Book Reviews


Andrew Wilson’s book on the Chinese merchant elites in colonial Manila is a much welcome addition to the historiography on the ethnic Chinese in the Philippines, especially since it covers an important period, 1880–1916, in the history of the Chinese-Filipino community.


What I find most impressive is the wealth of materials gathered especially from primary sources like the archival records of the Zongli Yamen, the Waiwubu, and the Kuomintang repository in Taiwan; documents from the Number One Historical Archives in Beijing; and the National Archives in the Philippines and the United States. Wilson also spent some time at the Kaisa Para Sa Kaunlaran’s Chinben See Memorial Library which he acknowledges to be “perhaps the best single resource for the study of the Chinese in the Philippines” (p. 15). He has made extensive use of Kaisa’s collection of records, voluminous journals and anniversary and souvenir publications (most of them in Chinese) of the various families, hometowns, schools, and civic organizations in the Chinese-Filipino community. The book is thus a most valuable resource for the further study of the Chinese in the Philippines.

Wilson’s first chapter, “Origins and Evolution of the Manila-Chinese Community, 1571–1898,” gives a concise background of Spanish colonial rule, interspersed with interesting sidelights on social controls in the period of crisis. Such controls, restrictions and repressions played an important part in shaping the “Patterns of Chinese Elite Dominance in Spanish Manila,” a subject which is tackled in Chapter Two.

and the final chapter, “Benevolent Merchants or Malevolent Highbinders? The Deportation of Agapito Uy Tongco et al., August, 1909,” together lay down the premises for his conclusions, that the ambitions of the Chinese merchant elites played an equal, if not greater role (than the interplay of external and internal factors), in the formation of ethnic identity among the Chinese in colonial Manila, that the merchant elites “had an extensive and flexible repertoire of strategies for attaining and justifying their elite status” (p. 134), and that they exercised “liminal virtuosity” in creating the institutions and constructing the identities that largely defined what it was to be “Chinese” in colonial Manila (p. 16 and throughout the book).

Unfortunately, much of the conclusions above do not quite match the premises that have been set out, especially with regard to the causal effects in the interplay of the ambitions of the merchant elites and the construction of their own identities and those of the community. In fact, the data and materials gathered by the author highlight the complexity of the issue of identity that defies a simplistic conclusion that it was the ambitions of the merchant elites that gave rise to “community strategies” that defined ethnic identities.

Except for the very interesting and enlightening chapter on Carlos Palanca, Chen Qian Shan and the deportation of Agapito Uytongco, there are not enough supporting data to bear out the far-fetched conclusion that Chen and his fellow cabecillas “sought new strategies to establish and protect social status and economic interests in an unstable environment” and that elite strategies and institutions also served to reinforce Chinese identity and “ethnic solidarity” (p. 61).

There is little basis to state that “[t]he construction of Chinese identity and the perceived insularity of the Chinese community were more the product of migration strategies, community institutions, and elite ambitions than they were the result of spontaneous ethnocultural affinity or innate Chineseness” (p. 22). Even up to the 1950s and 1960s when the first postwar local-born generation appeared, innate Chinese-ness and spontaneous ethnocultural affinity or, in short, the “born a Chinese die a Chinese” attitude, was in fact the accepted norm.

In various chapters, Wilson takes Wickberg to task but his own data do not quite challenge Wickberg’s conclusions that the Spanish and American policies, historical events and the political environment at that time essentially defined the social categories and influenced much of the Chinese leaders’ actions. Wilson puts the emphasis on the local Chinese leaders and suggests, unconvincingly, that the merchant elites had much expertise, prowess and power to weave a strategic force in influencing policy to feed their own ambitions and influence identity formation, and that “the innate ambitions of Chinese cabecillas led them to construct an institutional superstructure for the Chinese community as a distinct ethnic enclave” (p. 22). The summary on the book jacket says, “It [the book] reveals the