

# Filipino Identity through Foreign Eyes: Reflections of an Exchange Student in Korea\*

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BEING AN EXCHANGE STUDENT in Korea in 2006 was an opportunity to make one's university and home country proud; but it was also a challenge. Many of the people I interacted with had not met a Filipino student before. And I observed how much the locals looked up to students from Western and Japanese universities. During our orientation, we, the two Filipino students, were the only Southeast Asians in the program. Only a few regular students approached or even looked at us. In fact, the regular students who did talk to us were Americans, one of whom used to live in the Philippines.

I also noticed that whenever Korean students and teachers first met us, they were kind but did not seem to expect much from us probably because we were Southeast Asians and because we were Filipinos. Korean students were especially surprised to find out how well we could converse in English even though our teachers were also Filipinos. As foreign students, we bore our country's name in everything we do. Most people referred to us as someone from the "Philippines" or "Filipinos" before they could remember our names. Whether we liked it or not, as foreign students, we somehow lost our individual identity. Instead, we became our country. We became the Philippines. We bore the name of our nation, and everything we did could and did affect others' view of the Philippines and Filipinos. I often sensed that the initial standard which people used to determine how much we could excel at anything was our physical appearance and where we came from. Physically, I looked Northeast Asian but because I am from the Philippines, I had the feeling that we as Filipinos, always

needed to strive harder to prove something to the people there. The realization motivated me to do my best in everything I did; I excelled, and they were always surprised whenever they found out that I was a Filipino. My experience in studying in another country heightened my awareness as a 'Filipino.' This is not to say that I was not proud or aware of the fact before I went to Korea; it's just that living in a foreign land foregrounds—somehow problematizes—one's identity. My experience led me to see that who or what a Filipino is is not a straightforward affair. For one, being Filipino seemed to defy classification schemes. We had to study Korean as part of the exchange program, and my language instructors had a hard time finding an appropriate category for me in pronunciation class. I was initially placed with the Northeast Asian (particularly Japanese) students, who learned very quickly. I had difficulty keeping up with them. Eventually, the teachers placed me with the other Southeast Asians, but noticed that I learned faster than my Southeast Asian peers did. Finally, they decided to place me with the Western students (from the United States, Canada, Europe, and Latin America). And the teachers found that I learned at the same rate as everyone else did. This made me think: were we Filipinos really Western, or was this just a matter of adjusting differently from our fellow Asians?

I also had the chance to hear the insights of people of different nationalities on the Philippines and on Filipinos. I particularly remember one Korean woman who approached me in the university and told me that she thought Filipino women were powerful because we have female leaders. I also recall a group of Malaysian students in the university who were so glad to find out that I was a Filipino because they were fans of Filipino soap operas (i.e. *Mula sa Puso*, *Sa Dulo ng Walang Hanggan*, *Pangako Sa 'Yo*, etc.). I was surprised to find out that they even knew the names of the characters in the series. Even I was not familiar, since I had not seen most of the shows.

During university events where international students were asked to prepare something, my fellow Filipinos always volunteered. We even asked for assistance from the Philippine Embassy in Seoul and the Tourism Office

to provide us with materials. They gave us posters and pamphlets, and lent some materials which we dutifully displayed in our booth. During the celebration of the Spring Festival in the university, for instance, we were tasked to sell Filipino food. Who would have guessed that our best-sellers were *turon* (deep fried banana rolls) and San Miguel beer?

These foregoing reflections on Filipino identity dovetail with, among other things, the need for Filipinos to understand the role they play in the Philippines' people-to-people relations. We are seen as "experts" on matters concerning the Philippines whether we like it or whether we are prepared. However, unlike official government representatives, ordinary citizens are less prepared to assume their roles as "representatives;" hence preparing them is crucial: they should be screened and briefed about their country of destination, its people, and other related matters. They may be ordinary young Filipinos, but as my experience attests, they can affect the country's foreign relations on an academic and on a personal level.

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