

# From Overseas Chinese Community to Chinese Community: The Identity and Cultural Transformation of Chinese Filipinos

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## ABSTRACT

In the process of integrating into local society, the Filipino Chinese community has experienced the collision of their own cultural genes with indigenous cultures. With the passage of time and the intermingling of cultures, the local Overseas Chinese community has gradually evolved into a Chinese community. A notable cultural marker of this transformation is that the identity of Filipino Chinese has begun to align more closely with that of indigenous ethnic groups, and their group culture has become more closely aligned with that of the Philippine nation. This process of transformation is rooted in historical causes and has been subtly influenced by various factors such as political environments and social trends.

## KEYWORDS

Overseas Chinese; Philippines; Identity

## 1 Introduction

In the process of integrating into Philippine mainstream society, the Chinese community has undergone a transformation from a “Chinese diaspora community” to a “Chinese community”, with cultural systems—including religious beliefs and language—gradually losing their traditional Chinese characteristics and shifting toward the cultural concepts and self-identity of the indigenous Filipino people. This paper takes the formation and transition of the Philippine overseas Chinese community to the Chinese community as its central theme, exploring the localization adaptation of Chinese people from “returning to their roots” to “taking root locally”, and examining the internal motivations and external factors driving their cultural and identity transformations.

## 2 The construction and transformation of the overseas chinese community

Spanish colonial rule (1571–1898) not only left an indelible political and cultural legacy for the indigenous peoples of the Philippines, but also had a profound impact on the formation of the Filipino Chinese diaspora community. The Spanish colonial government imposed strict economic restrictions on the Chinese community. In the age of great maritime trade, the silk and porcelain supplied by the Chinese to the colonies were of high value, playing a crucial role in trade between the Philippines and China, as well as other Asian regions. As a result, the Chinese were required to act as intermediaries in the colonial economy, but the colonial government restricted them to specific trade and commercial activities. Although the Chinese community accumulated substantial wealth, they faced competition from the indigenous Filipino population and other ethnic groups without corresponding political power commensurate with their economic status. While the Spanish colonial government ostensibly granted the Chinese certain commercial rights, it maintained and exacerbated their marginalized status in political and social spheres.

Although the Chinese community served as intermediaries in trade between the Philippines and the rest of the world at the time, providing the Philippines with a wealth of goods and labor, the Spanish colonial authorities remained highly suspicious of the Chinese, believing they were highly likely to collaborate with China to occupy the Philippines. For various reasons, in order to control the economically powerful Chinese community while also hoping to use the Philippines as a springboard for further invasion of China, the Spanish colonial government implemented political ethnic segregation and cultural forced assimilation against the Chinese in the Philippines. In 1581, the Spanish government established the Parian community in Manila, a designated area for Chinese residents. The purpose was to reinforce the boundaries between the Chinese community and local Filipinos through spatial segregation. Chinese residents were required to pay annual license fees, tributes, property taxes, and other taxes, and were forced to perform unpaid labor. Additionally, the Spanish government restricted the movement of Chinese people through a “travel permit” system, preventing them from freely moving within Philippine society. By the 17th century, the Chinese population in the Parian community had reached 20,000, becoming the core of the Chinese community. The Chinese community gathered here to live, establishing Chinese associations, clan halls, and commercial centers, gradually forming their own unique social structure and cultural system. After a series of violent incidents in which the Spanish suppressed Chinese resistance, the Parian Community became the earliest prototype of a Chinatown in Southeast Asia. The Spanish colonial government successfully separated the Chinese community from the indigenous Filipino population and other ethnic groups through physical isolation, thereby preventing potential social conflicts or uprisings while also reinforcing the Chinese diaspora

community spatially.

Culturally, the Spanish colonial government implemented a policy of forced religious conversion, making conversion to Catholicism one of the legal requirements for Chinese residents in the Philippines. In fact, as a Catholic country, Spain had always felt uneasy about the Chinese community, whom it considered "heathens," believing that only by converting them to Catholicism could cultural assimilation be achieved. The laws enacted by Spain vigorously promoted the replacement of traditional Chinese beliefs with Catholicism. Chinese Catholics could enjoy tax exemptions, access to land, and freedom of movement. After undergoing baptism, Chinese individuals could also obtain godparents who could serve as guarantors for their loans and protectors<sup>[1]</sup>. To minimize the defection of Chinese nationals returning to their homeland, the Spanish government restricted the freedom of movement for non-Catholic Chinese and encouraged Chinese Catholics to intermarry with indigenous Catholics. This led to the emergence of a group of Sino-Filipino mixed-race individuals, who became a close link between the Chinese community and the indigenous population. By the 18th century, approximately 30% of the Chinese population had converted to Catholicism, driven by political considerations and self-interest. However, this forced religious assimilation did not completely alter the traditional belief systems of the Chinese. Their connection to the Philippines remained primarily economic, and their thoughts and culture continued to reflect traditional Chinese influences<sup>[2]</sup>. Buddhism, Catholicism, and the worship of Guan Yu and Mazu are not mutually exclusive among Chinese communities. This religious fusion not only demonstrates the adaptability of Chinese communities but also reflects their search for self-identity in colonial societies while preserving their traditional culture and beliefs. This multiplicity of beliefs has become a distinctive feature of the Chinese community in the Philippines.

The policies of the Spanish and American colonial governments toward the Chinese community not only reflected the mainstream colonial society's apprehension and marginalization of this foreign ethnic group but also highlighted the diverse characteristics of the Overseas Chinese community. First, there is the disconnect between the economic strength and political status of the Chinese diaspora community. As a minority group and foreign immigrants in the Philippines, Chinese Filipinos played a significant role in driving the local economy through commodity trade and agricultural processing. However, both the local ethnic groups, who were economically oppressed and dissatisfied, and the colonial authorities, who viewed Chinese Filipinos as outsiders and threats, relied on political and violent means to restrict the activities of Chinese Filipinos both spatially and institutionally. During the colonial period, regardless of their relationships with the colonial government and indigenous ethnic groups, the social status of the Chinese community remained on the periphery of the mainstream and was largely excluded from conventional avenues for social advancement. This was also a key factor contributing to conflicts and tensions between the Chinese community and other local ethnic groups. Secondly, there is the cultural duality of the overseas Chinese community. On one hand, political environments and economic interests compelled some Chinese to convert to Catholicism and begin learning the mainstream languages, scripts, and behavioral norms of the Philippines. On the other hand, traditional Chinese culture and religious beliefs remained deeply ingrained in this group's psyche, and they continued to identify themselves as Chinese. The exclusion by the mainstream Philippine society further reinforced this sense of identity.

During the American colonial period (1898–1946), U.S. policy toward China was slightly more lenient than during the Spanish colonial period, allowing the Chinese community to gradually shake off the oppression of the Spanish era and usher in new economic and social opportunities. In 1902, the U.S. government passed the Chinese Exclusion Act, and policies toward Chinese Filipinos gradually tightened. On the one hand, the colonial authorities began to restrict the number of Chinese immigrants, and Chinese in the Philippines were subject to strict oversight by the colonial government, with their social status inferior to that of Filipinos. On the other hand, the government restricted Chinese activities in the commercial sector and imposed higher tax burdens on them compared to other groups. These measures forced Chinese capital to shift from traditional handicrafts and retail industries toward manufacturing, enabling Chinese to gradually participate in heavy industries such as tobacco processing in the Philippines. The restructuring of capital not only altered the economic role of the Chinese but also made their economic activities more diverse and complex. The Chinese no longer relied solely on traditional commercial activities but began to participate in broader industrial production and economic development, thereby further enhancing their economic influence in Philippine society.

As American rule progressed, Western-style education and assimilation policies began to influence the culture and identity of the Chinese community. In 1899, the newly established American colonial government in the Philippines, which had replaced Spanish rule, implemented a liberal policy in the field of education, placing no restrictions on Chinese-run schools and even allowing them to operate without registering with the American colonial government. The establishment of the Manila Chinese School in 1912 marked the modernization of the Chinese education system. The school adopted a "bilingual education" model, with English and Chinese accounting for 60% of the curriculum, while Min Nan was retained only for morning classes. This educational model cultivated the first generation of localized Chinese elites, enabling the Chinese community to integrate more deeply into Philippine society and play a greater role in economic and political spheres<sup>[3]</sup>.

During the American colonial period, the Chinese community began to show signs of integration with the local Philippine society. On the one hand, the Chinese community maintained its traditional culture and social networks

through clan associations and traditional family structures; on the other hand, they penetrated the mainstream economy through capital power and gradually became part of the modern Philippine economy. This duality in economics and culture prompted the Chinese community to seek points of convergence between their own identity and Philippine society, and to extend their influence to more areas of their host country.

### 3 Localization and adaptation of the Chinese community

In the mid-20th century, amid the wave of national independence, colonialism collapsed across the globe, and Southeast Asian countries successively declared their independence, with nationalist sentiments on the rise. Following independence, the Philippines initially implemented a nationality law that prioritized bloodline over place of birth. Since most Chinese Filipinos were born in China, coupled with the numerous requirements and cumbersome procedures for naturalization, Chinese immigrants found it difficult to obtain Philippine nationality, and the issue of immigrant status became a major obstacle to their integration into Philippine society<sup>[4]</sup>. Due to the strained Sino-Philippine relations and the international environment at the time, in addition to economic suppression, the political power and cultural education of the Chinese community also faced challenges.

The formation of the Chinese community began with the resolution of the nationality issue for overseas Chinese. In 1972, U.S. President Nixon's visit to China opened the door to the normalization of Sino-U.S. relations. As an ally of the United States, the Philippine government also actively sought to establish diplomatic relations with China. To prevent Filipinos of Chinese descent from aligning with their ancestral homeland after establishing diplomatic ties, then-President Ferdinand Marcos initiated efforts to resolve the naturalization issue for overseas Filipinos. In 1975, Marcos issued Presidential Decree No. 270, allowing Chinese nationals to collectively naturalize and simplifying the naturalization process. Between 1975 and 1986, approximately 200,000 overseas Chinese obtained Philippine citizenship<sup>[5]</sup>. After obtaining legal status in their new country of residence and gaining equal political rights, Chinese immigrants began to play an active role in Philippine politics, leveraging their economic strength. In 1986, both Marcos and Corazon Aquino actively sought the support of the Chinese community in the presidential election. Both sides recognized the economic influence and political potential of the Chinese community and made commitments to protect their commercial interests and improve the business environment. Mrs. Aquino attracted many Chinese voters with her promises of reform and the establishment of a transparent government. Although Chinese Filipinos accounted for a small percentage of the total population, their economic status enabled them to play a pivotal role in the elections and the subsequent People Power Revolution. This marked a significant turning point in the political and cultural awakening of Chinese Filipinos, after which their enthusiasm for political participation grew even stronger. Their involvement in politics also expanded from providing financial support to directly entering the political arena. By the end of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century, the political status of Chinese Filipinos had significantly improved. An increasing number of Chinese Filipinos entered local governments, Congress, and administrative agencies in the Philippines. Chinese Filipino political participation gradually expanded from local politics to the national level, becoming an indispensable part of the Philippine political system.

While gaining political recognition, Chinese culture has further integrated with local Filipino culture. Mandarin and Min Nan remain the primary languages among the Chinese community, and Chinese families tend to send their children to Chinese-language schools. However, due to the influence of Western-style education and language policies in Philippine society, an increasing number of Chinese families are choosing to have their children learn English and Filipino in order to better integrate into Philippine society. Traditional festivals such as the Spring Festival and Mid-Autumn Festival remain important for Chinese communities, but they also participate in local Filipino festivals such as the Philippine Holy Child Festival. Additionally, over time, Chinese behavioral habits, family relationships, and marriage patterns have incorporated local Filipino social customs. In terms of religion, while Catholicism has attracted more Chinese adherents, some Protestant denominations also found supporters within the Filipino Chinese community in the latter half of the 20th century. Protestant teachings emphasize concepts such as the individual's relationship with God and personal salvation, which differ from the traditional Confucian and Taoist cultures of the Chinese. Among some Chinese, particularly those with higher levels of education and greater openness to Western culture, Protestant teachings have gained partial acceptance. The religious beliefs of the Chinese in the Philippines exhibit a trend toward diversity. Many members of Chinese families do not share the same religious beliefs. While some maintain Taoist or Buddhist customs at home, they also participate in Christian religious activities. This coexistence of religious beliefs reflects the complexity and flexibility of cultural identity among Chinese Filipinos, who are able to maintain respect for tradition in a modernized context while also adapting flexibly to the cultural requirements of the mainstream religions in Philippine society.

### 4 Identity formation under Filipino-Chinese integration

To date, the Chinese population in the Philippines is approximately 1.6 million, accounting for 1.4% of the total population<sup>[6]</sup>. From the Overseas Chinese Community to the Chinese Community, the Filipino Chinese community has

undergone more than just political, economic, and cultural adaptation and integration; it has also experienced a transformation in its sense of identity. Many Chinese have already integrated into mainstream society linguistically. According to data from the Philippine Statistics Authority in 2021, among Chinese under 35 years old, the usage rate of Min Nan has dropped to 17%, but 94% are proficient in English and Tagalog; Chinese schools have reduced Chinese language classes to 12% of the curriculum, instead offering more practical business-related courses. In terms of religious beliefs, traditional faiths such as Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism are increasingly declining. Taking Buddhism as an example, there are currently only around 30 Buddhist temples across the Philippines, and Buddhists account for less than 2% of the Chinese community. For the descendants of Chinese immigrants and minority groups, religious beliefs are not only a spiritual refuge but also play an important role in maintaining emotional support and ethnic identity. Over time, especially in the context of generational change and deepening social integration, the religious beliefs of the new generation of Chinese will increasingly align with the mainstream religions of their host countries, reducing their reliance on traditional beliefs. Traditional religions are no longer the primary markers of Chinese identity, and their role in defining ethnic boundaries is gradually weakening<sup>[7]</sup>.

Cultural shifts reflect changes in the identity of Chinese Filipinos. Older generations of Chinese Filipinos generally maintain an “emigrant mindset” of “returning to one’s roots,” identifying more strongly with Chinese culture and emphasizing maintaining connections with China. In contrast, younger generations tend to identify more with Philippine society, particularly in terms of language, education, and daily lifestyle, aligning more closely with Philippine indigenous culture. As society has developed, the younger generation of Chinese Filipinos has increasingly come to view the Philippines as their home and place of origin, with the concept of “putting down roots” becoming a central tenet of their identity. The third generation of Chinese Filipinos exhibits higher levels of Filipino cultural assimilation in language, lifestyle, and social behavior. The generational differences in identity reflect the growing diversification within the Chinese Filipino community regarding their sense of identity.

With the globalization of the economy and society, many Filipino Chinese have established close connections with Chinese communities around the world. These transnational connections are not only reflected in commercial exchanges but also in cultural exchanges and education. While identifying as Filipino citizens, Chinese Filipinos also maintain connections with China and other Chinese communities. Especially among Chinese Filipino families, many children choose to study, work, or start businesses abroad, and after completing their overseas education, they often establish transnational families. Their children frequently hold passports from the Philippines, China, and a third country. This results in their identity no longer being confined to the Philippines and China but instead forming a fluid, evolving identity that transcends traditional borders.

## 5 Conclusion

Throughout its historical evolution, the Filipino Chinese community has consistently faced the clash between its traditional culture and the local mainstream culture, as well as the recurring tension between national identity and integration into local society. As the once “overseas Chinese community” gradually transformed into a “Chinese community” deeply integrated into the Philippine nation-state, its identity underwent a significant localization process, shifting from emphasizing the origins of Chinese culture to actively adapting and integrating, increasingly aligning with the Philippine mainstream society in terms of language habits, value orientations, and social participation. This transformation is the result of the interplay between colonial legacies, national policies, and the globalisation wave, and also reflects the survival strategy of minority ethnic groups within a nation-state during its formative years, navigating the complex interplay of diverse ethnic tensions: neither clinging to cultural purism nor passively accepting one-sided assimilation, but instead fostering new bonds of identity through continuous cultural gene recombination amidst differences. It can be said that the identity transformation of the Filipino Chinese is a process intertwined with multiple forces, where the institutional remnants of the colonial era and the assimilation policies of the post-independence nation-state have jointly shaped the uniqueness of the Filipino Chinese community.

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