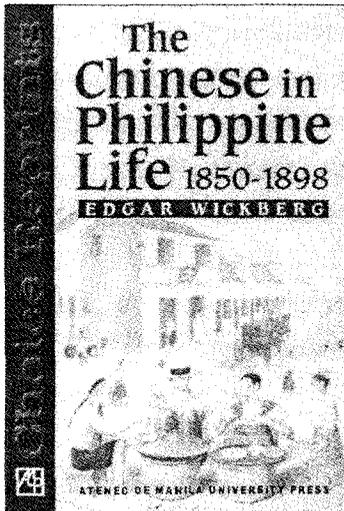


Book Review

Edgar Wickberg. *The Chinese in Philippine Life 1850-1898*. Original 1965.
Republished edition 2000. Quezon City:
Ateneo de Manila University Press.

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This is a republished edition of Wickberg's book, which was first published in 1965. Except for the omission of Chinese characters, the book is reprinted as is. I never saw the original but reading this republished edition has been a riveting experience, a testament to the book's timelessness.

Wickberg's preface to the republished edition acknowledges the many changes that have happened since 1965 in the Philippines and within the Filipino-Chinese community. Nevertheless, his thesis in 1965 is still valid—the situation of the ethnic Chinese in the Philippines today is shaped “in large part by the developments of the period 1850-1898”. Wickberg's impeccable scholarship reconstructs that vital period in Philippine history and shows how the Chinese migrants both influenced and were influenced by these events.

Wickberg reminds us that there have been several waves of Chinese immigration, some dating back even before the Spanish colonial period. Although the book is subtitled “1850-1898”, Wickberg adds very detailed information as well for the 18th century, showing how earlier Chinese immigrants gradually integrated into Philippine society through intermarriages. We learn that by 1850, there were about 120,000 mestizos – legally defined as those whose fathers were Chinese or mestizo – out of the national population of 2,500,000. In a half dozen provinces, mostly in

Central Luzon, the mestizos comprised a third or more of the population and wielded great economic power as professionals and landlords.

Jose Rizal was himself a fifth-generation mestizo. Eventually, these mestizos were to expropriate the term “filipino”, originally used only by Spaniards born in the Philippines; several of these “new” Filipinos, including Rizal, later became prominent in the reformist movement in the late 19th century that sought greater assimilation with Spain.

Wickberg’s book mainly deals with another wave of Chinese migrants that came in the 19th century, encouraged by more liberal Spanish immigration policies that accompanied the opening of the Philippines to world trade. These policies provided new economic opportunities and privileges for foreigners, including land ownership and inheritance. There were many “push” factors working from within China as well, including the civil unrest from the Taiping rebellion (1850 to 1864), the forced opening of China to the world, and even the availability of low cost steamship service between Hong Kong and Manila.

The most important niche that opened up for the new wave of Chinese migrants was in trading. The Chinese quickly took to wholesale and retail trading, from the *tienda de sari-sari* (variety stores) and *tiendas de chucherias* (“knick-knack stores”) to the plush bazaars of Escolta. Wickberg provides a fascinating glimpse into these trading activities. We learn, for example, that the Chinese bazaars sold “Viennese furniture, musical instruments from Paris, cooking stoves, cabinets, ornaments for carriages, dinnerware, lamps, galvanized iron for roofing, Chinese silks, European cottons and yarns.” (p. 108)

These Chinese migrants were also active in the textile trade, with various commercial areas for different segments of the market – the Escolta-San Vicente-Nueva area was for quality imported goods, Calle Rosario for intermediate quality goods and the Calle Tabora-Divisoria area for the cheapest imported cloths.

The Chinese took advantage of new venture capital coming in from Europe and the United States. The first promissory note from the Banco Espanol-Filipino de Isabel II (now Bank of the Philippine Islands) was issued to a Chinese merchant. Motivated by self-interest, European banks tended to recommend their Chinese clients to European merchants so that by 1879, one writer observed, “From

the commercial point of view, the Philippines is an Anglo-Chinese colony with a Spanish flag.” (p. 72).

That was probably an exaggerated statement. The westerners and local mestizo population continued to be major players in the local economy but the new migrants, Wickberg proposes, were more systematic in their buying and distribution activities and in positioning themselves in a *comprador* role for western capitalists.

Anti-Chinese sentiment grew as the Chinese became more powerful economically, unlike the past though this did not erupt into pogroms and massacres as in earlier periods during the Spanish colonial occupation. The new migrants were able to prevent this partly because they were more organized in the 19th century. Under Spanish laws, they enjoyed legal rights and political representation including a *Gremio de Chinos* with an elected *governadorcillo* or *capitan* who spoke on their behalf. The Chinese also had mutual help associations. The Chinese Cemetery and the Chinese General Hospital were established during this period, partly because of anti-Chinese discrimination – non-Christians were excluded from Catholic cemeteries and the local hospitals such as San Juan de Dios, would not admit Chinese patients.

Moreover, these new migrants could fall back on China for assistance. The Spanish and Chinese governments had several treaties that looked after the welfare of the local Chinese. It was not surprising then that the Chinese, even as they were assimilated into the Philippine mainstream as merchants, resisted cultural integration, establishing temples, local newspapers, schools and even Chinese herbalist shops exempted from Spanish laws regulating the sale of drugs, arguing that such shops were “cultural”. (This rather archaic principle has been retained into the 21st century – to this day, Chinese drugstores do not need to register their products for safety and efficacy since they are, technically speaking, cultural institutions.)

The Chinese also became politically powerful, learning to maneuver their way around the Spanish bureaucracy. One of the community leaders, Tan Quien-sien (better known as Carlos Palanca), was a powerful political figure. His power was such that he was sometimes perceived as corrupting government officials. The character Quiroga, a corrupt Chinese merchant in Rizal’s *El Filibusterismo*, is believed to have been modeled after Palanca.

It is unfortunate that Wickberg's book ends with the Spanish occupation, although he gives us one tantalizing passage that links the 20th century with the 19th: "When the United States set the final seal of rejection upon full participation of the Chinese in Philippine society by encouraging both Filipino nationalism and Chinese cultural exclusivism, the way had already been prepared for the Philippine Chinese to survive, not only as a community, but as a community whose cultural orientation was specifically Chinese." (p. 236)

How very true. During the American occupation and the post-independence period, laws were passed to exclude foreigners, particularly Chinese who had not become Filipino citizens, from land ownership and the retail trade. Acquiring Filipino citizenship was expensive and cumbersome. This only reinforced the separation of the ethnic Chinese from mainstream Philippine society.

History repeats itself. Today, we find various degrees of assimilation among ethnic Chinese, even among the better known taipans or business tycoons. Alfonso Yuchengco is considered to be totally assimilated into Filipino society while Lucio Tan retains a very Chinese identity, sending his children off to China to study Chinese. Others – the Gokongwei and Sy families – are somewhat in between.

There are also non-taipan ethnic Chinese who self-identify as *Tsinoy* (Chinese-Pinoy), emphasizing that the Filipino identity is primary. (Compare this to the older preferred term, Filipino-Chinese, which remains the name of the largest business association, the Federation of Filipino-Chinese Chambers of Commerce.)

But to many Filipinos, they remain *Intsik*. The close identification of Chinese-Filipino business people with the Estrada administration and allegations of corruption have fanned anti-Chinese resentment. The kidnappings of ethnic Chinese add to perceptions of growing anti-Chinese sentiment. All this could lead to more segregation. There is, for example, talk of "reappropriating" the old term *Intsik* rather than *Tsinoy*, a way of reasserting one's Chinese identity. There is, too, a renewed interest in Chinese culture and language, which means a new market of younger ethnic Chinese who will be interested in reading Wickberg. (A side comment here: my own rekindled interest in things Chinese made me feel that the omission of Chinese characters in Wickberg's republished book was a loss. Many

Chinese names – of people and places – would have made more sense if the Chinese characters had been retained.)

Having said all that, I should qualify that I do not think we will have a new ghetto or isolationist mentality emerging from among the ethnic Chinese. Wickberg's book reminds us that there are many domestic and international events that shape the development of ethnic Chinese communities in the Philippines. The rise of an extremely diverse Greater Chinese community – China, Hong Kong, Macau, Taiwan, Singapore – means that there are no monolithic models for what "Chinese" is. Chinese-Filipinos continue to evolve, including a number who have initiated a new diaspora — weary of local civil unrest and kidnappings, some are migrating to the United States and Canada along with other Filipinos.

By and large, however, the *Tsinoy* and *Tsinay* who stay on – direct descendants of that wave of 19th century immigration – continue to shape a hybrid culture, much more self-conscious and vibrant than did earlier generations. The *Tsinoy* and *Tsinay* are now found in different occupations and are no longer limited to business and trading. A distinct Filipino-Chinese literature has emerged, reflecting an ethos that is very much rooted in the Philippines, yet with a gaze that looks out, not toward China, but to the world. That should not be surprising. Perhaps it is the same gaze that first prompted the Chinese migrants of the 19th century to set out from China.