

Forum Kritika: Regional Studies on the Chinese Diaspora
in the Philippines

JOSÉ TAN SUNCO
(CHEN GUANGCHUN 陳光純)

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Abstract

José Tan Sunco (Chen Guangchun 陳光純) (1853-1924), a Chinese businessman in Manila from the late nineteenth to the early twentieth centuries, is less known in the Philippines than some other Chinese immigrants to that country who rose from rags to riches. In Quanzhou, China, however, he was one of the most prominent men of the day.

His is one of the stories of the attempts made by members of the Chinese diaspora in the early twentieth century to contribute to China's modernization, and of the important role that the Philippines played in that regard, not only in terms of financial resources, but also of social resources.

Keywords

Chinese diaspora; Chinese in the Philippines; Quanzhou, Fujian; Catholic Church

About the Author

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Tan Sunco's Origins and Business Activities in the Philippines

Chen Guangchun (陳光純) (hereafter, CGC) was born on 2 December 1853. He is also listed in the Chen genealogy as having had another personal name, “Guanghuan” (光環), and the *hao* (號), a name or style assumed or given in adulthood, of Puzhai (朴齋) (Fengxi Lanyuan 83). He was a native of the village of Lanyuan (藍園) in Meishan (梅山) county, in what is now the city of Nan'an (南安) in the southern part of China's Fujian (福建) province (Li; “Quanzhou shi” 3835).

CGC's father is said to initially have been a farmer's middleman (Chua), which probably means that he purchased crops from farmers and sold them to wholesalers in the city. When CGC was young, he accompanied his father to Manila. As it was common at the time for boys who accompanied a father or other male relative to the Philippines to do so when they were in their early to mid-teens, a good guess was that CGC was about fifteen years of age—sometime around 1868—when he first came to the Philippines. CGC's father became involved in the textile trade, a promising and growing business at the time. Later, CGC succeeded to his father's business and gradually expanded it (“Quanzhou shi” 3835).

CGC was involved in the retailing, and perhaps also the importing, of textiles (V. Khu). By the 1870s, around the time when he would have been helping his father in the latter's textile business, British textiles, particularly from Manchester and Glasgow, were the top import item in the Philippines (Wickberg 47). Thus, it is likely that this was the commodity that CGC dealt in at the time. We do not know when he established his store (whether, for example, his father was successful enough in the textile business to have accumulated enough capital to set up his own shop, to which CGC succeeded) or whether the business had always carried the same name. What we know was that, at the time of CGC's death, his textile store in Manila was called the Eng Bio Liong Cloth Emporium (Yongmaolong buzhuang 永茂隆布庄) (Li).

During the early 1890s—and perhaps as early as the mid-to-late 1880s—CGC's business began to prosper, to the extent that the *Gazetteer of Quanzhou City* stated that, at that time, “he became one of the richest Chinese in Manila” (“Quanzhou shi” 3835). By then, CGC had become commonly known as Tan Sunco (Chen Chungé 陳純哥), there being a local Fujian custom of substituting one character of a prominent man's personal name with the character 哥 (“co” in Hokkien; “ge” in Mandarin), meaning “older brother,” to indicate respect (Chu 187). He was also well-known as Tan Gong Soon (in Mandarin, Chen Gongchun 陳公純), it being another local Fujian custom to substitute one character of a man's personal name with “公 (gong)” (best translated as “Sir”), as a respectful form of address. In the larger Philippine society, he was known as “José Tan Sunco” (Chen).



Fig. 1: Chen Guangchun, or more famously known in the Philippines as José Tan Sunco.

Marriages

CGC probably first married when he was about nineteen years old, or around 1872. His first wife, who was born in 1858, would have been fourteen years old at the time. Little is known of her. Because of the polite convention of substituting one character of a married woman's name with the character “娘 (niang)” (meaning “Madam”), we only know her as Su Feng[niang] (蘇蜂[娘]). She would have been a woman whom his parents had selected for him to marry, and would have come from a nearby village. According to family members, she had four adopted sons, who were born between 1873 and 1884. However, the genealogy indicates that only the first and third of these four sons had been adopted. All four died young. Likely because she was not CGC's own choice of spouse, Ms. Su did not seem to have played a large part in CGC's life. She is not known to have accompanied him to Manila or to Quanzhou (泉州). It seems that she remained in her

husband's village after their marriage and was also buried there when she died on 14 June 1909 (“Fengxi Lanyuan” 83; *Fengxi Lanyuan*).

CGC's second wife, on the other hand, was very much his companion and active partner. Her surname was Wei (魏), and she is listed in the Chen genealogy as having the personal names Juhua (菊花) and Lida (理答) (“Fengxi Lanyuan” 83). However, published accounts of CGC's life and the obituary written by her children give her personal name as Zhide (智德). This last is perhaps a name she chose for herself, as an adult.

She was born on 23 December 1870. In her obituary, her hometown is stated to have been the port city of Xiamen in China's Fujian province, but she is said to have been born and raised in Beiping (i.e., Beijing) (Li). In a published source written by one of her grandsons, she is said to have been the daughter of a prominent Chinese merchant in Manila and a Spanish, probably a *mestiza*, woman (Wu 140). In another account, she is said to have been a *mestiza* of Chinese and Filipino blood (V. Khu). It is possible that she was a mixture of all three races. Although the above accounts of her origins differ, together they do suggest that she was probably the daughter of an active Chinese merchant from Xiamen and a woman of mixed blood from the Philippines. Thus, the abovementioned name of “Lida” is probably

a transliteration of “Lita,” a name that is not uncommon in the Philippines. She is said to have married CGC at the age of eighteen (Li). As this almost certainly refers to Chinese years, this means that she was probably seventeen when she married. Thus, the marriage would have taken place in 1887, when CGC was thirty-four. His age suggests that, this time, she was someone he himself had chosen—not someone who had been chosen for him.

Ms. Wei was the mother of three of CGC’s sons who survived to adulthood—the sixth to eighth sons—and three of his four daughters—the first, third, and fourth. She is also thought to have been the natural mother of all or most of his four sons who did not live past infancy or early childhood, and who are listed, but not ranked, in the Chen genealogy.

CGC also took a third wife, the younger sister of his second wife (Chua). We do not know if the two were full sisters or half-sisters. However, they were said to have been very close (W. Khu). The two sisters were concurrently married to CGC. It is also possible that they both married him on the same day as well, but this is not known for certain. If CGC did not marry his third wife at the same time as his second, he must have married her soon after, judging from the fact that she was the mother of his fifth son, born in 1891. Thus, the latest that he could have married the younger Ms. Wei would have been in 1890. It would seem to have been somewhat unusual for two young girls of good family to be concurrently married to the same man. This fact perhaps indicates that the Wei sisters had come from a merchant family whose fortunes had declined.¹

We know very little about CGC’s third wife—not even her personal name. She is not mentioned in the Chen genealogy at all. Nor do we have a photograph of her. We know that she bore CGC two children, the abovementioned fifth son and, in 1897, a daughter, his favorite child, Chun-tee (Chunzhi 春治), but both of her offspring are listed in the Chen genealogy as being the children of the second wife. There may be two explanations for why the younger Ms. Wei does not appear in the genealogy. First, despite being the younger sister, she passed away many years before her older sister. Second, in Chinese tradition, children of the secondary wife are considered to belong to the main wife. Almost all that we know about the younger Ms. Wei is that she died in Quanzhou of bubonic plague in 1908.



Fig. 2: The second wife Wei Zhide, the most prolific and known among CGC’s wives.

If she had been no more than one year younger than her sister, she would have been at most thirty-seven at the time of her death.

After their marriage in Xiamen, CGC took his new bride, the elder Ms. Wei (and perhaps the younger one, as well) to live with him in Manila (W. Khu). It was very unusual at the time for a Chinese man to bring a wife from China to the Philippines. In 1886 (one year before CGC married Wei Zhide), there were only 194 Chinese women out of an official Chinese population of approximately 66,000 in the Philippines: a ratio of 3 females to 1,000 males. As 191 of these women were in Manila, which had a Chinese population of close to 50,000, the ratio there was 4 females to 1,000 males (Wickberg 174-75). If Ms. Wei's mother had indeed been from the Philippines, however, then this move is less unusual than it might first appear.

The Shift to Quanzhou

At about the age of forty, sometime around 1893, CGC set about building a home in Quanzhou. Quanzhou, a port city in southern Fujian province, was the "Zayton" described by Marco Polo as "one of the two greatest havens in the world" and "the Alexandria of the East" during the Yuan dynasty (1206-1368). It had declined in importance as a port, eclipsed by the nearby port of Xiamen (廈門) by the late seventeenth century ("Stones of Zayton"). However, it was and remains one of the principal cities of the province of Fujian.

The home was a three-story brick foreign-style structure on a large plot of land that he had purchased between Tongzheng Lane (通政巷) and Kuizhang Lane (奎章巷). He built an artificial mountain and a garden, and also opened a pawnshop. All of these structures were joined within one large area. There were iron doors on each floor of his mansion. On a stone pillar of the main building of his mansion was carved the following couplet: "Blue [*lan*] water comes from afar, dividing Quanzhou; mansion [*yuanlin*] newly built on selected Ao Hill (藍水遠來支分鯉郭, 園林新築地卜鰲山)" (Wu 140). The first character in each of the two lines together form the word "Lanyuan (藍園)," the village from which CGC hailed. Construction on this new house was probably completed sometime in the early to mid-1890s. Although now very rundown, this mansion still stands. The current address is No. 345 Zhongshan zhonglu (中山中路), and it is accessed through a narrow passageway between Nos. 343 and 349 Zhongshan zhonglu.

This home became CGC's main residence while in China. Following the construction of this home, he began traveling back and forth between Manila and Quanzhou, spending one or two years at a time in each place (Chua). He may also have spent more time in Quanzhou during the turbulent years of the Philippine-American War and Philippine Insurgency of 1898 to 1903. The home in Quanzhou also became the full-time residence of his second and third wives and all of his children (W. Khu). His eldest daughter, born in 1890, was born in Manila (Chan),

but as far as we know, all of CGC's children born from 1897 onwards were born in Quanzhou, with the possible exception of his youngest son (also his youngest child).

CGC now set about shifting the focus and nature of his activities, from a previously exclusive concentration on running his textile business in Manila and other interests in the Philippines, to a redirection of his energies into investing a considerable amount of the profits from that business into real estate in Quanzhou. From about 1912 onwards (and perhaps earlier), CGC is said to have spent over one million silver dollars in buying or building at least a hundred houses in Quanzhou. He is said to have been the largest overseas Chinese property investor in that city (Quanzhou shi 3835). His holdings included a great deal of property in what is now Zhongshan zhonglu (中山中路), a prime shopping street in the center of what is now the old town.

In 1918, CGC is reported to have made the decision to return to China permanently ("Nan'an shi" 170; "Quanzhou shi" 3836). He would then have been sixty-five. After retirement, he continued to make the occasional trip to Manila.

Chen Guangchun's Charitable and Public Service Activities

At about the same time that CGC began to shift the bulk of his holdings to Quanzhou, he also became heavily involved in charitable and public service activities. CGC, like many overseas Chinese at the time, was deeply troubled by China's economic and political weakness. This weakness was reflected in the incursions that foreign powers were making into China, and by the low status of Chinese living abroad. He came to believe, as others did, that "China's backwardness is due to the backwardness of the culture; and the backwardness of the culture is due to the backwardness of science and technology in the country." Along with other Chinese, he was particularly shocked by China's humiliating defeat in the Sino-Japanese war of 1894-1895 ("Nan'an shi" 169). Something had to be done, he felt, or "the strong will eat the flesh of the weak and those who are backward will be defeated" (Wu 140).

When Sun Yat-sen traveled throughout Southeast Asia in the early 1900s to spread the message of democracy and revolution, CGC is said to have actively supported Sun, and to have later generously subscribed to the national bonds issued by the new Chinese republic ("Nan'an shi" 169-70; "Quanzhou shi" 3835; Wu 140).² In 1912, CGC joined the Quanzhou Overseas Chinese League (泉州華僑公會), and in 1915 he became the head of the fourth session of the League ("Quanzhou shi" 3835).

Above all, however, it was through his active promotion of education in China, particularly that of girls, that CGC did his best to try to rectify what he saw as the

backwardness of Chinese culture, as his contribution to the modernization of the nation.

CGC put into practice his belief about the importance of educating girls by seeing to it that his own daughters received an education. The family had a live-in tutor, who instructed CGC's children, both the boys and the girls, in the Chinese classics. In the case of the girls, these included study in the Four Books for Girls (Nü si shu 女四書) (Chan). This tutor was Wu Qiaonian (伍喬年), who had attained the rank of provincial graduate (juren 舉人) in the imperial examinations (meaning that he had passed the provincial level of examinations, held once every three years), which had been abolished in 1905 (J. Khu).

Two sources state that CGC subsequently sent all of his daughters to study at the Fuzhou Normal School for Girls (Fuzhou nüzi shifan xuexiao 福州女子師範學校) ("Nan'an shi" 170; Wu 141), while another states that in 1920 he sent two of his daughters to that school ("Quanzhou diyi suo"). We know that his second daughter, Chun-tee, was either the first or second of his daughters to attend the school, after which her father probably sent his two younger daughters to study there as well. One source states that all of CGC's daughters were sent to the school in 1920, and that all of them graduated in 1922 and returned home to Quanzhou (Wu 141). From evidence from the life of CGC's second daughter, Chun-tee, we know that, in Chun-tee's case, this is incorrect, as she had attended the school before 1920. However, this could indicate the period when her two younger sisters attended the school.

The fact that the Chinese government had begun encouraging overseas Chinese to make donations to educational enterprises may also have prompted CGC to consider channeling his public service efforts along these lines. One scholar has noted: "In October 1914, Beijing issued the 'Revised Regulations on Awards for those Investing in Education' (Xiuzheng juanzi xingxue baojiang tiaolie), which authorized the issuing of 'certificates of recognition' for 'those Huaqiao [i.e., "overseas Chinese"] who made donations to educational enterprises.' The certificates, usually presented with great fanfare at special ceremonies held at the Chinese consulate, played a critical role in overseas Chinese society; donators now had a concrete expression of their philanthropy in the motherland that confirmed their status as a patriot" (Cook 182-83).

It seems to have been not long after the issuance of this edict that CGC decided upon the course of action that he wished to take. In his project, he worked together with Serafin Moya (known in China as Ren Daoyuan 任道遠), a Spanish Catholic priest of the Dominican order. CGC is said to have become acquainted with Fr. Moya while in Manila. Fr. Moya had served in the Philippines for some years until his transfer to Zhangzhou (漳州) in Fujian in 1895, to carry out evangelical work. In 1902, he went to Quanzhou as the representative of the Catholic Church there. He was to remain in Quanzhou until his death in 1948 (Wu 144). Not long after arriving in Quanzhou, Fr. Moya made a special trip to the Philippines to raise funds for his work in Quanzhou. It was either at this time, or perhaps earlier (when Fr.

Moya was still serving in the Philippines), that the two became acquainted with each other (“Quanzhou shi” 3551). It is possible that the acquaintance first came about through CGC’s second wife Zhide, who was an extremely devout Catholic. She is said to have frequently said to her husband: “The Lord’s grace to us is very great. Only if one follows the Lord’s instructions, and is charitable to one’s fellow man, will one attract the attention of the Lord.” She is also said to have been very frugal towards herself, but to have donated generously to charitable causes (Li).³

CGC and Fr. Moya forged a close relationship, one that was strengthened by a specific incident. One day, probably in 1916, at the beginning of the “warlord period” of 1916-1928, when central authority collapsed in China and banditry and warlordism became rampant throughout the country, bandits arrived in CGC’s mansion with the intention of kidnapping him. Fr. Moya, who happened to be visiting CGC at the time, shielded CGC (apparently by hiding him under his robes) and chased the bandits away by calling over troops of the Nationalist (Guomindang 國民黨) government. These troops ended up staying for over a decade, maintaining their headquarters in a three-story building owned by CGC that was located diagonally opposite his mansion, in the same compound. They were led by the army officers Division Commander (shizhang 師長) Li Yannian (李延年) and Brigade Commander (lüzhang 旅長) Qian Dongliang (錢東亮). CGC repaid this act of bravery on the part of Fr. Moya by becoming a great supporter of his work in Quanzhou (W. Khu). Indeed, it was through Fr. Moya that CGC channeled the bulk of his charitable efforts.

There are some inconsistencies in the various accounts of CGC and Fr. Moya’s collaboration, but these discrepancies relate almost entirely to the dates and not to the substance of the joint work of CGC and Fr. Moya. The most reasonable chronology seems to be as follows:

In 1916 or thereabouts (a discussion of the exact year is given later in this article), CGC established the Qiming School for Girls (啟明女學). Initially, he set aside part of his own mansion to house the school, and paid for all of the expenses of running the school (Nan’an shi 170; Wu 141-42). Fr. Moya was recruited as the principal. The post of director of studies and responsibility over general affairs was assumed by CGC’s eldest daughter, Manila-born Jee Gee (Ciyi 慈義) (Wu 142). The Dominican church’s chronology of its activities in China notes the following: “1916: Foundation of the School for Girls in [Q]uanzhou founded by a beata Maria Thang [Maria Tan was Jee Gee’s name in English] and Fr. Serafin Moya” (“History”). This year ties in with the rough estimate of the time of CGC’s retirement. By then, CGC was in his sixties and was no longer so actively involved in the day-to-day running of his textile business. He had completed most of his property investments in Quanzhou, and had the time and energy to spare on his public service activities.

At first, the Qiming School for Girls was entirely a primary school. It offered instruction in Chinese literature, arithmetic, music, art, physical education, embroidery, handicrafts, weaving, and so forth. It also offered classes on the Bible

(“Quanzhou diyi suo”; Wu 142). Subsequently, in 1921 or 1922, CGC purchased a large empty lot in Xucuo Cheng (許厝埕) and paid for the entire cost of constructing a three-story building, which was at the time the tallest and largest reinforced concrete structure in Quanzhou (“Quanzhou diyi suo”; “Quanzhou shi” 3836). The building housed the school, which had now expanded to offer part-time studies classes (buxi ban 補習班), an accelerated teacher-training class (shifan sucheng ban 師範速成班), a junior middle-school section, and a Chinese studies institute (guoxue zhuanxiu yuan 國學專修院). The design and plans for this concrete building were drawn up by Fr. Moya (“Nan’an shi” 170; “Quanzhou shi” 3836; Wu 142-43).

Accounts differ as to the year of the establishment of the Qiming School. One source states that the school was established in 1921 (“Quanzhou diyi suo”), while two others state that it was founded in 1922 (“Nan’an shi” 170; Wu 141-42). Still another claims that the Qiming School was established in 1895 as a primary school, and that CGC established the Qiming Middle School (啟明中學) in Quanzhou in 1919. A reasonable assumption is that 1921 or 1922 was the year that the stand-alone building housing the school was erected and the Qiming School expanded to include a junior-middle school, but that the school itself had been established earlier, at around 1916. Prior to that, CGC had been hiring tutors to educate his children at home. Perhaps other children had been invited to attend these classes as early as 1895.

In addition, on the western side of the building housing the Qiming School for Girls, CGC built a Gothic-style Catholic church. This church had a pointed roof, on top of which was a cross. This church was also designed by Fr. Moya and entirely financed by CGC (“Quanzhou diyi suo”; “Quanzhou shi” 3836; Wu 143). CGC donated both the building and the church to the Catholic Church to be used as a school and a place for religious worship, respectively. In 1948, when Fr. Moya passed away, he was buried on the northern side of the main hall of worship of this Catholic church (Wu 143-4). The original church no longer exists; in 2001 it was torn down and rebuilt in a different style (“Ting houbai” 12).

The buildings that housed the Qiming School for Girls and the Catholic church were originally attached to each other. On its eastern side, this large compound bordered Nandajie (南大街, now Zhongshan zhonglu 中山中路); on its west is what is now the Agricultural Bureau (nongye ju 農業局); on the south was Flower Lane (Huaxiang 花巷); and on the north was Kuixia Lane (奎霞巷). A sign saying “Qiming School for Girls” hung at the entrance of the school, which was on the southern side of Kuixia Lane). In the 1980s, the building still existed. It is now the site of Building No. 7 of the City People’s Government (shi renmin zhengfu qihoulou 市人民政府七號樓) (Wu 141-42, “Quanzhou diyi suo”).

As the school expanded from a home-based operation to a full-fledged school, CGC’s eldest daughter, Jee Gee, continued to handle the day-to-day operations (“Nan’an shi” 170; Wu 141-42). The school had over 20 instructors, many of whom

were well-known teachers in Quanzhou. One of them, Wu Qiaonian (伍喬年), who taught Chinese literature, had been the tutor to CGC's children. Wu Qiaonian was also a devout Buddhist and practicing doctor of Chinese medicine. He would later emigrate to the Philippines and practice Chinese medicine in Manila (J. Khu).

Although the number of classes in the Qiming School for Girls was not small, because schooling for girls was not widespread at the time there were not many students in each class—about three, five, or up to ten students. In all, the school only had about one hundred students. A few of its graduates apparently went on to higher studies or even went abroad to study (“Quanzhou diyi suo”; Wu 142-43).

CGC also assumed the position of supervisor of the primary school attached to the Xiyu Normal School (Xiyu shifan fushu xiaoxue 西隅師範附屬小學 or, for short, the Xiyu Primary School 西隅小學), which was located behind the Kaiyuan Temple (開元寺), one of the landmarks of Quanzhou. He paid for all the expenses of running that school, and also frequently visited the school to supervise the teaching (“Nan'an shi” 170; “Quanzhou shi” 3836; “Quanzhou diyi suo”; Wu 143).

The Gazetteer of Quanzhou City states that CGC also established the Manila Overseas Chinese Primary School (Manila huaqiao xiaoxue 馬尼拉華橋小學), and paid for the expenses of running this school (“Quanzhou shi” 3835). However, the accuracy of this claim is somewhat doubtful, as there does not seem to have been a school of that name in Manila. It is likely that the reference is to the Anglo-Chinese School (Zhongxi xiaoxue 中西小學), the first Chinese school in the Philippines, established in 1899 by the Philippine Chinese Charitable Association (Huaqiao shanju gongsuo 華僑善舉公所). As a prominent merchant in Manila, CGC would certainly have been expected to contribute to the expenses connected with the founding and running of the school.

Some accounts, including Wei Zhide's obituary, state that CGC was a devout Catholic (Li; “Nan'an shi” 169; Wu 142). The fact that then-widely practiced Chinese rituals such as making offerings to the ancestors were not practiced in his home in Quanzhou might seem to suggest that this was true (Chua). However, his second daughter, Chun-tee, said to have been his favorite child (Chan), had never been baptized, nor was she known to have been particularly religious or well versed in Catholic beliefs or rituals. While this may merely indicate that Chun-tee's mother, the younger Ms. Wei, was not a devout Catholic (or perhaps not Catholic at all), unlike her older sister, it would also seem to suggest that CGC himself may not necessarily have been a true believer in Catholicism. Rather, his close association with Fr. Moya would have bolstered the general belief that he was a Catholic.

The association between CGC and Fr. Moya was a fruitful one. The Catholic Church, and Western religious organizations in China in general, were at the forefront in bringing modern education to China, particularly with regard to the education of girls (Anderson; Lutz). Indeed, it is possible that it was Fr. Moya who first suggested the establishment of the Qiming School for Girls to CGC. The Qiming School for Girls was not the first school for girls established in Quanzhou,

although it was one of the first. The very first school for girls in Quanzhou had been established in 1890 by the English Presbyterian Mission, and also received financial support from overseas Chinese (Qiao 99). What the Qiming School for Girls represented was the first school for girls in Quanzhou established by an overseas Chinese (“Quanzhou diyi suo”). In this endeavor, it made sense to draw upon the expertise and energy of an experienced missionary like Fr. Moya. Moreover, the foreign link added to the credibility of the enterprise as a modernizing mission and undoubtedly helped to attract students.

Several sources state that, in order to pay for the expenses of running the schools that he was supporting, CGC frequently traveled between Quanzhou and Manila (“Quanzhou shi” 3836; “Quanzhou diyi suo”; Wu 143).

On July 9, 1924, CGC passed away in Manila, at the age of 71, from a stroke. A funeral was held for him in Quanzhou, in the Catholic church that he built. He was buried in a tomb surrounded by a garden owned by the Chen family, located in the northern part of the old city of Quanzhou, south of what is now the Quanzhou Teacher’s College and beside what is now Xuefu Road (學府路). The park was fenced in with iron railings, with an iron door and lock. The tomb itself was constructed of concrete. At the top was a large cross, and on the lower portion of the tomb was the inscription: The tomb of Mr. Chen Guangchun of Lanyuan (Lanyuan Chen Guangchun xiansheng zhi mu 籃園陳光純先生之墓) (Wu 144).



Fig. 3: CGC’s tomb in Quanzhou, seen here with the prominent cross on top.



Fig. 4: CGC’s funeral held in the Catholic church he built in Quanzhou.

The Decline of the Chen Family’s Fortunes

CGC passed away at a particularly unfortunate time for his family. If CGC had indeed retired in Quanzhou around 1918, and turned over the management of his business in Manila to one of his sons, he was doing so at a time when the textile

trade in Manila was flourishing. However, business became very competitive starting in the mid-1920s and perhaps somewhat earlier. Even the largest and most established textile businesses began to struggle to achieve a profit (Wong 91).⁴ With the death of CGC, the Chen family lost its shrewd and experienced head, just when he was most needed to guide the family textile business through difficult times—which became even more difficult in the late 1920s.

Dealing with a business during a period of intense competition would task even the sharpest and most experienced of businessmen, so it is not surprising that his son proved to be unequal to the task of running the family business in Manila. After CGC's death, his widow Wei Zhide and his eldest daughter Jee Gee continued to support the Qiming School for Girls and the Xiyu Primary School ("Nan'an shi" 170; "Quanzhou shi" 3836; Wu 144-45). However, the difficulties facing the business in Manila began to affect their ability to do so. In the spring of 1925, Zhide and his third daughter Shumei (淑美) traveled to Manila to help manage the family's store. They remained for a year, before returning to Quanzhou ("Quanzhou diyi suo"; Wu 144).

The year 1929 was probably the worst year for the textile trade in the Philippines. One scholar described the situation: "At the end of 1928, easy credit and miscalculation had led many dealers to become overstocked. Smaller establishments reported poor profits for the year. By February 1929, Chinese textile merchants nationwide were overstocked and selling below cost in the face of light demand. Meanwhile, textile arrivals continued to pile up as a result of orders placed in late 1928. Business in June 1929 was 50 percent below sales of a year earlier" (Doeppers 527).

And, indeed, it was in 1929 that the family's textile store, which was a nine-entry emporium on San Vicente Street in Binondo, in the heart of Manila's Chinatown, closed its doors: one entranceway each month from February until October, when the entire operation was shut down (W. Khu).

In the ensuing years, the Chen family also lost a large portion of their landholdings in Quanzhou. Because of their financial difficulties, the Qiming School for Girls ceased operations in 1931 ("Nan'an shi" 170; "Quanzhou shi" 3836; "Quanzhou diyi suo"; Wu 145). At some point, according to the Dominican records, the Qiming School for Girls came to be administered by the Canadian Sisters of the Immaculate Conception, but it is unclear when this happened ("History"). CGC's third daughter, Shumei, who had been a teacher at the Qiming School for Girls, went to teach in the elementary school of the Xiyu Normal School in order to try to continue her father's work (Wu 145).

In 1935, Wei Zhide passed away while on a visit to the home of her youngest daughter in Xiamen on 3 May 1935. She fainted and never regained consciousness. A doctor of Western medicine was called in, and his verdict was that her heart had stopped. She was sixty-five at the time of her death (Li). A memorial ceremony was held in Gulangyu (鼓浪嶼), an island that is part of the city of Xiamen, after which

her coffin was transported to Quanzhou. She was buried just a few feet east of CGC's tomb. The work of building her tomb commenced, but only a flat platform had been constructed when the advancing Japanese forces brought these efforts to a halt (Wu 145).

Either in the period of the Sino-Japanese War (1937-1945), during the Great Leap Forward (1958-1960), or during the Cultural Revolution (1966-68), the iron railings and gate to CGC's tomb were torn down and stolen by looters (Wu 145; ("Ting houbel" 12; Tan et al.). During the Cultural Revolution, the cross on the tomb was torn down and cement was smeared over the inscription on the tower portion of the tomb ("Ting houbel" 12). Around 1990, the village commission (cunweihui 村委會) of the Quanzhou government, without any authorization, built rental homes on the garden surrounding the tomb. It would not be until more than a decade later, on 6 June 2001, that CGC's tomb was officially declared a culturally protected site, and not until 2005 that the houses that had been built on the land were torn down, enabling the site to be restored to something of its former self.

Conclusion

The Philippines played a large part in every aspect of the life—business, personal, and philanthropic—of a figure prominent in the local history of one of China's oldest cities. CGC spent most of the active part of his life, from his teenage years until his retirement at the age of sixty-five, largely engaged in business activities in the Philippines. When he left China to seek his fortune in the Philippines, China was under an imperial government and the Philippines under Spanish colonial rule. Well before his death, China had come under a republican form of government and the Philippines under an American regime. CGC deftly made his way through these national transformations to achieve what would have been the dream of nearly all migrants from China to the Philippines at the time—a prosperous retirement in China in or near his hometown.⁵

His own personal transformations were perhaps just as significant—and although this is the story of the life of one individual, it has something to say about the larger experience of Chinese migrants from southern Fujian to the Philippines during the decades straddling the turn of the twentieth century.

CGC left as a young Chinese bachelor from a poor village and returned a wealthy urbanite with foreign tastes, a wife of mixed heritage, progressive ideas about the education of girls, and a staunch supporter of a representative of a foreign religion. One scholar of the Chinese in the Philippines during this period notes: "At the root, to be Chinese in the Philippines, that is, one nationality residing in the space of another, was to be transnational" (Wilson 227). Although we lack details about many aspects of CGC's life, one thing is clear: the continuing relevance of China to CGC's plans and strategies, both economic and familial, while in the Philippines, and vice versa.

His most intimate relationship was with a deeply Catholic wife who was of part-Filipino or part-Spanish descent (or both), who was at the same time capable of functioning seamlessly in Chinese society—a fact in itself suggestive of the permeability of culture and identity in that period of transition (Chu, Chapter Six). Although his wealth and *mestiza* wife would have made it possible for him to raise his family in the Philippines, he chose to do so in China. He did so presumably because he considered that the importance of a Chinese education (difficult at the time to obtain in the Philippines) to the cultural identity and economic success of his children, who would later be functioning in a diaspora community in the Philippines, outweighed the disadvantages of long periods of separation from his family.

Nor did he simply migrate to the Philippines and then return to China. Rather, he kept strong footholds in both places. He invested in real estate in China, built a house and raised his family there, but his main business remained in the Philippines. To tend to both, he commuted between the two places, and maintained the expectation that his sons would later take over the running of his business in the Philippines.

For CGC, the emotional tug of China as home was a strong one. His desire to help his beleaguered country absorbed a large part of his energies later in his life. In this endeavor also, the imprint of the Philippines is clear. To begin with, CGC's business in the Philippines was the source of the financing for his attempts to contribute to the modernization and strengthening of his native country when it was beset by disorder and occupied by foreign powers. Beyond that, however, the channel through which most of his charitable efforts were ultimately directed—that is, via the Catholic Church in Quanzhou, in the person of Fr. Serafin Moya—was a connection that he likely made in Manila, and very likely through the agency of his deeply Catholic *mestiza* wife.

An unusually progressive and energetic man, CGC educated his daughters to a level beyond what was common at the time, and was active until the end, spending large sums on the school for girls that he had established in Quanzhou and on the Catholic church that he had built in the city. Sadly, only a few years after his death in 1924, much of the wealth that CGC had spent his life accumulating had dissipated, and the school that he built and financed had to be closed down. He is, however, remembered to this day in the official history of the city of Quanzhou as one of its patriots.

Editor's Notes

1. Earlier marriage practices amongst wealthy Chinese families in China and among the Chinese diasporic communities in Southeast Asia included concubinage or polygyny, and hence it was not unusual for CGC, even as a Catholic, to have more than one wife (see Lang 50-2; Chu Chapter 4). The bride's family was expected to provide a dowry to the groom's family, and a rich merchant family gave a dowry almost equivalent to the bride price as a way to ensure that their daughter would earn the respect of her husband's family and thus not be maltreated (Wolf and Huang 76). It is not clear however to the editors whether a family's financial status determined whether daughters would be married off to different men. As the author has no definitive sources to corroborate her hypothesis, the explanation here about the two sisters' family fortunes as the cause for this conjugal arrangement with CGC needs to be further examined.
2. Southern coastal China, especially Fujian, has had a long history of political, social, and economic interaction with the people of Southeast Asia/Nanyang. It is not surprising therefore that when reformists and revolutionaries of China were clamoring against the Qing government for change, many of them sought the assistance of the "overseas Chinese." For more information about the relationship between China and the Southeast Asian Chinese, see Cook.
3. Historically, the Spanish Roman Catholic Church in the Philippines played a major role in the conversion of the natives, including the Chinese who migrated to the country, to Catholicism. Conversion was the principal condition for allowing the Chinese to marry. The Dominicans, along with Jesuits, had created a community of Chinese Catholics and their mestizo families in the Philippines, but especially in Manila. Much has been written about the Catholic Church's relationship with the Chinese during the Spanish colonial period, but very few studies have explored the history of this relationship during the American colonial period.
4. The general context for this was the turmoil of the textile trade market owing to the world depression and the Japanese penetration of the British-ruled markets in India and other parts in Asia. There was a collapse of the post-World War I boom in the 1920s (Howe 226-227, 229). A similar pattern of decline in textile trade was recorded in North America in the early 1920s.
5. For a broader historical overview of the history of the Chinese in the Philippines during the late Spanish and American colonial periods, see Wickberg; Wilson; Chu; Wong; and Tan.

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