



REVIEWS

Fernando Nakpil Zialcita. 2005. *Authentic Though not Exotic: Essays on Filipino Identity*. Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press. 348 pp.

Fernando Nakpil Zialcita's latest book, *Authentic Though Not Exotic: Essays on Filipino Identity* (Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2005), is a defense of Philippine lowland Christian culture written in a clear, concise, and straightforward language that seems to be increasingly alien to many contemporary scholars of Philippine culture and society. Zialcita's text is written in a very direct first-person perspective. This "I" and "we" approach to the uncovering and dissecting of discourses gives Zialcita a sharp piece of critical and literary cutlery that enables him to whittle down derisive attachments that describe aspects of Philippine culture as "bastardized," "mongrel," "imitative," or "derivative." Using tools of comparative culture with a rather wide sampling of cases of cultural borrowing and accommodation from Europe, the Americas, and East Asia, Zialcita builds a strong argument that depicts Philippine lowland Christian culture as no less worthy of study and admiration as that of the Javanese, Balinese, Japanese, Mexican, or the French.

The problem of Philippine culture, as Zialcita presents in this collection of essays, revolves around the following questions: "Why do lowland Christian Filipinos experience unease when reflecting on their Hispanized heritage? How has this unease been fed by current ways of reading history and culture? What might be an alternative way to read history and culture?" Zialcita attributes this unease to how Filipinos

and outsiders read Philippine history and culture. Apparently much of the “reading” runs aground when many things “Filipino” turn out to originate from someplace else, specifically, Spain. This realization, in turn, is complicated by an “outside gaze” that readily casts doubts on the Filipino’s “Asian authenticity.” Zialcita attributes these biases to the following: “(1) the demonization of Spanish influence, (2) a limited menu of binaries for interpreting culture, and (3) reductionist interpretations.”

In “Toward a Community Broader than Kin,” for instance, Zialcita tackles the issue of Filipino fractiousness attributed to Spanish influence. He presents data that support an opposite view. Highland communities that were untouched by Spanish influence exhibit as much inability to develop loyalties that go beyond the kinship group and thus are as divided, if not more so, compared to the lowland Hispanized communities. Zialcita contends that centralization processes of the state that linked administrative units of *sitio*, *barrio*, and *provincia* developed a sense of community based on membership in a universal church such as the Catholic Church and allowed residents of the islands to think or to imagine broader entities such as “Katagalugan” or “Filipinas.”

In “Bourgeois yet Revolutionary in 1896,” Zialcita illustrates how binary models for interpreting history and culture limit the Filipinos’ understanding of the past. To Zialcita, a reading of the past should take note of prevailing discourses in which present “readers” are embedded. For example, a reading of history by nationalists, and most especially members of the Left in the post-World War II era, extols Andres Bonifacio and company for their “proletarian agenda” often at the expense of the late nineteenth-century elite. This elite’s guilt in “Betraying the People’s Cause” seems to be linked to their descendants’ ownership of urban estates and rural farms. Zialcita attributes this formation of opinion to a mismatch: “The articulated aspirations of the leaders of the Philippine Revolution of 1896 do not match the concerns of the nationalists of the 1970s-1990s. Furthermore, binary models do tend to oversimplify.” As Zialcita puts it with much wit, heroes must be “beyond fault.” Alas, he concludes that this perspective “may not give us any heroes” at all.

“As yet an Asian Flavor Does Not Exist” is not only the most palatable but perhaps the most thought-provoking essay in Zialcita’s anthology. In this essay Zialcita comes to the rescue of Filipino cuisine, which is rather maligned for its “un-Asian” taste. In the process, he

unveils through an examination of geography or ecosystems, the outdated concept of “race,” language, culture via the concept of *oikumene* (with the help of Toynbee, and Steadman, among others), the Western invention called “Asia.” Indeed, the reductionist approach to “Asian” cuisine using “spiciness” as its main indicator fails to whip up a convincing operationalization of Asia-ness. The variety of culinary sensibilities found in Vietnamese, Cantonese and Japanese, to name a few, debunks the reductionist myth of spiciness as the defining element of “Asian” cuisine.

This reviewer hopes that one day this tome of Zialcita would be translated to Filipino. Translation will give a wider public access to the ideas presented in this book. Indeed, Filipinos need not be insecure or uneasy about many aspects of their culture—indigenous, imported, or hybrid. Zialcita, this reviewer has heard from several sources, has expressed his fear of becoming a “popularizer.” If the process of “popularization” refers to an airing of ideas that seek to correct misconceptions about one’s own culture through a comparative reexamination of artifacts across national boundaries using language that can easily be understood, then Zialcita ought not to fear anything. Perhaps he should embrace this role, one that is of great import accorded only to a few with the skill and the talent to write with great clarity, and in so doing become a “defender of faith in Philippine culture.”—**MCM SANTAMARIA**, ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR, ASIAN CENTER, UNIVERSITY OF THE PHILIPPINES, DILIMAN.

* * * * *

Kevin Hewison and Richard Robison, eds. 2006. *East Asia and the Trials of Neo-Liberalism*. London and New York: RoutledgeCurzon. 156 pp.

East Asia and the Trials of Neo-Liberalism is a compilation of articles concerning the imposition of neoliberal reforms in selected East Asian economies (Indonesia, Malaysia, South Korea, Thailand, Vietnam, and China) as a result of the Asian crisis. The main point of the book, especially expressed in the integrative essay by the editors in the preface, is that there had been inroads by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank in imposing neoliberal reforms in the selected East Asian economies, but nowhere did they achieve the