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Editors Introduction

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Editor's Introduction

Why are social-historical realities seen, experienced, and represented in some ways but not in others? Seeking answers through sustained or implicit comparative approaches, the articles in this issue explore the social representations of “the Chinese,” ex-colonies as tourist destinations, and the electoral process, and their implications for culture and politics. Comic strips during the Japanese occupation point us not only to social engineering but also to the intents of graphic artists in representing policy and reality. And what are we to make of ancient manuscripts—and one word in particular, Ma’I—which stand for a world and a specific place of which we cannot be absolutely certain?

Rupert Hodder argues that popular depictions of Chinese in Southeast Asia have affected scholarly constructs, which have then found their way into popular discourse. Street views and academic representations of Chineseness have been mutually reinforcing and generative of stereotypes and distortions. Hodder calls for moving beyond reductive notions of culture and structure in favor of studying, with an open mind, the complexity of social relationships and how Chineseness may or may not emerge, may or may have no meaning in given circumstances. In aiming for a cosmopolitan and universalist, yet fluid, variable, and multidimensional, understanding of relationships, Hodder’s suggestion is particularly salient for the Philippines “whose society, for all its faults, possesses the core qualities of great civilizations—openness and a tolerance of others” (25).

In a rare juxtaposition of Puerto Rico and the Philippines and their shared legacies, Faye Caronan examines the images of these two countries in a colonial-military travelogue of 1899 and in today’s highly popular travel guides, *Lonely Planet*. She finds a similar impetus in these two sets of texts: the islands as items of commodity consumption by

foreign travelers and tourists. Foreign exchange earnings make the governments of these countries willing participants in promoting tourism, which, in Caronan's view, perpetuates the asymmetries of colonial power. In contrast, two novels by minority migrant writers in the United States provide alternative narratives that contest the dominant representations and explore the limits and possibilities of human agency. But the fact that Caronan finds the alternatives in novels and not in another genre makes us wonder if representations for tourism purposes can ever escape commodity fetishism.

Karl Ian Cheng Chua brings us back to the Japanese occupation and revisits everyday life from the perspective of comic strips. Japanese colonial authorities had the peculiar understanding of the importance of *komiks* to Filipinos, and set about to exploit this medium. Cheng Chua connects these komiks to Japanese propaganda as well as wartime existence. Admitting that komiks can have different readings, he alerts us to subtle techniques of subversion that Filipino artists possibly could have employed. Some komiks can then be seen as valuable artifacts that embody resistance amid collaboration.

In 2004 the Institute of Philippine Culture (IPC), Ateneo de Manila University, conducted a study that explored ordinary people's views of elections. The findings, some of which are presented in my article, indicate that the poor see elections in two ways: as the means to select officials, which requires their obligatory participation as citizens; and as a gamble that entails all the concomitants of a game of chance. My article mediates the presentation of this finding through a cultural-historical framing of the electoral process as a ritual, and of gambling as a distinctively Filipino approach to social and political life.

Finally, Go Bon Juan unsettles the conventional understanding of the place named Ma'I in tenth-century Chinese chronicles as Mindoro. Based on known facts about the trade with Guangzhou and the civilizational requisites of such a trade, his explorations of Bai, Laguna, leads Go to propose that Ma'I is best understood as referring to an ancient realm called Ba'I located in southwestern Luzon. Go's crucial intervention should revive scholarly attention on this important question. At the same time, reading and rereading Ma'I alerts us to the unstable, incomplete, tangled, and contingent nature of representations.