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John T. Omohundro

Chinese Merchant
Families in Iloilo

Commerce and Kin in a Central Philippine City

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THE PHILIPPINE CHINESE

THIS STUDY OF THE CHINESE COMMUNITY of Iloilo City, Philippines, is organized around three themes of both social and economic import to the contemporary Philippine nation. First, the organization and operation of Chinese business life is portrayed to support my contention that like the fisherman, hunter, or farmer, the merchant has a culture which owes much of its structure and distinctiveness to his livelihood. Second, the family business, as the basic social unit of the Philippine Chinese, is examined for the complex interplay between social and commercial needs and desires. Finally, running as an undercurrent throughout the book and receiving careful scrutiny in the epilog, is the prospect of Chinese integration into Filipino society. Momentous changes have occurred in the Philippines in the last few years. By directing attention to the Chinese as ethnic merchants, organized into family businesses, we can best foresee how those changes will affect integration.

Compared to other Southeast Asian Chinese populations, that of the Philippines is small (about 300,000 people) and a small proportion of the total population (about 1 percent). Compare these figures to those for Malaysia's Chinese (3,000,000, or 30 percent of the total population) or Thailand's Chinese (about 2,500,000, or 8 percent of the total population). In spite of its small size, however, Philippine Chinese society has frequently been the subject of anthropological studies. The structure of the Philippine Chinese family and its patterns of marriage and intermarriage have been treated a number of times (H. Reynolds 1964; I. Reynolds 1964; Liu, Rubel, and Yu 1969; Amyot 1960; Tan-Gatue 1955). The structure and history of community organizations, including the lineage and other kin groupings, have also been described (Amyot 1960; Weightman 1960; Blaker 1970). Some of the myriad works on the Philippine Chinese operations in the economy have also attempted to comprehend the specific internal workings of local Chinese marketing practices (Wickberg 1965; Doeppers 1971) and the intra-community network of business connections and market information (Weightman 1960). The urban ecology of Chinese neighborhoods (Doeppers 1971) and the position of the Chinese as a class in the colonial and post-

colonial socioeconomic orders (Wickberg 1965; Ravenholt 1955) have also been carefully researched.

From these social studies as well as from the more general works on the history and political status of the Philippine Chinese emerges a vivid picture of the condition of this overseas Chinese community compared to others in Southeast Asia. George Weightman (1960:10) has summarized this position as follows. Philippine Chinese constitute a smaller percentage of the population of their host nation than do most Southeast Asian Chinese enclaves, yet their economic position is still very strong. Overall, they are a remarkably homogeneous and well-to-do group, with an almost nonexistent peasant or proletarian element. They comprise only two speech groups, the Cantonese and the Fukienese. They are more urban than any Southeast Asian Chinese group, except that in Singapore, and enjoy a standard of living higher than most. They are more literate than most, more Christian, and operate a number of high quality news services, schools, churches, and public relations activities. They are more exclusively pro-Kuomintang than most Southeast Asian Chinese, at least in public, reflecting the anti-Communist bias of the Filipinos. Finally, unlike the Chinese of Malaysia and Indonesia but similar to the Chinese of Thailand, Philippine Chinese have not maintained any distinct intermediate ethnic groups of the Peranakan or Baba Chinese type.

Chinese Merchant Families Outside Manila

Because of the relative homogeneity of the Philippine Chinese group, the relative abundance of literature about them comes closer than in other countries to a faithful portrayal. Yet there are still some rather large gaps in our knowledge which my research has sought to fill.

First, most scholars have concentrated their attention on Manila, whose greater metropolitan area contains about one-half of the Chinese citizens and probably a similar proportion of the ethnically Chinese Filipino citizens (Purcell 1960:494). The remaining 50 percent of the Philippine Chinese are not well understood in either their own community organization or in their relation to Manila.¹ For this reason Iloilo province and Iloilo City were selected as the site of this research. As we shall see in chapter 2, Iloilo is one of the largest, oldest, most active, and most conservative of the Chinese concentrations outside of Manila. On the other hand, because of the homogeneity of the Philippine Chinese, many of the conclusions regarding business practices, family life, intermarriage, and so forth that I shall set out here should be fairly applicable to the Chinese in Manila, Davao, Cebu, Zamboanga, and other Philippine cities.²

Second, there have been few attempts to examine and analyze the economic activities of the Philippine (or any Southeast Asian) Chinese at the local level. Precisely what is the operation of the "airtight system of financing

and credit, cooperative purchasing, and interlocking ownership" (Alip 1959: 69) which is frequently alleged to be characteristically Chinese and the source of their economic advantage? What is the connection of Chinese enterprise to Filipino capital, to Filipino labor, to the Filipino agricultural hinterland? Precisely how do Chinese organize and operate their businesses? What resemblance does this bear to the way Americans or Filipinos might operate? There are many barriers to this sort of inquiry, some of which involve the Chinese businessman's understandable reticence to be investigated in these matters. Other barriers involve the theoretical tools which economists bring to their task. Philippine Chinese writers themselves, beneficiaries of the best inside information, tend to be most interested in macroeconomic questions. They shun the local study, which demands a sociocultural approach and thus veers away from the patterns of economic tests. Inclined to work with official statistics and usually working within the same paradigms of economic activity as their official sources, the conventional economic students are at a loss at the local level where statistics are virtually unavailable and the macroeconomic categories appear far less relevant. The approach of the economic anthropologist, who is prepared to gather his own facts and to invent more of his own categories (or accept those of his subjects), seems preferable on the local level, even when working in a community of thousands of Chinese located in a matrix of hundreds of thousands of Filipinos.

A third deficiency in the study of Philippine Chinese is the failure to correlate the institutions of their society. That is to say, Philippine Chinese economy, religion, political behavior, and family life, for example, have been the subjects of good research. However, these different aspects of Chinese community life are usually presented as isolates. Also, data collection is often a remote questionnaire procedure, at best. Yet residence in a community of Philippine Chinese shopkeepers will quickly show the researcher that there is a definite social organization to Chinese economic activity and that a heavy burden of economic function is placed upon the social organization. For this reason I have presented and defended the term "merchant society" as a label for the Philippine Chinese (chapter 3). This "merchant society" label serves to emphasize the interrelationship between the social area and the economic area of Philippine Chinese behavior. Second, this label will draw attention to their place in a worldwide presence of "marginal trading communities," "resident strangers," or "immigrant shopkeepers," as they are variously called (Nash 1966; Weightman 1960). In *East-West Parallels*, W. F. Wertheim (1964) has already argued for a view of the overseas Chinese within a worldwide phenomenon of "minority trading communities." However, Wertheim has dealt exclusively with assimilation and racial harmony. In a wide variety of contexts, writers have made reference to the similarity between European Jews, Levantine traders in Africa, and Indians and Chinese in Southeast Asia, but these were only passing references.

Comparisons of the economic activities of trading minorities and their family structures still beg to be done.³

A central theme of this book is the interaction of family and business in Iloilo Chinese merchant society. The family business, as the ubiquitous social unit of Philippine Chinese communities, is here considered as both an economic unit and a kinship unit. The shape the family takes is a product of culture exported from China and reworked in the Philippine environment (the subject of chapters 2, 5, 6 and 7). The strengths and weaknesses of this commercial unit stem in a large part from its familial base. At the same time, the shape of the family is influenced by the needs of business. This latter process has been given much attention on only two occasions, Maurice Freedman's (1957) Singapore Chinese work and Donald Willmott's (1960) study of Chinese in Semarang, Indonesia. I have expanded their treatment of some topics, for example, the business effects of marrying a native wife, and in several places my findings do not agree with theirs.

The importance of family organizational principles, kinship, and commercial concerns in Iloilo Chinese life can be seen in chapter 4, where I attempt to discern a pattern and purpose in the complex and flexible political organization the Chinese have raised since the Second World War.

Finally, the close bond of family and business is the key to understanding the future integration of Chinese into Filipino society, the subject of the epilog. I cannot pretend to foresee the future, but some trends are perceptible and some conditional statements are possible.

The Chinese as an Ethnic Group

The Chinese living in the city and the province may be labeled an ethnic group, but choosing an appropriate definition of that term immediately introduces inevitable and pervasive biases. On the one hand, we shall find it useful to define the Chinese as those within a certain residential area, or breeding population, or those possessing certain culture traits imported from China. On the other hand, we might usefully allow the Chinese to define themselves in terms of who thinks he is Chinese or in terms of the behavioral strategy exercised (in this case, being a sojourner or minority merchant). Even this dichotomy does not illustrate the full range of possibilities for defining the group. Sometimes the Chinese talk of themselves as a statistical sum of individuals and businesses qualifying as culturally Chinese, and at other times they speak of a Chinese identity giving particular shape to a person's actions and thoughts. Lastly, J. Clyde Mitchell (1974) has pointed out that not only might the ethnographer and the actors have two (or more) different conceptual frameworks for defining the ethnic group, but each might also have his own ways of interpreting the behavior of the actors.

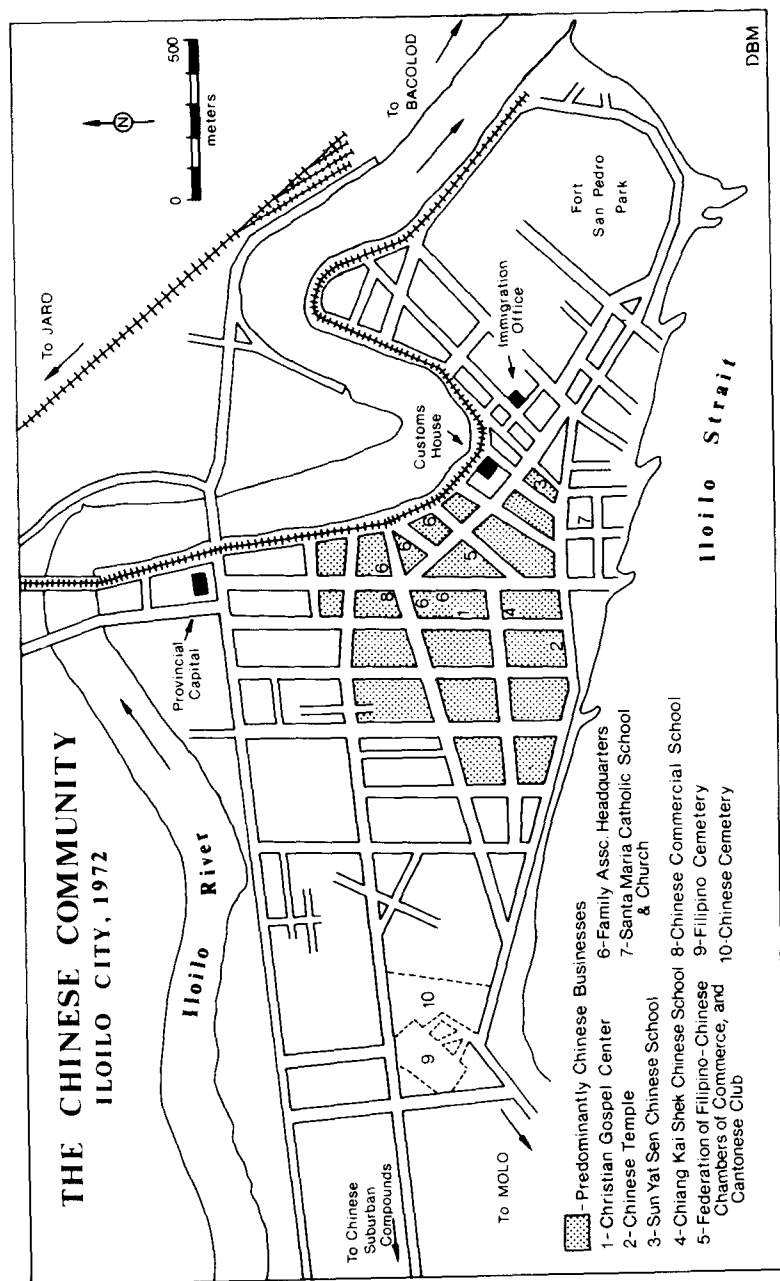
This complexity should not be cause for dismay. The problems of defining and explaining ethnic groups have finally broadened to join anthropology's older debates on the core notions of culture and society. Anthropologists are no more in agreement on what an ethnic group is, how it should be studied and explained, and what its boundaries are, than they are agreed about their older term, culture. Now that the study of ethnicity by anthropologists has intensified in recent decades, theoretical rumblings in one area are bound to jostle the other.

In this study, the several notions of ethnic groups are used like interchangeable lenses on a microscope, each revealing different ways light is shed by the subject. At the outset, the population approach and culture trait approach will provide convenient overviews.

According to Bureau of Immigration statistics, Iloilo City's alien Chinese community of 2,200 stands fifth behind Manila, Cebu, Davao, and Cagayan de Oro, in order (Philippine Census 1960). However, Iloilo has the third largest number of Chinese business establishments registered in the Chinese business directories (*Filipino-Chinese Chambers of Commerce Yearbook* 1965). In the opinion of Filipinos and Chinese, the Iloilo Chinese are considered to be a more visible, more active, more conservative, and more ancient Chinese community than any but Manila and Cebu. There are more Chinese associations and Chinese schools in Iloilo than anywhere but Manila and Cebu. By most measures, then, Iloilo ranks in the top three or four Chinese communities of the Philippines.

Iloilo itself, at the southern tip of Panay Island in the western Visayas region (map 1), is a town of about 250,000 Filipinos. It is the capital of Iloilo province, one of the oldest Hispanic developments and the third greatest rice-producing region in the nation. Iloilo City plays the dominant role in the western Visayas as accumulator of agricultural products and distributor of imported and manufactured goods. It has served in this capacity since the seventeenth century, thus providing fertile ground for the growth of a Chinese merchant community. Until the rise of Cebu in the twentieth century, Iloilo was the second most important and second largest Spanish settlement in the country after Manila, earning the title "Queen City of the South."

The Chinese community of Iloilo province is based in Iloilo City, where about 90 percent of their number reside and operate businesses. The vast majority of combined business-and-residences are in the downtown business district on five or six main streets (map 2). Unlike the Binondo-Santa Cruz area of Manila, which is called Chinatown, Iloilo's downtown does not constitute a Chinatown in the sense that the businesses hire predominantly Chinese or cater predominantly to Chinese or that residence within the area is limited to Chinese or that residence outside the area is restricted for Chinese. It is simply that the majority of downtown businesses are owned and lived in by Chinese.



Map 1
Chinese in Iloilo City

In defining Chinese individuals for demographic purposes, I shall include all ethnically Chinese individuals, regardless of citizenship. An ethnic Chinese was born in China or attended Philippine Chinese schools, can speak Chinese, and has traceable descent from Chinese ancestors. This operational definition allows me to include Philippine-born Chinese and mestizos and yet exclude the pure Filipinos who attended Chinese school and can speak some Chinese. It begs the questions of political allegiance, assimilation to Filipino culture, and personal identity for the time being.

Official Philippine government recognition of the Chinese community is by means of statistics on race, mother tongue and citizenship of individuals. According to data recorded at the Office of Immigration in Iloilo in 1973, Chinese citizens of the Republic of China comprise about 1 percent of the city's population and 0.3 percent of the total provincial population. In the 1948 census, the last to record "race," there were 2,487 individuals of pure "yellow" race in Iloilo province and about 1,200 mestizos. The racially pure Chinese, then, constituted 0.3 percent of the total population. In the Philippine census of 1960, 2,032 or 0.2 percent of Iloilo's provincial population spoke Chinese as their mother tongue (first language learned). So, by race, language, or citizenship, the Chinese are between 0.2 percent and 0.3 percent of the total provincial population and about 1 percent of the city's population.

When the Filipinos speak of the Chinese, officially or unofficially, they estimate their number at 2,000 to 3,000. When Iloilo Chinese estimate their own numbers, confidential estimates often range to 10,000 (whereas officially Chinese accept the Filipino figures to play down their presence). The Chinese are apparently counting by quite a different method than are the Filipinos. For the Chinese, a man is *lân-lâng* ("our people") if he meets the flexible set of criteria which I mentioned above as a working definition of ethnic Chinese.

There are numerous ways to estimate the cultural Chinese population, but one of the better methods is to extrapolate from the Chinese school population.⁴ In Iloilo the assumption that all cultural Chinese will send their children to Chinese school is reasonable, since I conducted a survey of Iloilo's schools and found only 3 percent of the racially pure Chinese children not in Chinese school. The main flaw in extrapolating the population from the school age population is that the Chinese population pyramid is not symmetrical due to immigration patterns.

In Iloilo City's four Chinese schools the enrollment in 1972 included 710 pure Chinese, 1,277 mestizos, and 500 pure Filipinos, a total of 2,489 children. Eliminating the pure Filipinos and the students who board because their families live in other cities but adding the small number of dropouts each year gives a total of 1,950 to 2,000. Now, what percentage of the total population do these children represent? Alien registration figures for the province suggest schoolchildren are 22 percent to 34 percent of the

total number of Chinese, which is far too low.⁵ In a standard population pyramid school-age children are about 40 percent, and in Iloilo they may constitute 50 percent. Thus, Iloilo's ethnic Chinese population is roughly 5,000.

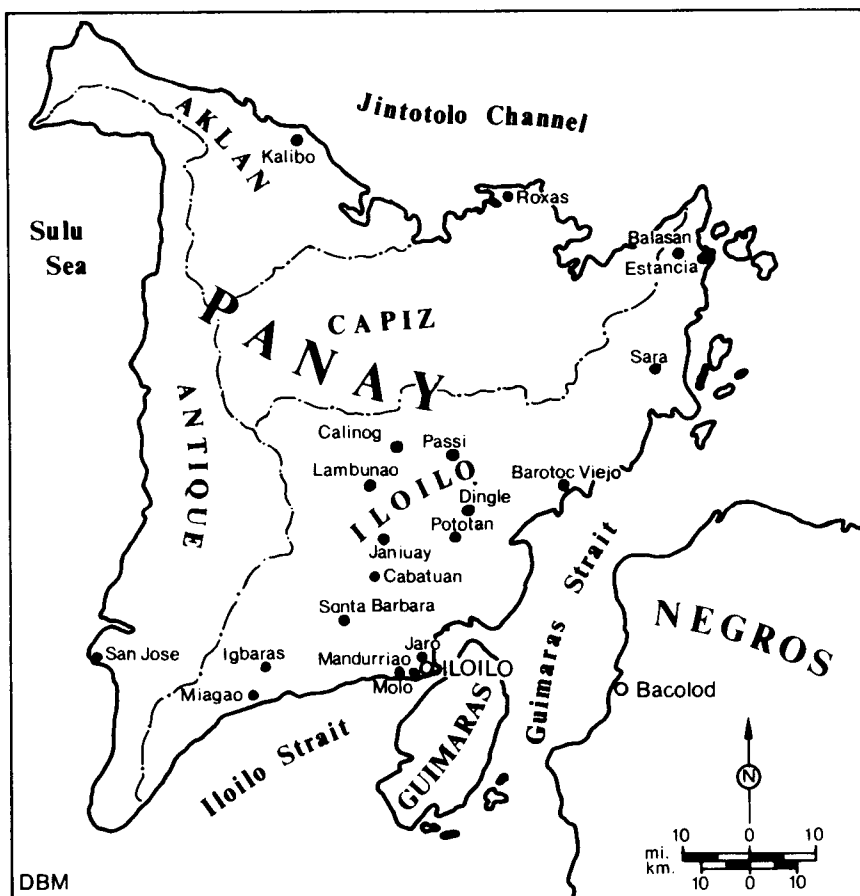
Comparing this total to my previous figures on citizenship, we may conclude that about 40 percent of the ethnic Chinese are Chinese citizens. In a genealogical survey of 70 families, the proportion of Chinese citizens more closely approached 50 percent. Applying this same formula to the national figure of 150,000 Chinese citizens results in a population estimate for ethnic Chinese of about 300,000 to 375,000 (Philippine Census 1960). Estimating the national ethnic population directly from Chinese school enrollment figures of 65,000 in 1971 (McCarthy 1972) gives 195,000.⁶ Thus, the ethnic Chinese population of the Philippines is probably between 195,000 and 375,000. With far less care in computation, estimates of 500,000 to 1,000,000 Chinese have been published by the mass media and the government.

Government definitions of citizenship can give misleading results for research purposes. Alien certificate of registration figures copied during fieldwork in 1972 reveal that 49 percent of the 2,221 people shown as Chinese aliens in the province are Philippine-born minors. Forty individuals are pure Filipino women who married their Chinese husbands officially and, thus, lost their Filipino citizenship. Also, there are a large number of mestizo minors who have not yet officially filed for acceptance as Filipino citizens as is their right through their Filipino mothers. So about one-half of all aliens registered are not the "stereotypic" aliens, that is, China-born adults of pure Chinese race, and some do not even qualify as ethnic Chinese.

In the final analysis all government figures, social surveys, and extrapolations therefrom are only estimates and should not be made to carry much burden of proof.

Although the Chinese community is about 50 percent Chinese citizens, the distribution of aliens among the generations is highly skewed. First-generation immigrants, whether they arrived in the 1920s or 1950s, very rarely acquire Filipino citizenship. Each subsequent generation, born and educated in the Philippines, acquires Filipino citizenship at rates of 25 to 50 percent per generation. My collection of sixty-eight genealogies of ethnic Chinese in the city shows that families whose third generation is now about forty-five years old have the highest proportion of Filipino citizens, but immigrant families of more recent arrivals have acquired Filipino citizenship at the fastest rates. Overall, the community is predominantly alien for persons over forty-five and predominantly Filipino citizens for persons under forty-five years old.

The Chinese community is racially heterogeneous, also. Data I gathered from seventy Iloilo Chinese families concerning racial composition by sex and generation show that racial variety has increased with each generation. An



Map 2
Panay Island, Philippines

overall average of 80 percent pure Chinese is thus an excessively coarse measure. The schoolchildren in 1972, it will be recalled, were 64 percent mestizos.

Of the province's cultural Chinese, 90 percent live in Iloilo City, but about 500 (including 300 aliens) reside and work in provincial towns and crossroads. The number of aliens in proportion to the number of ethnic Chinese is larger in the provincial towns because a greater proportion of men marry Filipinas. The subsequent mestizo generations lose contact with the Chinese community of Iloilo City faster than do pure Chinese or urban mestizos. The 1960 census showed that twelve Iloilo provincial towns had more than twenty, but fewer than eighty, Chinese citizens (thus forty or more ethnic Chinese). About two dozen other towns and barrios had one to twenty Chinese citizens.

In general, the population has grown faster in Iloilo City than in provincial towns, and a number of provincial towns have actually dropped in population (Census of the Philippines 1903, 1948, 1960). In the 1903 census, Iloilo City contributed 10 percent of the province's Filipino population, while in 1960 it contained over 18 percent. In both 1903 and 1960, the Iloilo City Chinese constituted 85 percent of the province's Chinese population. But the economic prominence of provincial towns with Chinese populations, like Janiway, Sara, and Balasan, has declined. So, although the percentage of Chinese outside Iloilo City has not decreased, their importance clearly has. In addition, a look at the origins within the Philippines of Chinese migrants to Iloilo City's Chinese community reveals that about two-thirds of the Chinese who come to town have come from provincial areas or smaller Chinese communities. Likewise, those who leave Iloilo's community generally head for the bigger cities such as Manila, Cebu, or Davao. The overall migratory pattern for Filipinos and Chinese alike is, therefore, one of urbanization.

The Chinese community of Iloilo consists of about 490 business families in the city and perhaps 40 or 50 business families in the provincial towns, excluding families without any independent business, such as teachers, salaried executives, and salesmen. The number of households is somewhat fewer than 490, because some families combine into extended families and other large households. My genealogical survey reveals that average family size in terms of surviving children is 5.7 children, which is slightly below the Philippine national average of 6.7. Not all these children are now living in Iloilo with their parents. Average urban household size is 7.5 related Chinese family members, exclusive of nonrelated Chinese, servants, resident employees, and visitors. To include these latter categories of household residents would raise the average to 10 or more people per household.

As we have seen, the Chinese community is residually concentrated in the downtown business area, operating over 400 shops, services, and offices. The three contiguous neighbor municipalities of Jaro, Molo, and

La Paz each have about 15 to 30 Chinese combined business establishments and residences.

Residence and business are not coterminous now, although they were until the Second World War. From a sample of sixty-three residence histories, I find only 54 percent of the families are living over their downtown businesses, 19 percent are living in apartments elsewhere in the city, and 27 percent are living full-time in country houses, Chinese compounds, or haciendas in neighboring Molo, Jaro, and La Paz. Almost all of these suburban residences were acquired after 1960.

The Iloilo Chinese are immigrants or descendants of immigrants from Fukien and Kwangtung provinces. Depending upon the method of estimating, the Fukienese comprise between 80 percent and 90 percent of the community, with the remainder composed primarily of Cantonese, plus a tiny handful of Swatow and Shanghai Chinese. Doeppers (1971) specified ratios of Cantonese and Fukienese for a number of Philippine cities. By those figures Iloilo is intermediate in its regional diversity, Davao being the greatest Cantonese area (36 percent of its Chinese are Cantonese), and some small towns such as Vigan and Laoag the least heterogeneous (3.5 to 5.7 percent Cantonese). Such variation occurred because Cantonese migrated to towns in demand of their regional occupational specializations, such as tailor shops and restaurants, and to towns where relatives and friends were available to receive newcomers.

To review the definitions of this ethnic group so far, statistics on parentage, citizenship, and residence patterns reveal a population aggregate in the city which can be called Chinese. The operational definition of Chinese used here, involving birth and language, is close to the one Chinese would use for themselves as a group. However, by my count there are 5,000 Chinese; some Chinese estimate their own numbers as high as 10,000. The Philippine government, not interested in counting other than Chinese citizens, arrives at a more conservative figure of 2,200 to 3,000. We may assume that three such disparate figures in the minds of different parties occasionally generate rather different behaviors.

Though actual counts vary widely, population aggregate figures for defining the ethnic group are fairly straightforward. Pinpointing the Chinese as a social structure or an identity group is more complex, partly because these criteria do not define the same groups. Note, for example, the disparity between Iloilo Chinese as a population and as a formal institutional structure. Although the Chinese have 10 to 25 percent of their number distributed about the province and suburbs, the actual seat of the community's cultural activities and organizations is clearly Iloilo City, where almost all provincial Chinese have homes, apartments, or branches of their family business; where their school-age children are enrolled; and where they will be buried in the Chinese cemetery.