

## **An Exploration of Chineseness in Mindanao, Philippines: The Case of Zamboanga City<sup>+</sup>**

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### **Abstract**

There has been a growing body of narratives on the minorities in Mindanao, the Philippines' second largest island group, mostly focusing on the Muslims and the lumads (non-Muslim indigenous people) either as a whole or as a specific people group. Such narratives are in light of issues concerning aspects of peace and security, economic development, land disputes, and the environment. The Chinese as a minority in Mindanao are not given much attention despite the many works on Chinese integration and Chineseness in Southeast Asia. Similar research in the Philippines is confined largely to Manila, leaving a gap in the historical narratives. This exploratory and descriptive research note aims to provide a pilot inquiry on the Chinese in the spatial peripheries of the Philippines, particularly in Zamboanga City, by exploring how Chineseness is practiced in their everyday life.

**Keywords:** *Chineseness, Chinese community, Zamboanga City, Mindanao*

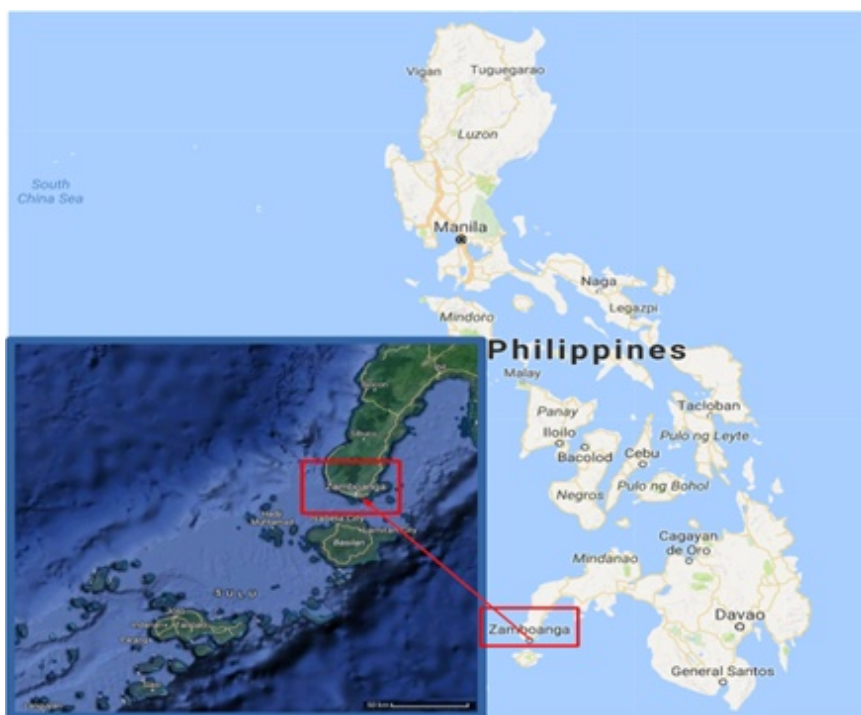
## 1. Introduction

Philippine history tends to focus on events in Luzon and Visayas, with less attention on Mindanao. Recent events concerning the resumption of talks on the Bangsamoro Basic Law (BBL) (*MindaNews*, 13th January 2017), the violent encounter in Mamasapano, Maguindanao in 2015 (*Rappler*, 6 January 2017), the impunity surrounding the election-related massacre in Maguindanao in 2009 (*MindaNews*, 21st November 2016), the spate of kidnappings and beheadings by the Abu Sanyaf Group (ASG) (*Benar News*, 10th January 2017), the alleged militarization of lumad areas in Mindanao, the Marawi crisis of 2017, and the victory of former Davao City Mayor Rodrigo Duterte in the 2016 presidential elections are some of the major events that led to Mindanao becoming the topic of everyday conversation in recent times. But beyond the many negative reports on Mindanao, there is much more to know and understand about its history, culture, and people.

Following the assumption that the Chinese is a heterogeneous group depending on where they settled (Ang-See, 2011), and noting that more studies are needed on the Chinese in Mindanao, this research note focuses on the Chinese-Filipinos in Zamboanga City (Figure 1). Zamboanga City is selected as the area of study because of its rich history owing to centuries of trade and cultural intermingling involving the Chinese, Malays, and local people groups dating back to the 13th to 14th century. At present, there seems to be a harmonious coexistence among the residents of the city. Chinese schools and a Buddhist temple exist alongside Catholic schools and churches, and Islamic masjids. Moreover, with the city being the gateway to Mainland Mindanao from the outlying islands of Basilan and Sulu, one would be able to find Chinese Muslims who migrated to the city after the burning of Jolo in 1974 during the Marcos regime. On the other hand, Spanish settlement in the city in the 16th century paved the way for Catholicism to take

root. This research note explores aspects of Chineseness through languages spoken, festivals observed, religious beliefs and practices, attitudes towards non-Chinese, and self-identity. A brief description of the Chinese community within Zamboanga society will be presented in this essay.

**Figure 1** Map of the Philippines with Inset Showing Zamboanga Peninsula (Google Maps 2017)



Source: Google Maps.<sup>1</sup>

## 2. The Concept of Chineseness

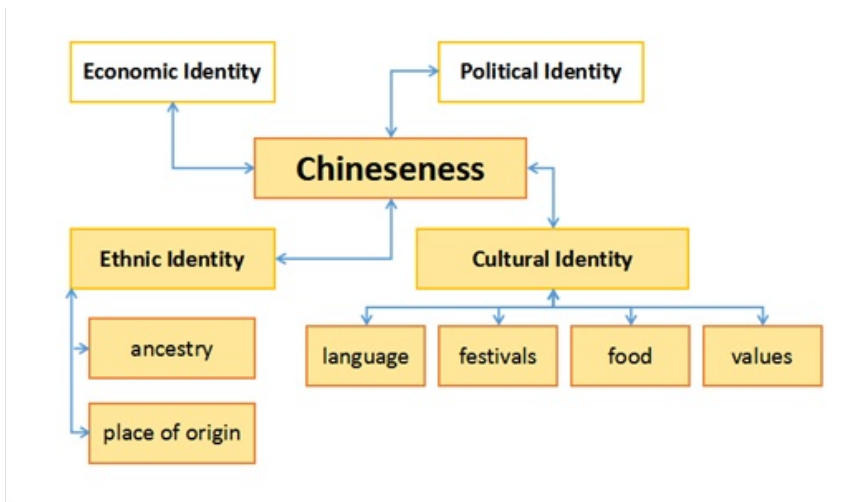
Studies on the Chinese in Mindanao have large room for more scholarly attention and the subject areas that can be explored in further research are myriad. Majul (1999), for instance, mentions that Muslim missionaries from China arrived in Sulu as early as the 4th century. The work inspires interest in future interrogations that investigate the connection between the development of Islam in the Philippines and China. Another interesting study that yields valuable insights for future studies is the mapping of families done by Samuel Tan (1994) to find out how the Chinese have become integrated in the political life of Sulu. Interracial marriages in this context reflect the situation of Chinese traders or members of their family marrying into local political elites thus establishing strong politico-economic ties. It is quite interesting how Chinese and Islamic elements would fit together to create social harmony given that the two cultures have been trading as early as the Yuan Dynasty (1278-1368) (Abubakar, 1973). At present, there is great room for in-depth studies that investigate the dynamics of the different identities involving Chineseness and Muslimness, and how they fit into the concept of the Filipino identity.

“The Chinese have never had a concept of identity, only a concept of Chineseness, of being Chinese and of becoming un-Chinese,” writes Wang Gungwu (1992) in his seminal book *China and the Chinese Overseas*. Wang later qualifies this and proposes the existence of Chinese identities instead of a homogenous Chinese identity, or even Chineseness, which varies as a subjective concept. Efforts to preserve a strong Chinese nationalist identity among the Chinese migrants led to the establishment of schools in an attempt to create a transnational identity that transcends citizenship and demands allegiance to China, the country of origin. But historical events, both global and local where the Chinese settled, contributed to and still contribute to changing Chinese

identities. Chineseness as an elusive concept leads scholars looking into this topic to agree with Wang (1992) that the Chinese is not a homogenous group (Djao, 2003; Pan, 2006; Ang-See, 2011; Suryadinata, 2011; C-B Tan, 2011). Such a view results in a vast number of studies with the goal of identifying how Chineseness is manifested in different contexts in today's highly globalized world (See Djao, 2003; Pan, 2006; Tong, 2010).

As this essay aims to explore how Chineseness is practiced in Zamboanga City, it utilizes a modified version of Wang's (1992) multiple identity model and considers Chinese identity as comprising four aspects: ethnicity, nationality, class, and culture. This research note focuses on the ethnic and cultural aspects as indicated in the conceptual framework (Figure 2).

**Figure 2** Conceptual Framework for Exploring Chineseness



Ethnic identity acknowledges a shared heritage (John Macionis in Djao, 2003) and is operationalized in the framework through ancestry and place of origin. Cultural identity is analyzed by looking into language, festivals, food, and values (Figure 2). It is important to underscore that this essay explores respondents' perceptions and applications regarding a broad set of indicators, characteristics, and practices that are associated with Chineseness in aid of giving greater salience to how respondents frame their identity regardless of how much of these factors are manifested in their daily life.

In the framework, the use of a Chinese language is included as a marker, which is cultivated in Chinese schools.<sup>2</sup> This research note also considers Ul Ain's (2015) study of the Muslims in China, which includes the observance of festivals as an indicator of acculturation in Chinese society. In looking at the extent that certain Chinese festivals, which are observed in Mainland China, are practiced in Zamboanga City, we consider the Spring Festival or Chinese New Year (春節), Qingming / Tomb-Sweeping Day (清明節), Dragonboat Festival (端午節), Hungry Ghost Festival (中元節), and Mid-Autumn Festival (中秋節). In Chinese textbooks in the Philippines, these are also considered to be the top four traditional festivals, with the exception of the Hungry Ghost Festival. The latter is observed for its association with many taboos that apply to occasions such as weddings, business openings, and various celebrations.

Eating and preparing Chinese food are linked to family ties and knowledge of Chinese cuisines connotes knowledge of Chinese culture where food is of great significance especially during festivities. Chinese values are centered on filial piety wherein ancestor worship is practiced and parents are looked after in their old age. Other important Chinese values also include frugality, attention to schooling and education, and diligence (Djao, 2003). The view that these values indicate Chineseness

is hinged on a particular social context that, in many instances, does not exist anymore. Nevertheless, certain stereotypes remain, even when such values are also associated with other groups and even while these values are present in other cultures. We allow respondents to frame their perceptions whether in contestation or otherwise.

### **3. Method and Findings**

The preceding conceptual framework was used to design a questionnaire and an interview instrument. The latter allowed elaboration of questionnaire responses. Sensitive logistical preparations were made since this pilot inquiry took place in Zamboanga City where kidnappings are relatively frequent due to the city's proximity to Sulu where the Abu Sayyaf group is based. The researcher employed social networks to build a network of gatekeepers that were critical to facilitating respondent selection of persons who self-identify as having Chinese heritage (i.e. Chinese-Filipinos in Zamboanga City) and providing the mediation that established openness from the respondents. Given that different Chinese persons manifest varying degrees of Chineseness, the sole criterion for selecting respondents is ethnic identity, indicated by the existence of a Chinese ancestor whether patrilineally, matrilineally, or both and an affirmed self-identification by the respondent.

Structured data processed from questionnaire responses were juxtaposed with content analysis of interview data. This pilot research gave salience to respondent perceptions and personal narratives of their practices in order to understand the complexity of the subject and to gain deeper insight by gathering meanings, which may otherwise be obscured by conventional structured interrogations (Sandelowski, 1991) that seek generalization of results rather than in-depth reflection on particular cases. In light of this objective, respondents were deliberately limited to

seven. Moreover, the pilot respondent sample was necessary to evaluate the questionnaire and interview instruments in the context of productivity in retrieving information.

In the tables and succeeding discussion, respondents are distinguished by codes. Table 1 presents the respondent profile. Table 2 presents respondent perspectives on Chineseness indicators. For the respondents, ancestry is the top marker of Chineseness and all respondents share the same view that it does not matter whether Chinese ancestry is from both parents or from either parent. The second top marker is the use of a Chinese language while all respondents agree that proficiency in a Chinese language does not necessarily qualify one to be Chinese. As CA1 and BA2 noted, many non-Chinese Muslim students in Zamboanga with no Chinese ancestry exert effort in learning the language.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, 4 respondents (CA1, CA3, BA1, BA2) emphasized the importance of knowing how to read, write, and speak a Chinese language for one to claim Chinese heritage. BA1 rhetorically asked, if one does not speak a Chinese language, can he/she still be considered Chinese ( “ 哪有不會說華語的華人 ” )? Her daughter-in-law added that it is embarrassing that some Chinese are less interested than non-Chinese Muslims studying in Chonghua School in gaining language proficiency. But for CA1, speaking the language is mostly for utilitarian purposes as the language is very important in conducting business. Regarding the history of Chinese education in the city, BA2 expressed disapproval of the decrease in number of Chinese subjects as mandated by the Department of Education. For her, this does not bring any good ( “ 沒有好處 ” ) because Chinese children are losing the ability to speak Chinese. Respondents who had Chinese education until high school preferred to use Hokkien, although one respondent (BA1) indicated a preference for Mandarin (Putonghua).



**Table 1** Respondents' Profile

| Code | With Chinese name? | Age         | Sex    | Religion | Generation  | Occupation                    | Chinese education |
|------|--------------------|-------------|--------|----------|-------------|-------------------------------|-------------------|
| MA1  | No                 | 46          | Male   | Muslim   | 2nd         | policeman                     | none              |
| CA1  | Yes                | undisclosed | Male   | Catholic | 3rd         | businessman                   | high school       |
| CA2  | Yes                | 54          | Female | Catholic | 3rd         | businesswoman                 | high school       |
| CA3  | Yes                | 54          | Female | Catholic | 3rd         | businesswoman                 | high school       |
| CA4  | Yes                | 55          | Male   | Catholic | 3rd         | none                          | high school       |
| BA1  | Yes                | undisclosed | Female | Buddhist | 3rd         | grandmother, temple volunteer | high school       |
| BA2  | Yes                | undisclosed | Female | Buddhist | undisclosed | teacher, temple volunteer     | high school       |

Zamboanga City has resident multilinguals as a result of intermingling among different cultures and ethnolinguistic groups – Tausug, Sama, Chinese, Visayan, and Tagalog. All respondents speak Filipino and Hokkien (Table 3). CA1 and CA3 speak and use all seven languages in various contexts as both run a business. CA3 shared that she uses Tausug and Visayan to communicate with domestic helpers and employees. This provides an insight into the socioeconomic status of the latter two groups. On the other hand, BA2 shared that her grandchildren are all multilinguals who speak Tausug because of interactions with Muslims enrolled in Chinese schools. CA1 emphasized the importance of Chinese in conducting business but also stressed that it is the key to preserving Chinese culture.

**Table 2** Indicators of Chineseness Based on Respondents' Perspective

| Code         | Has Chinese ancestors | Speaks a Chinese language | Recognizes China as place of origin of ancestors | Practices ancestor worship |
|--------------|-----------------------|---------------------------|--|----------------------------|
| MA1          | 1                     | 0                         | 0  | 0                          |
| CA1          | 1                     | 1                         | 1  | 1                          |
| CA2          | 1                     | 1                         | 0  | 0                          |
| CA3          | 1                     | 1                         | 1  | 0                          |
| CA4          | 1                     | 0                         | 0  | 0                          |
| BA1          | 1                     | 1                         | 1  | 1                          |
| BA2          | 1                     | 1                         | 1  | 1                          |
| <i>Total</i> | 7                     | 5                         | 4  | 3                          |
| Percentage   | 100%                  | 71%                       | 57%  | 43%                        |

**Table 3** Languages Spoken

| Code         | Languages | Hokkien | Filipino | Mandarin | English | Chavacano | Tausug | Visayan |
|--------------|-----------|---------|----------|----------|---------|-----------|--------|---------|
| MA1          | 5         | 1       | 1        | 0        | 1       | 1         | 1      | 0       |
| CA1          | 7         | 1       | 1        | 1        | 1       | 1         | 1      | 1       |
| CA2          | 5         | 1       | 1        | 1        | 1       | 1         | 0      | 0       |
| CA3          | 7         | 1       | 1        | 1        | 1       | 1         | 1      | 1       |
| CA4          | 6         | 1       | 1        | 1        | 1       | 1         | 0      | 1       |
| BA1          | 3         | 1       | 1        | 1        | 0       | 0         | 0      | 0       |
| BA2          | 5         | 1       | 1        | 1        | 1       | 1         | 0      | 0       |
| <i>Total</i> |           | 7       | 7        | 6        | 7       | 6         | 3      | 3       |
| Percentage   |           | 100%    | 100%     | 86%      | 86%     | 86%       | 43%    | 43%     |

**Table 4** Chinese Festivals Observed

| Code         | Spring Festival | Tomb-Sweeping Day | Dragonboat Festival | Hungry Ghost Festival | Mid-Autumn Festival |
|--------------|-----------------|-------------------|---------------------|-----------------------|---------------------|
| MA1          | 1               | 1                 | 0                   | 0                     | 0                   |
| CA1          | 1               | 1                 | 0                   | 0                     | 0                   |
| CA2          | 1               | 1                 | 0                   | 0                     | 0                   |
| CA3          | 1               | 1                 | 0                   | 1                     | 1                   |
| CA4          | 1               | 0                 | 0                   | 0                     | 0                   |
| BA1          | 1               | 1                 | 0                   | 1                     | 1                   |
| BA2          | 1               | 1                 | 0                   | 1                     | 1                   |
| <i>Total</i> | 7               | 6                 | 0                   | 3                     | 3                   |
| Percentage   | 100%            | 86%               | 0%                  | 43%                   | 43%                 |

Of the five important Chinese festivals, the Spring Festival is the most familiar to the respondents who all observe it (see Table 4). Six out of 7 respondents observe Tomb-Sweeping Day. MA1 observes this special day, despite being Muslim and considering that Islam forbids giving too much attention to the deceased (Ul Ain, 2015). MA1 reveals that they clean tombs on Qingming (around the month of April or May in the Gregorian calendar) as a sign of respect to their deceased loved ones. CA3 follows the tradition of preparing five kinds of fruits and six dishes (*go'kuan lak'lai*) during Qingming. The Hungry Ghost Festival and Mid-Autumn Festival are observed only by CA3, BA1, and BA2 who identify themselves as “very Chinese”. CA3 makes sure that she prepares food offerings during the Hungry Ghost Month. She also observes the Mid-Autumn Festival with the Tan-Yu clan association with which she is connected through her mother. Both CA2 and CA3 shared

that they do not play dice games in Zamboanga, but they do so when they are in Manila. The Dragonboat Festival is virtually not observed in spite of the city's coastal features. It is then interesting to investigate further the process of integration that the Chinese migrants historically experienced given the festivals they observed in China (e.g. the Dragonboat Festival in Fujian) and Zamboanga's local culture (e.g. marine culture as epitomized by the Vinta vessels). Regarding the preservation of Chinese culture, MA1 thinks that observing traditions is sufficient while the rest of the respondents see language as a central component of culture and its preservation.

All respondents agree that the Chinese would rather set up his/her own business rather than to be an employee and that the Chinese are a hardworking people. Regarding frugality and thriftiness being important Chinese values, only MA1 disagrees on account of extravagant banquets. Where social interactions with non-Chinese are concerned, all respondents agree that there is harmonious relationships with non-Chinese. All respondents not only have non-Chinese neighbors and friends but they also do not feel discrimination from non-Chinese while in their company. Only BA1 shared wariness towards Muslims, including Chinese Muslims, due to the kidnapping issues that are associated with extremist groups.

Table 5 shows that despite the liberal view permitting Chinese men to marry non-Chinese women, no respondent agrees to the view that Chinese women should marry non-Chinese men. CA3 shared with slight resentment that it seems unfair that her brothers are allowed to marry non-Chinese, but she is not. Despite her disagreement, she concedes that it would be difficult to marry a non-Chinese because of cultural differences. Only BA1 opined that the Chinese should marry fellow Chinese.

**Table 5** Views on Interracial Marriage

| Code         | Chinese men are permitted to marry non-Chinese wives. | Chinese women are permitted to marry non-Chinese husbands. | My parents strictly want me to marry a Chinese. | I prefer to marry a Chinese. |
|--------------|---|--|---|------------------------------|
| MA1          | 1   | 0  | 0   | 0                            |
| CA1          | NA  | NA   | NA  | NA                           |
| CA2          | 1   | 0  | 1   | 1                            |
| CA3          | 1   | 0  | 1   | 0                            |
| CA4          | 1   | 0  | 0   | 0                            |
| BA1          | 0   | 0  | 1   | 1                            |
| BA2          | 1   | 0  | NA  | NA                           |
| <i>Total</i> | 5   | 0  | 3   | 2                            |
| Percentage   | 75%   | 0%   | 43%   | 29%                          |

**Table 6** Rituals, Beliefs, and Diet

| Code         | After offering food to household gods, we eat the food. | We offer food to deceased ancestors. | I believe in life after death. | We practice cremation. | We bury the dead instead of cremating them. | Newborn males should be circumcised. | It is okay to drink alcoholic beverages. | I eat pork. |
|--------------|---|--------------------------------------|--------------------------------|------------------------|---|--------------------------------------|--|-------------|
| MA1          | 0   | 1                                    | 1                              | 0                      | 1   | 1                                    | 1  | 0           |
| CA1          | 1   | 1                                    | 1                              | NA                     | NA  | NA                                   | 1  | 1           |
| CA2          | 1   | 1                                    | 1                              | 1                      | 1   | 1                                    | 1  | 1           |
| CA3          | 1   | 1                                    | 1                              | 1                      | 1   | 1                                    | 1  | 1           |
| CA4          | 0   | 0                                    | 1                              | 0                      | 1   | 1                                    | 1  | 1           |
| BA1          | 1   | 1                                    | NA                             | 1                      | 1   | NA                                   | 1  | 1           |
| BA2          | 1   | 1                                    | NA                             | 1                      | 1   | NA                                   | 1  | 0           |
| <i>Total</i> | 5   | 6                                    | 5                              | 4                      | 6   | 4                                    | 7  | 5           |
| Percentage   | 71%   | 86%                                  | 71%                            | 57%                    | 86%   | 57%                                  | 100%                                     | 71%         |

Table 6 presents respondents' practices that relate to rituals, beliefs, and diet. Ancestor worship is practiced by all respondents but in different ways. MA1 clarified that they do not worship the dead, but that they honor them by means of ritual food offerings to household gods and ancestors, deviating from Islamic teachings. However, offered food is not consumed by the family members. CA4, a Catholic, does not practice this ritual. Burial of the deceased is the norm although CA2, CA3, BA1 and BA2 see cremation as an alternative. Regarding circumcision, all agree that circumcision must be performed on males, but that it is not required for newborns. MA1 explained that according to Islam, circumcision on newborns is a must, but that in contemporary times, circumcision may be performed later in life. Regarding diet, MA1 raised the pork taboo. On the other hand, BA1 and BA2 espoused Buddhist vegetarianism, although BA1 consumes meat on rare occasions. MA1 shared that it is okay to drink alcoholic beverages. When asked to clarify, he answered that he himself does not drink, but he sees nothing wrong with people who drinks alcohol, a sign of openness to other cultures.

#### **4. Closing Remarks and Further Research**

Rather than proposing a definitive yardstick of Chineseness, the pilot study provided insights into how a community, contingent on its particular social context, can frame Chineseness that consists of negotiations and constestations of different aspects of cultural and ethnic identity.

Further conceptualization can focus on the economic and political aspects of identity. Moreover, a large-scale survey would be fruitful. Particular sampling can consider student respondents in Chinese schools. Participant observation in the places of worship and in restaurants can

also be employed to observe how social interactions take place among the Chinese in Zamboanga City.<sup>4</sup> Finally, local historical research will be a good complimentary work. For instance, narratives from the burning of Jolo in 1974, which led to mass migration of Chinese from Jolo, can be explored.

Another interesting research area is cultural practice in the context of Samuel Tan's (1994) observation that Muslim rites and rituals have merged with those of the Chinese as much as Chinese costumes and customs have adopted Islamic characteristics. From the interviews, the respondents indicated awareness of similarities and differences between Muslims and Chinese. CA3 mentioned that both groups practice the provision of dowry to the girl's family prior to marriage. CA4 shared that the groups are similar when it comes to the practice of polygamy, the use of the lunar calendar, and to having a strong sense of community.

The subject of religion also yields research potential. Based on respondent information and physical observation, there are at least three Chinese groups in the city based on religion (see also Table 1). One group is comprised of the Chinese who attend Sunday mass and self-identify as Catholics. Another group consists of the Chinese who attend Buddhist prayer rituals at Avalokiteshvara Temple. Some from them claim to also attend Catholic mass from time to time. A third group is composed of Muslim Chinese who worship at the mosque. Despite the differences in religion, the groups enjoy a harmonious relationship with each other.

Finally, the aspect of commercial relations among Chinese and non-Chinese can be explored. Zamboanga city does not have a Chinatown (唐人街). Businesses owned by Chinese and non-Chinese are situated side by side. The same can be said of the residential areas, where, according to the locals, the Chinese have both Chinese and non-Chinese as neighbours.

## Notes

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1. Following usage instruction at source "Using Google Maps, Google Earth and Street View" (guidelines are for non-commercial use) <<https://www.google.com/permissions/geoguidelines.html>>.
2. Schools are among the identified institutions together with temples, clan associations, and business clubs that help promote Chineseness. The evolution of education policies in the Philippines (Sussman, 1976; Pan, 2006) has been an important factor in the language skills of the Chinese. The temples, on the other hand, continue the propagation of Buddhism and provides an opportunity to use the Chinese language through the books



used in ritual prayers. Clan associations provide an avenue for important celebrations where reunions take place. Business clubs encourage social networks, which intertwine commercial and social ties.

3. Similarly, the respondents recognized that many Filipinos without Chinese ancestry already engage in practices that were strongly associated with the Chinese, such as fengshui, and the use of Traditional Chinese Medicine.
4. Following Pelletier (2014) in his study of Taiwanese Muslims, the researcher observed the people at an eatery serving satti, a popular breakfast meal of sticky rice topped with heapful of spicy sauce that goes well with barbecue. Also, participation in a Buddhist prayer ritual or what the locals call “Sunday Mass” in a temple dedicated to Avalokiteshvara (a.k.a. Guanyin) provided insights on Chinese language usage.

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# Postscript

