

Bahay Tsinoy, museum of Chinese in Philippine life

THE INS AND OUTS OF WORKING (IN) A MUSEUM

Tsinoy means Tsinong Pinoy or Chinese Filipino. He is a special kind of Filipino because he is of Chinese descent. Thus Bahay Tsinoy – Museum of the Chinese in Philippine Life is a Philippine museum. It documents the influence and impact of the ethnic Chinese on all significant events that shape the Philippines as a nation. It is not a China museum and you will not find the dragons, the jade and the ivory here but you will find important treasures that are part and parcel of Philippine life through centuries.

Bahay Tsinoy is located in the “walled city” of Intramuros, a 100-hectare land surrounded by a four-kilometer wall. During the Spanish occupation, the Spaniards walled in the seat of the government and kept the Chinese out of the walled City. But today, Bahay Tsinoy has become an important landmark in city tours of Manila. Before the museum was built, visitors who were interested about the Chinese in the Philippines were brought only to two places – Binondo (Chinatown) and the Chinese cemetery.

Although Binondo is throbbing with life and shows us how the Chinese of the 20th century lived, there is scanty information about the history of the Chinese in the Philippines. We have always been envious that the Germans have their Goethe Institute, the Spaniards have the Instituto Cervantes, the French have the Alliance Francaise but the Chinese only has the cemetery. Considering that as an ethnic minority, it is the Chinese who have had the longest contact with the Philippines, preceding western influence by more than 500 years, it was quite sad (even pathetic?) that there is little in the country to celebrate, espouse and explore this historical tie. Until, of course, the advent of the Kaisa Heritage Center, which houses the Bahay Tsinoy.

Kaisa Heritage Center

A few weeks before he died in 1986, my dad, Professor Chinben See, wrote out his ideas for a Chinese-Filipino cultural center. In his frail handwriting, on four sheets of pad paper, he detailed his ideas for a place where we could have a library filled with books and filing cabinets of research materials on the Chinese in the Philippines (in fact, he was thinking of his own library collection at home). The place would also display important artifacts (most of which he knew were in private collection) brought to the Philippines by the Chinese and loads of photos documenting the difficult past and sacrifices of the early immigrants.

When he finally passed on, his essays and research papers on the Chinese in the Philippines were published into a book, *The Chinese Immigrants*. His plans for a Chinese-Filipino center were typed out in the appendices with an editor’s note:

“These random thoughts were written in Prof. Chinben See’s own frail handwriting while on the hospital bed. It is included in this section of his book to show how the cause of the ethnic Chinese community and the greater Philippine society had always been in his mind. Above all, publishing the random thoughts here may hopefully plant some valuable seeds that will someday germinate into full-blown workable ideas.”

True enough, almost 10 years after he wrote his plans down, the seed did germinate and has now become the Kaisa Heritage Center, which houses the museum, the Chinben See Memorial

Library, a research center and databank, as well as the offices of the dynamic organization, Kaisa Para sa Kaunlaran. We just celebrated our 21st anniversary last August and it is now 23 years since my late father planted the seeds for this Center.

The Center's main objectives are:

- To be a lasting repository of the historical and cultural legacy of the Chinese in all aspects of Philippine life.
- To document the tangible and indelible imprints and influences of the Chinese in Philippine history, society, culture and politics.
- To help restore and record the Philippine historical past that are found in Chinese records and artifacts.
- To highlight the unique blending of Filipino and Chinese cultures and the intertwining destinies of the two peoples throughout history.
- To help promote and hasten the integration of the Tsinoys into mainstream society.
- To be a bridge of understanding between the Chinese community and the mainstream Philippine society.

It is mainly through efforts of the Kaisa Para sa Kaunlaran which had the Center built. Kaisa mobilized the entire Tsinoys community to raise the funds to build the Center, an effort which we dubbed as "claiming our rightful place in the Philippine sun." Initial seed money was provided by Dr. Angelo King. After all, it was Dr. King who read Prof. See's book and agreed with the professor's ideas on a Chinese-Filipino cultural center. The rest of the funds were raised from the Tsinoys community. Hence, the Kaisa Heritage Center belongs to the entire Tsinoys community. It is a "community property," not the sole property of the Kaisa Para Sa Kaunlaran.

The total cost of the Kaisa-Angelo King Heritage Center building, including the lot, the museum and the other offices came up to P167 million more or less. Rough breakdown as follows: Lot P33 million, building P68 million, finishing and furnishing P50 million, museum P20 million. P147 million was initially raised from the kindhearted donors for this purpose and the remaining P20 million we owed the contractors and suppliers was slowly raised and paid off during the first five years. Some of our suppliers and contractors waived some of the remaining balance we owed them. With these funds, Bahay Tsinoys museum, the first of its own kind in the world, came to fruition.

The museum holds precious artifacts brought to the Philippines by the early Chinese – from farm implements, the weaving loom, cookware, goldsmith tools, and other items that had an impact on Philippine life to precious pottery and porcelain and other treasures. The museum reconstructs the life of the Chinese Filipinos over the last millennia in the Philippines, beginning with their early trading activities in the parian days, to their struggle to defend Philippine freedom and nationhood alongside the Filipinos, and finally ending with their role and impact on contemporary Philippine society.

Students and teachers from public schools, educators, government officials and influential policy makers, NGO workers and members of cause-oriented groups visit and marvel at the unique museum displays and the wealth of information it contains. Sharing such information and

experiences with other groups certainly goes a long way towards helping other groups address majority-minority relations and ethnic tensions in a more meaningful and effective way.

Many of these museum artifacts and materials were gathered from Filipino collectors. Being predominantly “merchants” not many Chinese Filipinos seem to be interested in the preservation of Chinese culture and heritage. The Ching Ban Lee family, particularly the two children, Alfredo Ching and Rita Ching Tan, who donated their father’s entire collection of more than 200 valuable Chinese paintings to the Shanghai Museum, are quite unique and rare. Most of the valuable and extensive collection of Chinese ceramics are owned by Filipinos like Roberto Villanueva and the Locsin family.

It is not easy to interest the young generation, especially, in the preservation of this tangible and intangible heritage of the Chinese Filipinos. Purchasing these materials and displaying them in the museum, helps in disseminating information and showcasing the rich legacy of the ethnic Chinese on Philippine life. Through such efforts, the museum also hopes to awaken interest and appreciation of the preservation and propagation of this heritage. The Museum indeed is an effective bridge that helps to bridge this gap.

The exhibits

Because of the dearth of tangible artifacts, the story of the Chinese in the Philippines is told through life-sized dioramas, re-created tableaux, photographs and prints. The museum is divided into sections following the course of Philippine history.

History comes alive because the diorama sets are as authentic as we could make them. Research was done mainly by Teresita Ang See and Go Bon Juan. The research division of Kaisa met, argued and decided on the entire curriculum. With our designer, Eva Penamora, the ideas in the curriculum were fleshed out. The most important first step is the curriculum from which the storyline is drawn. From this story, exhibits almost form themselves.

Bahay Tsinoy’s story revolves around people. It talks of the changes the Chinese people underwent as they interacted, migrated and settled in the Philippines – from sojourners to Tsinoy. It is through the story, also, that we could determine which parts to cut out, which parts to include, which parts to highlight.

In pre-hispanic Philippines, we highlighted barter trading through a diorama. A sampan stands in the middle of the exhibit floor, acting as both exhibit and divider/ transition piece. Once visitors go past the sampan, they literally move from pre-hispanic period to Spanish period. Ancient dynastic annals are displayed with a voice tape reading part of the annals that describes the early Filipinos, long before the Philippines was named after King Philip II. The sampan itself transitions from barter trading to the galleon trade. It is quite important to make sure that the pieces, and design of the museum leave nothing wasted. Space is such a premium that we need to consider how our displays stand, how people would walk through the exhibits, as well as where to place artifacts.

Part of storytelling is the setting. We maximize the use of lights, sounds and ambience to make the dioramas more authentic. For example, the Parian market scene is very bright, as vendors ply

their wares on cobblestone floors during daytime. So even if the figures are behind low railings, the “feel” of this section is still as a vibrant day at the market. Upon entry into another section of the museum on cultural influence, the mood changes to depict the interior of a church, complete with the subdued lighting, Gregorian chants and marble floors. The replica of the doors of San Agustin Church as well as a stained glass altar realistically portray how the unmistakable Chinese influences are indelibly imprinted on religious life during the colonial period. We are sure that our settings are realistic because some children actually make the sign of the cross upon entering our “church.”

Temporary exhibits are put up when opportunity arises. We are one of the five Zero In consortium museums (with Ayala Museum, Ateneo Art Gallery, Lopez Memorial Museum and Museo Pambata), which means we put up at least one exhibit for the year. For 2008, Bahay Tsinoy put up Treasure and Heritage, an exhibit on pre-colonial trade for Zero In Bridges. Also at the end of the 2008, an old friend of the organization put up a calligraphy exhibit. And to celebrate our 10th anniversary in January 2009, we opened *Bittersweet, a documentary exhibit on colonial life*, with a special opening reception for the diplomatic corps.

Topics for temporary exhibits should always be in tune with the museum’s mandate. Since we are a specialized museum on the Chinese in the Philippines, people expect us to put up exhibits on Chinese dances or music or dragons or even feng shui. Unfortunately, these are practices that did not really enter the life of the Chinese in the Philippines. So even if these could be crowd drawers, we couldn’t put them up.

Although we do put up exhibits on China itself – as a way to introduce the country to Filipinos as well as the younger generation Tsinoy who have now little ties to China.

Museum visitors

The museum does not really compete with schools or other educational institutions. Our competition is primarily the malls and the internet. Unfortunately, we still hear tour operators and teachers who urge their children to hurry because they were still headed to Mall of Asia.

Note: The Department of Education has already issued directives that field trips are not supposed to head to malls or TV shows. However, in the case of Mall of Asia, they do have the Science Discovery Center, which makes it a legitimate destination.

Our main audience is still students. As much as possible, we want them to stay awhile and look around at a more leisurely pace. Unfortunately, although quite understandable, most field trips would cram two to three museums in one day to maximize the use of the rental buses. It is quite rare that only one classroom would come and really spend time in the museum.

Since Bahay Tsinoy is divided into sections, only 30 people can comfortably fit in one section. Thus when students on a field trip enter, they do so in batches of 30 with a wait time of five to ten minutes. How we wish the wait time were longer, which would mean that students get to stay inside and really take in the museum experience.

More conscientious teachers would prepare their students in advance. There would be pre-field trip lessons, and the kids would have questionnaires they need to fill out. Since our docents are

volunteers, it is not often that we are able to guide the students inside the museum. At most, busloads of students are gathered at the lobby and one guide will give them a brief summary – what to expect in the museum, what they won't see inside, museum rules. As much as possible, we try not to answer the questions directly, but rather give hints to the students on where to find the answers.

The really good questionnaires that I've seen even make sure that the answers can't be found in the brochures that we give out. These two-page brochures summarize the history of the Chinese in the Philippines. Of course, lazy students would just use the internet or copy the text in the brochure to answer their questionnaires.

Then there are the more *masipag* teachers who bring in students one class at a time. There are only a handful of them. In Bahay Tsinoy's 10 years, I've encountered only three. One teacher is from calls me up to talk about her current lesson so I could tailor my talk/ lecture accordingly. The first year she brought in her students, my guided tour focused on Philippine history. In another year, we talked about migration, and the students only came to see the sections on the Spanish and American colonial periods.

On the downside, there are field trips where teachers leave their students to wander aimlessly around the museum. One student could actually go through the whole two and a half floors in 15 minutes! Obviously, they don't pick up anything except that the dioramas are amazing, our air conditioning doesn't work very well, and that the Chinese in the old days were semi-bald with braids hanging down their backs.

For pre-schoolers up to third grade, we always ask their teachers to come and look at the museum first before committing to a field trip because very young children can't really appreciate Philippine history yet. It is, of course, a plus when young children are exposed to history and culture at an early age. The ideal that we would prefer is for teachers to take the time to pre-teach a history lesson before their museum visit. For younger kids, it is also preferable that they talk about history one chunk at a time. Children really can't handle the overload of information history museums offer. Otherwise, the kids just go through the museum admiring the dioramas without really understanding anything.

For younger audiences, we tailor our talks to help them understand the museum better. For example, the Bahay na Bato and store at the ground floor (TSAI-AH-TIAM) is the foundation of Mini Stop and 7-11. History becomes a little more exciting as we tell them how the Spanish period 7-11 works: the Chinese store owner would go to sleep at night, but tie a string to his toe. The string would dangle outside the door. If you want to buy something, pull the string, wake up the old man – service *bente kwatro oras*. In the old days, the “richer” Chinese traders would use the Tamaraw either to go to church, or ply their wares to farther provinces. Today we still use the Tamaraw (FX) everyday.

Since it is quite difficult to explain matters of economics to young children, we point out to them instead that even among the early traders, they had class distinctions – the fruit, meat, noodle vendors are all barefoot, the goldsmith and textile vendor wore slippers, and the public reader wears boots. This just goes to show the importance of being educated.

To make the museum experience more interactive, even if visitors cannot touch anything, we elicit answers from the children. For example, we ask them to guess what other services the barber during the Spanish times offers. Most of the time, the answers are: massage, manicure, pedicure. It's unfathomable for them to think that the barber shaves beards, cleans ears and noses.

The people behind Bahay Tsinoy

Kaisa para sa Kaunlaran, a 21-year-old non-governmental organization, manages the museum. Funds for museum operations come from Kaisa Heritage Foundation. Prior to the building of the museum and the Center, the board of directors of Kaisa only deals with the projects and activities of the organization.

When Dr. Angelo King expressed interest in putting up the "community center" he read about in Prof. Chinben See's book, it was with the Kaisa board that he talked to. It was decided that a new foundation was needed to handle the funds for the community center. Furthermore, this new foundation would be made up of an entirely new board of trustees. The founding trustees of the Kaisa Heritage Center were made up of those who donated P1 million and above, as well as select officers from Kaisa, since it is Kaisa that would run the day-to-day operations.

Kaisa added a division to its board of officers – the Bahay Tsinoy division, which I have been handling since 2001. All officers of the organization are volunteers. Unlike other NGOs where officers are there to handle policy issues only, and an existing executive director plus staff handle the daily operations, the Kaisa board is a hands-on working board.

I do not have to report to the museum everyday, but I do handle the major tasks of the museum. Even though I had been assigned to take care of the museum in 2001, it was only in 2004 that I attended the National Museum's Basic Museology Training. It was then that we started a system of inventory, and finalized policies for the museum.

Our docents are all volunteers so it's not often that they are available to provide guided tours on weekdays. The usual docents are Ang Chak Chi and me, since he's semi-retired and I only teach part time.

It's really the staff who runs the day-to-day nitty gritty museum operations. We have one administrator who runs all affairs related to the building, and three staff members – one to watch over the museum tickets and shop sales and acts as the administrator's assistant, one all-around guy (electrician, plumber, carpenter, mason, lights technician, sounds technician, troubleshooter, and one assistant for the all-around guy.

There are two custodians from an agency, who've been with Kaisa Heritage Center for a few years already that they've been helping out with museum work for the past few years. One of the custodians found me a supplier for mugs that we sell as souvenir items. They already know how to dress tables so when we have events with an accompanying cocktail reception, we don't need to hire caterers. We buy our own food, and the custodians decorate the tables. Bahay Tsinoy is very lucky that our people are quite talented, committed, loyal and hardworking.

For the last major exhibits, *Treasure and Heritage* (November 29-Jan 31) and *Bittersweet* (January 23- February 28), it was Roel Custodio, our all-around guy, who built all the stands that I needed. Even if I didn't ask him to help save money, he took it upon himself to re-appropriate old boxes in storage and convert them to stands. One of the stands he made used to be a cabinet that someone donated to Kaisa. Another display stand that looks stunning is one that he built for a 2006 exhibit, which he just fixed up and repainted. He's also getting quite savvy in what kinds of display cases/ stands would look appealing.

This just goes to show that a museum does not have to have tons of money to put up an exhibit. We could always re-use old things.

Response to difficulties and challenges

The usual problem for a lot of museums is financial. The center is currently raising an endowment fund where we would only touch the interest. We're targeting P150 million, and have been working on this for the past two years. We're halfway there. P150 million seems staggering but here's how we made it more manageable: P150 million equals 1500 people who will donate P100,000 each. The Tsinoy community is quite small at one percent of the Philippine population. Half of this population is in Metro Manila. For our target donors, P100,000 is an appropriate enough amount. Some organizations pool together the money from their members i.e. P5,000 x 20 members. Cutting up the target amount into smaller bite-sized pieces doesn't sound so scary after all.

Another key to raising funds is corporate sponsorship, something Bahay Tsinoy has not been tapping yet. John Silva gives an amazing workshop on grant writing which cultural and museum workers would definitely benefit from. I've attended his workshop but haven't been able to use what I learned yet, primarily because I don't really have the time.

If you have a space that you could rent out, that's also one way of earning some money for operations. Children's museums, I think, would be a good venue for a children's birthday party. As a perk, visitors could visit the museum for free.

Stretching a budget also requires people. Bahay Tsinoy is quite blessed with a wonderful staff and a pool of volunteers as well. These same volunteers came by on weekends to help prepare for the *Bittersweet* exhibit. They cut up foam boards to frame our documents, created cigarette boxes for display, scanned magazines – mostly manual tedious labor. Ang Chak Chi typed all the Chinese texts, and then translated a poem for the exhibit as well.

At one time in the 1990s, we had a couple of volunteers who were very keen on research so they were assigned to read books on Philippine local history and log all mention of the Chinese in those books. The materials have become useful references for students and researchers on the ethnic Chinese in local history. The volunteers have since migrated, so the project halted for quite a long while. It was reactivated when we started getting students fulfilling their CWTS/ NSTP (Civic Welfare Training Service/ National Service Training Program) hours, or on OJT duty.

I'm sorry to report that there really are "more desirable" students than others. Those CWTS/NSTP students who are more reliable are given more challenging tasks like finishing the museum inventory, and doing research in other libraries. Other students report to the library and do manual work like filing, clipping newspapers and preparing them for filing, logging new book acquisitions, cleaning shelves, typing.

We had a tie up with the Chinese University of Hong Kong who sent us anthropology students. Because they're naturally interested in history, we gave two of them Chinese books about Asia and the Philippines, which they scanned and summarized for cataloging. The other two were given books on Philippine local history, which they had to log as well. In the past we also got volunteers from Japan, and they made the website for *Tulay Fortnightly*, as well as created a catalogue for Chinese books and volunteered for our Gawad Kalinga projects.

There is no dearth of people if you know where to look. The first stop is schools. Get your museum accredited with the college or university and you will get a pool of volunteers. You can train these kids to become storytellers, or just ask them to help out with museum operations.

Docents are another story altogether. For Bahay Tsinoy, the first requirement to being a docent is familiarity with Philippine history and an interest with what's happening in the world as well. When we guide visitors, it's not enough to recite a script. We need to tie up history with what's currently happening in the world. Otherwise, we lose the visitors' interest. For example, all students know about OFWs and what OFW stands for. To start talking about the Chinese sojourners or Sangleys during the Spanish period, I always use the term OCW – overseas Chinese workers. Immediately, you'll see their faces light up with understanding about what these people were really about.

Ang Chak Chi already trained a few docents for us, but they have yet to be tested. Hopefully, we can train enough and that these docents could be available to give brief guided tours to our visitors. Our mainstay Chinese guide is one of our advisers, Mariano Trajano, and he has trained Chinese speaking guides as well. They were recently tested when 100 children from the quake-hit province of Sichuan visited the museum.

Another difficulty that museums face is public awareness. Malls and movies win hands down over museums. Given the lack of budget for advertising, what do we do? This is where networking plays quite an important role. Volunteers can help you do the legwork. For example, you can have a small flyer printed and a couple of volunteers could go around the hotels and restaurants to ask permission to leave the brochures behind. These volunteers will also keep track of where the brochures went and if they need replenishing.

If your volunteers have an internet connection, they can surf the net and sign in with all the online tourist forums in the world wide web. All you have to do is to provide a few sets of tourist feedback that they can post. You can also use your staffs family and friends. Pretty much everyone has a multiply site or friendster or blog. Ask all your contacts to put a link to your official website on their blogs. This will propel your site to the top of the list when someone googles you.

Also use your volunteers to stage activities inside your museums. Then just issue a press release and fax or email to all media outlets. From experience, out of 40 media outlets that we inform of activities, around five will show up. If your activity happens to be on a slow news day, then more media outfits will come cover the event. You can also specifically invite student publications and give them a tour of your museum. They write about it and give you free publicity among the student body.

Conclusion

The purpose of showcasing ethnic Chinese heritage through exhibits, artifacts, documents, and other research materials is not meant to flaunt the so-called “superiority” of Chinese culture but to preserve and propagate it as an integral part of the history of the Filipino people itself. The main objective of our advocacy is to hasten integration so that the Tsinoys can comfortably accept their Filipino identity while taking pride in their heritage and their ethnic origins.

It is largely through Kaisa’s work on building bridges that we have shared the uniqueness of Chinese culture and the richness of our cultural heritage with mainstream society. It is the organization’s way of protecting, preserving and propagating the indelible imprints of the rich legacy of the ethnic Chinese in all aspects of Philippine life.

Appendix:

A few samples of rare artifacts in the Museum (on and off display)

1. Microfilm of Spanish documents from the Philippine National Archives pertaining to the Philippines.
2. Copy of the earliest painting of a Chinese couple, Sangley, with the two Chinese characters 常来 (meaning frequent arrival) on top. This is part of the Boxer Codex, a manuscript dated most probably in 1595. The original is kept at the Lilly Library of Indiana University.
3. Publication of all Beijing First National Archives collection of Qing dynasty documents pertaining to the Philippines.
4. Cover of the *Beng Sim Po Cam*, or *Libro Chino* -- the first book ever translated from Chinese into a European (Spanish) language by Fr. Juan Cobo. It was compiled and published in China in 1393. It is a collection of mottos for children drawn from books and writings from the Tang dynasty to early Ming dynasty.
5. 1604 deed of sale, other Spanish documents, baptismal records, and a reproduction of the painting of the 1603 massacre of the Chinese.
6. 19th century rare prints and photographs on the Philippines, with barefoot Chinese vendors included.
7. Original religious icons (five pieces) hand carved by the Chinese artisans and priests vestments embroidered in gold threads by the Chinese, with unmistakable Chinese features.
8. A complete collection of trade ceramics manufactured from all kilns in China that traded with the Philippines. Highlights of the collection are the Tang Dynasty wares and the qingbai wares from the Song and Yuan dynasties. The celadon and blue and white pieces in the collection are equally outstanding ones.

9. Antique furniture handcarved by the early Chinese and used in the typical Bahay na Bato (stone houses) owned by the middle class Chinese mestizos during the Spanish occupation. These include original farm implements and other equipments used by the Chinese during the colonial period.
10. Tombstones made of piedra china (Chinese granite), which were first used as ballasts for the sampans and then used by the Chinese for tombstones. The tombstones were later utilized to pave streets and courtyards of stone buildings and churches.
11. Rare books, photographs and manuscripts from early 20th century, all of which contain information about the early Chinese.
12. Microfilm of records of the Chinese cemetery since late 19th century to 1980.
13. Photographs of tombs in Chinese cemeteries all over the Philippines.
14. Original underground propaganda materials disseminated by the Chinese guerrillas during the Japanese occupation.
15. Copies of the first issue of the Chinese Commercial News, of the Jinan Philippine Studies Journal, and other rare books and documents during the American regime.
16. Cigarette wrappers from the 1800s which show evidence that these were manufactured by the Chinese (address is in Binondo or San Nicolas or manufacturer's name / brand name is Chinese)
17. Original travel documents from China to the Philippines, dated in the 1800s
18. Lotto tickets, that are marked with red Chinese seals, dating back to the 1850s