Chinese

Profile

It is difficult to estimate numbers of ethnic Chinese (sometimes known as Tsinoys) because ethnicity is not specified in census data. Estimates vary from 600,000 to 900,000, with fewer than 150,000 being foreign-born. Under Marcos, citizenship procedures were eased and many Chinese became citizens. Most younger Filipino Chinese, however, are more at ease with English and Tagalog than with their mother tongue.

Ethnic Chinese face a problem of perception: that they are rich business owners backed by Chinese cartels that have stamped out competition from other groups. There is, however, a sizeable Chinese working class in the Philippines, and there is a sharp gap between rich and poor Chinese.

Historical context

Trade between China and the Philippines was already in place by the twelfth century, and some of these Chinese traders undoubtedly remained from this period. Under Spanish colonial rule, the Philippines was an entrepot for trade between China and the Spanish empire in Latin America. Ethnic Chinese in Manila managed the trade. The Chinese soon outnumbered the Spanish, who sought to control the ethnic Chinese by residential and occupational restrictions, deportations and periodic violence. Not until the mid-nineteenth century were Chinese granted freedom of occupation and residence. In the second half of the nineteenth century there was a new surge of Chinese immigration. Moving into the rural provinces, ethnic Chinese came to occupy a central position in commerce and commercial agriculture at provincial and local levels. Under US rule, Chinese immigration was sharply curtailed.

During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Chinese immigration to the Philippines was almost entirely male. This led to intermarriage with Malay Filipinos and the creation of a Chinese mestizo group. When restrictions on Chinese economic activity were lifted, many Chinese mestizos moved into rural landholding and agricultural development by leasing the large tracts of land owned by Spanish religious orders. By the late nineteenth century, as Chinese mestizo landholding increased, they became a major component of the Filipino elite, a situation that continues to the present day. Chinese mestizos acquired Filipino identities and contributed substantially to the development of Filipino national identity.

Although ethnic Chinese dominate the corporate world, they are still denied access to the political arena. This is mainly to do with popular resentment and envy of the Chinese for their commercial success. None of the major political parties in the Philippines courts the Chinese openly, and all hide the fact that much of the campaign funds come from Chinese businesses. The Chinese are thus forced to become ‘influence peddlers'. There is also pressure for Chinese to marry into prominent mestizo families to protect their business interests. The Chinese have been targets of kidnapping for ransom and, in many cases, the police are involved. This has led many Chinese to send their families abroad.
Current issues

The Chinese minority in the Philippines - perhaps because of the intermarriages with other segments of Filipino society - does not face significant levels of discrimination, and they now can freely operate cultural organizations, schools, newspapers and religious associations. Restrictions that existed previously, such as obstacles in obtaining citizenship, ended during the period of President Ferdinand Marcos, and today the Chinese of the Philippines, like those of Thailand, do not face any significant breaches of their rights as members of a minority from state authorities, although there still exists a degree of intolerance from members of the non-Chinese majority.