

Vignettes of East Asia in a Year of Transition

Miguel Paolo REYES

*Third World Studies Center
University of the Philippines Diliman*

In Hong Kong, we underestimated the cold. It was February; we expected it to be warmer than it was during our last visit two months before. “Nippy” is inadequate; “freezing” is hyperbole. When we finally learned how to work the heater, how soundly we slept. While awake, we weaved through the ever-busy city—a yellow umbrella sticker lost among other signs, a gathering of my countrymen waving election paraphernalia, the affluent mingling with the destitute (in Kowloon; the latter’s hard to find in Stanley). Over one dinner, with the Hong Kong skyline glowing beside us, we set aside talk about how the world’s ending to talk about our wedding—maybe we’ll watch all the brightly lit cities burn someday as husband and wife.

We rented a van to look at Mayon from all possible angles. I couldn’t help but ask our driver, on the way to Daraga from Legazpi, who the people here are voting for in next month’s elections. People, he claimed, liked a certain someone whose father supposedly gave them so much. These roads we’re taking were given by that man, he believes. People, he claimed, didn’t like a certain homegrown candidate. An unknown outside of Naga, he professed. He wanted to go for D for president, but is now

rather hesitant to support him; maybe if D cuts the crazy talk, he'll win back our driver. Mayon doesn't look postcard-perfect from certain vistas, we learn, but friends from far away (think Bangkok, Delhi, and Tehran) can't stop taking pictures of it anyway.

On our annual pilgrimage to a beach resort in Zambales, we drank a bottle or two of gin. Or was it wine? Perhaps it was the sort of beer with a little more kick than usual. Anyway, we gulped it down while watching attack ads. Or were we watching an interminable soap? No, it was probably attack ad after attack ad, as well as a few other election ads that made me think about the Third Reich for some reason. It was a few days before the Philippine elections. The water in the beach was still clear. A black sand mine can still be seen in the distance. One can probably ride a jetski to Scarborough Shoal—provided one brings spare fuel, or knows a trans-dimensional shortcut—from where we watched the sun turn pinkish-orange. Or was it bright crimson? Memory fails.

We somehow had sufficient funds to go to Japan for our honeymoon in August. In Dotonbori in Osaka, we feasted. The Glico Man had imitators everywhere. Confusing as the train system was, there was always someone ready to lend a hand. Our guide said she has a brother who sings for a children's charity in Manila. Admirable brother, I think. Other details seem hazy now; we were sure it was forty degrees outside on at least one of our excursions. A very hot summer, I heard. We found shade in the cafes. We shivered in the museum, where we faced Van Gogh; he was smaller than we thought he would be. Picasso was as outsized as we expected. It was the elderly and the children staring at the paintings that I recall the clearest. Can artists feed us?

Kyoto was as serene as I remember. Kinkaku-ji glistened in the summer sun. We stayed calm even after riding the wrong bus four times. By the time we arrived in Arashiyama, the sun was starting to set. So much for a clear photograph of my wife in the bamboo grove. But the town was charming in the early evening. The train to Kyoto Station seemed surreal, though far less apocalyptic than most of the Dali paintings we saw the day after. Dali in Kyoto—a portent? In my country, there was no calm before the storm. In Kyoto, politeness reigns; we all stayed on one side of the escalator, we bowed, we smiled. The vending machines keep us well-hydrated. How long will it stay a refuge? We bid farewell to Japan, leaving behind a mass of plastic waste sufficient to fill one of our suitcases.

We had to see the waxen, bemedalled one. Apparently, so did many others; from visiting Filipino-Americans to a company branch probably on a team-building seminar, the Marcos Museum in Batac was packed. Perhaps they all wanted to catch a last glimpse of the “corpse,” seeing as how the new president was adamant about burying “him” soon. I tried to blend in; one can only pretend to gush and fawn so much. Here lies love. Here are lies? I expected sophisticated refrigeration. The room had an air conditioner in every corner, but it was hardly freezing. Marcos looked well, though, for a prop. Later that day, we went to the library of the campus he bequeathed his brethren. There, a woman literally sings praises to the Bagong Lipunan. For her hospitality—as well as her immense knowledge of Marcosiana—we give our thanks. Come for the food, stay for the people, leave before the Maharlikan mesmerism works on you.

I have to admit, I did not know Sule from Shwedagon upon arriving in Yangon. Nor did I know that the latter, at night, featured golden *bodhisattvas* surrounded by blinking lights; the smell of incense and the

sight of flowers were, however, expected. The following night, we go to a nice mall; on my last night in the city, we went to a mall that was open 24/7. The traffic reminds me of home, though it hardly matches our carmageddons. We compare protests in our countries—his due to corruption, hers due to corruption, mine due to the lovely funeral of our favorite dictator. Here, people are hopeful—in Daw Suu we trust. We climb NLD headquarters; democracy is an interminable, twisting stairway. On the way, one can build the stunning Yangon International Airport, refurbish the colonial buildings downtown, peddle cheap cellphones, or encourage ultranationalists—all of the above, if “the people” want.

Portraits of His Majesty are readily visible—they already were the last time I was in Bangkok, but now, they are everywhere. I can probably draw him now from memory, if my hands cooperated. He is survived by his people, clad in black and white, a fair number of whom still have daily access to the best tom yum in the known universe. As in Yangon a few days before, here we compare rallies (or in Bangkok’s case, the lack thereof). The Koreans are having a people power moment—what happens next? It’s axiomatic that at least one country in Southeast Asia has to be under a junta, right? Bangkok, Thailand—the trains run well, it’s a joy to cruise over the Chao Phraya, the simplest food is delectable. The city is a treat, as long as you remember to keep your mouth shut about certain matters. Take note, would-be ASEAN dictators.

Ichihara is a city I never thought I would visit, let alone with over a dozen of my relatives. Yet there we were, struggling to keep warm, grateful for the gift of *kairo*. Were it not for the fellow Philippine citizens among our gracious hosts (whose house is the only one decked in Christmas décor for miles), it is exactly how we envisioned rural Japan: relatively roomy houses lightly scattered beside rice fields, with a half-full pachinko parlor

only a twenty-minute drive away from a bankrupt one. Our country's fearless leader visited shortly before we did; as far as I know, he didn't watch Mickey annihilate a dragon (in Nihongo), clash swords in "ancient" Nikko, nor drown in the Christmas illumination of the Tokyo German Village. Still, no fantasyland here can match that which his worshippers think our nation morphed into.

Hardly anyone was launching rockets or lobbing 'crackers on our street in Pasig this New Year's Eve—the fabled Duterte Effect? Hardly; it's been this way even before I first heard Rody curse. Maybe some of the neighbors thought to give their earnings to the storm-stricken instead of buying things to blow up. Or maybe they had no earnings, what with their bosses (thinking about) hightailin' it back to Trumpland—were the times really a-changin,' like the laureate says they are? Our little one is still half a year away from knowing the world beyond the womb. What a time to be born, my dear, what a time to be born.