnic Chinese themselves, brought about by changing circumstances within the communities as well as from outside, and will show how integration is not only possible but desirable, even as that integration needs to be better defined by the ethnic Chinese themselves and the Filipino host population.

The practical implications of this study go beyond ethnic identities but into very practical realities: in an age when China has re-emerged as a global power, the loyalties of the ethnic Chinese in the Philippines become all the more important. How will this emergence of China shape ethnic Chinese identities and, by extension, their activities around economic investments, politics, even culture? Will there be conflicts of interests and loyalties, and if they do emerge, how can these be resolved?

In this paper, I will first present a historical review of the various migration waves and the types of ethnic evolution that took place in each wave. The historical review is necessary to highlight the fact that China was a regional power for many centuries. I will then describe three main trends around ethnic identities, and then name and discuss ten factors which I believe to be important in shaping these evolving ethnic identities. In the last part of the paper I will present the implications of all these trends for public policy.

The study is necessarily limited given the scope of the project and its timeline, but I draw strongly on recent published materials as well as informal conversations with ethnic Chinese from different generations. I deliberately avoided formal interviews to elicit spontaneous reflection and reactions. It is striking that my informants, all older people, have asked to remain anonymous because they feel that relations between local ethnic Chinese and the host population remain a sensitive issue, and were worried that some of their comments could be misinterpreted.

They also warned me to be very circumspect in the choice of words, warnings which made me realize that there are still very real tensions, many historically-based, between ethnic Chinese and the host population.

My paper attempts to identify the gaps, the missing voices and views that need to be articulated in future studies.

Some Definition of Terms

I will be using the term *ethnic Chinese* generically, referring to several waves of Chinese migrants and their descendants. Ethnic here includes self-ascription, for as long as a sense of Chinese-ness remains present and which is usually associated with the ability to speak one of the Chinese languages.

As I will be explaining in the paper, distinctions have emerged through the years with the labels, some etic (an anthropological term referring to an outsider perspective) as in the Sangley and the *Intsik*, others emic (used by insiders or natives) such as the *lan nang* (our people).

The local Chinese will sometimes refer to themselves as *Hokkien*, referring to the southern Chinese province of Fujian from which most of the Chinese in the Philippines are descended. However, in terms of ethnolinguistic affiliation, *Hokkien* is not accurate. Fujian province has several languages (or dialects, depending on which linguists are consulted) and the bulk of Chinese in the Philippines come from areas that speak *Minnan*, the name itself meaning "south of Min" (river). I will use Minnan to refer to the language spoken by the majority of local Chinese.

The term *Filipino host population* is admittedly awkward since many, if not most, of the ethnic Chinese in the Philippines consider themselves Filipino. But I make the distinction here to emphasize that there is still a kind of *host* and *guest* relationship that exists, with even the ethnic Chinese sometimes talking about non-Chinese as hosts, a discourse that can include a strong sense of gratitude and indebtedness.

Finally, I have to explain that the one time I use *pure-blooded* in this article is a very reluctant concession to popular culture. The need to determine one's racial mix, a kind of racial accounting, is particularly strong in the Philippines and is

unscientific, but it is a distinct cultural phenomena that cannot be shunt aside. An article by a young Chinese Filipina, Gena Valerie Chua starts out with a declaration that is particularly interesting in the way it reflects our search for cultural roots and explanations: "I am 87.5 percent Chinese. The numerical approximation is a result of two things: my being a math geek and the pursuit of an explanation for my non-Chinese eyes, which apparently come from the other 12.5 percent."[3] Toward the end of her article, she asserts: "I don't consider myself any less Filipino than locals (who can say they are 100-percent 'purebred' anyway?)."[4]

Chinese Migration Waves

The review that I will be presenting in this section of migration waves draws largely from *Tsinoy: The Story of the Chinese in Philippine Life*[5] and Wickberg.[6] My use of the term *waves* does not refer to discrete homogenous population movements but to the historical context of Chinese migration to the Philippines, that context being important in understanding how Chinese ethnicities evolved. This historical context is important, as is shown by Wickberg's (1998-2000) reference to *oscillations* during the Spanish colonial period as the Spaniards and Filipinos moved between policies of exclusion and inclusion for the Chinese.

Pre-hispanic and Spanish Colonial Periods

There have been many waves of Chinese migration to the Philippines, long before Magellan "discovered" the Philippines. Archaeological excavations have yielded many Chinese ceramics, some dating back to as early as the *Tang* dynasty (618-960 AD), and attesting to trade relations. The earliest printed reference to the Philippines appears in the *Song Shi* (History of Song) dating back to 971.

The trading activities were still going on when the Spaniards arrived. The term *Sangley*, recorded by Spanish chroniclers as referring to the Chinese, seems to have been derived from

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the Minnan words *Siong Lai*, which mean "frequently coming." The visits were intermittent, involving mainly (if not exclusively) males, with most of these early Chinese visitors probably returning home. The term *Intsik* was actually an honorific term used to refer to older persons, but has degenerated through time to take on pejorative connotations, with some attempts from young ethnic Chinese to reappropriate the term and bring the term back in the context of ethnic pride. I will return to this point shortly.

It is impossible to determine how many of the earlier Chinese traders stayed longer and had children with local women, but their descendants probably stayed on and were very much integrated into the mainstream Filipino population. The levels of integration and assimilation, varied from one area to another; for example, the Ilocos provinces assimilated the Chinese quite deeply[7] while a province like Batangas resisted the entry of Chinese migrants way into the late twentieth century. Note too that the Spaniards had strict restrictions on the movement of the Chinese. Until 1839 the Chinese were mainly limited to large urban centers. In Manila, the Chinese had to live in the Parian. Anti-Chinese sentiment sometimes broke out in violence, with massacres of the Chinese in the Parian.

By the nineteenth century, liberalization opened new possibilities for the ethnic Chinese in both the economic and social spheres. The mestizo and mestiza offspring of Chinese men and Filipina women, often with a fair amount of wealth, were swept up by emerging nationalism. Chinese mestizos were implicated in the Cavite Mutiny of 1872, with several executed, imprisoned, or exiled. In the reform movement and the Katipunan-led revolution, there were many Filipinos with partial Chinese ancestry, including Jose Rizal and Emilio Aguinaldo. The descendants of those generations of Chinese mestizos and mestizas were again totally integrated into the mainstream Filipino population. Many adopted Hispanicized surnames (e.g., Roxas) or modified the full name of the patriarchal head, e.g., Ongpin.

History also records one Katipunero "pure-blooded" general, Jose Ignacio Paua, born in 1872 in Fujian province. He was said to have recruited some 3,000 ethnic Chinese to support the revolution with money, faked government certificates, weapons, food, propaganda materials, and warehouse space.

Besides participating in the struggles for independence, the ethnic Chinese left their mark on Philippine culture over the centuries through various occupations. An early Spanish census in 1689 of the Parian, an enclave where the Chinese were forced to live, showed that the most frequent occupations were: sellers of silk (50), fishermen (38), sellers of *buyo* (33), porters (33), sellers of blankets (31), weavers (31), tobacco dealers (28), peddlers (27), fishermen with boats (26), sellers of vegetables (26), sugar vendors (24), dyers (24), and boatmen who traveled to Pampanga (23).

Chinese artisans and craftsmen figured prominently in the Philippines, leaving a Chinese cachet on church architecture (for example, there are temple lions at the entrance to the San Agustin church) and the sinicized facial features of *santos*, particularly of the Virgin Mary and the Santo Niño. The street *pancitero*, *pancit* originally being a Minnan term to mean "ready-made food," undoubtedly influenced Filipino cuisine in terms of names as well as preparations. Note though that there were many local variations and sometimes mysterious modifications: *lumpiang shanghai*, for example, does not exist in Shanghai and is simply a reduced fried Minnan spring roll.

In the middle of nineteenth century there was another important wave of new migrants from China. As the Philippines opened up to world trade, a new niche emerged for the Chinese, this time as traders in the *cabecilla*-agent system. The Chinese *cabecilla* was the main importer who would then supply goods to agents in different parts of the archipelago. The agents in turn provided goods to local retailers, all the way down to the *sari-sari* stores.

The movement of goods was not limited to importations. Local agricultural produce—such as rice, abaca, sugar, and copra—would be bartered with the Chinese, making its way to foreign markets through the Chinese networks. What emerged then was a distinctly Chinese mercantile capitalist economy, different from that of the mestizo who had now become integrated into Philippine society.

The Chinese population in the Philippines, usually averaging around 5,000, grew to 100,000 in the nineteenth century. The Spaniards discouraged any kind of organizing for the *indios* as well as the Chinese for fear of political activity, but Chinese organizations did emerge, starting with musical associations as early as

1820 and diversifying to mutual help organizations. A Chinese hospital was first set up in 1879, built from donations following a cholera epidemic. The Spaniards also allowed a *Gremio de Chino* or Chinese Guild, formed in 1870, with a *Gobernadocillo de Chino* appointed to administer the activities.

US Colonial Period

The Chinese merchant émigrés continued to flock in during the first half of the twentieth century during the American colonial period. In 1903 there were some 20,000 Chinese merchants and laborers in Manila, a significant number considering then the total labor force in that city was only 130,000.

This influx of Chinese migrants became severely restricted when the Americans extended a Chinese exclusion law to the Philippines. Originally passed as an American federal law in 1882, the act imposed strict limits on Chinese migration. The American law was a reaction to the large numbers of Chinese laborers who had entered the United States, first during the gold rush of 1848 in California, and later for a transcontinental railway project. The Chinese Exclusion Act remained in force until 1943.

Even today, many ethnic Chinese will have two identities, a "real" one based on actual birth circumstances and a "tua di" identity, to refer to the immigration documents which had been bought.

The extension of the Chinese Exclusion Act to the Philippines supposedly barred Chinese laborers from entering the Philippines, but new migrants continued to come in, as merchants, for example. Others bought immigration papers of earlier migrants, including those who had died. Even today many ethnic Chinese will have two identities, a real one based on actual birth circumstances and a *tua di* identity, literally "big papers," that refer to the immigration documents which had been bought.

Migration continued based on networks of relatives and village-mates dating back to the nineteenth century. Ironically the Americans themselves allowed the entry of some 3,000 Cantonese laborers early in the twentieth century to build Kennon

Road in Baguio City. Many had to return to China after the construction, but there were others who did stay on to establish the vegetable gardens. There were also Chinese who entered the country as household help including, ironically, Hong Kong amahs, or women who served as nannies to the children of wealthier Chinese and Filipinos. Today there are some 100,000 Filipinas working as nannies in Hong Kong.

Generally though, the numbers of Chinese migrants were relatively small compared with other Southeast Asian countries. American laws also barred the Chinese from many businesses, and acquiring Filipino citizenship was almost impossible, but the Chinese were able to find their niches.

The nineteenth and twentieth century migration waves consisted of Chinese who saw themselves settling down in the Philippines, even if retirement back in China remained in the horizon. Many eventually brought their Chinese wives over and raised families that now emphasized ethnic purity. The first Chinese school in the country was established in 1899, the Anglo-Chinese School, followed by the Iloilo Chinese Commercial School in 1912, and more than a hundred others in Manila and other urban centers. These schools taught Chinese language, history, geography, and culture. In some schools, even math and science were taught in Chinese.

Intermarriages were discouraged in principle, but practiced widely. One reason was that the Chinese male migrants often had arranged marriages back in mainland China, but after a prolonged stay in the Philippines, would end up starting a new family with local women. Some would eventually go back to China and settle down down with their Chinese wives. Others brought their Chinese wives over or, because polygyny was allowed and considered a status symbol, would take several Chinese and Filipina wives.

There were many variations in their split-family configuration, but one common consequence: a significant *chut-si-a* (the Minnan Chinese term for mestizos and mestizas) population that was often discriminated against, no longer considered *lan nang*. Note that even the Cantonese Chinese—a minority among the migrants except in Baguio—were not considered *lan nang*.

In the intermarriages that did take place, the offspring from these marriages took on a Filipino identity quickly, often within one generation, abandoning everything Chinese except their surname, and even there the practice of modified

surnames was also common. Surnames like Teehankee, sounding less Chinese than than the monosyllabic ones, are derived from the full name of a pioneer émigré, Tee Han Kee. The name of one nineteenth century migrant to Tarlac, Co Giok Huang, eventually mutated—the Giok dropped and the suffix Ko, which simply means elder brother, affixed to produce Cojuangco.

Even among the children of the pure Chinese families, there was an emerging hybrid identity of a Filipino-Chinese, Chinese still being the primary identity. Many of the twentieth century Chinese migrants began to accept the possibility that they and their children and grandchildren would eventually be adopted by the Philippines.

When it became easier to become naturalized Filipinos, many Chinese became Filipino citizens but the distinctions remained, the Chinese still using "lan nang" for fellow Chinese, and Filipinos still calling the Chinese "Intsik", originally a term of respect which, with time, became derogatory.

Wherever there were Chinese, there would be a Chinatown, with Chinese schools, restaurants, temples, groceries, even drugstores. The building of Chinese cemeteries, which dates back to the nineteenth century, was significant, marking a realization among the Chinese that they would never return to China. These cemeteries are found in the larger cities of the Philippines and are miniature versions of Filipino-Chinese society, featuring Chinese architectural styles (sometimes syncretic, with western symbols like the Christian cross) and the signs of class differences in that society. Also important were the Chinese charitable mutual help associations that supported these social institutions, with an informal cradle-to-grave social security system that extended into care for the aged and burial assistance for the dead.

Participation in local politics was subdued but significant. A Chinese Chamber of Commerce was established in 1904 and was active in lobbying against an anti-bookkeeping law which required that accounting books be in Spanish and English. Chinese merchants argued that if they wanted to defraud government, they could do so in any language. The US Supreme Court eventually declared the law unconstitutional.

There was also still a strong sense of orientation toward China, including participation in anti-Japanese activities. This included a boycott of Japanese goods initiated even before the Second World War broke out. After the Japanese invaded the Philippines, some local Chinese joined Filipino guerilla groups and the underground, with many eventually being imprisoned and executed by the Japanese. The Chinese Cemetery in Manila has a Martyrs' Hall built to honor these ethnic Chinese.

The civil war in China between the Kuomintang (Nationalist Party) and the Communists was mirrored in the local Chinese community, which was also divided along these party lines. Both parties had their own schools and newspapers.

After 1949 and the establishment of the People's Republic of China many of the Chinese realized the chances of returning to China had become even more remote. When it became easier to become naturalized Filipinos, many Chinese became Filipino citizens, but the distinctions remained, the Chinese still using *lan nang* for fellow Chinese, and Filipinos still calling the Chinese *Intsik*, originally a term of respect which, with time, became derogatory (e.g., children would taunt the Chinese as *Intsik beho*, *Intsik tulo laway*). While there were no massacres like those of the Spanish period, there would be individual acts of violence and, in October 1924, one outbreak of race riots.

Post-independence

In the post-independence period, the communist victory in China in 1949 was to impact strongly on ethnic Chinese in the Philippines. It now became even more clear that a return to China would be more difficult. Yet, becoming a naturalized Filipino, while possible, was a very difficult and expensive process.

It now became all the more important to strengthen mutual help associations, many of which had been established during the American colonial period, around clans and villages of origin in China. The Federation of Filipino-Chinese Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FFCCCII) was established in 1954; the term Filipino-Chinese was widely used, from the business federations to student organizations.

The new federation was established in response to a Retail Trade Nationalization Law passed on June 19, 1954. The law limited the retail trade to Filipino citizens. Non-Filipino citizens were given 11 years to dispose of their retail businesses. This law was to have far-reaching effects on the ethnic Chinese, many of whom were involved in retail trade, from tiny *sari-sari* stores to large bazaars and department stores. The FFCCCII was not able to have the law repealed, and the situation became even more dire for the ethnic Chinese with the introduction of a Filipino First Policy in 1958, extending priority in businesses to Filipino citizens.

The Retail Trade Nationalization Law did have an unexpected benefit: it forced many ethnic Chinese capitalists to enter manufacturing, helping to build the industrial sector in the Philippines. Ironically, in the last decade or so, many of these ethnic Chinese small industrialists have now been displaced, unable to compete with cheap goods coming in from mainland China.

After 1949, tensions between the pro-Kuomintang (or pro-Taiwan) and pro-"communist" (pro-Peking) factions grew. Many Chinese schools, which were established with funds from the Kuomintang (Nationalist Party), now exiled to Taiwan, became quite strident about loyalty to the "Republic of China."

Identification with the mainland Chinese government was not without risks. The Philippines was caught in the Cold War, the government staunchly allied to the United States. Even local Chinese newspapers were tagged and during the Marcos period, there was the infamous case of the Yuyitung brothers, publishers of the Chinese Commercial Press, identified as being sympathetic to the communists, with one of the brothers, Rizal, eventually being deported to Taiwan, where he was imprisoned for many years.

Ironically it was also during the Marcos era that the Philippines, taking the lead from the United States, established diplomatic ties with China. With that famous visit of Imelda Marcos to Beijing where she met with Chairman Mao Zedong, interest in things Red Chinese became almost chic for Filipinos, regardless of whether they were ethnically Chinese or not.

Marcos was generally seen as supported by the ethnic Chinese community; in fact, crony capitalism under his regime was closely identified with ethnic Chinese businessmen. In reality, as would be expected in politics, Marcos was a pragmatist who wanted to tap, as well as control, the ethnic Chinese.

In 1975 Marcos issued Letter of Instruction 270, or the Mass Naturalization Decree, making it easy for local ethnic Chinese to become Filipino citizens. The idea was to neutralize the ethnic Chinese as the Philippine government moved toward the recognition of the People's Republic of China. The mass naturalization offer basically gave local Chinese a choice: to become Filipino or to become citizens of the People's Republic of China. Most chose to become Filipino.

Ideological differences remain strong among the older Chinese, with the Taiwanese government maintaining a cultural office in the country after Philippine recognition of Beijing. Accusations of interference from both the Chinese and Taiwanese diplomatic corps are occasionally raised by local Chinese, but many of them are quite pragmatic, seeing no problems with attending celebrations of the People's Republic's foundation day on October 1, and the Double Ten celebrations of the Taiwanese on October 10.

Kaisa members advocate the use of the term Tsinoy, from Tsinong Pinoy or Chinese-Filipino, the primary identity now shifting to Filipino.

It was also under Marcos when Chinese schools were ordered to filipinize. This happened in 1973 after a new constitution was approved. The Chinese schools had to drop Chinese from their names, administrative positions were limited to Filipino citizens, and Chinese subjects were reduced to two 40-minute sessions of language classes. Chinese school administrators protested, but in the end, the government had its way.

In the last two or three decades, there has been much soul-searching among the descendants of earlier twentieth century Chinese migrants. In 1969 young ethnic Chinese established the Pagkakaisa sa Pag-unlad, calling for integration of ethnic Chinese into mainstream Philippine society. It was a controversial move, opposed by many local Chinese. Pagkakaisa also lobbied to have a new constitution that would recognize jus soli, citizenship extended to anyone born in the Philippines. That proposal was not adopted, but Pagkakaisa's call for integration found favor with younger Chinese.

Pagkakaisa was later disbanded, but today there is Kaisa para sa Kaunlaran, representing a younger generation of Chinese and led by Teresita Ang See. Kaisa members advocate the use of the term *Tsinoy*, from *Tsinong Pinoy* or Chinese-Filipino, the primary identity now shifting to Filipino.

Despite this strong affinity with being Filipino, the Tsinoy have revived interest in a Chinese past with a well-curated museum in Intramuros set up by Kaisa. Alfonso Yuchengco Jr., one of the wealthiest local ethnic Chinese, has also set up a Yuchengco Museum which regularly has exhibits related to Chinese culture.

In recent years there has been still another wave of Chinese émigrés coming not just from Fujian but also from other Chinese provinces. Many come in to do business, selling cheap goods produced in China (the Binondo store 168 is a major hub for these new émigrés). Others are brought in to teach Chinese or to write for Chinese newspapers. Some of these émigrés use the Philippines as a stepping stone to the US and Canada.

An article by Roel Landingin[8] in the *Financial Times Philippines*, July 24, 2007, quotes Tessie Ang See of Kaisa as estimating that there are between 80,000 and 100,000 illegal Chinese in the Philippines. There is some tension between these new émigrés and earlier waves of Chinese migrants as well as the host Filipino population, coming from the tendency to stereotype the new émigrés as being associated with the smuggling of Chinese goods and the production of the illegal drug *shabu* (methamphetamine hydrochloride), which local ethnic Chinese fear will lead to a resurgence of anti-Chinese sentiment among Filipinos.

The Future

There are three distinct trends that can be identified today among the descendants of the Chinese migrants who came to the Philippines in the early twentieth century: (a) complete absorption into the mainstream, as a Filipino without any Chinese identity; (b) recognizing one's primary identity as Filipino but retaining varying degrees of Chinese ethnic affiliation; and (c) recognizing one's Filipino citizenship but retaining a strong sense of affinity to Chinese-ness.

a) Complete absorption. This has taken place many times over, as the ethnic Chinese intermarry and the offspring grow up not learning to speak Chinese, and almost totally divorced from Chinese culture.

b.) Hybrid identity: being Filipino but retaining varying degrees of Chinese ethnic affiliation. This comes closest to the Tsinoy identity proposed by Kaisa, with an active interest in Chinese language and culture and participation in Chinese community and cultural activities. An example came recently in an article published in *Sino-Fil*, a daily Chinese broadsheet, by Cheng Lay, a columnist whose grandfather first migrated to the Philippines.

Cheng's column was titled "I am Filipino," which seemed almost strange because it was written in Chinese.[9] Cheng describes a recent encounter he had in Singapore with a taxi driver. He and his wife were talking in Chinese and when the driver asked where they were from, he had answered, "We are Filipino." The driver, who was ethnic Chinese, responded, "I am Singaporean." Cheng Lay's article urges local Chinese to consider more of this "I am Filipino" and to talk about the Philippines as "our country."[10]

Cheng's column has led to a contest sponsored by the paper among Chinese schools asking students to do their own "I am Filipino" essays.

There are, however, variations in the depth of the Chinese identity, and the sentiments about having a hyphenated identity. R. Kwan Laurel's "Ongpin Stories", recently published by Kaisa Para sa Kaunlaran, captures the complexities, tensions and ambivalence as one grows up "hyphenated", wanting to be Chinese yet unable to meet the norms of speaking Chinese, or of staying in a Chinese high school.[11]

On the other hand, the more affluent seem to be moving towards a revival of Chinese identity. A glossy magazine, *Asia Dragon*, costing PHP250 and touted as "the first bilingual business and lifestyle magazine in the Philippines," comes out quarterly featuring Chinese-Filipinos in various fields. The magazine is produced by Foresight Books with address at the Destileria Limtuaco building. The Limtuacos are one of the bigger Chinese clans that rose to prominence during the early part of the twentieth century.

c) Primary Chinese identity. Finally, there still remains a segment of the local ethnic Chinese population that emphasizes a primary Chinese identity, with a strong sense of exclusion of the non-Chinese including the local host population.

Cheng refers to the racism that still exists and urges local Chinese not to use terms like *whan na* to refer to Filipinos.[12] The term is sometimes combined with other negative terms like *gong* (stupid), actually one of the milder epithets.

I have encountered this chauvinism and racism even among people younger than myself. At a recent launch of an anthology, for example, I was approached by the husband of one of the writers. He was in his 40s and asked if I could speak Chinese. I said yes. He scowled and said in Chinese, "So why don't you speak in Chinese? You shouldn't be like one of those *whan gong*." I was shocked, then mortified, and his wife was clearly embarrassed, quickly saying, "Okay, okay, so that makes me *whan gong* too."

Factors Shaping Ethnic Chinese Identities

I have identified 10 factors that I feel will be significant in shaping local Chinese ethnic identities in the next generation:

1. *Economics.* There has been a distinct diversification of the activities of the ethnic Chinese away from the traditional retail and wholesale sectors. This absorption could not be clearer than in the empires of the so-called taipans, or ethnic Chinese magnates. The six taipans (Henry Sy, John Gokongwei, George Ty, Emilio Yap, Alfonso Yuchengco, Andrew Gotianun, and Lucio Tan) have accumulated their wealth from various businesses: banking, real estate, shopping malls, publishing, insurance, manufacturing, and even hospitals and schools.

   It is also instructive to look at *Forbes* magazine's latest listing of the wealthiest people in the Philippines, which include 14 ethnic Chinese. It is significant that only one of these 14 multi-millionaires is active in the Federation of Filipino-Chinese Chambers of Commerce and Industry. All the others are not members and, for all intents and purposes, are considered Filipino by the local Chinese, even as some of them can still speak Chinese languages.

TABLE 1: Ethnic Chinese listed among the 40 wealthiest Filipinos:

Henry Sy (rank 1)	Andrew Gotianun (rank 17)
Lucio Tan (rank 2)	Alfonso Yuchengco (rank 18)
Andrew Tan (rank 4)	Mariano Tan (rank 19)
Tony Tan Caktiong (rank 5)	Betty Ang (rank 29)
John Gokongwei (rank 6)	Philip Ang (rank 33)
George Ty (rank 9)	Frederick Dy (rank 36)
Emilio Yap (rank 12)	
Beatrice Campos (rank 14)	

Source: Businessworld, October 16, 2008

The diversification of economic activities among the ethnic Chinese includes entry into various professions. The stereotype of the ethnic Chinese taking medicine or engineering is disappearing as younger generations enter law, the social sciences, and the arts and humanities. Mother Lily Monteverde of Viva Films, for example, is ethnic Chinese so it should not be surprising that she produced several *Mano Po* films centering around Tsinoy families. The late Betty Go Belmonte, daughter of *Fookien Times* publisher Go Puan Seng, was among those who established the *Philippine Daily Inquirer.* She also established the *Philippine Star,* currently the country's second largest broadsheet newspaper.

Kaisa, together with *Manila Times,* another newspaper owned by ethnic Chinese, has sponsored an annual search for outstanding Chinese-Filipino in various fields. The award categories, which include public officials, literature and journalism, medicine, and the sciences, reflect how the ethnic Chinese have diversified.

2. *Citizenship.* The economic diversification of the ethnic Chinese would not have been possible without Filipino citizenship becoming easier to acquire. The practice of various professions like medicine and law, for example, are barred to non-Filipinos. In the 1950s and 1960s many ethnic

Chinese who did take courses like medicine, engineering, nursing, and pharmacy eventually joined the Filipino exodus to the States.

To run for various public offices such as Congress requires not just Filipino citizenship but natural-born status, which meant those who were naturalized in the 1970s are still barred from participating in politics as officials.

3. *Civil Society participation.* The strong sense of self-help among the ethnic Chinese is today being translated into civil society participation and reaching out to the majority Filipino population through activities ranging from medical missions to entire firefighting fleets.

4. *Women's status.* This factor is often overlooked in the shaping of gender identities. The local ethnic Chinese women, especially if products of intermarriage, had more social space and higher status than their counterparts in China, able to participate more fully in activities outside of the household. The famous women of Malolos, who dared to write Spanish officials to ask for higher education and inspired Rizal's even more famous letter, were mestiza Chinese.[13]

In traditional Chinese society, Chinese mothers have been conservative guardians of Chinese culture. The Philippine experience is showing how Filipina mothers, as well as ethnic Chinese mothers, may take on a different role, pushing for ethnic change and more radical transformations in society. It is not surprising that the Tsinoy movement is headed by a woman, and almost runs parallel to the patriarchal Federation of Filipino-Chinese Chambers of Commerce and Industry.

5. *Religion.* Many ethnic Chinese are Christian, and while there are some attempts to retain a Chinese cachet in the practice of Christianity (for example, using Chinese religious songs and liturgy, offering incense), the pull of Christian religions is definitely toward a more Filipino, if not Western, practice.

The diversities in Filipino Christianity are reflected among the ethnic Chinese as well. Protestant groups, especially smaller "house" evangelical sects, have many ethnic Chinese followers. Within the Catholic Church, there are also various Chinese segmentations, including growing membership in the Opus Dei.

It should be noted that Taoism, Confucianism and Buddhism remain popular among the ethnic Chinese. The emergence of humanist Buddhist groups, with a strong emphasis on charity work, is also significant in the way it contributes to greater civil society participation.

6. *Language.* Being able to speak and write Chinese is an important cultural marker. We see a wide range here on linguistic capacity. Many younger ethnic Chinese no longer write or speak Chinese. Others may be able to understand a little of Chinese. Still others speak Chinese languages that are heavily modified, taking on many local terms. There are in fact even variations now on Minnan depending on the region; the ethnic Chinese from Cebuano-speaking areas, for example, will incorporate *man* to end their sentences, as Cebuanos do. There has been a resurgence of interest in Chinese language mainly as an asset for business and for the practice of professions.
7. *Geographical dispersal and emergence from the ghettos.* Perhaps the most visible change that has taken place in the last 50 years or so has been the move out of ghettos by the Chinese. During the Spanish colonial period, the Chinese were forced to live in the Parian just outside Intramuros. Even today there are distinct Chinatowns in each of the larger cities in the Philippines, together with schools, restaurants, and places of worship and cemeteries. But the ethnic Chinese themselves have dispersed, moving to suburbia and sometimes creating new Chinatowns, but with less of the Chinese imprint. Metro Manila itself has at least three Chinatowns now: the original one in the Binondo area, another one in Banaue (Quezon City), and a third in San Juan.

The three Chinatowns reflect differences in cultural assimilation as well as class. On the fringes of the original Binondo Chinatown, for example, still live many ethnic Chinese from the lower and middle classes, renting tiny apartments and living on small salaries. The newer Chinatowns, on the other hand, are homes to some of the taipans and tycoons, their children going to private schools that charge upwards of PHP100,000 a year in tuition. The richest Chinese tycoons interestingly enough are not even in these Chinatowns, choosing instead to live in one of Makati's exclusive subdivisions.

This dispersal has also meant the emergence of subcultures. Gena Valerie Chua describes the segmentation in terms of her classmates in college: "Uptown were those who went to the two schools in San Juan (geographically located on a hill); Downtown was anyone from Binondo… and Midtown was basically anything in between."[14]

8. *Racial relations.* As an anthropologist, I use the term *racial discrimination* with great reluctance since race is an artificial construct, without real biological basis. The attribution of particular physical characteristics to separate races is artificial. At the same time both the ethnic Chinese and non-ethnic Chinese in the Philippines use terms like *lahi* to draw boundaries and borders accompanied, sadly, by discrimination, invoking the racial element.

The tensions underlying the discrimination have varied across history, as we saw in my earlier review of migration waves. The term *anti-Chinese discrimination* may not be totally accurate since quite often, as in the Malaysian *bumiputra* policy, what has actually happened is an assertion of nationalism. For example, during the administration of Manila Mayor Arsenio Lacson, signage using Chinese characters was banned, almost as if to assert Filipino-ness in the 1950s.

Racial discrimination seems to have declined over the years but has not disappeared, expressed sometimes in rather extreme forms such as murders and kidnappings.

Amy Chua in her book *World on Fire* describes how the resentment of a dominant economic minority has spawned violence and kidnappings.[15] The scale has not been as horrendous as that of Indonesia but can be serious enough to sometimes push ethnic Chinese to isolate themselves or even to disengage and migrate.

On the part of the ethnic Chinese, the continuing insistence among many families on marrying *lan nang* has been problematic. Gena Valerie Chua describes how painful this is for many young Chinese-Filipinos: "My friends call it the 'Great Wall', their own witty analogy for all the broken hearts, the ruined relationships, the you-and-me-against-the-world love stories brought about by this unforgiving rule."[16]

9. *Re-emergence of China.* With China's entry into global affairs, there is a pull factor for ethnic Chinese in terms of pride in things Chinese. Some ethnic Chinese families have gone further, sending their children to China to study. This happened especially during the rash of kidnappings. But more than a security measure, it was also part of an interest in reviving Chinese identity.

The Chinese government gives importance to relationships with overseas Chinese, each province having an office that takes care of these relationships to court tourism, business investments, education, and cultural exchanges. One of my informants showed me a New Year's card he had received from the Jiangsu Federation of Overseas Chinese, supposedly a private confederation of Chinese businesses that have dealings with overseas Chinese.

The Chinese government also has a Confucius Institute, similar to the British Council and the Goethe House but based in schools like the Ateneo and Xavier, offering Chinese language lessons as well as exposure to various aspects of Chinese culture, including *tai chi chuan* (shadow boxing) and Chinese painting.

10. *Double diaspora.* There is much to learn from the Chinese experience in the Philippines, as we witness the world's third largest diaspora in modern times: after the Chinese and the Indians, Filipinos are now the most dispersed people in the world, with many emerging hyphenated ethnicities, for example, Filipino-American and *Japinoy.* The number of Chinese-Filipinos who have joined this diaspora is not small – there is, for example, an entire community of Chinese-Filipinos in Vancouver that originally came from Davao City; the community continues to bond in terms of that Davao origin.

Migration for the ethnic Chinese was made easier because of two factors. First, many of the migrants and their families were not able to acquire Filipino citizenship. After the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, these Filipinos technically became refugees and were given priority by US immigration as people seeking asylum. Migration was also easier for the Chinese who went into the medical professions.

A second reason for the large numbers of Filipino-Chinese and Chinese-Filipinos leaving for North America was the discrimination encountered in the Philippines. Not quite accepted as Filipino and raised with a strong Chinese identity, it was not surprising that the ethnic Chinese were quicker to disengage from the Philippines and leave. More studies will be needed to look at this sub-group of the Filipino diaspora, but my hypothesis is that with non-existent roots in China and shallow roots in the Philippines, these migrants become Americanized rapidly, with no problems handling the resulting double-hyphenation (Chinese-Filipino-American).

Policy Implications

More than a thousand years of Chinese migration to the Philippines has resulted in many forms of interaction with varying impact. Philippine languages carry the imprint of these interactions, with Chinese words inserted into many domains—kinship terms, household items, food—indicating relationships that were quite intimate, and also of the pedestrian day-to-day type.

Fears of the Chinese have always been there, and continue today, often a function of larger regional or even global politics. Today's latent anti-Chinese sentiments may include a fear of communism, a resentment of shoddy if not dangerous goods from the mainland, perceptions of Filipino politicians coddling the Chinese, and simply, the high visibility of the Chinese in businesses.

Yet, the centuries of interaction have shown that the ethnic Chinese can assimilate into mainstream Philippine society even while retaining some Chinese ethnic identity across generations. In the past the choices were simpler. There were the Chinese who came to the Philippines only to trade, returning to China without any significant ties to the Philippines. Those who did stay in the Philippines, and we are talking here about an almost exclusively male émigré population, intermarried and their offspring quickly became Filipino.

Today the situation is much more complex. I have described three possible streams or pathways for the ethnic Chinese. Projections into the future are not easy. For example, I would not venture to say that the new émigrés will retain a primary Chinese identity. Many of them have assimilated quite rapidly into Philippine society, even as they may themselves become guardians of Chinese culture, teaching Chinese and managing the Chinese press.

In some cases these factors have interacted, perhaps amplifying each other. As more ethnic Chinese took on Filipino citizenship, it allowed them to purchase land and enter the retail trade legally, allowing the diversification of capital investments. Ironically those who entered manufacturing, helping to build a national bourgeoisie, have suffered in recent years, unable to compete which cheap goods coming in from China. There is ambivalence among these business persons as to how they can relate to China.

The changing economic landscape has interacted with other spheres of society in the shaping of ethnic identity. Quite clearly it is the richer ethnic Chinese who seem more conscious about preserving some sense of Chinese-ness. A magazine like Asian Dragon, sold at PHP250 each, is not within the budgetary priorities of ordinary ethnic Chinese. In fact, informants note that assimilation into the Filipino mainstream is more rapid among lower-class ethnic Chinese. Intermarriages happen more frequently, and consciousness about Chinese culture is quickly diluted.

I have tried to demonstrate that the attitudes of the host population toward the ethnic Chinese were crucial in pulling the migrants toward assimilation or pushing them to the margins and ghettos, or even into another diaspora. Quite often the policies of the host population were themselves to blame for the ethnic Chinese's retreat into parochialism and chauvinism as a defense mechanism.

There has been much ambivalence in official policies toward the ethnic Chinese. For example, while the government forced Chinese schools to filipinize, they have continued to exempt Chinese drugstores from government requirements of safety and proof of efficacy for its medicinal products, the reason here being that the drugstores are cultural institutions.

Many older policies need to be reviewed and revised. An example comes with the Chinese schools being forced to reduce the number of hours of Chinese lessons; yet, today many Filipino educators themselves recognize the importance of Chinese lessons, even sending their own children to Chinese language classes.

The ethnic Chinese will also need to become more introspective. Foremost, it has to become more conscious about eradicating the last vestiges of racism, from the ban on intermarriages to language like *whan na*.

The experiences of the local ethnic Chinese show that there need not be a contradiction between a sense of Chinese-ness and of being Filipino. The young Tsinoy and Tsinay have no problems with code-switching, moving from Filipino (Tagalog) into English into Minnan (or, for those in Cebu, into Cebuano). Neither are there problems practicing Catholicism but retaining a veneration of ancestors. Finally, there seems to be no question that political allegiance is no longer a matter of choice between Taiwan and the People's Republic of China. The local ethnic Chinese, with the exception of the new émigré, consider themselves Filipino.

There should be no problems either with retaining a sense of Chinese-ness which, going beyond the externals such as language, could include a deeper internationalization of certain philosophical views. Older Chinese rightly decry the way younger ethnic Chinese have abandoned what they (the older Chinese) feel were the strengths of Chinese culture that allowed Chinese businesses and ventures to become successful: hard work, frugality, and mutual help. Conspicuous consumption among the younger Chinese is a source of concern for older ethnic

Chinese who see this not just as a squandering of wealth or a way of inciting envy and resentment in the host population but also as a loss of civic consciousness.

In the process of researching for this paper, the conversations I had with both younger and older Chinese reminded me that policy making needs to extend to all spheres of social interaction, down to the personal. I have mentioned that we need to hear more voices, and it is in this spirit that I recommend more documentation to assist in an extended definition of policy making.

(1) Local histories of ethnic Chinese communities, which could show finer details of ethnic dynamics and contribute to a stronger social memory of the Chinese Filipinos, for both ethnic Chinese and the host populations. A good example of what could be done is *The Ethnic Chinese in Baguio and in the Cordillera Philippines: The Untold Story of Pioneers.*[17] I have mentioned that the documentation so far of Chinese-Filipino history has tended to be very male in its focus. More life histories of the women are sorely needed considering the central role they play in the shaping of ethnicity and culture.

(2) Studies on the transformations, as well as persistence, in local ethnic Chinese culture – from food and language and health practices to religion and kinship ties – as a way of shedding insights into social change in general and how certain cultural elements might help toward cross-cultural understanding.

(3) Studies on how China deals with overseas Chinese in the Philippines. As I mentioned earlier, this includes convincing local Chinese to invest in China. Given the many Filipinos now living overseas, we might want to pick up lessons from the Chinese government's pragmatic initiatives to promote goodwill.

(4) An incisive review of how Philippine policies toward the Chinese (or maybe foreigners in general) have evolved through the centuries and the impacts of these policies. As I mentioned earlier, there have been many variations here and an understanding of these variations should help us to avoid duplicating mistakes of the past while picking up the good practices.

Conclusion

After all that has been said, the question that keeps emerging is this: How will China as a regional, if not global, power affect the relationships between local ethnic Chinese and the host Filipino population?

The answers lie, in part, at looking to the past. Centuries of the interactions between the Chinese and the Filipino host population have been marked by a whole range of attitudes, from violent repression as in the Parian massacres to cordial, if not intimate, relationships.

What is striking is that for all the talk of China as a power, all the waves of Chinese migrants have largely been left on their own to fend for survival. China was always in the background, looming large and powerful. Yet, China too was ambivalent in its attitudes toward the migrants, tapping them for remittances and investments sent back to China but not necessarily fighting for their welfare.

It is not surprising then that the Chinese in the Philippines, as with many other overseas Chinese communities in other countries, developed strong traditions of mutual help. Where local anti-Chinese discrimination existed, these mechanisms for mutual help became all the more important.

Today the Chinese government is more visible in fostering ties with overseas Chinese, but it still keeps its distance. In fact outright intervention in local Chinese affairs by Chinese governments was stronger during the Cold War, when Beijing and Taipei competed for the local Chinese's loyalties through schools and newspapers, and when Beijing supported the Communist Party of the Philippines (Marxist-Leninist-Mao Zedong Thought). Today, with the Cold War over, there are no ideological battles to support.

In the disputes over the Philippine Sea, China has not called on the local Chinese for shows of support or allegiance, and it is not likely that local Chinese will speak out either, not so much because it would be too controversial as because the issue does not resonate in their lives.

For the local Chinese, the struggle is not so much a choice between being Chinese or Filipino as in joining an entire nation that is itself in search of an identity. For the local Chinese, questions are raised about the very relevance of acknowledging Chinese ancestry and heritage, of speaking or not speaking Chinese, all in the context of the Philippines and of being Filipino.

Notes

1 The paper was first written in 2009 as part of the PEJA Writing Grant given to the author. Some parts have been edited while a new study may be necessary to update on the details that have changed since that year-Eds.
2 Edgar Wickberg, "The Philippines," in *The Encyclopedia of Chinese Overseas*, ed. Lynn Pan (Singapore: Archipelago Press, 1998), 187.
3 Gena Valerie Chua, "Pei Pa Koa: The ties that Bind," *The Philippine Star* (Philippines), October 24, 2008. Henceforth to be referred as "Pei Pa Koa…"
4 Ibid, n.p.
5 Teresita Ang See, Go Bon Juan, Doreen Go Yu, and Yvonne Chua. *Tsinoy-the Chinese in Philippine Life* (Manila: Kaisa para sa Kaunlaran, Inc., 2005), n.p.
6 Edgar Wickberg, *The Chinese in Philippine Life 1850-1898* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2000), n.p.
7 I. Hubert Reynolds and Harriet Reynolds, *Chinese in Ilocos: 1950s-1960s* (Manila: Kaisa para sa Kaunlaran, Inc, 1998), n.p.
8 Roel Landingin, "Paradox for Philippines as Chinese Set Up Shop," *Financial Times* (Philippines), July 24, 2007.
9 Lay Cheng, "We si fei li pin ren (I Am Filipino)," *Sino-Fil Daily* (Manila), August 17, 2008. To be subsequently referred as "We si fei..."
10 Ibid.
11 R Kwan Laurel, *Ongpin Stories* (Manila: Kaisa para sa Kaunlaran, 2008), n.p.
12 Cheng, "We si fei...," 2008.
13 Nicanor Tiongson, *The Women of Malolos* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University, 2004), n.p.
14 Valerie Chua, "Pei Pa Koa…," 2008.
15 Amy Chua, *World on Fire* (New York: Doubleday, 2004), n.p.
16 Valerie Chua, "Pei Pa Koa…," 2008.
17 Charles Cheng and Katherine Bersamira, *The Ethnic Chinese in Baguio and in the Cordillera Philippines: The Untold Story of Pioneers* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990).

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