

Othering in Asia: An Introduction

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Thanks to postcolonial theory, the ‘Other’ has become one of the buzzwords in the contemporary humanities. Often referring to oppressed groups, especially outside the West, the term has acquired a centrality that paradoxically belies its embodiment of marginality. The Other may have been discriminated against, and the term itself points as much to an urgent political issue as to the latest intellectual fashion. There has indeed been a lot of Othering these, not least of which is the marginalization of immigrants.

Despite its recent origins, the term, “Other,” allows us to speak of, and find a unique thread running through, various forms of oppression, across Asian societies. Even though history’s downtrodden did not speak of their experiences in the language of postcolonial theory, all of these involved a process whereby one group becomes, or is seen as, different, which then opens them to horrendous kinds of domination and exploitation. Majority of the contributions in the present issue deal—directly or otherwise—with such Othering. They all point to the ever present reality—to say nothing of different manifestations—of marginalization. They also offer proof that if Asians have been “othered” by Europeans, they themselves have been equally guilty of the same process with their fellow Asians, including their countrymen.

More often than not, we often conjure images of the poor and the dispossessed when we speak of the marginalized. But as Mari-Elina Ekoluoma shows, even rich Korean tourists can be victims of discrimination and stereotyping. In her field site of Sabang in Mindoro province in the Philippines, Elina discusses how Korean tourists were seen as strange, exotic,

and different. Her article is also a modest contribution to intra-Asian tourism, and a departure from tourism studies, which has frequently looked at Westerners in Asian settings. Furthermore, Ekoluoma's study offers a different perspective on Koreans in the Philippines, who are primarily studied and perceived in relation to popular culture such as films and TV shows.

Peasants and local historiography in the Philippines have had their share of advocates, but are still, overall, less understudied and underappreciated than, say, cultural studies or national history. Renato Pelorina's article hits two birds with one stone: not only does he add to the literature on the peasantry during the Philippine revolutionary period, but also provides a much-needed local perspective therein, looking at an area outside the Tagalog-speaking regions. Masbate lies in the periphery of the periphery, as it were. The historiography of the Bicol region has focused largely on the provinces of Albay, Camarines Sur, and Sorsogon, all of which in turn are subordinated to the national yet Manila-centric narrative. If few Filipinos know about the history of these provinces, even less would be aware of goings-on in Masbate from 1898 to 1905. And the fact that Pelorina's paper explores rebel peasants—who barely appear in the historical record any way—the obscurity, if not the Othering, increases. We do hope the article at least sheds a little light on the province, tell the story of nineteenth-century peasants in a Philippine province, and help spur further research.

In Melissa Maramara's article, we jump from nineteenth-century Philippines to late-20th century Japan, and learn how a play speaks up for Filipina comfort women who suffered under Japanese colonialism, as well as for Filipino workers who have endured the travails of migrant life in Japan. The play, *Tuko! Tuko!*, according to Maramara, appropriates the theatrical norms of the oppressor (Japan) to speak up for these exploited and murdered Others. In this respect, *Tuko! Tuko!* expresses the need for recognition and justice in cultural terms that the oppressor himself, so the play hopes at least, can understand. As Maramara shows, this deployment of Japanese cultural forms came in the mid-1990s, when the Japanese and Philippine governments could do little to confront the historical traumas

of World War II, as well as the plight of Filipino immigrants in Japan in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

Many of the commentaries and travel narratives in this issue attempt to raise awareness of the marginalized. When one thinks of India, it is easy to conjure images of Hinduism or the Taj Mahal, but the problems faced by the Gorkha in Northeast India is, to many outsiders especially, an unfamiliar aspect of the country's politics and social life. Datta and Sengupta provide a useful historical overview of the issues. Caroline Hau's essay pays homage to Filipino-Chinese cuisine, a central component of Philippine culture, but whose practitioners have historically faced misunderstanding and discrimination. Adding spice, as it were, to Hau's essay are her short but illuminating discussions of Filipino-Chinese history and the history of the Chinese in Southeast Asia. Sir Anril Tiatco's piece offers an ethnography of a fiesta in Batanes province, which is comprised of a few islands whose history and culture are known little, if at all, among many Filipinos. Our commentary section also features a tribute essay to Dr. Aileen Baviera, Professor at the UP Asian Center who passed away on 21 March 2020.

Leonardo Munalim's account of his visit to Tacloban brings attention to the plight of the survivors of Super Typhoon Yolanda, which had destroyed much of the city and killed thousands on 8 November 2013. Jorge Bayona's essay yields interesting perspectives on the practice of area studies in Latin America, which has only recently begun to pay attention to Southeast Asia, even if such scholarship has largely been Latin America-centric. The essay explains why, and usefully reflects on the fate of Asian studies outside the US and Europe.

The two poems featured here do not deal with Othering. *A Morning in Pratunam* captures the chaos of that district in Bangkok, a mess of colors, sights, and sounds reflected in the poem's unusual enjambment (how each line ends). The shortness of each line evokes a tightness and crampedness, suitable enough for a crowded area, and conveys a sense of disorganization and haphazard speed. The author has deployed all these textual strategies to great aesthetic effect, one reminiscent of Charles Baudelaire's poetry on

nineteenth-century Paris, or of the impressionistic images of urban life in many of Charles Dickens's novels. In contrast, there are no unusual line breaks in Noel Moratilla's *Pinoy Patriot no. 1*, a feature designed to convey the formality and dignity of the persona, who begins each stanza with the incantatory "tonight ill undo my country," as though he was making a speech. All this formality—conveyed by sophisticated imagery and word choices (cinders, ossified)—is all undone by the deliberate failure to follow the rules of capitalization, and the fact that everything actually takes place in a drinking session. One could argue that the lines represent the ramblings, albeit in poetically articulate form, of a mad fascist—note the last line and deliberate spelling of i'll as ill. As such, the poem is a relevant riposte to the rise of fascism all over the world.

That most of the contributions deal with Othering is not only happenstance but also a testimony to the duty of intellectual production: to identify and respond to various forms of marginalization. More importantly, in identifying the Other, we must learn to change our perceptions thereof; come to a point where we no longer see the Other as such; and realize that the question of Othering has more to do with ourselves—our politics, our assumptions, and our fears. By no means should all our differences be erased, but in a genuinely just society, they will not—or should not—really matter. All of us are different, but we are the same, too, and should at any rate be equal. In a radically transformed society, we may perhaps cease to see differences at all. Because by then, our ways of thinking, seeing, and doing will have been radically altered; we'd have dissolved reified, oppressive binaries, and abandoned our present ways of thinking.