Trade, Commerce and Masterplans III
Chinese merchants trading with the Spaniards and Portuguese, 1593 (ZA).
Chapter III

Trade, Commerce, and Masterplans

The Spaniards who came to Cebu in 1565 were hardened soldiers, ill-suited for the life of either settler or merchant. Their leaders, Legaspi, Salcedo, and Goiti, were men cast of a different mold, with a predilection, not for militaristic strategies of colonization, but rather for ones designed to gain the confidence and respect of the natives, similar to the methods that merchants deployed in their bartering and trading activities throughout the archipelago. They astutely perceived the wonderful array of business opportunities provided by the bustling trade between the Philippines and other Oriental countries, principally China. So as soon as they could, they established between Cebu, Manila, Villa Fernandina, and Acapulco a bustling galleon trade. So important became this trade in the period 1571-1815, that the entire economy of the country depended on it. The galleons or nao were themselves owned by the Crown that, in return for its conduct of the trade, received a share of the trade’s rich profits. Every member of the Spanish community, including those domiciled in the provinces, was entitled to participate in the freighting of the galleons. Through this conduit gold, cotton blankets, sailcloth, maguey rope, and hammocks from the Ilocos Region came to be included among the items exported to Mexico.

A vast commercial undertaking, the galleon trade facilitated large scale exchanges of art, culture, and botanical and agricultural specimens between East and West. By means of the trade, Europe and the Spanish Americas procured fine silk, porcelain ware, jars, Oriental furniture, paintings, ivory carvings, fine spices, tablecloths, embroidered items, textiles, and other fine Oriental merchandise. So intense a taste for Chinoiserie did the trade develop among the people of Europe and the Americas that the Baroque Period came to be infected by it.

Of all the cities in the Far East, Manila was best suited, on account of its natural and economic geography, to serve as the trade’s entry point into Asia. Two great staples of that trade, silk from the
North, and spices from the South, could be gathered in Manila more easily than at any other city in Asia. The goods would then be forwarded from Manila to the Americas, Europe, Japan, China, India, The Moluccas, Borneo, Indo-China, and Indonesia. If one thinks of these cities as set on a series of gigantic semi-circumferences, their radii all met in Manila. Villa Fernandina, for its part, grew to become Northern Luzon's most important city, the center of all its economic, social, cultural, religious and political activities.

The galleon trade was not without its important consequences for the Philippines. By means of it, cash crops such as corn, cotton, and tobacco, and root crops such as potatoes, camote, ube, and gabi, were introduced into the Philippines, as well as fruit trees, such as the mango, santol, tamarind, guava, caramay, duhat, singueulas, kamachili, and avocado, and spices, such as the popular Mexican pasote, garlic, onions, dill, anis, laurel, oregano, basil. It was the same with sugarcane (crucial to winemaking and the preparation of desserts), the cocoa bean from Mexico (for the popular afternoon afternoon drink), the coconut palm (for the production of cooking oil, wine, and vinegar), and the buri and anahaw palms (to make sleeping mats, called petate or banig, and baskets with).

In 1785, the galleon trade lost its monopoly of east-west trade with the authorization by Carlos III of the operations of the Real Compania de Filipinas, which plied the sea routes between Spain and the Philippines, but by way of the Cape of Good Hope in Africa, thereby bypassing Acapulco. With the onset of the Mexican Revolution, which began in 1810 and ended with Mexico's formal declaration of independence from Spain in 1821, the galleon trade, in 1815, came to a close. In face of this development, the Governors General began to pay better attention to the country's natural resources, which on account of the preferential treatment that had formerly been accorded to the galleon trade, had remained the object of a profound administrative neglect. They, among other things, instituted measures to strengthen the country's tobacco and mining industries. With assistance from the friars and Chinese artisans, they developed a number of new industries such as furniture making, wood and ivory carving, embroidery, jewelry making, and terracotta brick and roof tile manufacturing.
The end of the Mexican ascendancy in the Philippines, ushered in the beginning of the “continental” era. Manila in 1789 and, indeed, the entire country, began to engage in free trade with the rest of the world. This enabled the Dutch, English, Americans, Chinese, and other Asian constituencies to establish trading posts throughout the country. Liberal ideas, objects d’art, artistic techniques, fashions and other styles from the European continent, as well as new technologies, equipment, construction materials, scientific discoveries, and medicines, poured in through these trading posts and foreign companies, and combined to produce a distinct continental culture. The founding, in 1780, of the Sociedad Económica de Amigos del País (Economic Society of Friends of the Country) promoted advancements in agriculture, industry, commerce, art, architecture, and natural history. The opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 established even stronger and quicker links between Europe and the Philippines, enabling Filipinos to seek education abroad and develop better cultural and economic relations with the rest of Europe. French revolution-inspired political and social ideas poured in as well from the West, whetting the Filipino appetite for independence.

With the country’s economy booming, a strong, well-educated middle class emerged that was mindful of the benefits of its new status. The members of this class built large, ornate mansions and houses, acquired art work, and commissioned the production of elaborate religious images made of ivory for display upon their family altars, as well as portraits of themselves dressed luxuriously. They also entertained lavishly. Families that had already been wealthy acquired even more haciendas, or farmland, traveled extensively around Europe, and invested in ever increasing numbers of industries.

In 1898, Philippine independence was declared by General Emilio Aguinaldo. The first Filipino Congress was subsequently held at the Barasoain Church in Malolos, Bulacan. In that same year, however, Spain ceded the Philippines to the United States of America in exchange for twenty million dollars, in effect turning the Philippines into an American colony. It should be noted, however,
that long before the Philippines came under the political sway of America, Ilocanos had been migrating to America in large numbers. The Spanish Colonial Government even established a government office, called the Para Hawaii, for the processing of Ilocano applications for work in the sugar cane and pineapple plantations of Hawaii.

The province of Ilocos Sur, situated between Namacpacan (Luna) in the South, and Sulutsulut in the North, and bounded on the east by Abra province, and on the west by the South China Sea, is 2,579.60 square kilometers in size. 60% of this generally mountainous land, which has been put to agricultural use, is the mainstay of the majority of Ilocanos. Vigan itself, the provincial capital, 25.11 square kilometers in size, is composed of 39 barangays, with a total population of 46,000 people. In the 1950s, Vigan exhibited all the external signs of the most terrible neglect. Interminable political feuds and a sluggish local economy combined to send many families into the diaspora of those seeking their fortunes elsewhere (a trend which continues today with large numbers of Ilocanos still departing the country). Ancestral homes were abandoned or left to caretakers. Few families today reside in the stately homes of downtown Vigan, and many old structures lie in ruins.

In 1993, Architect Ramón Ma. Zaragoza, a restoration architect and town planner, came up with a Master Plan for the rehabilitation of Vigan. He recommended, first of all, that families bear responsibility for the restoration of their own houses, and that no foreign aid be solicited for that purpose. He recommended as well that the historic section of Vigan, along Crisologo Street, be closed off to vehicular traffic, though not to horse-drawn calesas; that the establishment of warehouses within the historical section be prohibited; that the city boost its economic profile through tourism promotion; that restored structures be converted into inns, restaurants, and shops, to support the local tourism industry and to pay for their maintenance; that old families be encouraged to return to Vigan to give back life and soul to the old city; that fiestas and religious processions be encouraged throughout the year; that the Isla de Biga be rehabilitated by means of the dredging of the Mestizo and Govantes Rivers; that illegal fish pens blocking the mouth of the rivers be dismantled as a preventive
to annual flooding and the outbreak of dengue; that the port of Vigan, on the Mestizo and Govantes River should be reopened to transport and trade; that the Vigan airport be reopened to commercial flights; that Vigan public plazas, monuments and other historical sites be properly maintained at all times; and that all denuded mountains, forest parks, Mira Hill in particular, be reforested. Underwritten by a lot of patient and determined work, the Zaragoza Master Plan, is proving to be a slow, but ultimately rewarding, success.

In 1999, the Spanish Government, through the Agencia Española de Cooperacion Internacional, prepared and implemented a master plan to supply drinking water and electricity to the 39 barangays of the city of Vigan. This work was supplemented by assistance provided by the Acción Contra el Hambre or Action Against Hunger to the farmers and fishermen of Ilocos Sur.
19th Century European silver plant holders used in Spanish houses.

18th century Chinese celadon planters.
Chinese trading ware from the Ming and Ching Dynasties used in Spanish and Filipinos houses.
17th century Blanc de Chine Chinese ware and ivory cricket cages.
Annamese (Vietnam), Thai and Chinese porcelain ware were among the prized possessions of Spanish and Filipino families.
16th century, Vietnamese tea cups, and Ming Dynasty blue and white jars.
Exquisite Chinese and Thai celadon tableware were very much a part of the colonial lifestyle in Ilocos and were used on special occasions.

19th and 20th century Chinese blue and white tableware used daily by servants in the Philippines during the Spanish Period.
18th and 19th century Chinese blue and white tableware used by the servants of affluent Vigan families.
Delicate 19th century cut out and carved coconut shells from Indonesia, embellished with Spanish silver covers. Finely carved animal bone lime containers used by rich hacendos.
19th century mother of pearl shells from Myanmar (Burma) were treasured by Spaniards throughout the Hispanic World.
Colorful 19th century, silk chasuble and stole, embroidered in gold thread.

18th century chasuble and manipole, embroidered in the finest Chinese silk.
18th century gold embroidered stars and trim used for priestly and santo vestments.
Like a Chinese imperial robe, this 18th century silk dalmatic is heavily embroidered in a floral pattern.

The elegantly embroidered floral design on a red silk chasuble, manipole and collar from the 18th century.
An 18th century dalmatic elaborately embroidered in red silk.
An 18th century gold embroidered robe for a Marian statue.
A 19th century Santo Entierro shroud decorated in gold thread and metal.
A 9th century black silk *capa pluvial* or cape, for use at a funeral procession.

A 19th century black silk dalmatic used by a deacon at a funeral Mass.
A 19th century silk dalmatic embroidered in gold thread.
A golden chasuble, embroidered in the finest Spanish gold thread, from the 18th century.

A 19th century light green chasuble and collar, embroidered in gold thread.