Chinese Immigrants in the Spanish Philippines: Looking through the Story of Hay Bing or Juan Imbin of Taal, Batangas*

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Introduction

The Virgin of Caysasay in Taal, Batangas on the Southwestern coast of Luzon Island is one of the well-known Catholic religious images that attract devotees from different parts of the country. The local tradition says that Juan Maningcad, who was a fisherman by profession and an honest man, accidentally netted a statue in the Pansipit River in 1603. Since then, the statue or image of the Virgin, our Lady of the Immaculate Conception, is said to have blessed the people with numerous miracles, such as curing illness, and bringing good fortune (Bencuchilla[o] 1953).

This image is unique in that it has also been revered among Chinese Filipinos as their goddess Matzu or "Mama Ma-cho" as it is affectionately addressed, while Taal is the town known to have no Chinese community.[1] The goddess Matzu is one of the most popular figures in the Chinese Taoist pantheon, particularly among seafaring people, including Chinese overseas as its part in origin, as their protector.

The contemporary devotion to Matzu explicitly associated with the Virgin of Caysasay cannot be readily established in the history of the latter's veneration. Among the miraculous stories attributed to the Virgin, however, the most notable is the story of Hay Bing or Juan Imbin. Hay Bing is said to have been a Christian

Chinese stonecutter who was brought back to life by the Virgin after having been killed by the local people during the massacre against the Chinese of 1639.

Looking into the story of Hay Bing, this paper shows how the Chinese immigrants in the colonial Philippines were perceived in the eyes of Spanish religious people, and identifies the historical factors behind it. This paper also suggests that the Chinese in the Spanish Philippines had not always been the colony's "Other" or they should not have been so much alienated from the native population of the colony. This could particularly be said when practically all the Chinese immigrants embraced the Christian faith during the mid-eighteenth century to the early decades of the nineteenth century. The Christian faith in the Spanish Philippines was very crucial to the colonial people because it served as the determinant of whether or not one could be considered as the legitimate component of the Spanish colony. In other words, in the Spanish colonial context, a conversion to Christianity meant symbolically a sign of submission to the Spanish king. The boundaries between the two peoples in those days were not so clear-cut as we might suppose them to have been from the experiences of our day.

The Story of Hay Bing or Juan Imbin

The story of Hay Bing or Juan Imbin can be found at hand in *Sketch of the Miraculous Image of Our Lady of Caysasay* that is attached to the novena dedicated to the Virgin. The *Sketch*, according to the former parish priest in Taal, Vicente Catapang, is a free English translation of the Tagalog original written by an Augustinian friar, Francisco Bencuchillo,[2] during the mid-eighteenth century. The story goes as follows:

A decree ordering that all the Chinese be arrested and killed reached Taal. Among those who were arrested and decapitated was a Chinese by the name of Hay-Bing, a devout venerator of the Virgin of Caysasay. Much to their surprise,

however, people found him in the morning very much alive at the door of the church. They examined him and let him tell the fact of his death the day before and how he was brought back to life. Hay Bing said that the Virgin made him return to life by uniting his head that was separated from his body by his executioners.

After having his life saved, happy and exultant, and grateful to the Virgin, Hay Bing promised for life to serve and to guard her blessed image in her church Caysasay. But after some years he forgot his promises and service to the Blessed Mother. One Saturday he went to plow. A man who was going to mass addressed to him, "Ungrateful Hay Bing why have you forgotten your promise?" To whom Hay Bing replied: "Never mind; that is an old promise and I have served the mistress long enough, and now I am caring for my wife." Hardly had he pronounced these words than a bull that was very tame turned to attack him until he died (Bencuchilla[o] 1953).

Above is the brief story of Hay Bing or Juan Imbin attributed to the miraculous work of the Virgin of Caysasay. The Augustinian chronicler of the eighteenth century, Casimiro Díaz (1693-1746), gives us more details (Feria and Hashimoto 2003a, 32-34; and *idem* 2003b, 61). Based on his reading of the accounts of a judicial investigation carried out in 1640, Jose M. Cruz, a contemporary Jesuit father, in his recent study on Tagalog society under colonial rule also provides us with details and meanings of the story (Cruz 1999, 125-136).

In 1639 one of the most bloody collisions between the Spanish authorities and the Chinese occurred under the governorship of Sebastián Hurtado de Corcuera (1635-44).[3] In the course of time, in all about 24,000 Chinese were killed. Hay Bing could have been one of the more or less twenty Chinese artisans rounded up in Taal through the instructions of the governor. He was at the time engaged in the construction of the stone church at the sanctuary where the Virgin was said to have made apparitions in the early seventeenth century. Studies show in fact a new

church made of reef stone was being built in 1639 (Galende 1996, 84; Cruz 1999, 124). The miraculous story tells us that Hay Bing's life was saved by the Virgin to continue the construction of the church.

As was the *Sketch* originally written during the eighteenth century, the story suggests not only the presence of Chinese devotion to the Virgin in the colony, but also the Spanish colonial perception at the time of Chinese immigrants and their faith.

In this regard, there are some points that merit a close look in relation to the Chinese immigrants in the Spanish Philippines; namely, 1) Hay Bing/Juan Imbin was a stonecutter whose skill was sought after for the construction of the church dedicated to the Virgin, or the Chinese would have traveled to the places where their artisanship was needed, such as to construct churches, convents and other edifices, 2) Hay Bing, a married Christian settled in Taal, was engaged in farming, and 3) his unusual death, or, why did Hay Bing have to be killed by his bull or water buffalo, after many years of devotion to the Virgin?

Chinese Immigrants as the Colonial "Others"

Within a space of less than three decades after Spanish establishment in 1571, Manila had emerged as a flourishing entrepôt of Asia from a previously peripheral port served by Chinese shipping. Its emergence owed largely to the successful operation of the Manila galleon trade system that connected Acapulco in Mexico and Fujian in South China via Manila.

Chinese junks from ports of Fujian served as the primary supplier of merchandise, such as silks and other luxuries, exported to Acapulco in exchange for Mexican silver. In addition, thousands of Chinese immigrants were shipped in these trading junks. Most of them were settled in Manila, particularly in the Parian or Chinese quarters-cum-commercial center set up in 1581-82, and the adjacent

areas, engaging themselves in various trades, from wholesale merchants to agricultural laborers (Schurz 1939).

Thanks to the steady flow of Mexican silver that eventually reached Fujian, Manila attracted more Chinese to settle to an extent that their population had grown at least five times larger than that of the Spanish. Their number at a time reached more than 20,000 in the early decades of the seventeenth century. The Spanish authorities regarded these Chinese as the colony's "Other" and tried to confine them as much as possible to the Parian.

At the same time, the measures were also taken to convert the Chinese to Catholicism. The policy of conversion was especially important to the Spanish colonial government as the Catholic faith was considered prerequisite for making the peoples in the Indies "Spanish subjects," in which peoples of the Philippines were a part and the Chinese immigrants were no exception.

They had, however, never been strictly required to adopt the Christian faith for the nearly first two centuries until the mid-eighteenth century. As a result, many of them did not think it necessary to take up the Catholic faith, and continued to live in the Spanish colony as the "sangley infiel" as they were referred to by the colonial authorities. The latter seemed to consider the former indeed "infieles" or disloyal to them although "infiel" here means infidel. The "sangleyes infieles" did presumably neither speak nor understand Spanish or any of the native languages; instead they would speak Hokkien that the Spaniards did not understand at all (Sugaya 1994). The "sangley infiel" as an ethnic group was totally foreign to the Spanish colonials, and thus remained as the colony's "Other." [4]

Chinese Immigrants Being Catholicized, 1750-1820

In 1755, Governor Arandía (1754-59) expelled all the non-Catholic Chinese residents from the Spanish colony (Sugaya 1994).[5] Since then to the early decades

of the nineteenth century, the Spanish colonial government had more or less maintained the guidelines implemented by Governor Arandía for the admittance of the Chinese immigrants; namely, that they had to embrace Catholicism.

The Chinese who decided to remain in the colony during the period virtually all accepted the Christian faith, nominally or otherwise. In other words, those who were converted to Christianity whether consciously or not became "Spanish subjects." To use a present-day term, they were "naturalized" in the Spanish Philippines.

For the purpose of the Chinese junk trade with Fujian, Governor Arandía constructed the Alcaicría San Fernando near the mouth of the Pasig River. The Alcaicería housed the Chinese junk traders and crewmen who were usually not Christians so as to maintain the "Catholic Philippines" as possible. Meanwhile, the Parian, the original Chinese quarters established in 1581-82, became a commercial center where Spaniards, Chinese Catholics, *mestizos*, and *indios* or *naturales* conducted their business (Rodríguez Bérriz, 1: 581-82; and Sugaya 2000, 555-56).

After the British occupation of Manila (1762-64), Governors José Raón (1765-70) and Simón de Anda (1770-76) expelled all the Chinese who were presumed to have collaborated with the British forces (Escoto 1999 and 2000). The Chinese had practically disappeared, except for those confined to the Alcaicería as transients, from the Spanish Philippines for nearly ten years when Governor José Basco (1778-87) arrived in Manila in July 1778 to immediately announce the readmission of Chinese immigrants.

As part of the "Bourbon Reforms," Governor Basco launched a program of economic reform for the Spanish Philippines. Unlike his predecessors, he planned to introduce a sufficient number of capable Chinese workers who could support various economic projects. The guiding principles were twofold. The Spanish government was to be careful enough to prevent the Chinese from dominating the

colonial economy, and to pay special attention to the maintenance of the "Catholic Philippines."

The governor ordered to prepare a *padrón general* or tax roll based on an accurate population census. The *contador oficial real* or royal official accountant and the *corregidor* or governor of Tondo Province were assigned to compile the *padrón* in cooperation with the *cabecilla* of the Chinese community under the supervision of the *fiscal* or treasury officer of the Royal Audiencia. The Chinese *cabecilla* was responsible for providing the exact number of Chinese residents in the Province of Tondo (Rodríguez-Bérriz, 1: 589-91).

In conformity to the circular of 6 April 1783, Chinese immigrants were required to carry licenses for *radicación* or settling, which were issued to them provided that they had been enrolled in the *pardón general* of the Chinese residents.

After having acquired a license for *radicación*, the Chinese who wished to settle in a province had to secure a license to establish there. Once in the province he had first to proceed to the office of the *alcalde* mayor or provincial governor to have his licenses validated. Then, he presented himself to a *cabeza* de barangay or head of a barangay (or tax collection unit) to whom he was to belong. He was then registered in the tax roll of that *cabeza*. The alcalde mayor of the province was required to report on his conduct in the province to the *officiales reales* in the capital at the end of each year (Rodríguez-Bérriz, 2: 851-852).

The Chinese who had stayed without properly validated licenses or those who had been found in places other than those designated in their licenses were to be arrested and sent back to the capital. These stringent policies were adopted not solely for security reasons. There was also a financial consideration of the Spanish government: that is, the collection of a six-peso annual capitation tax.[6]

Spanish Doubts: Were the Chinese True Catholics?

It is true that the Spanish authorities, either secular or religious, had questioned the authenticity of the Catholic faith of the Chinese since the beginning of their rule. In the latter half of the eighteenth century, when practically all the resident Chinese embraced Catholicism, the Spanish government had to be more concerned with the quality and nature of their faith.

The judge of the provisor's court of Manila, Dr. Francisco Durana, accused the Chinese of becoming Christian often in a deceptive manner. He gave an account in the late 1780's illustrating how a Chinese, in order to stay in the colony, made the best use of the deathbed baptism as one of the most convenient means for him to become "Christian." [7)]

Durana concluded that these Chinese embraced the Catholic faith in name only. They just wanted to lead an easy life that they could not enjoy back in their own country. They were most likely cohabiting with women or keeping concubines in the colony. Still worse, they often dared to apply for marriage licenses while they had already married in their own country. It was therefore no surprise that they did not fulfill the obligations of the Christian, such as hearing mass regularly and fasting on Fridays during Lent. Moreover, they would continue to worship Taoist and Confucian gods, or to keep Buddhist practices (Provisorato, AAM).

Governor Basco totally agreed on this point, and promulgated a decree prohibiting "idolatry" of the Chinese regardless of their religion (Rodríguez Bérriz 1: 587-588). In relation to the "idolatry" or unauthentic practices of the Catholic faith of the Chinese, a case in point may be cited here.

There was an image being venerated as miraculous for some time in the parish church of Bangui, the northern-most part of Ilocos Norte. The statue, which was in the kneeling position holding a lamb with both hands, was said to have been discovered by a local woman in the mid-eighteenth century. The local people

believed it to be the image of Santo Niño (the Infant Jesus) or that of St. John of the Baptist.

The bishop of Nueva Segovia from 1767-1779, Fr. Miguel García, O. P. in Vigan, examined the image. He found out that it was not a Catholic image but an "idol" of the Chinese belief system. The bishop ordered to burn it. According to an Augustinian of the late eighteenth century, every year the Chinese junks would carry the idols or images into the capital aside from those for the purpose of protecting their own voyages. It was not uncommon that those images became the objects of Christian veneration among the local population. The Spanish authorities confiscated and burned them in public. The statue found in Bangui must have been one of them (Castro 1790, 173-174, 210-211, and 241-243).

The same Augustinian lamented by quoting the words of the known Jesuit chronicler, Murillo Veralde, that if "our Catholic Kings should not have protected the Christian faith in the Philippines and Spanish America the people must have already returned to be gentiles much the same as was in the previous period." To him, this was still the everlasting reality here in the Philippines (Castro 1790, 174).

In the eyes of the Spanish religious people, the Chinese were in the better position to influence the *naturales* than the Spaniards not only in the latter's economic life, but also in their spritual life. It was in this regard that the Christian stonecutter Hay Bing or Juan Imbin must have been killed by his water buffalo in the middle of the field.

Concerning the tragic death of Hay Bing, the Augustinian chronicler of the eighteenth century, Casimiro Díaz, remarked that "his devotion had cooled until it returned to the ordinary unconcerned attitude, which was very hard to eradicate, of other Christian Chinese. He had even become worse than the others, failing to go to mass and to confession. To serve as a lesson to those who were ungrateful for Heaven's graces, he had died a very miserable death (Feria and Hashimoto 2003a, 34)." Thus, Hay Bing was not given a chance of receiving Extreme Unction.

Here we could sense their doubts about the authenticity of the Christian faith of Chinese converts on the part of the Spaniards.

In the concluding part of the *Sketch*, Fr. Bencuchillo reminds the faithful of not making a joke of their promise to the Blessed Mother. The Augustinian wished great wonders to be performed in the heart of all the people to turn them all into devout and true lovers of the Mother of God, whose image being venerated in Caysasay in the town of Taal, Batangas.

Conclusion

Since the governorship of Arandía the acceptance of Chinese as immigrants had as a rule been limited to Catholics. Governor Basco in particular showed his deep concern for the colony's economic development with the introduction of Chinese manpower. Yet the religion of the immigrant could not be disregarded. It was the central concern of the Spanish government of the day to uphold the Catholicism as the basis that would make the colonial people "Spanish subjects." This situation did not change until the early decades of the nineteenth century.

Conversion to Catholicism enabled them to legally marry local women who were also Catholic, however it did not necessarily mean the abandonment of their Chinese-ness. The degree of their assimilation or integration into the local community, however, may have varied from person to person. Neither were they severed from their ancestral hometowns. Instead, they effectively maintained a relationship with them. In fact, they would continue to practice ancestral worship as well as Taoist, Confucius or Buddhist rites that the Spanish authorities, particularly religious people, accused them of practicing idolatry (Protocolos, Manila, PNA).

Still, the Chinese during the period under consideration seemed not to be so alienated as we might assume from the rest of the population of the Spanish colony.

Often times, the local people or *naturales* seemed readily to accept the Chinese in their localities. Taking advantage of their numerical preponderance over the Spaniards, the Chinese immigrants with the closeness to the local communities could exert their influence on the *naturales* not only through the various economic activities, but also through their shared "Catholic faith."

Endnotes

1) The devotion of Chinese Filipinos to the Virgin as their goddess Matzu came to be known after World War II. The Chinese devotees in Batangas province, such as Batangas City, and the towns of Lipa, Tanauan, and Rosario started to celebrate their festivities by borrowing the image of Taal as a representation of Matzu. In 1975, the Batangas Ma-Cho Temple was inaugurated, where an exact replica of the Virgin of Caysasay has since been placed as the goddess Matzu. A group of Matzu devotees from La Union also started to make annual pilgrimages to Batangas in the 1960's. They have too built their own temple in San Fernando to house a traditional image of Matzu that was donated in the late 60's by a group of Taiwanese fishermen. The temple was inaugurated in 1978. This Matzu makes an annual visit to the Basilica of Taal as it is considered as her mother temple where "her original", the Virgin of Caysasay, has been venerated for many years (Ang and Go 1997[2003], 63-67[64-66]; Feria and Hashimoto 2003b, 60-61). In Lin Zuliang's *Matzu*, this figure is introduced as follows: "The Matzu in Western clothes venerated in the Bacilica of Taal in Batangas, the Philippines [菲律賓描岸省達社天主教堂内奉祀的洋裝媽祖像](Fujian jiaoyu chubanshe, 1989, p. 56/林祖良, 福建教育出版社, 1989年, 56頁)."

2) Arrived in the Philippines in 1732, Fr. Bencuchillo served as the parish priest of Taal and other adjacent towns until his death in 1776(Regalado Trota Jose, *Impreso: Philippines Imprints, 1593-1811* [Makati: Fundación Santiago and Ayala Foundation, 1993], p. 174).

3) Governor Corcuerra actually encouraged the Chinese to spread over the provinces by issuing for a fee a special permit enabling them to move about. The reason why the governor had issued the special license was to increase colonial revenues. The collision originated in Calamba, Laguna, where thousands of Chinese labors had been conscripted to work on a plantation by the order of the governor rose against maltreatment (Uchida 1974).

4) Belonging to the minority though, there had always been the Chinese who voluntarily converted themselves to the Catholic faith. From their marriage to the local woman, the sizable

number of Chinese mestizos were found in Manila, particularly such as in Binondo, Santa Cruz and Tondo, and other adjacent provinces.

5) The historical background directly related to this move was the enforcement by the Qing dynasty of the "Qing-jie ling" or coastal depopulation order from 1661-83 during which period the Chinese trade with Manila declined. A sizeable number of Chinese who had lived in the Parian sought economic opportunities outside and started to monopolize and control the local economy. The spread of these unconverted Chinese over the provinces was undesirable for the Spanish authorities as it totally contradicted their principle of building a colony based on the Catholic faith. It could be said that Governor Arandía tried to reestablish the colony as a "true" Spanish colony by expelling the non-Catholic Chinese as well as regaining the colony's economy in the hands of the Spaniards.

6) The Spanish government regarded the failure of an immigrant to register with the local authorities as tactics for tax evasion. Governor Basco pointed out the fact that a considerable number of Chinese residents must have once or twice traveled back to China after acquiring their licenses for *radicación*. Many of them managed to move about with their original or old licenses without reporting their return from China to the Spanish authorities (Superior Bando, 20 April 1787, PNA).

7) Durana illustrates the practice as follows. When the junk the Chinese was supposed to board was ready to depart, he would disappear. Then, he would appear before a priest pretending to be seriously ill and manage to receive baptism on "his deathbed." A few days later, he would be seen working under the Chinese master or *cabecilla* of an occupational guild or *gremio*. His name would thus appear in the parish register, as well as in the *cabecilla's padrón*, which entitled him to live in the Spanish Philippines. This kind of sharp practice was, according to the judge, supported by the whole of the Chinese community as was seen by the fact that the *cabecilla principal* and the job masters/*cabecillas* were in close cooperation with the Chinese in question (Provisorato, AAM).

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