CHAPTER NINE

NEGOTIATING IDENTITIES WITHIN CHINESE MERCHANT FAMILIES: TO BE “FILIPINO” OR TO BE “CHINESE”

Introduction

In the early twentieth century, as several factors combined to create political, economic, and cultural notions of nation-based identities, members of Chinese merchant families of the nineteenth century adopted flexible strategies in order to negotiate the attempts of the American colonial government in the Philippines, the declining imperial and fledgling Nationalist governments in China, and Chinese and Filipino nationalists in the Philippines to localize them into disciplinable subjects. In this chapter, I will describe the commercial and familial practices of Cu Unjieng and his family, as well as those of Mariano Limjap, to provide examples of such practices.

Cu Unjieng

One of the most prominent Chinese at the turn of the twentieth century was Cu Unjieng (fig. 24). A discussion and examination of his life and socio-economic practices can enrich and deepen our understanding of how Chinese merchant elite families adapted to and negotiated the changes occurring within the Philippines and in China.

Early Life

Cu Unjieng (邱允衡; Qiu Yunheng) was born on 1 January 1867 in Cuoshang (厝上), a seaside village in Jinjiang County, prefecture of Quanzhou (Khu 2008, 9). Little is known about his father Qiu Jike (邱季科), except that he was born on 18 September 1834 and died on 15 November 1878. His mother was born on 5 November 1837, and was listed in the genealogy as Zhang Ge [niang] (張格娘). As mentioned in Chapter 1, the term “niang” is often appended to the name of women in genealogies, and was a polite term that can be equated
All published Chinese sources indicate that Unjieng’s personal name was Bingjun (秉鈞; meaning “to handle matters even-handedly”) and that his literary name or zi (字) as well as hao name was Liquan (立權; meaning “to establish authority over matters”) (Khu 2008, 9; QZSZ 2000, 3845).

Among his siblings, one brother Yunda (允達) stayed in China and studied to become a scholar, but did not pass any exams. Eventually, two of Yunda’s sons migrated to the Philippines. A younger brother named Yunyin (允胤) remained in China and handled the remittances Unjieng sent him to disburse (Khu 2008, 19). Unjieng’s youngest brother, Yuncai (允財), also went to the Philippines, although the date is uncertain. Among his three sisters, two eventually married and had sons who went to the Philippines to help out in Unjieng’s business. The youngest sister, who had bound feet, moved to Manila in 1937 (Khu 2008, 17–8).

While one of his brothers received a formal education, Unjieng did not. Instead, he attended one of the traditional clan schools or sishu (私塾; see Chapter 1) and “wrote beautiful calligraphy” (Khu 2008, 40).

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1 It often replaced the last character of a woman’s personal name and was widely used among the Chinese in Southern China.