

# • The Chinese in Moroland

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**C**hinese presence in Moroland<sup>1</sup> is an account full of historical and social significance. For one, Sulu and Maguindanao basked in a prehistoric trade and commerce with neighboring societies in Southeast Asia with profound Chinese influence as well as directly with the merchants from South China. Observers noted that such relations were "prehistoric," even antedating Islam on Mindanao and Spanish colonization of the Philippine islands for over 300 years (Saleeby, 1908; Beyer, 1921). Chinese trade in Moroland probably intensified during the three centuries of Spanish conquest due to restricted trade and Spanish monopoly that discouraged Chinese junks from visiting Manila (Laarhoven, 1987). Meanwhile, Sulu remained a "free port" even under the brief Spanish rule confined to Jolo town.

The second reason for Chinese presence is that the Moros (for Muslims in the Philippines) were the most organized and "developed" communities compared to the more "primitive tribes" on Mindanao. The Chinese bartered goods (pearls, *tripang*, wax, etc.) with the Moros in exchange for items that in turn enriched Moro material culture, thereby enhancing Moro political and cultural dominance due to superior technology in warfare (Warren, 1976). What began as purely commercial relations evolved into a permanent or continuing Chinese influence in the shaping of the social institutions of Moroland, notably the economy, polity and social structure of Moro society.

This paper is a preliminary attempt to show the underlying process that has made this event possible. It will paint a social and economic picture of the Chinese in Moroland at the start of this century, and how such a picture interfaces with Moro social stratification. Some implications on social integration are then drawn, with an eye to understanding the present situation in "Muslim Mindanao."

## **Chinese Population**

The coming of the Chinese in the Philippines was rather late and from the south (Reynolds, 1967). While permanent Chinese settlements (*hua-ch'iao*) were noted in Palembang (Sumatra) in 1270, and in Tamasik (now Singapore) by 1349, "it was unlikely

that there were Chinese permanent communities (in the Philippines) before the 15<sup>th</sup> century.”

Trade and commerce between the Chinese and peoples of Mindanao and outlying islands were, however, established in known entrepots such as Jolo (Sulu) and Butuan even before the coming of Islam in the 1300s. There was evidence to show that the Arab traders who visited Jolo came with islamized Chinese. Tombs of royal families there often carried Arabic characters and Chinese names. One such record of the trade between Sulu and China is documented in the 15<sup>th</sup> century when the Sultan Paduka of Sulu went to China to pay tribute to the Imperial Ming Court of Emperor Yung Lo in Beijing. He died there after paying tribute to the Emperor. However, such visit to China left its permanent imprint. Today, the tomb of the Sultan can be found in Te-Chou, Shantung, China. Furthermore, the sultan left some descendants there, the youngest of them being An-Jien whose photograph at a tender of 1.5 years old (1981) can be seen, together with the tomb of the Sultan, at the De La Salle University Museum in Bacolod City.

By the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Chinese population in Moroland was insignificantly small. Bowring (1859:111), quoting a Spanish source, *Guia de Forasteros* of 1858, found only 455 tribute-paying Chinese and mestizos. Such population perhaps refers to the settled or immigrant Chinese. Outside of the province of Misamis, where the Chinese resident population was greatest, the Chinese were concentrated in Maguindanao and Sulu due to the historic trade between the Moro sultanates during the late 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries (Warren, 1976). By the 1900s, there were probably at least 1,000 Chinese scattered all over Moroland, particularly in primary towns or *pueblos*. When the Americans occupied Mindanao, the exploring expeditions found significant Chinese populations in Jolo, Pollok (Cotabato), Isabela (Basilan), and Zamboanga, among others.<sup>2</sup> The expeditions were unanimous in reporting that “all or most trade was carried out by the Chinese.” In Sulu and Cotabato alone, General Davis reported that “the Chinese are equal in numbers to Filipinos.”<sup>3</sup>

Table 1: Estimated Chinese Population in Moroland, 1900

	Number of Chinese	Total Population
Pollok	75	275
Isabela (Basilan)	75	500
Jolo (Sulu)	600	1,270
Zamboanga	500	20,000
Davao	500	--

About a decade later, at the end of the military regime in 1913, General John Pershing would place the number of Chinese in the Moro Province at 3,188 or 0.6% out of a total population of 518,695. By the next government census in 1918, the Chinese population had increased to some 5,000 souls but nonetheless remained a tiny fraction of the total Mindanao population.

Chinese immigration to Mindanao has steadily increased through the "backdoor." After World War II, the Philippine Census of 1948 would report 10,663 Chinese speakers in Moroland. This represents 7.3 percent of the total Chinese speakers in the Philippines, or 0.4 percent of Moroland's population. Interestingly, there were more Japanese in Davao in 1935 (at 15,000) than Chinese in Moroland in 1948.

Table 2: Chinese Population in 1948\*

District	No. of Chinese	Percent	Total Population
Cotabato	1,192	0.4	439,669
Davao	2,988	0.8	364,854
Lanao	577	0.2	415,647
Palawan	259	0.2	467,769
Sulu	1,461	0.6	240,826
Zamboanga	3,457	0.7	521,941
Total	10,663	0.4	2,398,584

\* Persons able to speak Chinese.

*Census of the Philippines, 1948: Summary of Population and Agriculture.* Manila: Bureau of Printing, 1954.

### Moro-Sino Trade

Moroland, or at least Jolo, was already known to the Chinese even before the Europeans set foot in Southeast Asia. Perhaps as early as the 11<sup>th</sup> century, Chinese junks began visiting Sulu and other islands. Marco Polo was said to have provided detail of such trade, especially during the Majapahit empire (1293-1389). Chinese sources (e.g., by Chau Ju Kua in 1225), also gave more vivid accounts of trade and provided an early ethnography of the native peoples before they embraced Islam (Beyer, 1921). Archeological finds would later confirm the presence in Moroland of porcelain ware associated with the Ming Dynasty. Perhaps, the seven military expeditions from 1405 to 1433, or its subsequent impact on trade, under the command of Admiral Cheng Ho had also something to do with this discovery (in Reynolds, 1967:470).

Spanish colonization of the Philippine islands (1565-1898) restricted trade with the Chinese and even created hostility between the natives and the Chinese merchants. The threat posed by Limahong and the British occupation of Manila during the 17<sup>th</sup> century were singularly important – these events made the Chinese a convenient scapegoat resulting in their being herded (in the *parian*) or massacred. Many of the Chinese residents were said to have moved down south to avoid persecution from both the Spaniards and christianized natives.

Such was not the case in the south. The relative independence of Moroland during the 18<sup>th</sup> century promoted trade between the Muslim aristocrats and other nations, including the Chinese who visited Sulu, Malabang and Maguindanao in search for pearls, *tripang* (sea cucumber), birds nest, beeswax and other products. In return, the Chinese paid the natives in gold or exchanged weapons (e.g., bronze cannons) and gunpowder (Combes, 1909). Shortly before the US-Spanish War of 1898, Sulu began to decline in its maritime importance as a consequence of the introduction of the modern steamboat which the Spanish used with success to crush “Moro piracy” starting in 1849 (Warren, 1977). By virtue of the Treaty of Paris of 1898, the United States “inherited” Moroland and by its military administration of the same perfected the arduous project of creating a Philippine state.

With that change came the inevitable decline of the Moro-Sino trade. Remnants of early Chinese traders decided to stay and carve out a new life in Moroland with the thought of establishing themselves in the host community. Today, many of them have become part of the Moro society with which they initially engaged in trade. Most of them are still in business which, like it or not, is a major source of upward mobility in an impoverished, rigidly stratified society (Hunt, 1954).

### **Economic and Social Roles**

Despite their being a minority in demographic terms, the Chinese in Moroland were significantly represented in commerce and trade, as well as in education. In almost every major town, trade was almost completely under the hands of Chinese merchants. Big business, however, had been monopolized by American and European interests. In 1911, statistics showed that of the 126 large plantation owners (those who managed 100 hectares or more), 20 were owned by the Chinese (Pershing, 1911; Box 371A, Pershing Papers). In Davao, while the major plantations belonged to the Japanese and Americans, “90 percent of the retail trade was in the hands of the Chinese.”<sup>4</sup>

While most of the natives were illiterate, half of the Chinese were literate enough to be able to read and write. In Jolo, some Chinese associated in Jolo wrote to the American authorities in Spanish or English, suggesting the type of their education.<sup>5</sup> Those with knowledge of English were most likely immigrants from Singapore, with which Sulu had a well developed trade.<sup>6</sup> Occasionally, Chinese teachers were recruited in the American-run public schools. In the schools, Chinese pupils constituted about 1.0% to 1.5% of the total number of students enrolled during 1911 to 1913 (Pershing, 1913:80).

American occupation of Mindanao, including the militarization of the Moro Province, effectively controlled business and commerce and minimized profiteering by local merchants. The military government itself served as “entrepreneur” by founding

trading stations and the relatively organized Moro Exchange in 1904 which flourished in Zamboanga, Jolo and Lanao.<sup>7</sup> For one, the volume of business accounted for by the Moro Exchange in Zamboanga went up from P238,573 in 1904 to P558,22 in 1908.

In more ways than one, the intrusion of government in business diminished the dominant position of Chinese trade and likewise checked possible excesses. General Pershing, then Governor of Moro Province, reported in 1911 about a "tendency (among Chinese traders) to take advantage of the ignorance and of the necessities of the primitive people" (Pershing, 1911:8, Box 371A, Pershing Papers). Unscrupulous Filipino and Chinese traders on the Pacific Coast of Mindanao were found to "corner rice during the southeast monsoon and sell to the improvident inhabitants at 100 to 150 profit."

It became clear nonetheless that Chinese participation in business had been reduced into "marginal" trading during the colonial era, as Moroland's economy was incorporated into the mainstream. There were cases, however, of Chinese making it to the top of Moro society. One such case was Datu Piang of Kudarangan, Maguindanao. Datu Piang was half Chinese with a Moro mother. He grew up in the royal circle of Datu Uto and later became the most powerful ruler in Cotabato valley during the American regime. Datu Piang's "collaboration" also paved the way for the successful integration of the defiant Maguindanao into the Philippine society.

### Social Stratification

Moro society is somewhat rigidly stratified. Members are ascribed statuses according to whether they descended from the nobility (datuship or sultanate), freemen and slaves<sup>8</sup> (Mednick, 1974). In most senses, the social stratification is a dichotomized structure based on lineage and access to power or status. Either one is a noble or he is a commoner. Although the Moro structure appears to be "castle-like" and stiff, there are avenues through which an outsider can be accepted as a legitimate member of Moro society. How this affects the Chinese is our next concern.

The Chinese occupy a peculiar position in Moro society. They are in but not of Moroland. Initially alien, many of them have continued to be regarded as outsiders. However, those who have acculturated to the Moro ways, usually by virtue of birth or marriage, succeeded in gaining membership. In Maguindanao, some of the prominent families have Chinese ancestry, notably the Piang, Sinsuats, Matalams and Masturas (Hunt, 1954). The same pattern obtains in other sections of Moroland, particularly in Sulu where the process of incorporation to the dominant Tausug culture is much stronger. Many contemporary Tausug leaders bear Chinese surnames, suggesting mixed marriages, such as the Tans of Jolo.

Strangely, this is not the case for the Moros living in the hinterlands, the Maranaos and Iranons. For years, they were peripheral traders working for or through Maguindanao or Sulu. Hence, in Lanao and parts of Cotabato dominated by the Iranons, Chinese presence is relatively scant or recent.<sup>9</sup>

Many Chinese eventually were absorbed into the Moro society by intermarriages. In Cotabato, Hunt (1954:9) noted that the predominance of Chinese males and the scattered nature of Chinese settlers has led to a "considerable degree of

intermarriage." The tendency among the offspring of such mixed marriages has been to gravitate toward the dominant culture of the community, hence resulting in a gradual or partial assimilation of the Chinese.

Assimilation of the Chinese (by virtue of intermarriages) has been a passport for their social acceptance as well contributors to economic affluence of the host community. In time, the growth of the middle class and economic well-being has been attributed largely to Chinese success in entrepreneurship.

To the Moro eye, the prosperity of the Chinese is a deep contrast to the poverty among the Moros. What results therefrom is, perhaps, a feeling of relative deprivation. The rash of Chinese kidnapping in the 1990s could well be an indication of this type of deprivation being directed against the Chinese and wealthy Christians, especially in Cotabato City and Basilan during 1993-1996. This year alone, the papers reported about 36 Chinese kidnappings in Cotabato alone. In Marawi City, the deterioration of the peace during the 1970s exacted a heavy toll on the Chinese residents – it drove away nearly all the Chinese from that predominantly Muslim city.

### **Concluding Observations**

The Chinese in Moroland are there to stay. They have played and will continue to assume important roles in a place where others are reluctant to tread. No doubt, as a group they have succeeded in entrepreneurial activities and consequently enlarged the economic welfare of the community. As they participate more and more in business and trade, however, appear to compete directly with the "locals," some of whom become driven by bad intentions.

Social interactions between Chinese and locals have not been always entirely pleasing or satisfactory. The Chinese, together with wealthy Filipinos and foreigners, have become the object of some unsavory practices in Moroland. While the motive of kidnapping is decidedly economic, another reason for this lies in the social stratification. The Chinese are regarded condescendingly as "outside" this stratification system. This is so because the ethnic Chinese has remained distinct, though many of its members have been assimilated into the local culture. Hence, they face the consequence of being regarded as "non-entities." Like the Christians, they are not part of the Bangsamoro homeland.

A scenario similar to that in Malaysia or Singapore is a distant possibility in Moroland, because unlike these two countries the Filipinos consider assimilation in cultural rather than racial terms (Suryadinata, 1989). The peoples of Moroland or what is now called "Muslim Mindanao" are believed to have come from the same cultural roots as other non-Moro Filipinos. The unfortunate consequences of colonization are what divided them into three cultural (religious) categories. This is why the Chinese do not fit into this cultural mold of peoplehood, because they are ethnically different from all others. Their only recourse, perhaps, is by incorporation into a strongly assimilative society.

With the 1996 Peace Agreement now in effect, the Chinese will certainly make adjustments in their social position. Such adjustments may entail increasing articulation

toward islamic practices while at the same time thinking more in regional terms due to the trade that comes with peace.

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## NOTES

1. By "Moroland," I mean the areas comprising the Moro Province in 1903, namely: Sulu, Cotabato, Zamboanga, Davao and Lanao. It is more or less equivalent to the areas identified under the 1976 Tripoli Agreement and the 1996 Peace Agreement between the Philippine government and the MNLF. These areas consist of 14 provinces and 9 cities in southwestern Mindanao, coinciding with some of the territorial boundaries of the old Moro Province, except that Palawan is included.

2. The exploration reports were filed in the archives of the Bureau of Insular Affairs (henceforth abbreviated here as *BIA*) or Record Group 350, Washington, D.C.. Among such files are those numbered #BIA 1835, 1836, 1837, and 1839, among others.

3. General George Davis, "Notes on the Government of the Country Inhabited by Non-Christians on Mindanao and the Neighboring Islands," BIA #5075-7. In Sulu, Saleeby (1908) noted that about half or 600 of Jolo town's population are Chinese. They were mostly settled in the "walled city" of the town and virtually controlled all trade in Sulu at that time.

4. S. K. Matsumoto. "The Truth about the Japanese in Davao," Aug. 30, 1930. Box 28-2, Joseph Hayden Papers, Bentley Historical Library, Ann Harbor, Michigan.

5. A certain L. Tiano wrote 14 letters (in Spanish) to Hugh Lenox Scott, governor of Sulu District, between 1907 and 1909 (see Scott Papers). Some of his letters were about the depredations of Jikiri and the robbery and murder of Chinese trades in Sulu in 1908. Another such letter was written (in English) by Ho Kim Swee, President of the Chinese Chamber of Commerce in Sulu, to the American Governor-General, July 18, 1919, complaining about the unsolved murders of three Chinese traders on Jolo during 1918-1919 (BIA #4865-143C).

6. Prof. Benito Lim of the University of the Philippines suggested that some of these Chinese teachers learned English from American missionaries in Xiamen and Zhuanzhou, China.

7. John P. Finley, "The Development of the District of Zamboanga," *Mindanao Herald*, February 3, 1909. 61-63.

8. They are variously termed as *banyaga*, *oripen* and *bisaya*.

9. In Lanao, Iligan and Malabang were the only places where the Chinese settled to trade before the 1900s.