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# Book Reviews

FILOMENO V. AGUILAR JR., WITH JOHN ESTANLEY Z. PEÑALOSA, TANIA BELEN T. LIWANAG, RESTO S. CRUZ I, JIMMY M. MELENDREZ

## **Maalwang Buhay: Family, Overseas Migration, and Cultures of Relatedness in Barangay Paraiso**

Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2009. xx, 414 pages.

*Maalwang Buhay* is the result of a study focused on migration and the family, commissioned by Fr. Bienvenido F. Nebres, S.J., and implemented by a team of dedicated researchers led by Filomeno Aguilar Jr. from May 2007 to about July 2008, and conducted in a barangay somewhere in Batangas, which was identified to be the origin community of a good number of migrant workers based mostly in Italy. To contextualize this review, let me mention that these comments come from the perspective of an NGO worker engaged in advocacy for the economic empowerment of migrants, and whose knowledge of sociological research processes is little, or almost nil. In any case, I try to relate the insights and implications that I have gathered from this book to my own work, and hopefully any future activity or further research that may be undertaken on this subject.

After overcoming my fear of the first chapter, I found that the book is not that hard to read, which is testament to the ability of this book to effectively communicate, something that is often absent from many scholarly works. Life is short and society is hungry for solutions; brilliant work should not only inform, but must also be followed by action, rather than end up languishing

in a steel cabinet or some computer file. *Maalwang Buhay* indeed has furthered my education, and promises to enrich my own work. Let me tell you why.

My organization is also involved in doing research work especially on migrant remittances and development, particularly on the behavior of Italy-based Filipinos. There have also been recent and ongoing research by the United Nations International Research and Training Institute for the Advancement of Women (UN-INSTRAW) as well as by the Scalabrini Migration Center. Invariably, we come up with findings on the behavior of migrants in respect of savings, investment, or generally the use of their remittances, which strike us as irrational or economically unjustifiable, such as the construction of huge houses, which end up being uninhabited. As researchers we are often asked if house construction or even education should be considered an investment, given that it does not produce any income. *Maalwang Buhay's* first lesson is that migrant behavior should be taken in the context of the history and culture of a migrant's community of origin; assessing migrant behavior solely on economic terms is not only incomplete, it is also empirically incorrect.

Evidently migration advocates, who call themselves experts after spending a few days with migrant communities, must read *Maalwang Buhay* to realize that (1) a house that a migrant builds symbolizes adult status and autonomy; (2) a house serves as social preparation for sibling unity, which is the basis for community; and (3) houses show the desire of migrants, despite their absence, to maintain their connection to the origin community or village roots, to where they will return after overseas work. Our current research on the retirement aspirations of Filipinos in Italy show that a large majority will be retiring in their communities of origin. This could indicate that the building of houses is part of the preparation for retiring in their origin communities. Perhaps it even makes economic sense to build now than much later when prices of construction materials might be higher and unaffordable. Somehow there could be logic to what appears to be nonessential.

The presence of extended households and why migrant workers send so much money for the maintenance of these large households are also an issue. Aside from acting as surrogate parents, caregivers look after migrants' children, and often do the budgeting of remittances, as this study found. Grandparents, mostly senior citizens, play a critical role in the caregiving process. Even the community and especially educators, being part of this

culture of relatedness, might consciously or unconsciously take a certain responsibility for looking over the children of migrants. It would make sense for the migrant not only to support his or her own household but also give support to the wider community. All told, many of these gains are not quantifiable in economic terms and are immeasurable, as *Maalwang Buhay* points out. The findings have perhaps given way to the need for a new definition of what is a migrant investment, something whose measurement is not limited to financial gain, but also includes psychic satisfaction.

Let me also cite other insights that I find remarkable:

There is a debate on whether education is a productive use of remittances. This study has found that migration has enabled more investments in the education of migrants' children, which has given rise to a diversification of professions or occupations, mostly higher paying, as well as a growing diversification in the countries of destination. If that is not productive, not only for migrant families but also for the country, I don't know what is.

Migrants normally take on jobs overseas that locals there are not willing to perform, such as domestic or less skilled work. With the improvement of life and commerce in an origin community, a similar situation in the destination begins to exist in the origin, Barangay Paraiso, where casual employment has been created because locals will not or cannot perform domestic or less skilled work. The creation of employment occurs not only overseas but also domestically.

The culture of relatedness, aside from being a social reality, could also be a coping mechanism. Migration has created networks that have enabled migrants to bypass recruitment agencies, occurring with or without government intervention. Filipinos may have found a way to cut the costs, which in the case of those going to Italy now costs around P800,000.

Migration may not only be triggered by economic need, but also by the desire not to be left behind by current trends. This is one aspect that is perhaps missed out in migration surveys but highlighted in this study. Migration can indeed be prompted by the desire to keep up with others, to embark on an adventure, or to engage in work for other noneconomic reasons.

Beyond these achievements, however, as a migration and development advocate I would have wanted to see a discussion of other aspects in the community. The study could have provided some more information on how migration has increased the resources or revenues of the community or local government, especially in terms of tax revenues and municipal

permits, increased consumption or spending on house construction, or other multiplier effects. In other words, we need to understand how the community “pays back” in terms of improved services. I am sure municipal records should have been able to yield some salient information. Likewise, we need to understand the role of financial institutions such as rural banks, cooperatives, or microfinance institutions in mentoring migrant families to be productive or entrepreneurial. Perhaps these are not within the study’s parameters, but something that other studies could look into in the future.

All told, the wisdom *Maalwang Buhay* has provided, at least for me, is the missing link or the explanation for some forms of migrant behavior that have continued to baffle us in our work. This study is to be commended for giving us a useful tool for improving the body of knowledge, and enhance the work of migrant advocates, to benefit our modern-day heroes in ways they truly deserve.

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RICHARD T. CHU

## **Chinese and Chinese Mestizos of Manila: Family, Identity, and Culture, 1860s–1930s**

Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2010. xviii, 451 pages.

Focusing on the 1860–1930 period, Richard Chu’s book deals with an important aspect of Philippine history that has been relatively neglected in recent years. It contributes to transnational histories by documenting the flexible border-crossing diasporic strategies of a select number of Manila-born “Chinese mestizo” merchants and their families. The illustrative cases include those of Joaquin Barrera Limjap and his son Mariano Limjap, Ignacio Sy Jao Boncan, Ildefonso Tambunting, Cu Unjieng, Carlos Palanca Tan Quien-sien as well as Bonifacio Limtuaco (a mestizo born in China unlike the others and saw himself decidedly as Chinese). Chu argues that these Chinese mestizos deployed identities flexibly and strategically, especially during the late nineteenth century. Excelling in “liminal virtuosity” (300), they retained a Chinese mestizo identity, but concomitantly identified

themselves as Chinese (*chino* or *sangley*) and were also naturalized Spanish subjects (*españoles naturalizados*)—a flexibility seen in their diverse and ethnically crisscrossing relationships. Settling on a particular identity as either “Filipino” or “Chinese,” Chu contends, did not occur until the 1920s and the 1930s, when singular identities hardened and were reified due to developments in Chinese and Filipino nationalisms.

These interesting points are pursued by describing in rich detail various familial practices ranging from dual families and residences (usually one in China and another in the Philippines) to the malleability and multiplicity of names, religious practices, adoption of children, inheritance practices, business practices, public presentations of self, linguistic adaptability, and so on. Akin to a subplot, kinship hierarchies oppressive of women and children are also discussed.

Chu emphasizes that, whereas Edgar Wickberg focused on macrohistory, his book’s focus is microhistory. Nonetheless, some assertions in the book are intended to rewrite Wickberg. In particular, the assertion that in the late nineteenth century Chinese mestizos did not necessarily identify with “Filipinos” or *indios*—or, more accurately, the *naturales*—is decidedly revisionist.

It should be noted that Wickberg’s broad canvass of history is supported by quantitative data gathered by Daniel Doeppers (listed in the book’s bibliography), which demonstrate a considerable decline in public identification with the mestizo category during the 1880s and 1890s. In Manila Chinese mestizos accounted for 10.6 percent of all announced burials in 1868–1870 and 10.2 percent in 1881–1882; however, by 1892 Chinese mestizos represented 5.2 percent only of the total. The reduction by half is demographically exceptional (unless large numbers emigrated to China or moved en masse to the provinces) and could be explained only by the large-scale shift in social identities during this period. This overall sea-change in identities did not preclude the existence of both the *gremio de chinos* and *gremio de mestizos* in Binondo, the existence of which Chu refers to as emblematic of the vibrancy of the mestizo category (252). It is known that the gremios were not formally dissolved despite the abolition of the tribute and the attendant legal categories of indios, mestizos, and chinos in the 1880s.

By 1903 US census data on males of voting age (21 years and above) in the city of Manila showed a substantially diminished group that publicly identified itself as mestizo. Removing Americans, Europeans, and Japanese