

Every year, Forbes magazine comes out with a list of the richest people in the United States and the world. The list is further broken down into countries, including the Philippines, the list being confined to the fifty richest. For many years running the number one wealthiest continues to be Henry Sy, the founder of the rather pedestrian sounding Shoe Mart chain of stores. It is the Wal*Mart of the Philippines, with a twist. Instead of a stand alone store, Shoe Mart or SM are huge malls with dozens of other stores. Sy is the Sam Walton of the Philippines, but he has improved the concept of the mega-store. Not only does he sell merchandise, he collects rent from tenants as well. Sy is a Chinese Filipino, or as we say nowadays, *Tsinoy*. If you go down the list, an overwhelming majority of the wealthiest Filipinos are Tsinoy. The names are singularly Chinese, monosyllabic with only a few letters. There are names like Tan (several of them), Ty, Dy, Co, Chan, Ang, Ng, etc., all unmistakably Chinese. You have to go down the list before finding the name of a non-Chinese Filipino like Villar or Lopez. There are a couple of Spanish Filipino families in the top ten but we'll save that subject for a later day.

Not too long ago, Tsinoy were derided by Filipinos. We called them *intsik* and even had rhymes that started with "*intsik beho tulo laway*" which meant smelly, salivating Chinese. It gets worse from there. Chinese women worked as *amah* or babysitters. They could be identified by their uniforms which looked like pajamas. But even then, in the 1950s, the Tsinoy already dominated many aspects of the Philippine economy. The *sari-sari* or general stores were operated by Tsinoy. These stores would morph into the mega-malls of today. The Orosa family's favorite restaurants were *panciterias* or noodle houses, owned by Tsinoy. My own favorite was the eponymous Ma Mon Luk. Tsinoy commercial domination became so widespread that the government passed Filipino first laws. President Ramon Magsaysay touted local products and was responsible for the passage of the Retail Trade Nationalization Act. Under Magsaysay's successor Carlos Garcia, the Filipino First Policy was made into law. But the Filipino cultural mindset is that imported products are better. Smuggled American cigarettes had blue seals, which led to the term blue seal as meaning superior product. It has been almost 60 years but none of these laws or other regulations had much of an effect. Slowly but surely, the Tsinoy's wealth and dominance kept growing.

My mother shopped in the commercial district of Manila known as Quiapo, which was lined with Tsinoy owned stores. Filipinos have a concept called *suki*, or favorite vendor. You always went to your *suki*, who in turn saved some of the better quality products for you or in some cases extended credit. That was before credit card days. Without exception, all her *suki* were Tsinoy. They were mostly first generation Tsinoy, which you could tell by their fractured accent in speaking Tagalog. I am speculating but they were probably refugees from the Chinese civil war and subsequent fall of the Nationalist government in China. The men tended the stores by themselves and you hardly saw any of their women. A lot of the older Chinese women I saw still had bound feet.

This brings us to the question of why the Tsinoy are so successful not only in the Philippines but in other Asian countries as well. The wealthiest in Indonesia, Thailand and Malaysia are also of Chinese heritage. I am skipping Singapore because it is majority Chinese. Unlike in the

Philippines, Chinese in those countries adopt local names so their ethnicity is not readily apparent. The Thai billionaire and former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra's heritage is Chinese. The Salim family is one of the wealthiest in Indonesia. Its founding father was a Chinese immigrant who before turning his conglomerate over to his heirs was the wealthiest Indonesian. Eight of the ten wealthiest Malaysians are of Chinese heritage, including the first on the list.

Beyond Southeast Asia, immigration is also a common thread. Lebanese have been successful wherever they go. I picked this up from the Freakonomics radio website of Stephen Dubner and Steven Levitt. If you haven't read their books *Freakonomics* and *Super-Freakonomics*, then you've missed learning what they refer to as "the hidden side of everything." The world's wealthiest person is Mexican, but his parents were from Lebanon. Numerous examples abound of successful Lebanese in the United States.

Going back to the question of why Chinese immigrant families dominate the Philippines and its neighboring countries, let's turn it around. Filipinos have been coming to the United States for over 100 years but the diaspora started in earnest after 1965. There were two events that coincided. Under President Lyndon Johnson, immigration laws were liberalized, increasing quotas for Philippine immigrants. The other was the insidious arrival of Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos. His rule eventually led to martial law, leading to stagnation. What was once a trickle of migrants became a flood. Today, 10 million Filipinos have either immigrated or work outside of the Philippines, with 3.5 million in the United States. Filipinos do well in the U.S. Their average annual family income exceeds that of white families by a significant amount. Compared to other Asians, they are second in family income only to Indian Americans.

So, is it all about immigration and the immigrant ethic? Here is another intriguing statistic - Jews consist of 0.2% of the world's population but 20% of Nobel Prize winners are Jewish. Is it nurture or culture or DNA? A study was conducted on successful athletes, with the conclusion that nature played the biggest part. The issue of immigrants and their success is a complicated one but maybe someone will write a book with a really rigorous analysis. In the meantime, I miss those panciterias.

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