

## **Relations between Ming China and Spain during the Spanish Colonial Period in the Philippines: An Analysis of Berthold Laufer's "The Relations of the Chinese to the Philippine Islands"**

Aibek Yesbolov

---

**Abstract:** *This paper seeks to unveil the characteristics of China-Spain relations with regard to politics and trade during the Spanish rule in the Philippines. In his book "The Relations of the Chinese to the Philippine Islands", Berthold Laufer's main objective is not only to discuss the relations between Ming China and Spain during the Spanish colonial period in the Philippines, but also to compare Spanish accounts with Chinese testimony on the same subject. He aims to look at both sides of the story and uncover the points of view from both angles. It can be asserted that Spanish and Chinese sources all implied that no matter how serious the political issues were, the ill effects on trade relations were only temporary.*

**Note:** *The reader should keep in mind that Laufer's "The relations of the Chinese to the Philippine Islands" was written more than a hundred years ago. The biggest challenge that a 21<sup>st</sup> century reader might encounter when reading the English book would be the author's usage of the old pinyin used during his time (Wade-Giles system). For example, terms like "Hsiao hsi yang" (xiǎoxīyáng / 小西洋) would be very confusing to readers who are not used to the Wade-Giles romanization system or to those who do not have sufficient background in Chinese language. However, translations are sometimes offered in parentheses just right after the terms in pinyin. These translations could somehow alleviate the problem.*

---

### **I. Introduction**

At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, a lot of testimonies and historical accounts with regard to China-Spain relations had already been written. However, these were mostly based only on the accounts of Spanish writers since the early contact with the East. In the book "The Relations of the Chinese to the Philippine Islands", both Spanish and Chinese accounts on same subjects were considered and examined. Laufer believes that the Chinese have been acute observers of foreign nations and countries, and in their astoundingly vast amount of literature we find many valuable reports on the geography, history, and ethnology of the neighboring peoples (Laufer 1908: 248). The principal Chinese sources of which the author have made use are the Annals of the Ming Dynasty, the Annals of the provinces of Guangdong and Fujian, as well as the Tung hsi yang k'ao (东西洋考/ "Investigations regarding Eastern and Western Ocean", published in 1618).

### **II. Background**

The Ming Dynasty lasted from 1368 to 1644. Spain ruled the Philippines for 333 years (1565 – 1898). Relations between Ming China and Spain (via Philippines) spanned almost a century.

Trade with Ming China via Manila served as a major source of revenue for the Spanish Empire, as well as a fundamental source of income for Spanish colonists in the Philippine Islands. The establishment of the Spanish colony in Manila led to the first trans-Pacific trade route in 1565. Manila's role was to be the way-station between China and Mexico. China was always the principal source of the Manila Galleon cargo. The Manila-Acapulco galleon trade ended in 1815, a few years before Mexico gained independence from Spain in 1821.

Guido de Lavezaris, the Spanish Governor General of the Philippines from 1572 to 1575, wanted to negotiate with China concerning his desires for peaceful trading relations, freedom to carry on missionary (religious) propaganda within the China, as well as his request for the cession of a port near mainland China which the Spaniards might use as a base for trading with the Chinese (similar to Portugal's Macau at that time). This could have been a good jump-start for good trade and political relations between the Ming Empire and the Spanish empire. However, political issues led to Spain's trade issues with China.

### **III. Trade and Political Relations between Ming China and Spain**

It was in 1571 that the Spaniards and Chinese met for the first time in Mindoro, even before Legazpi (the conqueror of the Philippines) reached Manila for the first time (Blumentritt: 1879: I). The 323<sup>rd</sup> chapter of the Annals of the Ming Dynasty even mentioned that formerly the people of Fujian lived in Luzon (Philippines)

largest island, south of Taiwan) before the arrival of the Spaniards. They lived there because the place was conveniently near. They were wealthy traders, ten thousand in number, who took up a long residence there and did not return to China until their sons and grandsons had grown up. Unfortunately, according to the Annals of the Ming Dynasty, when the Spanish “snatched” away the archipelago, the Spanish king dispatched a chief to suppress the Chinese. As he was concerned that they might revolt, he expelled many of them. All those remaining had to suffer from his encroachments and insults.

In a brighter light, there was some positivity in the political relations between Ming China and Spanish-occupied Philippines. The good political relations began because of Limahong(林凤) – a notorious Chinese pirate and warlord who invaded the northern Philippine Islands in 1574. The Spanish Philippines forces (including both Spaniards and Filipino natives) and the Ming China forces collaborated in order to fight against Limahong. In recognition of the service rendered to them by China, the Spanish-occupied Philippines sent envoys (two military officers, two Augustinian friars). A commander of an imperial Chinese war vessel even offered to take these Spanish envoys over to China in his ship. Both the Ming Dynasty Annals and the Spanish documents of that time mentioned about the envoys as having arrived after the defeat of Limahong. Guido de Lavezaris – the current governor-general of the Spanish Philippines at that time – considered it his principal task to entertain peaceable and amicable relations with an empire (Ming China) whose pirates alone were able to almost shatter the Spanish possessions in Asia. He desired for the cession of a trading port near mainland China (similar to Portugal’s Macau at that time). Ming China did not grant him his request but in 1576, after reading the letters from Lavezaris, the emperor of China agreed to cede to the Spaniards an island near Guangdong under the same conditions as Macau had been turned over to the Portuguese. Unfortunately, Lavezaris was replaced by Sande as the new governor-general of the colony. The good relations that Lavezaris had made with the Chinese were just replaced by Sande’s ill relations with Ming China. Sande did not accept the offer, and offended the Chinese ambassadors by not reciprocating the presents sent to him from the Emperor. He even conceived the daring plan of conquering China by force of arms. He even deluged King Philip II of Spain with a mass of alluring reports depicting the feasibility of conquering China. However, the king flatly rejected the proposed project, and ordered Sande to further amicable relations with China.

Another political issue that is worth highlighting is the 1603 massacre in the Philippines. This is one of the tragedies that happened to the Chinese in the Philippines during the Spanish colonial period. Of all the tragedies, this has been the best documented, not only in Spanish, but also in Chinese sources. Moreover, both sources coincide in the presentation of facts and are alike in the ordering of events (Borao 1998: 22).

The tension that led to the “1603 Chinese Massacre” started in 1593, when 250 Chinese were forcibly recruited to row the ships which Gómez Pérez Dasmariñas – the governor-general of the Spanish Philippines at that time – sailed to conquer the Moluccas. Soon after they set sail, the Chinese in the ship staged a mutiny, assassinated Dasmariñas, and took over the vessel. 10 years later, in the spring of 1603, “three mandarins” arrived in Manila on a strange mission. They said that they were looking for a “mountain of gold” abundant with trees that bore gold as fruits. This visit raised the suspicion of the Spaniards in the Philippines. The Spanish in the Philippines concluded that this was probably a sign that Ming China is planning to invade Manila in the near future. At that time, the Chinese in Manila were almost 10 times the number of Spaniards. In autumn of that same year, the Chinese living in the Philippines revolted. The reasons for this uprising remain unclear. The motives range from the desire of the Chinese to dominate Manila, to their wanting to abort the Spaniards’ moves that seemed to lead to their elimination. The Spaniards quelled the rebellion and massacred around 20,000 Chinese.

After the Spaniards’ first attempts at reconciliation and China’s indignant reactions, both parties reached a new compromise and the agitation easily vanished as though nothing had happened. Former trade relations were resumed, allowing the Chinese to settle again in Manila, even if both sides harbored grudges against each other for what had happened earlier. In 1639, there was another great rebellion of the Chinese in Manila, still more obstinate and longer than that of 1603 (Laufer 1908: 273). Because of this rebellion, the Chinese quarter in Manila was pillaged and its inhabitants killed or expelled. Nevertheless the Chinese appeared again, and their settlement was again tolerated. When the Ming Dynasty was replaced by the Qing, issues between the Spanish Philippines and China (especially the Chinese people settled in the Philippines) arose such as the in 1709 when the Chinese were banished from Manila under the pretext that they were carrying off the public wealth. However, the Chinese did not hesitate to come back again.

#### **IV. Remarks**

The trade with China was by far the most important business of the Spanish colony – and with it the fortunes of the colony rose and fell (Laufer 1908: 248).

Trade relations between the two empires were interrupted from time to time due to political issues between Spain and China. However, no matter how serious the political issues were, trade relations between the Spanish (via the Philippines) and China managed to bounce back all the time. Therefore, I conclude that

political issues between Ming China and Spain (via Philippines) had a strong effect on the trade relations between them. However, I also conclude that trade between the Chinese and the Spanish was so indispensable that no matter how great the ill effects of the political issues have caused, trade relations were only be temporarily affected and tended to bounce back as if nothing had happened.

As Laufer said it in the book, "however great the hatred of the Spaniards and Filipinos towards them was (referring to the Chinese), they were conscious of the fact that without the Chinese trade and industry, the Philippines could not exist".

#### **References:**

- [1]. Blumentritt, F. "Die Chinesen auf den Philippinen". Leitmeritz, 1879.
- [2]. Borao, J. "The massacre of 1603: Chinese perception of the Spaniards in the Philippines". National Taiwan University: Itinerario, vol. 23, No. 1, 1998.
- [3]. Lavezares, G. "Relación del suceso de la venida del tirano chino sobreeste campo y de las demas cosas sucedidas acerca dello". Manuscrito L-I-15 de la Biblioteca del Escorial, fols: 291r-298v. (edición de Juan Francisco Maura Anexos de la Revista Lemir (2004) ISSN 1579-735)
- [4]. Laufer, B. "The relations of the Chinese to the Philippine Islands". Smithsonian Institution Libraries. 1908.