FEATURE ARTICLE

Tradition, Misconception, and Contribution: Chinese Influences in Philippine Culture

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses Chinese influence on Philippine arts and crafts, as shown in artifacts from the Sino-Philippine trade of pre-Hispanic times—the churches, religious icons, and paintings of the Spanish period—and in the contemporary art of the Chinese Filipinos. The Chinese traditional elements are given new meanings in a new environment, and it is these misconceptions and misinterpretations of the imported concepts that influence and enrich our culture.

THE PRE-HISPANIC PAST

The Sino-Philippine trade is believed to have begun in AD 982. *The History of the Sung Dynasty* or *Sung Shi*, published in 1343-1374, confirmed that trade contact started during the 10th century. A 13th century Sung Mandarin official, Chau Ju-kua, wrote a geographical work entitled "A Description of Barbarous Peoples" or *Chu Fan Chi*, the first detailed account on Sino-Philippine trade. The 14th century account of Ma Tulin entitled "A General Investigation of Chinese Cultural Sources" or *Wen Shiann Tung Kuo* referred to the Philippines as *Ma-i*.[1] The presence of trade is further proven by the Oriental ceramics from China, Vietnam, and Thailand that have been excavated from many places in the archipelago (Zaide: 1990). The Chinese came to the Philippines and traded with the natives peacefully, exchanging Chinese goods with hardwood, pearls, and turtle shells that were valued in China.

Traditional Chinese motifs that symbolize imperial power are found in the trade ceramics found in the Philippines. These are the

dragon and the phoenix; auspicious emblems of prosperity, long life, and wealth, such as fishes, pearls, and blossoms, like peonies; and the eight precious things or *Pa Bao*, namely, jewelry, coins, open lozenges with ribbons, solid lozenges with ribbons, musical stones, a pair of books, a pair of horns, and the Artemisia leaf. The magic weapons of the eight Taoist saints—the fan, sword, gourd, castanets, flower baskets, bamboo stick, drum, and flute—as well as lotus and lion designs are stamped and carved or incised on the jars and ceramic items.

The imported jars were traded from the lowlands to the mountains and were used in ceremonial rituals. Indications of wealth and prestige, these jars became deities and spirits, a sign of their new identity in the hands of their Filipino owners. Other signs include the granting of names according to gender. The jar with high, wide shoulders was female, while the jar with a rounded body and sloping shoulders was male. According to folklore, some of the jars were married to each other and have jarlet children (Valdes et al.: 1992). The folklore probably originated from the fact that some of the lids of the local ancient burial jars have been shaped into the heads of the occupants. Another sign would be the case of the 16th century dragon jars, which were called *"Ihalasan"* in the Visayas, from the word *ihas* or snake (Scott: 1994). The Chinese dragons had become Visayan snakes in the folk consciousness. A last example would be jars that allegedly talked and possessed magical powers.

THE COLONIAL PERIOD

The Spaniards began the widespread Christianization of the lowland Filipinos in the 16th century. For efficient evangelization, medieval religious structures and images needed for worship had to be created. Under the supervision of the friars, skilled artisans among the Chinese immigrants were employed to build architectural structures. They not only built churches and private homes up to the 19th century, they also provided the bricks and tiles for the constructions. Together with the local artisans, they copied European religious images and lodged them in churches throughout the Philippines.

It is interesting to note that despite the anti-Chinese programs initiated by the Spaniards, the Chinese left many indelible marks in Spanish Philippines. The Chinese Fu dogs, which decorate the courtyard entrance of the San Agustin Church in Intramuros, are a good example. The Fu dogs are the ubiquitous stone lions in China. They are so common that they are commemorated in a Ming stone arched bridge in the southwest suburbs of Beijing. Built in 1189, the bridge was called Lu (*Luguo Qiao*), named after the Lu channel. It is also called the Marco Polo Bridge. Not only is the bridge historically famous as the site of the beginning of the Sino-Japanese war, it is also culturally famous for its 485 stone lions that were carved in different positions, each one wearing a different expression.

There are also many religious icons made during the Spanish period that are reminiscent of Chinese ones. The Christian images have chinky eyes and sometimes stand on dragons (San Agustin Church Museum 1998). Guan Yin was a common source of influence. Guan Yin was believed to be a man who was granted femininity by heaven for his kindness and gentleness. He became the Chinese Goddess of Mercy.

The *Kuan-Yin Nuestra Senora del Rosario* in the San Agustin Church Museum Complex was done by an anonymous Chinese artisan around 1835. This depicts the Virgin Mary wearing a blue cape and a red robe, carrying the Infant Jesus in her left arm. Both of them are holding a rosary. The shining aura of the Infant Jesus brings to mind the Buddhist flame. The gesture and pose of the Virgin is reminiscent of Kuan Yin (Pilar: 1986).

Printing in the Philippines was also a Chinese contribution. The first three books in the Philippines were published by the Dominicans: the *Doctrina Christiana en Lengua Espanola y Tagala* or *The Christian Doctrine in Spanish and Tagalog*; the *Doctrina Christiana en Letra y Lengua China* or *The Christian Doctrine in Chinese Script and Language*; and the *Apologia por la Verdadera Religion* or *The Defense of the True Religion*. These books were printed using wood blocks and the Chinese xylography method. The man who printed them was a Chinese mestizo from Binondo, Tomas Pinpin.

The Chinese were also culturally influenced by the Filipinos. As the Wax Figures and Museum of the Kaisa Heritage Center shows,

the early Chinese imported iron needles and silk shawls (*Manton de Manila*).

The most historically significant Chinese contribution to Philippine nationhood was the Chinese participation in the struggle against Spain. During the latter part of the Spanish period, the scions of wealthy Chinese-Spanish mestizos went to Spain and acquired Western education, through which they learned the tenets of liberalism. A number of the heroes of the Propaganda Movement and the Philippine Revolution against Spain had Chinese blood.

CONTEMPORARY CHINESE FILIPINO ART

Integration between the two races was slow and not smooth. Filipinos might have inherited the Spaniards' anti-Chinese sentiments, but they are generally open to cultural and racial integration. The conservative Chinese families, however, being "pure Chinese," speak only Chinese and seek to preserve their Chinese heritage.

The ordinary Chinese Filipinos, in the meantime, straddle both worlds. Although they are required to learn Mandarin or *Pu Tong Hua* in elementary and high school, they also have to master English and Filipino for the other subjects. A large number speak Hokkien at home, but an increasing number now speak only English and/or Filipino. A few go back to China to learn the "real" Mandarin, but fewer Chinese Filipinos are "pure Chinese conscious." The latter have established roots in the country to which their ancestors immigrated generations ago.

Archeological findings often link the past to the present, and recent ones remind us that the destinies of the Chinese Filipinos belong to this archipelago. In 1991, some Chinese tombstones were discovered in the old Parian gate of Intramuros. The oldest tombstone was dated 1723, the first year of Yang Zheng, Qing dynasty. The seventeen tombstones belonged to Chinese artisans and their wives. While their last names were still Chinese, their first were Christian names. The wives buried with them were probably Filipinos (Ang See: 1996). The stone rubbing and documentation of the stones were done by the Chinese art master Hau Chiok.

Hau Chiok is a Lingnan-style painter and calligrapher originally from Hong Kong. He uses vibrant colors and bold strokes to depict the traditional Chinese subjects of flora and fauna. His wife, Lolit Hau Chiok, depicts the Philippines using the Chinese medium. According to her, the concern of the first generation of Chinese immigrants was survival, while the later generations were freer to attain their dreams. The couple has been teaching Chinese painting for more than three decades now. They founded the Chinese Art Center in 1975 where one can learn about Chinese traditional culture. The Center also publishes books on Chinese painting (Kaisa File: 1997).

Another famous Chinese painter is Lao Lianben.[2] A minimalist, he has received awards from Shell, Art Association of the Philippines, Mobile Art Awards, and the Cultural Center of the Philippines (CCP).

Lao Lianben is known for paintings with the quiet meditative mood of a Zen master which he expresses through a mixture of indigenous materials, nylon string, and plexi glass. The contrast of textures, together with a good sense of yin-yang balance and creative intuition, makes Lao's compositions Zen.

Different shades of black, brown, and white on a thick sheet of marine wood on his *Earth* (1981) surprises the viewer with a deep sense of serenity. He says:

> I use black because it is austere, sophisticated. Black color fascinates and excites me because of its quietness and silence that no other pigment can possess. Most often I work with intuition and it is necessary that a certain degree of dialogue should be created between me and the materials. Art is an intellectual pursuit for some definitions in life it is almost an extension of one's self.

One cannot help wondering if his preference for black and white is somehow influenced by Chinese Literati painting which is dominated by black ink, representing the austerity of scholarly virtue. Also, even if he handles his materials in a contemporary manner, his reticence toward his Chinese realization is consistent with his reticence toward his possession of a warm sensibility that is Filipino.

Lao is not the only Filipino artist with a Chinese heritage who handles materials with the understanding of a Zen master. Junyee, working in the quiet hideaway of Mt. Makiling, has also created profound pieces using the indigenous materials provided by tropical abundance. Born Luis Enena Yee, Jr., Junyee[3] is an installation artist. Like Lao, he has received awards from Shell, Art Association of the Philippines, and the CCP. In Junyee's installations, one finds the serenity of a Yin Shi, a hermit of the Chinese classical period. The selection of indigenous materials in his installations echoes the significance of nature in the Chinese tradition. The commitment to Philippine subjects is reflective of his UP education. He was the artist behind the bamboo installation of Katipunan flags in front of the CCP during the commemoration of the Philippine Centennial.

The best known Chinese Filipino artist today is perhaps the Cubist Expressionist Ang Kuikok, whose first paintings, traditional in style, were influenced by the famous Chinese artist Qi Baishi. He started by copying movie advertisements from the newspapers while tending his father's sari-sari store. He was the only son in a brood of six and was expected to take over the family's merchandise shop.[4] But he convinced his father to let him study art. He went to the University of Santo Tomas, where he studied under Victorio Edades, Diosdado Lorenzo, and Vicente Manansala. It was Manansala who influenced him the most.

His first painting exhibition was in 1954, in one of the galleries in Mabini. Then in 1955, his painting *Celesta* won the Shell National Students Art Competition. He won more awards at the Art Association of the Philippines competitions (1959, 1961, and 1963). After Ang's visit to North America and Europe with Manansala in 1965, he produced the "angst" paintings for which he became well known.

Today, many of his works, such as the Cubist depiction of the Crucifixion (1968), are considered Philippine art masterpieces. His canvases are dominated by black and red hues. His subjects are the agonizing Christ, still life, and animals. He depicts Philippine life in his paintings.

A well-respected man among the overseas Chinese as well as in mainstream Philippine society, Ang Kiukok was given the Outstanding Overseas Chinese Award in Art in 1961 and the Outstanding Citizen Award from the City of Manila in 1976.

For centuries, the unofficial Sino-Philippine relationship has quietly influenced Philippine cultural life. The recognition of these influences would make us appreciate the diversity of our heritage.

ENDNOTES

[1]One can see from the titles that the Chinese demonstrated a little racial bias toward non-Chinese societies. The Filipinos were not the only recipients of this discrimination; the Chinese called the Europeans "white devils" and Japan "Small Japan." The Filipinos called the Chinese "*intsik*," the Chinese called the Filipinos "*huana*." According to a Chinese professor from Xiamen, "*huana*" is a Hokkien slang and derogatory term that refers to the children of Chinese merchants who had foreign wives and whose offsprings were born outside of China. These derogatory names are meant for use only in private.

[2]Lao Lianben was born on April 21, 1948 to Mariano Lao and Martina Tan. He is married to artist and pottery maker Lilia Cruz. They have three children.

[3]Junyee was born on February 12, 1942. He is the son of Luis Yee Sr. and Eliza Enena. He graduated from the College of Fine Arts, University of the Philippines in 1976. He is married to Marites Gatchalian.

[4]The early struggle of Ang Kiukok fascinates many of his biographers. He was born on March 31, 1931. His father, Ang Sy Pong, was a leader of the anti-Japanese movement in Davao. *Kiukok* means "save the country." When the Pacific war began, Ang's family settled among the tribal Mansakas.

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