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Randy M. Madrid
UP Visayas, Iloilo City

A History of Disastrous Fires in Philippine Chinatown

Abstract. The paper is a history of fires in Parian that aims to show how fire management helped preserve social order in the capital city. Period architectures in Parian were analyzed through a historical-adaptation approach, a "unique means of examining the human-environment interchange," as introduced by Bankoff (2003, p. 163). The approach looked into how period architecture evolved in response to the interplay of environmental, political, socioeconomic, and cultural factors. The key elements were structural design and the fabric and method of their construction for functionality and fire prevention and/or resistance qualities.

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Introduction

Disastrous fires in urban centers are less studied events in history. Despite the loss of lives and property, the public may regard fires 'normal' to urban life. In ancient Rome, for example, the burning of villages to 'cleanse' them of filth or unwanted immigrants who posed risks to the state signified a cycle of rapture and renewal. Quite interestingly in Spanish Philippines, archival sources attest to fires in Parian (Chinatown) in Manila, highlighting their historical significance to city life and state response to check and/or contain them.

The paper is a history of fires in Parian that aims to show how fire management helped preserve social order in the capital city. Period architectures in Parian were analyzed through a historical-adaptation approach, a "unique means of examining the human-environment interchange," as introduced by Bankoff (2003, p. 163). The approach looked into how period architecture evolved in response to the interplay of environmental, political, socioeconomic, and cultural factors. The key elements were structural design and the fabric and method of their construction for functionality and fire prevention and/or resistance qualities.

Oliver-Smith (1979) inspired the study with the idea that "a disaster is a historical event – and the aftermath of the disaster is process coming to grips with history" (p. 96). A history of fires in Parian helps explain the links between racial segregation, resistance, and state response. Archival narratives on period architecture furnished information and insights on material culture, specifically the vulnerability of domestic and vernacular structures to fire and the coping mechanisms of the

inhabitants to fire hazards. Emphasis goes to colonial policies in confronting fire disaster, especially those dealing with neighborhood improvements, and maintaining fireproof structures.

Binondo in History

Tectonic activity made possible the deltaic nature of the estuarine landscape of the southeastern banks of Pasig River. Peralta and Salazar (1974) considered Manila's geological configuration vital in explaining the deltaic formation of the estuary. A process of faulting and folding caused the lifting of the land mass in Paranaque, Muntinlupa, and Marikina on one side and Pasig and Quezon City on the other side during the Pleistocene (Padilla & Cabanilla (1991). This had the effect of impounding of Manila Bay, with Pasig River the sole drainage of the lake. Through time the river enlarged, thus hastening the passage and deposition of fluvial materials on the estuary.

According to Paz (1998), riverine deposits created new lands/islets fit for human habitation as evidenced by flint and obsidian finds in Sta. Mesa and San Francisco del Monte. Deltaic formation expanded northwestward, transforming the scape into a conglomeration of islets, as stable dry lands, and marshes on the southern sides of the river, which were unfit for agricultural settlement. Manila used to be a mosaic of *esteros* (estuarine islets). Beyer (1948) believed that the first settlements were in what are now the cities of San Juan, Pasig, and Marikina on the southeastern banks of the river.

Tondo on the north and Manila on the south were already 'urban' settlements from the 10th century and onward (Gatbonton, 1994). Chinese *sampan* (junk) traders played a pivotal role in Manila's metamorphosis into an early center of urbanity. From a quaint, hilly station called *minundok*, Binondo would rise on the southern banks as a stilt settlement on dry land capable of accumulating remnants of material culture. It would help foster the status of Manila as the economic, political, and cultural capital of the country since the last quarter of the 16th century.

Binondo's role in Philippine history may be understood, more fully and deeply, by revisiting its links with Parian, a Philippine Chinatown. Parian was a product of institutionalized racial segregation in Spanish Manila. The term is 'synonymous' to Chinatown or Binondo and implies significant Chinese presence. The first reference to its Chinese origin

comes from Governor General Sebastian Hurtado de Corquera in 1636. He said, "They live in a place which has been built for them near the walls of Manila called in their language the Parian" (Blair and Robertson, 1903-1907, Vol. 26, p. 139). The term, pronounced as *pai-lin* in Mandarin, *pak-lam* in Cantonese and *pa-lam* in Hokkien, does not have meaning at all in Chinese. The closest term to Parian is *Chien-nei* as recorded by Shih Liang (1947). According to Liang, "In 1580, on the opposite bank of the Manila River a great building for the Chinese silk trade was built called *Alcaiceria* which the Chinese called *Chien-nei*" (pp. 233-234).

Whatever its provenance, the Parian is a Chinese ghetto located outside Intramuros (Walled City, Old Manila) where the merchant *Sangleys* (Christianized Chinese) and *Infieles* (unbaptized Chinese) resided, traded, and provided skilled services. A contemporaneous source described Parian as 'home' to artisans and a beehive of trade and commerce.

> Within the silk market are many tailors, cobblers, bakers, carpenters, candle-makers, confectioners, apothecaries, painters, silversmiths, and those engaged in other occupations. Everyday there is held a public market of articles of food, such as fowl, swine, ducks, game birds, wild hogs, buffaloes, fish, bread, and other provisions, and garden produce, and firewood; *there are also many commodities from China* which are sold through the streets (Blair and Robertson, 1903-1907, Vol. 7, p. 34).

However, the atmosphere in Parian was always tense partly because of Chinese resistance to racial segregation that confined their activity within the enclave assigned them. For more than a century, Parian was site of rebellion. The Spaniards usually reacted to the rebellions by razing down Parian (Santamaria, 1966, p. 79). Because of the threats that it posed to the state and society, the authorities transferred Parian to different sites in Manila, including Binondo, until its dissolution in 1860.

Fires in Parian and Binondo

A belief states that fire accompanies and benefits a Chinese trader wherever he goes. So it was that fireworks greeted the arrival of Chinese merchants in Manila from China. Two fires gutted Parian in 1639 and 1642. Citing an anonymous eyewitness account about the 1642 fire, Santamaria (1966) wrote:

> In a short a while, the greater part of *Parian* was reduced to ashes, a great deal of property was burned and great losses were suffered not only by the Chinese

who held the goods on consignment but by the Spaniards and by the widows of Manila to whom they belonged (p.80-81).

The first Parian was built on the marshy southern banks of the Pasig Riverin 1581. This was in compliance with the order of Governor-General Gonzalo Ronquillo de Peñalosa that the Chinese should trade only in a designated marketplace. Unfortunately, a fire consumed Parian on January 30, 1583. Morga (1609) wrote about a fire that burned the San Agustin Church. He said:

> In the time of Diego Ronquillo, a fire began in the Church of San Agustin around mid-day when the doors of the church were closed; it became so destructive that in few hours the city which was then built with wood was consumed (p. 20).

Citing a letter to the Spanish King mentioned about what happened, Santamaria mentioned two fires, one in January and another in February, which was what Morga remembered. Santamaria (1966) said:

> The fire occurred at 3:00 in the afternoon on January 30 burning seven houses in the silk market. On the following month, during the funeral for Governor Ronquillo, San Agustin Church was burned (p. 86).

Undaunted, the Chinese merchants built the second Parian in what is the site of San Juan de Letran today. The original plan of building structures made of bricks did not happen because of the failure to import the materials from Mexico. As usual, the structures were made of straw, which a fire razed to the ground in 1588 (Santamaria, 2006, p. 91).

The building of the walls of Intramuros involved the transfer of Parian to Binondo in 1594 as a security measure against the rising population of the *Sangleyes* and the riotous kind, the *Infieles*. Binondo became a Chinese settlement 'overnight' – far enough for military security but near enough for convenience to the Spaniards in Intramuros (De Viana, 2001, pp. 12, 18). However, a fire destroyed the Binondo Parian in 1597 (Blair and Robertson, 1903-1907, Vol. 10, p. 43).

The biggest fires, though, occurred in the 17th century, the first of which was associated with the biggest Chinese uprising in the country. On October 3, 1603, baptized *Sangleys*, numbering around 2000 under the leadership of Eng-Kang, revolted in Parian, Binondo, Tondo, and nearby settlements. The rebels killed the Spanish governor who was residing near the Binondo Church. The Spanish troops retaliated by driving

away the rebels to as far as Laguna and Batangas. State action, aided by Filipino volunteers mostly from Pampanga and some Japanese, resulted to the massacre of 23,000 Chinese in Manila and its environs. The bloodbath, looting, and burning affected the economy of the city. However, no sooner had the survivors retired to Parian that it was 'business as usual.'

Despite the recurrence of fires, only few inhabitants of Manila shifted from the use of light materials to stones and/or bricks. Complicating the matter were the earthquakes that also struck the city. Citing the personal account of a certain Hernando Estrada, Ching-Hong (n.d.) mentioned a fire that burned down 800 houses in Parian in 1628. He wrote:

> Fire began at 1:00 at night on March 13 in Parian, where more than 12,000 Chinese live outside the walls of this city of Manila. Within five hours all was razed. It naturally seemed impossible that so large a settlement, with wooden pillars which two men could not encircle, could have been destroyed but the fire was a punishment of heaven for the so horrible sins by which those heathen Chinese provoked the wrath of God. The church and convent of St. Dominic (Sto. Domingo), which is one of the splendid wooden buildings that there can be, escaped from the midst of this fire of Sodom. The inhabitants of Manila, who owned many houses, lost considerably in that fire. But in the space of four months, most of the *Alcaiceria* was rebuilt in squares with straight streets and uniform houses (p. 273).

Fires associated with Chinese uprisings continued to threaten Manila. In 1639, a Chinese revolt in Laguna spread to Manila. The rebels crossed Pasig River to Binondo, looted and ransacked the district, and torched its church. As buildings made of light materials in Binondo burned, the survivors sought refuge in the church and convent made of stone.

The rebellion, though effectively quelled, prompted the Governor-General to transfer the Parian farther northwest of Binondo in the area called Baybay (Longos), which is adjacent Tondo. The Chinese traders were placed in a stockade and their activities monitored. However, a fire wiped out Parian in 1642, which a friar vividly described, as follows:

> Among other ill deeds done by heathen Chinese, the worst was to manifest to the Christians their superstitions and lies. One night, when they were holding in one of their funeral services in honor of their dead, they used so many candles and burned paper and other things pertaining to magic that the house caught fire and the fire spread with the aid of the north wind and became so powerful

that in a short while the greater part of the *Parian* was razed and much property was lost. Actually, the ones who lost least were the Chinese for they had their goods in consignment to Spaniards and widows in Manila. The fire went on to destroy the greater part of Binondo…the Chinese hospital [San Gabriel Hospital] was also in great danger of destruction by fire, although this may seem hard to believe because it was far away. Nevertheless, the fire got there and it was possible to burn (Sta. Cruz, n.d.., p. 50).

The destruction of the Binondo Parian led to its transfer to Arroceros in 1645. Archeological finds from the 1960s to the 1990s on Arroceros Street and Mehan Garden (Jardin Botanico in Spanish Times) affirm historical accounts that once Parian was located outside Intramuros. An archaeological work conducted in 1978 yielded old foundations and common graves. Further diggings produced ceramic shards of Ming and Ching types, Chinese coins, and two architectural details. The most significant among the finds was a grave stone marker dated 1701 AD. It is made of *piedra China* (granite), measuring 75 centimeters in height, 40 centimeters in width, and 7 centimeters in thickness. Engraved on it were Chinese characters with Spanish translations (Dizon, 1994). A more recent study by Jago-on, Cuevas & Belmonte (2003) placed the existence of Parian from around the 17th and 18th centuries.It was not until the middle of the 18th century that the authorities relocated Parian to its last site near a wharf in Binondo. It was significant because it made possible Binondo's growth into an emporium in the 19th century.

The Seven Years War brought the British to the Philippines on October 6, 1762 (Nicholas, 1995). The occupation, which lasted from 1762 to 1764, caught Binondo unprepared. After the surrender of Manila, British troops pillaged and burned more than 400 houses in Binondo and Santa Cruz (De Viana, 2001, pp. 30-31). It forced the Chinese to shift allegiance to the British and to fight against the combined Spanish and Filipino troops. The war ended in 1763, providing normalcy to Spanish-British relations, but not in the Chinese community whom the Spaniards considered traitors. Anti-Chinese sentiments led to the expulsion of the Chinese from the country in 1766 and the dissolution of the Parian in 1784 to secure the colonial state from the Chinese 'menace.' The dissolution of Parian impelled many Chinese to move out to the neighborhoods of Santa Cruz, Quiapo, San Miguel, and Pandacan. Others left for Laguna and Batangas, while a few ventured south to Cebu, Iloilo, and Bacolod in the Visayas, and Davao and Zamboanga in Mindanao.

The Chinese 'diaspora', which led to the scattering of the Chinese to the chief port cities of central and southern Philippines, goes back to the British occupation.

From Materiales Ligeros to Materiales Fuertes

Two things followed the British occupation. First, it was after the end of the British occupation that the Bourbon kings of Spain introduced reforms in the economy like the shift from mono-crop to multi-crop agriculture and the diversification of trade and commerce. These reforming monarchs encouraged the promotion of the finest local products, such as cotton and silk, indigo, and spices, from Manila in the world market. The reforms also tried to break the monopoly of the Galleon Trade through trade diversification and multinational commercial intercourse (Skowronek, 1998).

Second, the reforms preluded the opening of more Philippine ports to international trade. Following the abolition of the Galleon Trade in 1815 (Schurz, 1959), Manila was formally opened to international trade in 1834, and Iloilo, Cebu, and Zamboanga after the 1850s. These moves transformed the Philippines from a trans-shipment port for goods coming from China and/ or Mexico to an active global trade actor since the second quarter of the 19th century.

The reforms also brought changes in the cultural scene, particularly in terms of imperial and domestic architectures. The grid iron city plan, which the Spaniards introduced through *reduccion* as a settlement policy in the 16th century, was the blueprint for urban development. As provided in the *Recopilacion de las Leyes de las Indias* (The Laws of the Indies), town life centered on the plaza complex that promoted and ensured social order. The *Laws of the Indies* reinforced this template through rigid ordinances that governed life in cities (Zialcita and Tinio, 1980, pp. 26, 125).

European inspirations found their way from floor plans to details of 19th century colonial architecture. Indigenous interpretations prevailed because, although the artisans were Chinese, the materials were local. Stone/brick houses, popularly known as *bahay na bato/bahay na tisa*, became the 'standard', signifying affluence, stability, and safety from fires. The harmonious matrix of *ladrill*os (Spanish-made ceramic floor tiles) and *tejas* (locally made roof tiles) provided protection from fire during the 19thcentury.

Binondo was one of the first settlements in Manila to enjoy the fruits of international trade. Immortalized by Rizal in his novel *Noli Me Tangere*, the Binondo of Capitan Tiago metamorphosed from impoverished Chinese enclave into an entrepót that defined Manila's prosperity in Southeast Asia. Escolta, one of the streets of Binondo, was an image of commercial success. Binondo, though, continued to struggle against fires and earthquakes, two disasters that influential the type of architecture that emerged in the process.

The initial Binondo settlement was composed of structures fashioned from *materiales ligeros* (light materials) sourced locally like wood, bamboo, and straw. The shift from *materiales ligeros* to *materiales fuertes* (strong materials) began with construction of the San Gabriel Hospital and the Binondo Church in the early years of 17th century, both made of stones. Eventually, the Chinese, not to be outdone, also had new houses made of stone. De Viana (2001, p. 85), citing Velarde, likened Binondo houses to those in Intramuros in the 17th and 18th centuries. The houses were large, tall, spacious, made of stone, and of fine architecture. They had balconies for shade in the sun and rain during the monsoons and *azoteas* (galleries) where the owners retired for fresh air at night in the heat of the dry season.

The process of building stone houses to check and/or contain fires entailed centuries of experimentation. A strong earthquake destroyed many churches in Manila in 1568. A weaker one struck Manila in 1645, destroying many of these houses, including the San Gabriel Hospital. This prompted many of the inhabitants in Binondo to revert to constructing houses made of *materiales ligeros* again for safety against earthquakes, which, in turn, made them vulnerable to fires. The persistence of this type of architecture from the 17th to the 18th centuries prompted the government to issue ordinances that prohibited the use of oil lamps in houses made of bamboo and nipa. The penalties for violations were harsh: male heads of households rendered forced labor in a foundry shop in Manila, whereas female heads of households languished in jail for three months (*Ereccion del Pueblos-Manila*, 1785-1855).

A discussion the difference between pre-19th century and 19th century architectures would help explain the significance of material culture in understanding how Binondo residents coped with fires.

The first of these structures is the Binondo Church, which was first made of light materials in 1594. The old building, though, was replaced by one made of stone in 1606. However, Intramuros residents petitioned the government for the demolition of the new church because it posed a threat to the capital city(Diaz-Trechuelo, 1959, p. 33). They argued that the rebellious Chinese could use the church to their favor. The Dominicans who built the church refused and prevailed. Indeed, the residents took refuge inside the church during the 1639 Chinese insurrection in Manila and during a fire in Binondo in 1642. Eventually, the church was demolished in 1740 to give way to the present church.

The material fabric partly determined the strength of the church as a fireproof structure. De Viana (2001) noted the use of hardwood like *trozos de baticulin, trozos de tindalo, trozos de molave, trozos de Betis, trozos y tablazones* from Bolinao, Pangasinan, and *madera* (lumber) from Orion, Bataan. The construction also utilized prized stone cuts like *piedra china*, *piedra de San Juan*, and *piedra de Meycauayan*. During the church's rehabilitation in 1764, it was considered "*de fuerte y desmerado grandor"* (strong and of excessive size), with an octagonal tower of six levels, all of *mamposteria* [masonry] (Diaz-Trechuelo, 1959, p. 34). The church, though, did not withstand the shelling by the American Liberation Forces in 1944.

Nineteenth century architecture in Binondo brought in revivalist styles from Europe, bridging space with function (Zialcita and Tinio, 1980, pp. 102, 108-109). Interior fixtures of imported furnishing bought at Manila's commercial emporia, as well as trinkets and gewgaws purchased during travels abroad,flaunted social status (De Viana, 2001, p. 160).The British and French-owned businesses brought in luxury items like phonographs, bicycles, cinematography, and the first prestigious car (Lucido, 1991, p. 80).

Space and ventilation were important considerations for convenience, comfort, and safety. These facilitated fast evacuation of the house during fires and earthquakes. Wide, symmetrical windows allowed the swift release of smoke. Binondo's narrow landscape, however, would not guarantee wide residential lots, prompting building owners to resort to contour design. A narrow house commonly projected greater depth posing a challenge to ingenuity of its owners (De Viana, 2001).

The plantation houses of Binondo were typical stone dwellings with added twist in furnishings. To facilitate comfort and safety during

earthquakes, the ceilings were made of light materials like bamboo or wood. The problem, however, was that these fixtures needed constant repairs because termites destroyed them. Affluence manifested in material culture found in every level of the house (Zialcita and Tinio, 1980). The *zaguan* (ground floor) contained the *carruaje* (carriage) or the *andas* (saint's palanquin) used for processions. Others have storage areas like the *lenera* (wood shed), *pozo* (deep well), and *algibe* (cistern). The *almacen* or *camarin* (storage of agricultural products) was also an important feature of a plantation house. Binondo affluence was also visible in window fenestrations like the *conchas* (sliding panels made of capiz shells panes), protective iron grilles, and *barandillas* (wooden balusters).

Materials that are more resistant to fires reached Philippine markets like tiles, zinc, and galvanized iron. Hardwood like *molave* and *baticulin* were valued for their sturdiness. In most cases, Binondo houses were made of adobe stones or brick reinforced with wooden frames. Most of the stones came from Meycauayan and Guadalupe. The favorite paving stone was the *piedra china* still evident in some Binondo sidewalks. There was also a demand for *azulejo* tiles that gave color and pattern to walls (De Viana, 2001, p. 191).

Policies that regulated building constructions offer insights on disaster reduction, particularly in times of fires. On September 11, 1794, an ordinance required that all structures within 1,500 *varas* radius from Intramuros be constructed exclusively of tiles and wood to prevent fires in Binondo, Tondo, Santa Cruz, and Quiapo. Violators rendered forced labor in public works for eight days and town chiefs who tolerated such violation were fined 20.00 pesos, which was a large sum at the time (*Cedulario*, 1792-1797).

A*vando*/*bando* (circular) informed the people about the ordinances for zoning. The government prohibited the use of light construction materials in places designated as *zonas de mamposteria* (sites reserved for structures made of strong materials). For instance, the *Gaceta de Manila* circulated an order in 1866, restricting the use of nipa in *zonas de mamposteria*, which covered the market of Binondo called *Divisoria* (*Gaceta de Manila*, 1869, p. 673). Since most of these *bandos* were not vigorously enforced, violations were common. Nonetheless, the government ordered the demolition of eighteen *casitas de paja y sauali*

in Murallon, Binondo for the "unpleasant sight they created and the danger they posed to the surrounding structures" (*Construccion de Casas*, n.d.).

Conclusion

The Chinese contributed to Binondo's prominent role in Manila's economic development. Defining the "Other" Manila, Binondo is one of the most conspicuous sites for studies on the relationships between architecture and disaster, especially fire, during the 17th and 18th centuries. The nexus between Parian and Binondo provided a continuous narrative of 'foreign presence', agency, and identity in the country. A history of disaster showed that the Chinese tried to adapt to fire risks in urban life partly though architecture. The government, through ordinances, helped check/contain the damages that fires caused on life and property.

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