

# THE CHINESE IN THE PHILIPPINES: CONTINUITY AND CHANGE

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China's growth, coupled with its open door policy in recent years, has attracted considerable investments from Chinese overseas, specially from Southeast Asian countries. To a certain extent, this has created a "China fever" in the form of an investments and development rush into China. This in turn has led to new speculations about the cultural renewal and reorientation or "resinicization" of ethnic Chinese in Southeast Asia. All these recent developments — investments rush, China fever and discussions on the possibilities of resinicization — raise a pressing need to reexamine the ethnic Chinese problem specially for those who espouse integration to the mainstream as a solution to this dilemma.

The growing interest and preoccupation with China certainly challenge the prevailing thought that, for the ethnic Chinese, the only direction or alternative is to be an integral part of mainstream society and be an inseparable weave in the fabric of the nation where they chose to sink their roots into. Hence, in discussing the problem of continuity and change in Southeast Asian ethnic Chinese communities, I have chosen to make an exploratory analysis of the new wave of "China fever" in relation to the integration of the Chinese community into Philippine life.<sup>1</sup>

## *Background on the Philippine-Chinese Community*

There are between 800,000 to 850,000 Chinese in the Philippines, making up roughly 1.3 percent of the total Philippine population of 68 million. It is the smallest ethnic Chinese population in all of the Southeast Asian countries, both in absolute number and in relation to the native population. Eighty-five percent of the early immigrant Chinese who found their way to

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the Philippines hailed from the province of Fujian in China and 15 percent from the province of Guangdong.

The history of the Chinese presence in the Philippines dates back to pre-Hispanic times. Since then, the Chinese community in the Philippines has slowly evolved from that of an immigrant community to a well-integrated one. The earlier community was composed mainly of members whose dreams were of doing well in their temporary home and one day triumphantly going back to their mother country. The present day community is largely composed of a new generation of Chinese Filipinos whose commitments are to that of their country of birth. Eighty-five percent of the ethnic Chinese population now are composed of local-born second, third and fourth generations who were raised and educated in the Philippines.

### ***The Immigrant First Generation***

Although the history of the Chinese in the Philippines dates back to more than a thousand years, the appearance of the local-born second generation had been delayed until the end of World War II for various reasons. Among them were the massacres and mass expulsions during the Spanish regime<sup>2</sup> which wiped out a big part of the population at that time, and the implementation of the California Exclusion Act in the Philippines during the American regime.<sup>3</sup> These historical incidents greatly limited the number of Chinese in the Philippines and resulted in the split family system typical of many early immigrant communities. The head of the family was in the Philippines but the wife and small children were left behind in China. Thus, the sons were born and raised in China and were brought to the Philippines only when they were old enough to be of help to the father. The cycle was repeated when the son returned to China to get married.

Hence, it was mainly just after World War II when whole families, including the women, immigrated to the Philippines, that the native-born generation appeared. Therefore, except for a few who came to the Philippines much earlier and had been assimilated completely into the Filipino mainstream, the first generation in the contemporary Chinese Filipino community are mostly composed of those who immigrated to the Philippines before the war and during the 1970s and 80s.<sup>4</sup> Their local-born children now make up the second and third generations.

Because of this particular historical condition, many of the first generation immigrants remain alive today, and in fact, still exercise leadership in the Chinese community through their organizations. Traditional organizations in the Chinese community as well as Chinese schools and Chinese language newspapers could not exist without them. Naturally, the younger second or third generations also play a certain role, but as long as the first generation parents are still around, their thoughts, sentiments and actions usually become the basis for describing the make-up of the local Chinese Filipino community.

At present, if we say China fever or *hua-wen* fever (strong, preoccupation with Chinese language education) in the Chinese Filipino community, it is mainly reflected in the first generation immigrants and their organizations. Given their nature and emotional sentiments, this does not come as a surprise. However, beyond this very limited circle of people, the situation is vastly different. Although the first generation immigrants have exerted great efforts to teach the second and third generations to follow in their footsteps and hew their line, or to be as engrossed as they are regarding their hometowns in China, the outcome has been very limited. As a result of the environment and historical forces, the changes in the nature, sentiments and aspirations of the younger generations are as inevitable as “flower falling from its stem.”

### ***The Local-born Young Generation***

This brings to fore another problem — when we study the Chinese community in the Philippines, do we use the viewpoint of a community in flux or one that is stagnant? Do we look at the majority local-born generation or the minority first generation who, however, wields positions of influence? Do we consider the long-term or limit our analysis to the short-term? The positions on these issues would largely affect the way we perceive the Chinese community in the Philippines. Different studies have been done about the changes that have been taking place among the post-war local-born generation. Some of these changes revolve around dimensions like first language, reading habits and outlook on intermarriage.<sup>5</sup> More recent studies, however, reinforce the observation that while the older generation immigrant Chinese have persisted in the preservation of Chinese culture, the tide of change among the younger generation could no longer be turned back.

In 1991, the Philippine-Chinese Language Education Research Center and an exchange scholar from the East Asian Studies of the University of Tokyo undertook a research on the cultural background and identity of students of the Philippine Cultural High School (PCHS), the oldest Chinese high school in the Philippines and the one with the highest standard of Chinese language education. The survey was conducted among freshmen to senior high school students (first to fourth year) with ages ranging from 12 to 19 years. Some of the data obtained were quite revealing.<sup>6</sup> One of the questions asked was the number of times the students have gone to China. Their responses were:

Not at all	70%
Once	10%
Twice	7%
Thrice	3%
Four or five times	1%

Because of their age and financial capability, the number of times a student has gone to China will certainly be vastly different from the adults; but the figures still show that at least among high school students, one cannot see the ardent China fever in existence, as only 10 percent of them have been to China. When the students were asked about the subjects they liked most, the result was:

English	79%
Filipino	72%
Chinese	46%

As to the subjects they liked least or do not like, the answers were:

Chinese	14%
English	1%
Filipino	2%

Quite interesting is the response to the question that, in a competition among the sports teams of China, Taiwan and the Philippines, which one will you root for? Those who expressed support for the Philippines were twice those for China and five times those for Taiwan. This again is a strong

indication that among the younger ones, China fever does not exist. We have to emphasize that PCHS is located near the center of the so-called Chinatown area; not only is its Chinese language standard among the highest, it also has the most links with China. If other schools had been chosen, like those which are more westernized in approach or those outside the cities or in the provinces, the results of the survey would have probably been more revealing. This survey reinforces our earlier contention that among the younger generation, not only is China fever difficult to whip up but their sense of identification with the Philippines has already been firmly established. Hence, their integration into the mainstream remains to be the historical direction and choice that Chinese Filipinos can opt for.

In terms of background, upbringing, orientation and education, there are indeed significant differences between this younger generation and the older immigrant generation, a summary of which is given below.<sup>7</sup>

The younger generation	The older generation
Born after World War II	Born before World War II
Born in the Philippines, usually has adopted a Christian name	Born in China, usually has a Chinese name
Identify more with the Philippines and have no first hand experiences of China	Have deep sentiments toward China and first hand or at least childhood experiences of China
Can easily cross ethnic barriers; socialize both with Chinese and Filipinos; at ease in both environments	Confine their lives and activities within the Chinese community socialize more with Chinese
Join Filipino groups like Rotary, Jaycees, Lions Club, etc.	Join family and hometown associations, local chambers of commerce, etc.
Have greater facility in using Filipino or English	First language is Chinese

The younger generation	The older generation
Attend Philippine colleges or universities	Attend only Chinese-language schools or minimal college
Westernized in taste, values and lifestyle; observe minimum of traditional Chinese rites	Very Chinese in outlook and lifestyle, observe Chinese rites and traditions, use Chinese form of social conventions and etiquette
Consider the Philippines as home and have no deep attachments toward China	Consider China as Motherland and the Philippines as second home

With this as background, this paper will examine the issue of continuity and change within the community specially at it relates to the problem of recent developments in China, the so-called “China fever”, resinicization, Chinese language education, publications and other indicators of change specially among the younger local-born generation.

### *Philippine-Chinese Investments in China*

Like the rest of the ASEAN countries, members of the Chinese Filipino business community have also made a beeline into China’s investments market. There are big, medium and small scale investments from the Chinese Filipinos and the number continues to grow.<sup>8</sup> However, in contrast to the ethnic Chinese from other ASEAN countries whose investments are mainly due to the pull of the lucrative Chinese market and favorable business climate in China, in the case of the Chinese Filipino business community, we have to add the push factors. These include the widespread kidnapping of Chinese Filipinos since the last half of 1992 and the grave power crisis in 1993 that resulted in 6-12 hour brownouts.<sup>9</sup> Both these pull (i.e. favorable business climate in China) and push factors (i.e. adverse conditions in the Philippines) have been responsible for the investment rush into China on the part of the Chinese Filipino business community. Hence, clearly such move is not necessarily purely due to China fever or rekindling of interest in China; much less is it due to patriotic reasons or *ai guo ai xiang* (love of country and hometown) sentiments as many want to conclude.

We do not have accurate figures on how much capital has been pulled out of the Philippines and channelled into investments overseas specially at the height of the kidnapping of Chinese Filipinos, but we can extrapolate from other sources. For instance, in a paper on "Ethnic Chinese in Philippine Banking," Go Bon Juan reported a drop in the share of total assets and deposits of ethnic Chinese-owned banks among all the commercial banks in the last quarter of 1992 and the first quarter of 1993 (see Fig. 1 below).<sup>10</sup> This period coincided with the time when the Chinese community was most beset by kidnappings; this was also the first time in the last six years that a drop in the share of Chinese-owned banks was seen. Although the percentage of drop was small, it still meant billions of pesos in absolute value considering that the share in total assets and total deposits was P700 billion and almost P500 billion respectively.

	Last quarter of 1992	First quarter of 1993
Drop in total assets	0.71%	0.66%
Drop in total deposits	0.06%	0.42%

Fig. 1. Drop in total assets and deposits of ethnic Chinese-owned banks

Because 85 percent of the ethnic Chinese in the Philippines hail from Fujian province, their investments and development projects in China are confined mostly to Fujian province, specially in Xiamen, Shizi, Jinjiang and other hometowns of origin. However, we cannot just conclude that this preponderance of investments in the hometowns is a manifestation of overseas Chinese resinicization, returning home fever or a patriotic gesture (*ai guo ai xiang*), much less as a desire to go against the tide of integration into mainstream Southeast Asian societies.

From the size of investments, most of the big investors in China are still confined to the *taipan* class (elite) like Lucio Tan, Henry Sy, George Ty, and John Gokongwei. However, even if we put the big *taipan* investors and the small and medium scale businesses together, the quantity and proportion of their investments are still quite small in the following respects: (a) their investments and assets in China in proportion to their total investments and assets in the Philippines; (b) total investments and assets of Chinese Filipinos in China in proportion to total investments and assets of all Chinese Filipinos

in the Philippines; and (c) total number of Chinese Filipino investors in China in proportion to the number of Chinese Filipino businessmen and women in the Philippines. The amount may be considerable in absolute numbers, but its total proportion to what the Chinese Filipinos have in the Philippines is still very small specially if we delineate the true definition of what constitutes the Chinese community, and if we recognize that this class of businessmen and women really forms a very small sector of the latter.

### *Problems in Definition*

In the academic community, we have a more accurate and acceptable definition of who is considered an ethnic Chinese and how a Chinese community is delineated. We also take the differences between the immigrant and local-born generations into consideration. In general practice, however, specially in the case of the Philippines, when one mentions the Chinese community, the reference point is usually the older generation immigrant Chinese who are generally active in the affairs of the community, wield some positions of influence, and are mostly members and leaders of various Chinese organizations. As a result, the understanding and impression the public gains about the Chinese community are based mostly on the activities, outlook and thinking presented by this group of people, their organizations or their leaders.

Such perceptions are often one-sided and inaccurate, specially since a number of these Chinese organizations are still heavily influenced by Chinese (i.e. China and Taiwan) politics. The partiality and limitations of such generalizations become even more serious because scholars on overseas Chinese often base their research on local Chinese papers which report mainly on the activities of this group of people. The inaccuracies are perpetuated once these scholarly studies get published.

Based on the definition of an ethnic Chinese or based on their age, birth, upbringing and education, the local-born second, third, or even fourth generation who are well-integrated into mainstream society and who already identify with the Philippines, make up more than 85 percent of the ethnic Chinese population in the country. Among them, those in their 30s or 40s have already started to take over the reins of businesses from their parents. In fact, some have even gone beyond the accomplishments of their parents and opened up new ventures on their own successfully. The problem is, in a



traditional Chinese community, as long as an elder (from the older generation) is still around, he is the one who holds the power and generally makes public appearances. Under such circumstances, therefore, the recognized heads or leaders of the community all come from the first generation and though much smaller in number, they and their activities, like heavily investing in China, are considered as representative of the Chinese community.

### ***Chinese Language Education and Newspapers***

The far-reaching changes in the Chinese community can also be seen from the problem of Chinese language education. Although support for Chinese language education has not been lacking and not a few businessmen-philanthropists have spent a lot of money and effort towards its reform and improvement, Chinese language education proves hard to revive and continues to deteriorate. So far, *hua-wen* fever is seen mainly among the first generation and some Chinese associations. From time to time Chinese language dailies play up attempts to revive interest in Chinese composition, Chinese literature, or *hua-wen* in general. However, the real target of Chinese language education — the Chinese students — remain disinterested and unenamored with what they consider a very difficult subject. We should learn from such experiences and the people who continue to whip up a non-existent China-fever should be wary of self-delusion or false satisfaction.<sup>11</sup>

The same analysis is true with Chinese language papers. The ability to read Chinese language papers is now confined largely to the first generation; in fact, these papers serve mainly as their public forum. The younger generation cannot read Chinese language papers much less do they find these papers reflective of their sentiments. This can be seen from the five Chinese language dailies published in the Philippines, each of which has a different stand on China or Straits politics. The China-Taiwan schism, however, does not have a market for the younger generation. China politics is a non-issue for them, they do not understand it nor are they even interested in debates on it. Chinese language papers certainly do not reflect or represent the whole Chinese community and using these papers to do research or to know more about the Chinese community, at least in the Philippines, has many serious limitations and drawbacks.

We do not deny, however, that there are certain groups of people who are still engrossed with developments in China. We do not deny also that there is still enthusiasm among some sectors for an upgrading of Chinese language education. But we have to dispassionately see and understand that all of these are confined to just a small sector within the minority, whose views, unfortunately, are often taken to represent the entire community.

Even if there is such a resurgence of interest in China, or an existence of China fever, we believe that, specially from a long term point of view, the integration of the ethnic Chinese into mainstream society is still the historical direction for the Chinese community. Most of the businesses and livelihood of the ethnic Chinese are rooted overseas and started overseas; their businesses, assets, interests and properties repose in their countries of residence and not in China. Their identification is with the country of residence and their interests, problems and concerns are thus inseparable from the fate of those countries. Even if their investments and development projects in China have grown, in general these are still very small compared to their total investments in their own countries.

In this connection, we suggest that what overseas Chinese, scholars specially, must pay attention to is a different kind of fever, that is, the “going abroad fever” from within China itself. This prevalence of people leaving China affects not only the image of China itself but also the development and evolution of Chinese communities overseas. In fact, this reality serves to negate the China fever. The new wave of migration adds pressure on and complicates the problems of existing Chinese communities.<sup>12</sup> It reenacts the history of the Chinese overseas all over again although this time, the process of evolution is likely to be shorter. By working in Chinese newspapers (e.g. as typesetters and proofreaders), teaching in Chinese schools or serving as assistants in various Chinese traditional organizations, these new immigrants reinforce the cultural and educational institutions in their community, serving to strengthen them and ensuring their continuity. Without them, most of the ethnic Chinese community’s cultural and educational work would not be possible.

### ***Cultural and Economic Outlook in the Community***

Aside from the possibility of studying the phenomenon of new migration from China and its impact on existing Chinese communities, another development worth examining is the local Chinese community since the 1970s. The 1970s marked a very significant decade for the Chinese community in the Philippines. It was during this period that mass naturalization took place followed closely by the nationalization of Chinese schools. These two executive fiats, however, had contrasting effects -- an upturn and a downturn -- on the Chinese community.

The mass naturalization allowed the majority of the alien Chinese to become citizens of the country. It resulted in a big economic boost, a period of rapid development since it removed a tough barrier to identification with their country of residence. With citizenship or legal identity, people became more confident in building and expanding their businesses. On the other hand, the Filipinization of Chinese schools contributed to the deterioration of the standards of Chinese language education.<sup>13</sup> The Filipinization of citizenship created an upturn, a development of the Chinese community economically and socially while the Filipinization of schools, in contrast, resulted in its downturn or deterioration. Economically, the community moved forward and became more developed but culturally, the community moved backward and became weak .

This opposes the popular belief that the growth of Chinese businesses or the economic development of the Chinese community is explained by the presence of Chinese culture. In this particular example, economic development took place in a period where Chinese cultural development deteriorated. This view may be an oversimplification but bringing it up is meant to highlight the ironic contrast. In truth, the historical development of the Chinese overseas economy is actually a history of their identification with the country they chose to reside in. As the ethnic Chinese identify more with their country of residence, so are they likely to find common interests with the latter, specially after they obtain citizenship and political identification develops. With a stronger political identity comes a greater capacity to fight for their rights as citizens. Moreover, as their roots sink deeper into the country, so can they become more developed economically. Their businesses and industries can no longer be uprooted overnight.

This trend is also reflected in the cultural development of the Chinese community. As the ethnic Chinese absorb local language and culture to a greater degree, so will they find it easier to deal with the native population. The more integrated they are with the mainstream, the faster their economic growth and the stronger the conditions for success. In other words, as the ethnic Chinese become more Filipinized and exposed to Philippine education and the Filipino business circle, so will their advantages for growth and development increase.

### *Conclusion*

We have explored a new way of looking at the so-called China fever and resinicization of the Chinese overseas. In the case of the Chinese community in the Philippines, we have shown that such sentiments are confined mainly to the first generation immigrants. More importantly, we have pointed out that, in order to avoid misinterpreting developments in the Chinese community, we should examine the community as a whole and not focus only on what is true for a small sector. Seen from this perspective, we believe that integration into mainstream society still represents the better direction to secure the future of succeeding generations of Chinese Filipinos.

The problems of the ethnic Chinese community are not narrow parochial concerns of the community alone, much less can they be solved by looking towards China or Taiwan. During the height of the kidnapping menace, the older generation Chinese had hoped that China and Taiwan could exert their political and economic clout on the Philippine government so that it would put a stop to these activities, but they were bitterly disappointed. The local Chinese learned their lessons — that they can depend only on themselves and the cooperation of the native population on problems that affect them.

In the past two years, the ethnic Chinese in the Philippines have personally experienced the various political and economic difficulties, in addition to the natural disasters, that have affected the rest of the country. These experiences have firmly driven the lesson that their future in the Philippines is closely intertwined with the future of the country itself. They have underscored the unity of interests and concerns between the minority Chinese community and the majority mainstream society and the need to work together so that permanent solutions could be found for these problems.

In truth, the recent years have been a test not just for the resilience of the ethnic Chinese, but also for the validity of integration and their identification with the country. The Chinese say that true gold is tempered only from the hottest of fires; only when the local Chinese went through the most bitter trials did they realize their true place and role in Philippine society.

### NOTES

1. The issue of integration has been explored in various studies like in the works of: Teresita Ang See, "Integration and Identity: Social Changes in the Post World War Philippine-Chinese Community" in *The Chinese in the Philippines: Problems and Perspectives*. Manila: Kaisa Para sa Kaunlaran, 1990, pp. 1-17; Gerald McBeath, *Political Integration of the Philippine Chinese*, Berkeley, California: Center for South and Southeast Asia Studies, 1973; and Charles J. McCarthy, S.J. *Philippine Chinese Profile: Essays and Studies*. Manila: Pagkakaisa sa Pag-unlad, Inc., 1974.
2. For reference on the Chinese during the Spanish rule, the most useful are the two volumes of works by Felix Alfonso, *The Chinese in the Philippines, 1570-1770* (vol. 1) and *1770-1898* (vol. 2). Manila: Historical Conservation Society, 1969.
3. For the American period, refer to: Khin Khin Myint Jensen, *The Chinese in the Philippines during the American Regime 1898-1946*. (M.A. Thesis, University of Wisconsin, 1956); Dr. Edgar Wickenberg. *The Chinese in Philippine Life 1850-1898*, Yale University, 1965.
4. Chinben See, "Education and Ethnicity," in Teresita Ang See, ed. *The Chinese Immigrants - Collection of Writings of Prof. Chinben See*, pp. 119-129.
5. Teresita Ang See, "Chinese in the Philippines: Assets or Liabilities" in See, ed. *The Chinese in the Philippines, Problems and Perspectives*, *op. cit.* pp. 107-119.
6. Liao Zhe Yang, Huang Duan Ming and Yang Mei Mei, "A Survey on the Cultural Background and Identity of High School Chinese Students," in *Edukasyong Tsino*. Vol. III, No. 3. November 15, 1993 (in Chinese).

7. Teresita Ang See. "The Chinese in the Philippines: Changing Views and Perceptions" in See, ed. *The Chinese in the Philippines, Problems and Perspectives*, *op. cit.* 94-106.
8. Felicidad Tan-Co. "1. 17-B Strong Consumer Market Provides Motivation to Invest in 'Mother China'" in *Into the Dragon's Lair*. 6th Anniversary Report of the *Business World*.
9. Teresita Ang See. "On Kidnapping, Election and the Political Position of the Chinese in the Philippines". Paper delivered at the International Conference on the Legal, Political and Economic Status of the Chinese in the Diaspora, University of Berkeley, November 26-29, 1992.
10. Go Bon Juan. "Ethnic Chinese in Philippine Banking" in *Tulay Monthly, Chinese Filipino Digest* (October 4, 1993). Also refer to "The Myth of Chinese Dominance" in *The Far Eastern Economic Review*. Vol. 156, No. 46, November 18, 1993.
11. Victor Go, Lily Chua, and Rosita Tan have written several articles about the problems of Chinese language education which were published in *Crossroads: Short Essays on the Chinese Filipinos*. Teresita Ang See and Lily T. Chua, eds. Manila: Kaisa Para sa Kaunlaran, Inc., 1988. pp. 43-75.
12. In the Philippines, the problem of illegal or overstaying aliens (mostly Chinese nationals) has always been a thorn in the Chinese community since politicians and the Bureau of Immigration are often fond of harassing them to the detriment of the larger community. Refer to Ang See, "The Chinese in the Philippines: Assets or Liabilities" in See, ed. *The Chinese in the Philippines, Problems and Perspectives*, *op. cit.*, 107-119.
13. It must be noted, however, that there are other reasons for the deterioration of Chinese language education, aside from the Filipinization of schools.