

Chinese New Year as a National Holiday: Towards Cultural Understanding In the Philippines?

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THIS RESEARCH NOTE reflects on the views of selected Chinese-Filipinos on the declaration of Chinese New Year as a national holiday in the Philippines. The author interviewed them or emailed them questionnaires and situated their responses alongside the views of those of other Chinese-Filipinos as reported in the Philippine media. It was discovered that the opinion of Chinese-Filipinos over the declaration is largely positive: most welcomed it as a sign of respect, solidarity, and cultural understanding.

Introduction

The Lunar New Year, popularly known as the Chinese New Year (CNY) and Spring Festival, is the most important festivity of the Chinese (BBC 2014). It is celebrated by over a billion people (Dice 2009), including those of Chinese descent, regardless of their citizenship and residence. Elizabeth Dice (2009) notes Chinese New Year festivities in New York, San Francisco, Vancouver, Lima, Paris, Melbourne, Butte (Montana), as well as the official celebrations in Brunei, China, Fiji, Hong Kong, Indonesia, Macau, Malaysia, Mauritius, Singapore, Taiwan, and Thailand.

The Philippines, whose first contact with China dates back to the Sung period (960 C.E.–1279 C.E.) [Wickberg 1965] and which boasts of the oldest Chinatown in the world (Buaron 2010), celebrated Chinese New Year as a special non-working holiday only last 2012 (and then in 2014).¹ This was done through Presidential Proclamations 295 and 655

(Official Gazette n.d.), respectively. Several bills to declare Chinese New Year as a national holiday had already been proposed, but were never enacted into law. At any rate, both presidential proclamations allowed Chinese-Filipinos² (also known as Chinoys, *Tsinoy*s³) and ordinary Filipinos⁴ to celebrate Chinese New Year. In the past, only the former did so, and not as a holiday. According to the text of the proclamations, the declaration of Chinese New Year as a national holiday seeks to promote solidarity with Chinese-Filipinos, who have been an inalienable part of Philippine society for a long time.

Research Questions, Objectives, and Significance of the Study

How do Chinese-Filipinos view the declaration of Chinese New Year as a national holiday in the Philippines? Interviews with the latter reveal a largely positive reception. As a preliminary assessment of the declaration in light of the relationship between Filipinos and Chinese-Filipinos, this research note seeks to jumpstart discussions of how effective, if at all, government efforts are in promoting cultural understanding between Filipinos and Chinese-Filipinos.

Declaration of Chinese New Year as a National Holiday: Background Information

In different ways, many ethnic Chinese and Chinese-Filipinos have already integrated into Philippine society (Suryadinata 2000); they actively take part in the political and economic arena of the Philippines; enroll in Philippine schools; practice Philippine customs and traditions; and adapt Philippine values while observing some of their own most cherished practices.

On the eve of the Chinese New Year, 31 January 2014, President Aquino encouraged the whole Filipino community to embrace the ethnic and multicultural diversity of the Philippines. He also called on the Chinese-Filipino community to deepen and strengthen their partnership with the Filipinos for a more unified and progressive Philippines (Montemayor and Orias 2014).

Prior to President Aquino's announcement, several bills⁵ had been proposed to declare Chinese New Year as a "Special Non-working Holiday" (Senate of the Philippines n.d.). The legislators lobbied for bills in recognition of the contributions of Chinese-Filipinos in Philippine society and their rich cultural traditions (House of Representatives n.d.; Senate of the Philippines n.d.). They believed that such a law would strengthen amity between the Filipino and the Chinese-Filipino community, who at two percent of the total Philippine population, comprise one of the largest ethnic Filipino groups in the country. The legislators argued that it is imperative to help different ethnic groups preserve some of their important traditions.

Reception of the Declaration among Prominent Chinese-Filipinos

Chinese-Filipinos have offered in the media two contrasting opinions on the celebration of Chinese New Year as a non-working holiday. Among the most prominent is Michael Tan, an anthropologist and the chancellor of the University of the Philippines Diliman. In his newspaper column (Tan 2014), he expressed discomfort at having Chinese New Year declared as a holiday. He compared it with the Muslims' *Eid al-Fitr* and *Eid al-Adha* festivals, which do little to promote understanding between Muslims and Christians in the Philippines. Tan is dismayed to see that an important celebration among Chinese-Filipinos has become just an opportunity for commercialism. The owners of the large shopping malls (mostly Chinese-Filipinos) develop promotional campaigns to urge Filipinos to go shopping. And as an anthropologist, he is also bothered by Filipinos' attraction to Chinese good luck charms, which reinforces the stereotype of the Chinese only as successful businessmen. Tan feels that many Filipinos are being fooled and deceived by these old Chinese cultural practices which are come to the fore during Chinese New Year.

The Philippines' most prominent personalities in business and finance come from the ethnic Chinese minority. One of them is George S.K. Ty,⁶ founder and chairman of Metrobank, one of the country's

largest banks. On behalf of the Chinese business community, he thanked and commended President Aquino for declaring Chinese New Year as a special non-working holiday in 2012 (Malinao 2012). Ty believed that it was an “important milestone in Philippine-China relations and will make the celebration more meaningful for the rest of the Filipino people” (ibid.).

Views of Selected Chinese-Filipino Respondents

Interviews and answered email questionnaires from ten Chinese-Filipinos also reflect these two contrasting opinions. The respondents⁷ include three Chinese studies scholars, two Chinese language instructors, translators and interpreters, four Chinoy from different professional fields, and one Filipino-Chinese.⁸ The interviews revealed that most of Chinese-Filipinos see the celebration as an important highlight of Chinoy-Filipino relationship, though a few expressed critical views and even disapproval.

Resistance to the Holiday

A Filipino-Chinese and an instructor of Chinese Studies, Ms. Chu, identifies two main groups that have different views on the Chinese New Year holiday declaration. There are (1) “those who think the holiday impedes businesses, because the country already has a lot of holidays and these can affect productivity” and (2) “those who think that getting CNY recognized is one way of acknowledging the contributions and cultural presence of Tsinoys in the Philippines.” Prof. Dy from a Chinese Studies association thinks it should not be a holiday, arguing that people, especially among the greater Metro Manila Area, are already conscious of Chinese New Year. She admitted, however, that the declaration may contribute to greater awareness of the celebration in other areas.

A Symbolic Gesture

Generally, however, the declaration found favor among most Chinese-Filipinos, who saw it as a sign of cultural sensitivity and goodwill towards China and the Chinese-Filipino community. A Chinese-Filipino doctor, Dr. Lim, shares that his family does not celebrate New Year on January 1, as many Filipinos do, but faithfully commemorates the Lunar New Year. The Lim family feels that the declaration respects one of the most cherished Chinese traditions.

Prof. Hu, a Chinese-Filipino author, said that the inclusion of Chinese New Year in the list of Philippine holidays is “a symbolic gesture of acceptance of the Chinese-Filipinos as part of the Filipino national community.” In addition, she acknowledged it as a welcome move which, indeed, “was well-received by the Chinese community.” Mr. Kho, a Chinese-Filipino and a Director of a Chinese Studies center, mentioned that the declaration indicated the significance of Chinoys in mainstream and multicultural Philippine society, complementing the 2013 Cultural Center of the Philippines Multi-arts Festival that featured Chinese-Filipino contributions to Philippine arts and culture.

Act of Solidarity

An act of solidarity: this in a nutshell is how some Chinese-Filipinos describe the declaration of Chinese New Year as a national holiday. The respondents observe mainstream Philippine society’s interests in the celebration, especially today when it has taken a larger, more festive mood. They see how Filipinos from all walks of life take part in the merriment and even celebrate the holiday outside Tsinoyn communities. Shopping malls organize holiday-related events and put up various decorations. Dragon dances are held in shopping areas; restaurants, not just Chinese ones, are full on that day; everyone also celebrates through different government- and media-sponsored street parties. And with mainstream media coverage, the celebration of Chinese New Year in the Philippines reached more Filipinos across different parts of the country.

These were the observations of the respondents, who believe that these developments will continue in the following years.

Forging amity and cooperation

Prof. Hu saw the Chinese New Year declaration in light of the history of exclusion of and the anti-Sinicism towards the ethnic Chinese. “Elsewhere in Southeast Asia, in Indonesia, for example, Chinese New Year as a holiday is an important gesture that represents a positive development and an attempt to redress the atrocious experiences.”

Other respondents expect that the recognition of Chinese New Year will pave the way for greater understanding and interaction. Mr. Co, a translator and author, thinks that “the mainstream Filipinos who joined and attended the Chinese New Year activities must have felt more affinity with the local Chinese after learning and appreciating some important aspects of Chinese culture. They must have become more Chinese-friendly,” he added. The declaration also heightens Filipinos’ awareness of the existence of the Chinese community in the Philippine society. Prof. Hu explains that it plays a part of a broader sea-change in public perception of and attitudes to the ethnic Chinese that move toward greater inclusiveness. In addition, she said that the declaration plays a role in countering the negative stereotypes of the Chinese in the Philippines. Indeed, Mr. Co believes that “making the Chinese New Year a legal holiday thru legislation and not just presidential proclamations will surely improve the integration of the Chinese Filipinos into the mainstream society.”

More than *feng shui*, *siomai* and *siopao*

Some respondents take advantage of the Chinese New Year holiday to promote Chinese culture, but wish that Filipinos see Chinese culture as more than the geomancy, *siomai*⁹ and *siopao*¹⁰ that Filipinos patronize. Ms. Chu said, “as long as the focus is only on *feng shui* and other

unsubstantial issues, the holiday will not be able to help improve the relationship in any way.” In addition, Qu, another respondent, remarked that “Chinese-Filipinos may also realize that not all Filipinos are indifferent towards them and that many are very interested to know more about the Chinese culture and people.” Mrs. Sy, a Chinese language instructor commented, “from the celebration, Filipinos are one step closer to understanding Chinese culture... but proclamations are just forms, the essence should be based on trust, sincerity, understanding and the unwavering desire to make the relationship work.”

Conclusion

Presidential Proclamations 295 and 655 indicate the effort of the Philippine government to further incorporate the practices of the Chinese-Filipinos into the main fabric of Philippine cultural traditions, and many in the Tsinoy community also see it that way. These Chinese-Filipinos feel that the proclamations reinforce their sense of belongingness to Philippine society, reminding them that they are no longer “outsiders” and that their ethnicity is welcomed as part of Philippine national identity. As a deeper understanding of Chinese culture is promoted, future celebrations of Chinese New Year hope to bring more steps closer towards the goal of a unified and progressive Philippines, regardless of race and beliefs.

Notes

- ¹ In 2013, the celebration fell on a weekend; thus, it was not declared a holiday (Rappler 2012). The study was made after the 2014 celebrations and thus excludes 2015 CNY festivities.
- ² Chinese-Filipinos are Filipino citizens of Chinese descent, who speak at least one Chinese language and observe some Chinese customs and traditions (McCarthy 1974, 1).
- ³ Tsinoy comes from “Tsino” (Chinese) and “Pinoy” (colloquial term for “Filipino”). The term is used to refer to Filipinos who have Chinese ancestry and to Chinese who have been Filipinized (Chu 2013, 326n2).
- ⁴ For the purposes of this study, the term “Filipinos” will be used to refer to non-Chinese Filipinos.

- ⁵ Senator Edgardo J. Angara authored Senate Bill (SB) 3569 (14th Congress) and SB 3323 (15th Congress); Representatives Ong, Rodriguez, Aggabao, Guingona, Del Mar, Angping, Gonzales, and De Guzman co-authored HB (House Bill) 5881 (14th Congress); Representatives Rufus B. Rodriguez and Maximo B. Rodriguez, Jr. coauthored HB 1215 (16th Congress); Representative Primicias-Algabas authored HB 3573 (16th Congress) [Senate of the Philippines n.d.; House of Representatives n.d.].
- ⁶ Ty is included in the 2013 Forbes magazine's list of richest men in the Philippines, along with other Chinese-Filipino business tycoons led by Henry Sy, Lucio Tan, Andrew Tan, and John Gokongwei, Jr.
- ⁷ For ethical considerations, the respondents' real names are not provided.
- ⁸ Filipino-Chinese is a term used for second-generation children of overseas Chinese in the Philippines (Hau 2007).
- ⁹ Pork dumplings.
- ¹⁰ Steamed buns.

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