CHAPTER NINE

A TWO-YEAR MERCHANT STRIKE (1636–1637)
AND THE CHINESE IN MANILA:
THE SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY CRISIS IN THE PHILIPPINES

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In 1636 and 1637 the Spanish merchants in the Philippines decided to interrupt the trade with Acapulco in Mexico as a protest against the enforcement of trade regulations by a royal inspector. This interruption meant that the Chinese merchants in the islands were out of business during these years, and when trade was finally restored the silver brought by the incoming galleon was not enough to cover the debts incurred by the Spaniards. The Chinese revolted and were massacred in large numbers. A violent episode in a century of wars and political upheavals was part of the trends and processes of the Seventeenth-Century Crisis that went beyond the merchant communities of America, China and Manila.¹

1. A Royal Inspector’s Visit and the Response from Manila

In 1635 the Spanish king Philip IV named Pedro de Quiroga y Moya a visitador or royal inspector. He arrived straight away at the port of Acapulco on the Pacific coast of Mexico and began an inquiry into the Manila-Acapulco galleon operations. The Spanish crown, well aware of the fraudulent activities of merchants, was at the time suffering acute financial distress and had thus decided to act.

The visitador found that the registered value of the arriving galleons’ merchandise was only 800,000 pesos, when in reality its true worth was in the neighbourhood of 4,000,000 pesos.² Quiroga responded by revaluing the cargo and collecting duties accordingly. In William Schürz’s words, “he laid an embargo on the line,” required a fine of 600,000 pesos to raise it, “and then interfered with the return of what proceeds remained from the sale of the cargo.”³ Things got worse. “To add to their consternation, the decree of 1636 was issued by the king interdicting all commerce between Mexico and Peru.”⁴

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² Souza, The Survival of the Empire, 81.
³ Schürz, The Manila Galleon, 188.
⁴ Zaide, Philippine Political and Cultural History, 326.
The merchants in the Philippines reacted forcefully by refusing to dispatch another galleon until the previous state of affairs had been restored. During the two years of interrupted trade (1636 and 1637), only one small vessel, a *patache*, crossed the Pacific, with 150,000 pesos of cargo, the property of Conde-Duque de Olivares, Felipe IV’s powerful first minister. The following year Sebastián Hurtado de Corcuera, the governor of the Philippines, wrote to the king that in protest against Quiroga’s actions the galleon Nuestra Señora de la Concepción would not carry a freight list. It did not matter: the galleon was shipwrecked. Another disaster followed in the spring of 1639, when the incoming galleon from Acapulco foundered off the east coast of Luzon. That was not the end of calamities, for the galleon back to Mexico in the summer of the same year sank near to Japan.

Imperial authorities preferred small revenues to a total absence of taxes, and given that social tensions in Mexico were high, they decided to change policies. Juan de Palafoux y Mendoza, a new general visitador to the viceroyalty, was more accommodating and things returned to the normal fraudulent routine. But the reverberations from Quiroga’s activities and the wreck of the galleons would last far longer in Manila. The immediate deadly consequence was a Chinese uprising from 20 November 1639 to 15 March 1640.

2. The Crisis of the Seventeenth Century

What might be regarded as a negative concatenation of circumstances resulting from an overzealous bureaucrat combined with natural disasters was actually part of a global web of events and processes that can be encompassed under the rubric of the “Seventeenth-Century Crisis.”

H. H. Lamb writes regarding the climatic changes that began in the sixteenth century and continued during the seventeenth century: “In the middle of the sixteenth century a remarkably sharp change occurred. And over the next hundred and fifty years or more the evidence points to the coldest regime […] at any time since the last major ice age ended a thousand years or so ago.” The eminent pioneer historian of the weather continues: “It is the only time for which evidence from all parts of the world indicates a colder regime than now.” William Atwell observed: “the climatic anomalies and particularly the declines in summer temperatures associated with volcanic eruptions often have had ‘catastrophic consequences for the world’s food supply.’” And that was what happened. The first months of the seventeenth century coincided with the eruption of the Huaynaputina volcano, between February and March of 1600, in

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6 MATHERS, “Nuestra Señora de la Concepción,” 45.
8 ATWELL, “Volcanism and Short-Term Climatic Change,” 71.