

AMBITION AND Identity

Chinese Merchant Elites
in Colonial Manila, 1880-1916



Andrew R. Wilson

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ANDREW R. WILSON



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IN MY FIRST YEAR of graduate school, I took a course on the history of United States–East Asia relations with Akira Iriye. In our discussion of the Spanish-American War, I asked a question about China's response to the American annexation of the Philippines. Professor Iriye admitted that he did not know how Beijing had responded and that the topic might be worthy of a research paper. The rest, if you pardon the pun, is history. From that first project I developed a keen interest in Sino-Philippine relations and in the Chinese community in the colonial Philippines. Throughout the rest of my graduate career my interest was encouraged by dedicated faculty mentors. William Kirby not only guided the project as my dissertation adviser, he also made it possible for me to travel and conduct research overseas. I was also fortunate to share a nascent interest in Chinese overseas with Philip Kuhn. To journey together with a historian of Kuhn's caliber through the complexities of Chinese migration history was both a privilege and an invaluable learning experience. Finally, Peter Bol not only trusted me to teach premodern Chinese history but forced me to look farther back into the history of the Chinese in colonial Manila in search of larger patterns of community development. To all of these mentors I am deeply indebted.

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MAP 1. The major ports and sending counties of Fujian Province.



MAP 2. The main islands and major ports of the Spanish Philippines.



MAP 3. The provinces of Luzon in the late nineteenth century.

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Introduction

ON MAY 9, 1912, THE *Manila Times* reported that the Manila Chinese General Chamber of Commerce, the leading voice of the local Chinese community, had formally recognized the new Republic of China and had received official greetings from China's new president, Yuan Shikai. Many in Manila's Chinese community responded enthusiastically to the overthrow of the moribund Qing dynasty by a modern Chinese republic. Some young Chinese patriots even had a celebratory photo taken unfurling the new republican flag. Given that the leaders of the 1911 Revolution, especially Dr. Sun Yat-sen, would later give great credit to Chinese overseas for their role in the fall of the dynasty, such overt support for the new republic either by the dour heads of the chamber or by the younger generation was completely understandable. Only six years earlier, however, the Chinese Chamber of Commerce had been founded with the direct support of the Qing government and had welcomed the Qing consul general as an honorary member. Moreover, the Chinese merchant elite, who controlled the Chamber of Commerce, had been aggressively emphasizing their loyalty and personal ties to the dynasty for over thirty years. These loyal overtures were reciprocated. In the last four decades of its rule, the dynasty had reoriented its foreign policy agenda to emphasize the protection of Chinese overseas through the establishment of consulates and embassies in major nodes of Chinese emigration—allowing Beijing to develop institutional linkages with its expatriate subjects—and had reformulated its national development strategy to capitalize on the wealth and talent of Chinese overseas. Manila's Chinese merchant elite had been significant players in

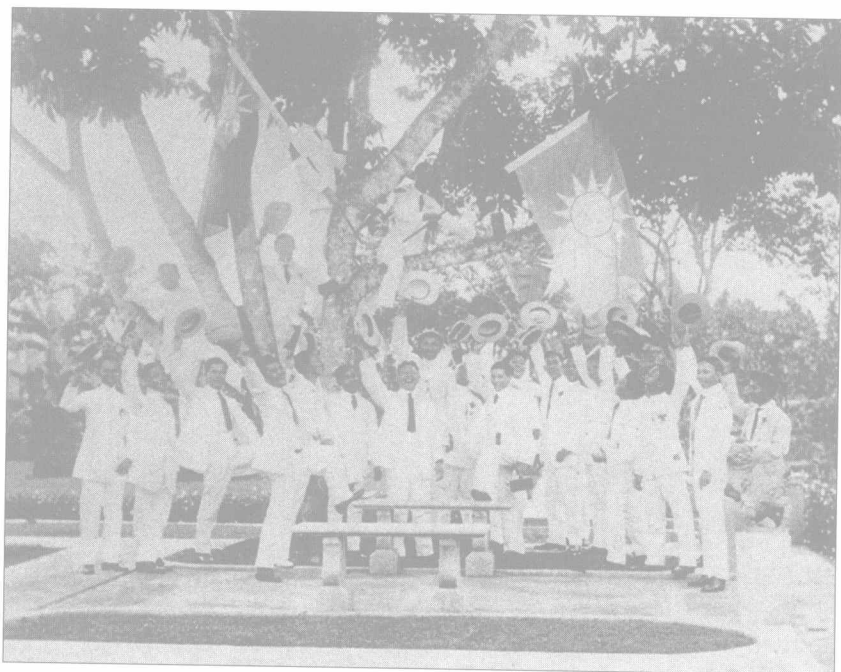


FIGURE 1. Local Tongmenghui members unfurling the new national and party flags in Manila, 1911. Courtesy of Guomindang Party Archives, Jinshan, Taiwan.

this process, but all these efforts were insufficient to save the faltering dynasty or to guarantee the loyalty of the Chinese overseas.¹

The reorientation of Beijing's foreign policy agenda had been rapid. Throughout most of the Qing dynasty (1644–1911), the imperial court had problematic relations with Chinese overseas. Various forces loyal to the Ming dynasty (1368–1644) had taken refuge in Southeast Asia in the late seventeenth century and harassed the South China coast in the name of restoring the Ming. Taiwan, once a Dutch outpost, fell to the pirate Koxinga, the most notorious Ming loyalist, whose family held the island until it fell to a massive Manchu-Chinese expedition in 1683. Other Ming loyalists found refuge in Vietnam and Thailand, often blending with established Chinese communities. Ethnic Chinese interaction with the region was therefore suspect in the eyes of the Manchu court. In the eighteenth century, Beijing took various measures to ban emigration for any purpose; while these laws were often relaxed in the case of merchants, it remained illegal for Chinese to travel abroad without official permis-

sion. In the late nineteenth century, however, the massive and largely uncontrollable flow of Chinese into Southeast Asia and the Americas as well as the dynasty's pressing need for talent and money forced a reappraisal of Qing emigration policy. A series of accords with Britain and France in the 1850s and 1860s sought to regulate labor recruitment in China's treaty ports. The 1868 Burlingame Treaty, between China and the United States, recognized the right of Chinese to emigrate freely and heralded a new official attitude toward the Chinese overseas.² Emigration laws were constantly revised, and the connections between Beijing and the Chinese overseas were continuously enhanced up until the dynasty's final collapse.

Institutional innovation accompanied this policy reorientation. In the 1870s and 1880s, the Qing established consulates and embassies throughout the world, charged to protect Chinese subjects and thereby improve the dynasty's international image. Investigative missions sent to Peru and Cuba in 1874 resulted in treaties that promised better treatment of Chinese laborers. Beijing successfully pressured foreign governments to end the abominable coolie trade and made the protection of Chinese overseas the first priority of China's new ambassadors to the United States, Spain, Peru, and Great Britain. In an era when China's international position was worsening daily, the Qing dynasty managed to enjoy a few foreign relations successes in the area of overseas Chinese affairs.

Beijing also courted the money and talent of the Chinese overseas for its self-strengthening program. In a reversal of the Confucian hierarchy that placed commercial activity near the bottom of the professions, merchants in the late Qing found their status elevated by a government that needed their skills. Successful Chinese were encouraged to return to China and invest in industrial and infrastructure projects. Zhang Bishi, a wealthy Straits Chinese from Penang, parlayed his overseas accomplishments into official position. His skills as a manager and his cash donations to government enterprises won him an imperial audience, and he was promoted to Director of the Court of the Imperial Stud and a place in the first rank of Qing officialdom.³ Another Straits Chinese, Wu Tingfang, was trained in English law and later became the Qing ambassador to the United States, Spain, and Peru. Chinese students, trained overseas, also returned to China to take up posts in the imperial government, in state-run enterprises, in the military, and in the foreign service. Those who did not return were still encouraged to invest in China

and to send aid in times of distress, while others were called upon to render service as consular officials overseas. The Qing rewarded its loyal and generous subjects with honorary titles and imperial emoluments, and imperial seals and charters were granted to the benevolent associations and economic institutions founded by Chinese overseas. The establishment of Chinese chambers of commerce, which were at once local but also chartered by the Qing government, further enhanced the linkage. To symbolize these formal and informal ties, the dynasty introduced a new word into its official vocabulary, “*huaqiao*” or “Chinese sojourner,” a term that emphasized membership in a larger cultural-ethnic Chinese community (*hua*) and directed loyalty toward the homeland as “sojourners” (*qiao*) rather than immigrants. Finally, the Qing Nationality Law of 1909 declared, by the principle of consanguinity, that all Chinese, everywhere, were subjects of the emperor.⁴ By the beginning of the last century, Chinese sojourners enjoyed a central place in Beijing’s consciousness that they had never known before, and they had access to institutions and the protection of laws that would lead them to identify themselves more readily with the dynasty and as Chinese.

The Qing government, however, was not the only political entity that took an interest in the Chinese overseas. Chinese reformers and revolutionaries also set their sights on Chinese expatriates. The leading constitutional reformers, Kang Youwei and Liang Qichao, were well received throughout Southeast Asia (Nanyang) and the Americas after their exile following the failed “Hundred Days Reform” in 1898. Kang and Liang collected donations and established numerous branches of their Protect the Emperor Society (Baohuanghui). Sun Yat-sen, the “Father of the Chinese Republic,” spent most of his life outside of China as both a student and an exile. In 1894, with the help of local Chinese, Sun founded the Revive China Society (Xingzhonghui) in Honolulu. In Tokyo, in 1905, Sun became head of the Revolutionary Alliance (Tongmenghui), which brought together the various Chinese student and political groups, and was later reorganized into China’s first political party, the Guomindang. In many ways, Chinese communities overseas, especially student communities, were the birthplace of Chinese republicanism and the place where many ethnic Chinese first began to identify with the Chinese nation.

In the Philippines, local Chinese were not immune to these developments. Branches of both Kang Youwei’s and Sun Yat-sen’s

groups were founded in the islands, but these movements developed slowly in the years before 1911. Instead of reformist or revolutionary affiliations, the local Chinese elite usually sided with the dynasty, and Beijing offered them awards and dispensations in exchange for this ostensible loyalty. The merchant elite lobbied successfully for the establishment of a consulate, purchased mandarin titles, dressed themselves in the style of Chinese officials, won imperial honors, and, in 1906, founded the Manila Chinese General Chamber of Commerce. The chamber, chartered in accord with the regulations of the new Ministry of Agriculture, Industry, and Commerce, granted an official Qing seal and, enjoying initially close ties to the imperial consul general, institutionalized the link between the local elite and the dynasty.

The Chamber of Commerce became the dominant Chinese institution in the American Philippines, and its directors took the lead in organizing Chinese community events. The chamber's members held annual celebrations for the emperor's and the empress dowager's birthdays, prepared lavish receptions for visiting imperial dignitaries, and collected funds for relief projects in China. As a reward, the chamber was allowed to select a delegate to represent the Philippine Chinese in China's new Constitutional Assembly. In every way, these merchants proved themselves to be loyal subjects of the Qing dynasty. How then could they so easily throw their support to a new government and a new president?

In pursuing the answer to this question, it became clear that understanding the dynamics of Chinese expatriate communities is central to understanding the social, economic, and political history of China in modern times. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Manila's Chinese community underwent dramatic changes. These changes reflected the evolution of colonial Southeast Asia and the dynamics of the global economy. Change among the Chinese in the Philippines also reflected the revolutionary developments taking place in China: a growing sense of Chinese nationalism, simultaneous with a growing regionalism, politicization of Chinese merchants, anti-Manchu revolutionary activity, intellectual and cultural experimentation, as well as a host of social and institutional innovations. In the Philippines, and particularly in Manila, these developments prompted the reorientation of the Chinese community's social structure, the adoption of new institutional forms, and the aggressive promotion of community and individual identity as Chinese.

Perhaps the most revolutionary event for all Chinese, both at

home and abroad, was the end of China's dynastic history and the establishment of a Chinese republic in 1912. With the exception of Yuan Shikai's unsuccessful attempt to found a constitutional monarchy in 1915–1916, the Chinese entered a prolonged era of experimentation with various forms of republican government. This was a fundamentally new historical experience for the Chinese people. By evaluating the overseas response to the Qing collapse within numerous discrete communities, one can go on to better illuminate the patterns of China's modern history by looking at this seminal event within the broader history of a transnational migrant community.⁵ This Chinese community's response to the 1911 Revolution did not represent disloyalty to the fallen dynasty, nor did it embody the inherent revolutionary or patriotic consciousness or even the appearance of a new generation of Chinese leaders. Such conclusions are either insufficient or simplistic. Dynastic collapse was both a crisis and an opportunity for Manila's Chinese merchant elite. They seized on this opportunity by identifying with the new government of China in an informed and logical manner that best suited their socioeconomic ambitions. Identifying with the Chinese government, whether imperial or republican, reinforced the community's Chinese identity, legitimized the elite, and promoted community cohesion: factors essential to the social and economic success of the Chinese in the past and presumably in the future.

Prasenjit Duara has provided a persuasive explanation for this phenomenon. By exploring the ways in which three factions of nationalist emissaries to Southeast Asia sought to create a sense of identification with China by establishing hard boundaries that distanced ethnic Chinese from their host environments, Duara finds that the first two factions—imperial officials and constitutional reformers—were the most successful among the Chinese in Southeast Asia. Chinese merchants in the region responded enthusiastically to the sale of imperial titles and the Qing empire's "effort to construct a Confucian nationalism."⁶ Kang Youwei and Liang Qichao's reformist Baohuanghui employed a "hybrid philosophy" to recruit overseas Chinese to the cause of constitutional monarchy for China and furthered their efforts through business activities that both enhanced the prestige of Chinese entrepreneurs and appealed to them as a symbol of a prosperous future.⁷ Revolutionary nationalism, in contrast, was less successful before 1911, because participation in Sun Yat-sen's Tongmenghui had fewer social and economic benefits. After

the fall of the Qing, however, the first generation of republican historians, responding to Sun's claim that Chinese overseas were the progenitors of the new China, sought to locate revolutionary activism in overseas Chinese communities where little actually existed. The subsequent politicization of *huaqiao* historiography is what Duara sought to correct and part of what this current work aims to evaluate.⁸

Among the Chinese merchant elite in the Philippines, the overwhelming appeal of constructing linkages to the Qing government relegated the reformist and revolutionary options to the status of minor political movements. Official certification by the Qing had more currency for a merchant community that was struggling to survive in an often hostile environment and that needed good relations with established authority than the potentially disruptive cause of an anti-Manchu revolution. When the dynasty ceased to be a viable political entity, however, the elite did not hesitate to shift its loyalty to the republic. Since it has been read as indicative of inherent revolutionary spirit among the Nanyang Chinese, this rapid—and opportunistic—shift has subsequently obscured the complexity of the relations between the Chinese overseas and the governments of China. Only by examining how the social and economic ambitions of the Chinese merchant elite in Manila informed their shift in loyalty from imperial to republican China—with little change in personnel or strategies—is it possible to salvage the history of the Manila Chinese community from the nationalist historiography of both China and the Philippines. Moreover, the reorientation of elite political loyalty was part of a greater pattern of skillful handling of shifts in the local and regional environment. Therefore, one must look farther back in time for the origins of merchant-elite strategies.

The subsequent chapters will show that 1911 was not the first time that local Chinese had faced a major crisis or had seized on a historic opportunity. For centuries, the Chinese migrants who traveled to Manila had been aggressively and opportunistically responding to changes within the host community and within China itself. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries these changes were both more dramatic and more rapid. To meet these challenges, the most skillful and successful Chinese employed a complex web of strategies and identities, some of which could be appropriated or dispensed with at will. The Chinese discussed in this work are simultaneously “traditional” and “modern,” monarchists and revolutionaries, merchants and mercenaries, self-serving and community-minded, Confu-