

**K**ini  
ug **K**aná  
**GWATSINAGGONG GADFLY**



This collection of Isabel Escoda's columns in Taglish (Tagalog/English) from the monthly newspaper *Pinoy Abroad* in Hong Kong includes some of her English-language commentaries written for other publications. The title of her column was Cebuano for "This & That"-- to which her editor added "(Mischievous) Gadfly" to match her occasional tongue-in-cheek style.

A longtime resident of Hong Kong, Escoda has broadcast and written about her compatriot Filipinos in the territory and elsewhere overseas. Her radio talks (aired over two Hong Kong stations) were published in her earlier books, "Letters from Hong Kong" and "Hong Kong Postscript."

She has lived around Asia and the U.S., and has two daughters and three granddaughters. When she isn't writing or teaching English and Spanish, she talks to the stray cats and dogs in her Lantau neighborhood, as well as to the plants on her roof garden.

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PINOY ABROAD

ISABEL TAYLOR ESCODA

# PINOY ABROAD

PERSPECTIVES ON PHILIPPINE LIFE IN HONG KONG



Isabel Taylor Escoda

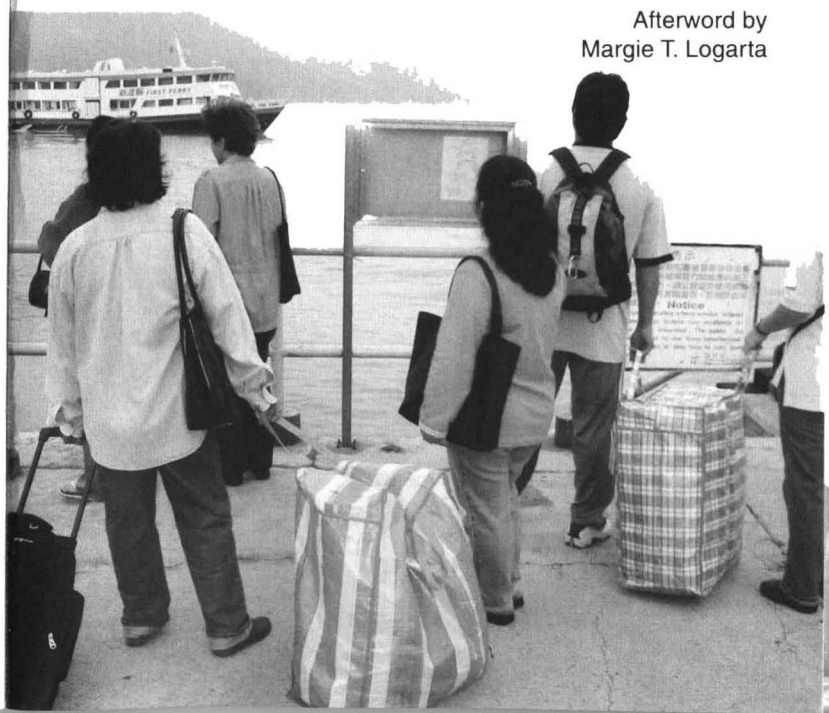


# PINOY ABROAD

By Isabel Taylor Escoda

Foreword by  
Cynthia Abdon-Tellez

Afterword by  
Margie T. Logarta



Also by Isabel T. Escoda

Collections of radio talks/essays:

- *Letters from Hong Kong*
- *Hong Kong Postscript*

Children's books:

- *Once Upon a Hilltop*
- *Ati-Atihan, a Pictorial in Verse*
- *Limericks for Little People,*  
*A Philippine Tour for Girls & Boys*

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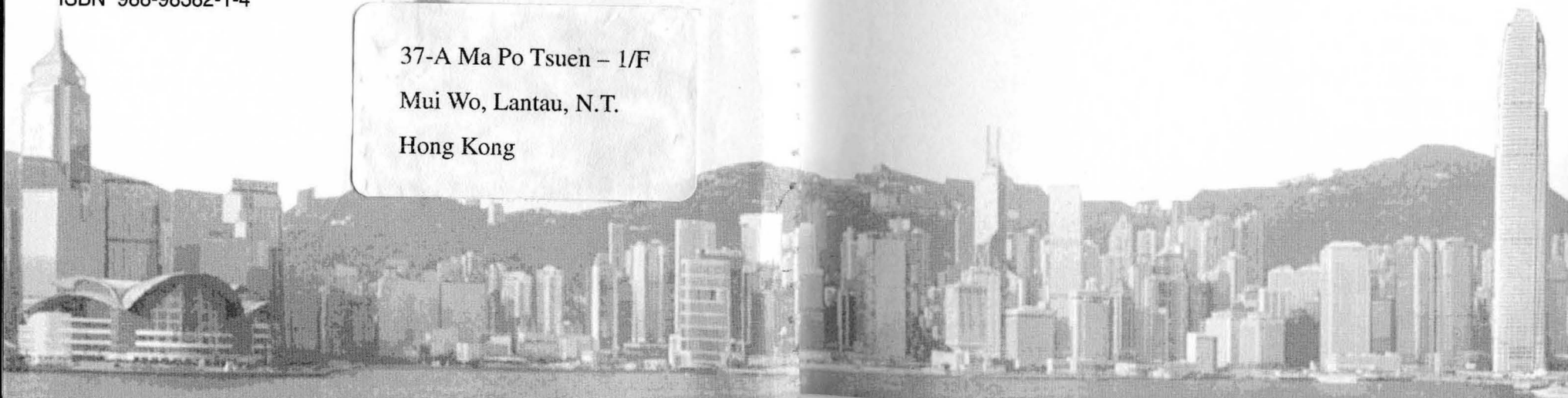
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*To my sister  
Cecilia*



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The generous **benefactor** who asked to be anonymous, without whom this book would not have seen print

All my cheerful, intrepid **kababayan** toiling in Hong Kong

**Rex Aguado**, who got me started in writing Taglish

**Harvey Stockwin**, for his moral support

**Martin Megino**, for his design expertise

## PREFACE

When the Filipino monthly newspaper *Pinoy Abroad* began publication in Hong Kong over two years ago, the editors asked contributors to write their articles in *Taglish* – the popular dialect which combines Tagalog with English. Even though my first language is Cebuano (having been born in the Philippines' second largest city of Cebu), I also know Tagalog and so agreed to write my column in Taglish. I found the exercise enjoyable and tried to write the way one would speak – as Filipinos often address each other in their daily speech.

There are Cebuanos, like myself, who have considered the adaptation of Tagalog as the Philippines' national language quite unfair, because Cebuano has long been spoken more widely than Tagalog throughout our far-flung archipelago. [Cebuano is spoken not just on the island of Cebu, but in many parts of the Visayas such as Negros, Samar, Bohol, Leyte and most provinces of the vast island of Mindanao.]

The Philippine Government's language institute which had been given the task of formulating a national language apparently did not have the inclination nor the resources to combine both Cebuano and Tagalog (the two major languages). They could have produced a truly authentic national language if they had combined those two languages along with some words from the other dialects. But it was apparently found easier and more convenient to declare Tagalog the overall *lingua franca* — mainly because the seat of government is located in the Tagalog-speaking region of Luzon, specifically Manila.

The first and last two articles in this book are in English. The first one (which the *Pinoy Abroad* editor asked to be written in English) was featured in a special supplement put out for Philippine Independence Day in 2002, and the final piece was my talk given at the



inauguration of a plaque in Hong Kong honoring national hero Jose Rizal. The penultimate article, also in English, is one that appeared in a Cebu publication, the *Sun-Star Weekend* magazine. This piece may produce accusations of chauvinism against me from non-Cebuano Filipinos, but I think the piece, though tongue-in-cheek in many ways, is relevant to the general theme on migrant workers' attitudes, ideas and goals.

The rest of the essays in this book (a collection of twelve of my newspaper columns, which are not featured chronologically) are in *Taglish*. To add to the linguistic mix, I named my column "*Kini ug Kana*" which means "this and that" in Cebuano. The editor added a subtitle, "*Gwatsinanggong Gadfly*" — *gwatsinanggo* meaning kibitzer or mischief-maker in Cebuano. *Pinoy Abroad* is still in circulation, but I discontinued my columns when I left Hong Kong for a spell.

The term "Pinoy" is the slangy word Filipinos use as a casual description of nationality, rather like "Brit" is used for citizens of the U.K. and "Yank" for Americans. Not a pejorative term (like the word "Flipilino" which was coined some time ago by Westerners who apparently thought us flippant and feckless), "Pinoy" indicates a mateyness and commonality among the people of an archipelago composed of myriad tribes which nevertheless profess a unique kind of nationalism.

I hope that readers who do not know Tagalog will — if they are interested — ask their Filipino friends to translate the parts of the essays which they do not understand.

I.T.E.

Lantau, N.T., Hong Kong  
April 2005

## FOREWORD

By Cynthia Ca. Abdon-Tellez

**W**ith our roots in the Philippines and our work of distinct difference, Isabel Escoda and I have one common passion — the Filipino migrant worker.

I met Isabel in the 1980s when the exodus of Filipina women to Hong Kong reached its peak. She was a broadcaster and writer at the time and I was, and still am, involved with a non-governmental service institution, the Mission for Migrant Workers (MFMW) at St. John's Cathedral. In our different ways, we have aimed to serve the best interests of our fellow migrants.

As the journalist she is, Isabel has probed into stories of overseas Filipinas' struggle and oppression, and she broadcast and wrote about those cases, often tackling controversial issues. Meanwhile we in the MFMW worked hard to address those cases. While Isabel wrote on those, I myself, as director of the organization, worked on case files and reports.

Many of the migrant workers (the majority of them women) who toil as domestics were once teachers, nurses, secretaries and would-be doctors back home. They saw the hopeless situation in the Philippines and succumbed to the pull of "higher-paying" jobs in Hong Kong. We at the MFMW handled many cases of abuse, fought for them and sometimes won, but sadly found that the women's notion of Hong Kong as an economic oasis was, more often than not, a mirage.

This image was, and continues to be, tarnished by laws and policies imposed by the Hong Kong Government which claims to resolve the exploitation and abuse of the foreign domestics. The wage cut imposed on the domestics in 2003, when HK\$400 was slashed from their salaries, was a slap on the migrant workers' faces. Six months later, a HK\$9,600 levy was imposed on employers for each contract signed. This was done

at the height of the SARS crisis. The irony is that the Hong Kong Government has placed the burden on the foreign domestics, who are in the lowest earning sector of the economy. The minimum wage was arbitrarily changed to a "minimum allowable wage" which, to all intents and purposes, allows the government to manipulate wages whenever they wish.

Isabel addressed this issue, even as we at the MFMW assisted our clients in their legal battles, advised them and acted as guardians, legal aides and friends. All this highlighted the fact that working abroad, for too many Filipinas, was not really the "greener pasture" they sought, even as it has been the only alternative to outright poverty.

Isabel's writing has not only promoted Philippine culture (which is sometimes difficult to label), but she has also criticized its excesses. In her columns for the *Pinoy Abroad* monthly paper, she ventured into Taglish with various columns, one of them about the innate subservience of the Filipino. The overuse of "Po" and "Ho" (Sir, Ma'am) is, in her view, internalized subservience which is overdone, thanks to our years of colonization. Institutions like the church, Philippine society and schools, and even the media have been guilty of implanting this kind of thinking into the mass of Filipinos. The result can be seen in Hong Kong among the domestics who slavishly overdo the use of "Ma'am" and "Sir" with their employers.

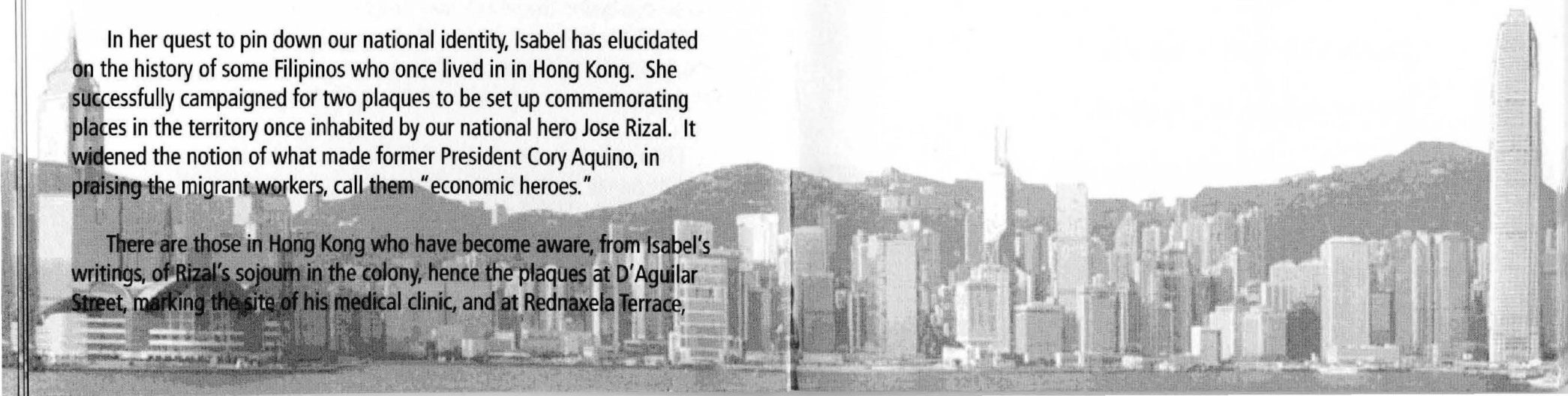
In her quest to pin down our national identity, Isabel has elucidated on the history of some Filipinos who once lived in Hong Kong. She successfully campaigned for two plaques to be set up commemorating places in the territory once inhabited by our national hero Jose Rizal. It widened the notion of what made former President Cory Aquino, in praising the migrant workers, call them "economic heroes."

There are those in Hong Kong who have become aware, from Isabel's writings, of Rizal's sojourn in the colony, hence the plaques at D'Aguilar Street, marking the site of his medical clinic, and at Rednaxela Terrace,

where he once lived. Those plaques remind us that our forefathers shared their skills and knowledge with Hong Kong people many years ago – Rizal, particularly, when he spent time here as an exile and worked as an ophthalmologist during his time of exile here.

Sadly, Filipinos these days are, in the words of former President Fidel Ramos, "internationally shared human resources." As the Philippines' primary export in this era of free trade globalization, we are unfortunately conditioned to be sold as commodities, often at the lowest rates. Which has made the recent slashing of the domestics' wages doubly painful.

I believe Isabel's values include making people understand that Filipinos are a precious resource, like all other human beings. Using simple down-to-earth language, she has confronted the facts of migrant life in her writing. While she has, in the past, written lightly, sarcastically and with humor (in the books *"Letters from Hong Kong"* and *"Hong Kong Postscript"*), she has also slashed with the truth about human rights abuses and violations that affect our compatriot Pinoys abroad.





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## ENCOUNTERS WITH THE GHOSTS OF PHILIPPINE HISTORY

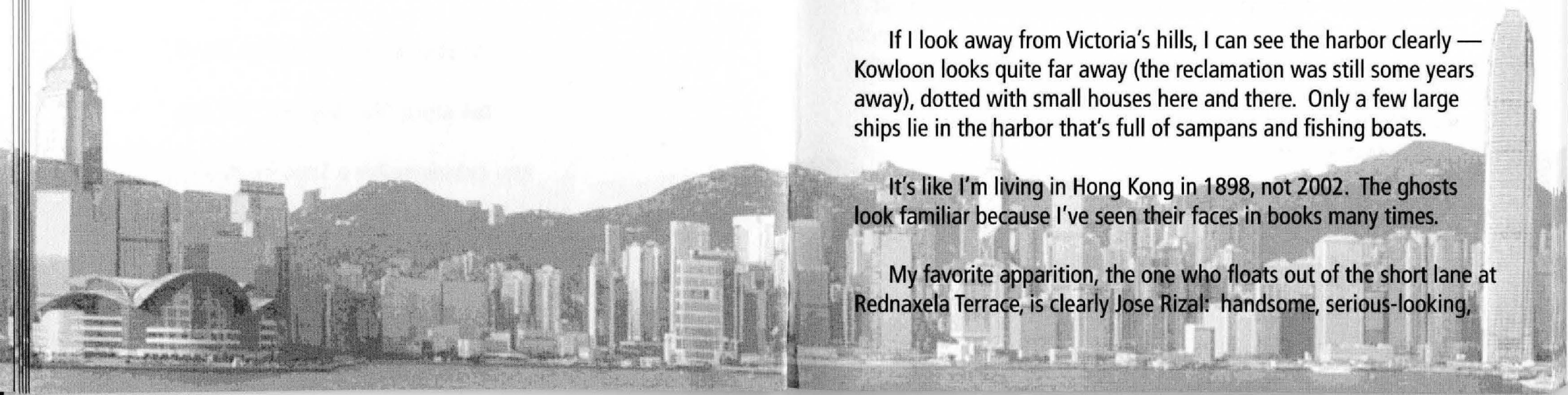
Sometimes when I'm in downtown Hong Kong, in the Central district, and I climb up D'Aguilar Street, or when I stroll through the Botanical Gardens, or if I'm passing by Morrison Hill Road in Wanchai, some familiar ghosts float before my eyes. The most familiar one tends to cross my path when I'm on that engineering marvel, the outdoor Central-to-Midlevels escalator, passing by Rednaxela Terrace. Strangely, I feel more curious than frightened each time this happens.

It's as though I'm dreaming — the scene is always misty, nothing to do with the smog or the fog. The crowds around me seem to disappear, as do the shops, trams and skyscrapers. There's hardly any traffic, only a few quaint motorcars and many rickshaws pulled by sweating coolies. Of course most of the folks around me are Chinese, many of the men sporting pigtails down their backs and wearing their loose garb. The few white faces belong to British colonial officials, policemen and businessmen. There aren't too many women around — the few white ones sport parasols and wear clothes often unsuitable for the tropics; they look with pity at the somber Chinese women hawking fruit, flowers and trinkets.

If I look away from Victoria's hills, I can see the harbor clearly — Kowloon looks quite far away (the reclamation was still some years away), dotted with small houses here and there. Only a few large ships lie in the harbor that's full of sampans and fishing boats.

It's like I'm living in Hong Kong in 1898, not 2002. The ghosts look familiar because I've seen their faces in books many times.

My favorite apparition, the one who floats out of the short lane at Rednaxela Terrace, is clearly Jose Rizal: handsome, serious-looking,





and always wearing a jacket (even when it's hot). He's a small man who walks purposefully, often carrying books and papers, sometimes a medical bag, under his arm. I stand back and stare, awed by his presence and wishing I could speak to him, but he melts into the mist.

The other ghosts I encounter are those of Emilio Aguinaldo, Mariano Ponce, Jose Alejandrino, Isabelo Artacho and some others whose names escape me but who I know were involved in the struggle against the Spanish oppressors back in the home country. When these men aren't walking about in Central or sitting in small cafes, smoking endlessly during their meetings, they stand along the quayside and gaze out over the water. I sometimes try to get close so I can hear what they're saying, but they too disappear into the mist.

Occasionally, when I'm on Arbuthnot Road and pass by Victoria Prison, the ghost of Rizal's old friend, the long-exiled Jose Ma. Basa, drifts by. He had a home on that road, and Rizal would often visit him to lend him his books and talk about their beloved homeland. How I wish I could eavesdrop on their conversations.

There are only two women wraiths who sometimes swim across my eyes. The first is *Doña* Marcela, wife of the first Filipino diplomat, Felipe Agoncillo. She's at a house on Morrison Hill Road, always bent over a large piece of cloth which she and some other women sew tirelessly. We know that after they completed the job, the product of their labor was secretly taken to Manila. (I like to speculate that it was a Filipina who wrapped it underneath her *saya* before boarding a ship for Manila.) In June that same year, the first Philippine flag, lovingly sewn in Hong Kong, was raised in Kawit, Cavite, when Philippine independence was proclaimed.

The other female ghost I often encounter always looks forlorn. It's the Hong Kong-born British-Chinese *mestiza* who was Rizal's last love, Josephine Bracken. Adopted as a child by a middle-class American businessman named George Taufer, she led an unhappy life. (The late

British historian Austin Coates speculated she may have been abused by her stepfather.) When Taufer started to go blind (because of syphilis, Coates suggested), he decided to go to Manila, having heard of the respected Filipino ophthalmologist who had practiced in Hong Kong some years earlier. Josephine, acting as his eyes, sailed with him to the Philippines. Arriving in Manila, they found that the Spanish authorities had banished Dr Rizal to Dapitan, so the two boarded a boat for Mindanao.

As the history books tell us, Rizal found Taufer's eyes beyond help. It was a tragic time for the American, not just because his blindness was incurable but because Josephine fell in love with Jose and refused to return to Hong Kong.

Jose and Josephine's sad love story has been the subject of several books and films. After Rizal's trial and subsequent execution at what is today's Luneta, Josephine stayed in the Philippines a while. But feeling lost and unhappy, she returned to Hong Kong where she married a Filipino of uncertain background, had a child and died in 1902 at the age of 25. She died of a rare form of TB when a plague was raging in the colony, but some say she died of poverty and a broken heart. Her grave has never been found. Coates surmises that she was buried in a pauper's grave.

Whenever I see Josephine's ghost wandering around Central, I often blink my eyes, not just to try to see her more clearly but also to hold back a tear for the tragic young woman.

It was fortunate that the British colonials tolerated the Filipinos who sought refuge in Hong Kong, even when they established the Hong Kong *Junta/Comite Central Filipino*. The exiles faced many problems, among them the difficulty of communicating with their revolutionary colleagues in Manila and fellow exiles in Europe, the intrigues and squabbles among themselves, and especially the shortage of funds. Today most Filipinos in Hong Kong face the same

problem with money — except that they're here, not struggling for national independence but for their financial independence.

My favorite historical photograph is the one taken on the steps of the Botanical Gardens in 1896 — the members of the Hong Kong *Junta*, dressed for cold weather, some wearing caps, look gravely into the camera. There was hope and determination in their faces.

There is a plaque on the Century Square building on D'Aguilar Street marking the spot where Rizal had his clinic. He was called the "Spanish Doctor" by his patients because he spoke the language beautifully. It was not just his medical prowess which gained him widespread admiration but also his cultured ways, knowledge of several languages and earnest patriotism.

The historical marker on Morrison Hill Road indicates the general area where the Agoncillos lived. Ronaldo Mactal's book, *Hong Kong Junta/Comite Central Filipino: Pulitika at Kontrobersya*, has an interesting passage which I translate from the Tagalog: "It's hard to imagine how the revolutionaries lived. They all squeezed into two houses at Morrison Hill, Victoria, paying 50 pesos monthly rent for what served as a residence for the members and some of their families. One of the houses, Greenmount House, served as an office for these revolutionaries in Hong Kong. However, any of them who wished to live somewhere else received only 12 pesos' pension per month. As a result, almost all of General Emilio Aguinaldo's followers lived in the two houses which were rented by the Hong Kong Junta, since 12 pesos was not sufficient for the daily expenses of each member per month."

It all sounds familiar — and sad.

There is still no plaque on Rednaxela Terrace, halfway up the escalator, to mark where Rizal lived briefly with his parents and sisters before he returned home to face execution. Whenever I pass by there,

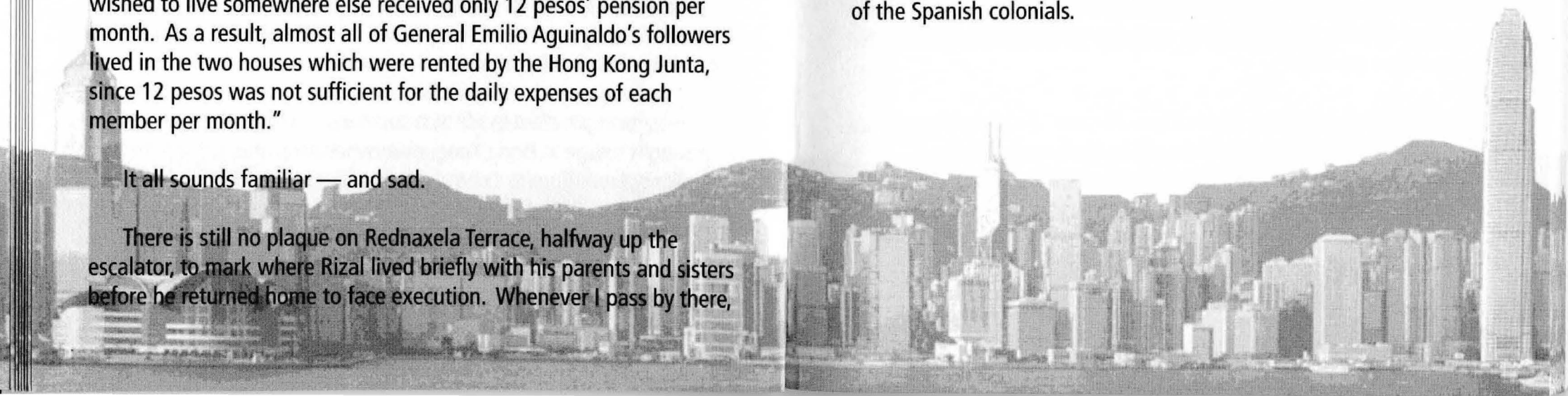
sometimes I think I hear laughter, making me wonder if the Rizal family is amused by the name of their little lane — because they knew that the Chinese street painter (who didn't know English) mistakenly inverted the name, which should have been Alexander!

What, I wonder, would our dead patriots say if they appeared today in downtown Hong Kong, on a Sunday with the multitudes of our migrant workers hunkering down on the concrete to relax on their day off. Would they ask: "Why are there so many Filipinos here, especially women?" I would probably reply that, although the Philippines may now be independent, "Life for many is still as hard as it was when you were here at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century — and this time it's mainly daughters, mothers, wives and sisters who bear the brunt of the hardship."

\* \* \* \* \*

*Pinoy Abroad* Independence Day Supplement  
June 2002

N.B. The plaque marking the site on Rednaxela Terrace where Rizal once lived was inaugurated by the Filipino community on 30 December 2004, the 108<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his death by musketry at the hands of the Spanish colonials.





## MONUMENTS FOR THE HEROIC LOLAS

**T**he Philippines should have a National Lolas' Day. Why? Because it's the grandmothers who have been saving Filipino families. There should be statues, like all those around the country for our national hero Jose Rizal, in plazas all over the archipelago showing an old woman carrying a baby on one arm and holding a small child with the other hand. Our Lolas deserve our gratitude and admiration — they're as courageous as revolutionary heroine Gabriela Silang and Josefa Llanes Escoda (my mother-in-law, killed by the Japanese for her underground activities during World War II, whose face is on the 1,000 peso bill).

Seguradong magulat tayo kung i-survey ang mga Lola caring for grandchildren whose parents work abroad. Kay lungkot isipin. Old age should be a time for taking it easy. But today Pinoy Lolas are burdened with caring for little ones, even older children left behind by absent mothers. Do they resent having to be yayas, or are they glad their daughters have jobs abroad? Ano ba kayang quality of life for these Lolas and their grandchildren?

Ano kayang mangyari kung mag-strike ang mga Lola? Will their grandkids become criminals, prostitutes, NPA or Abu Sayyaf members? Maging pulubi nalang ba ang mga bata, o magbenta ng sigarilyo o maghukay ng basura sa mga dumpsite? Will these be the future citizens of our country?

Meanwhile there was a recent *Pinoy Abroad "Pulso ng Bayan"* that surveyed 100 Filipinos "of diverse occupations and religion" asked: "Do you agree with moves to legalize divorce in the Philippines?" — 73 approved, 17 were against, while 10 were "not sure." Some might say "susmariosep!" at this, but I'm sure most of us are not surprised.

Consider the thousands of Pinays working overseas whose husbands aren't faithful. (Of course, there are also women who go abroad because their marriages have broken down.) Usually the husband is jobless or earns less than his wife, so among nangyari? He loses his self respect at naglalasing, nagsusugal, o naghanap ng babae. Isn't this grounds for divorce?

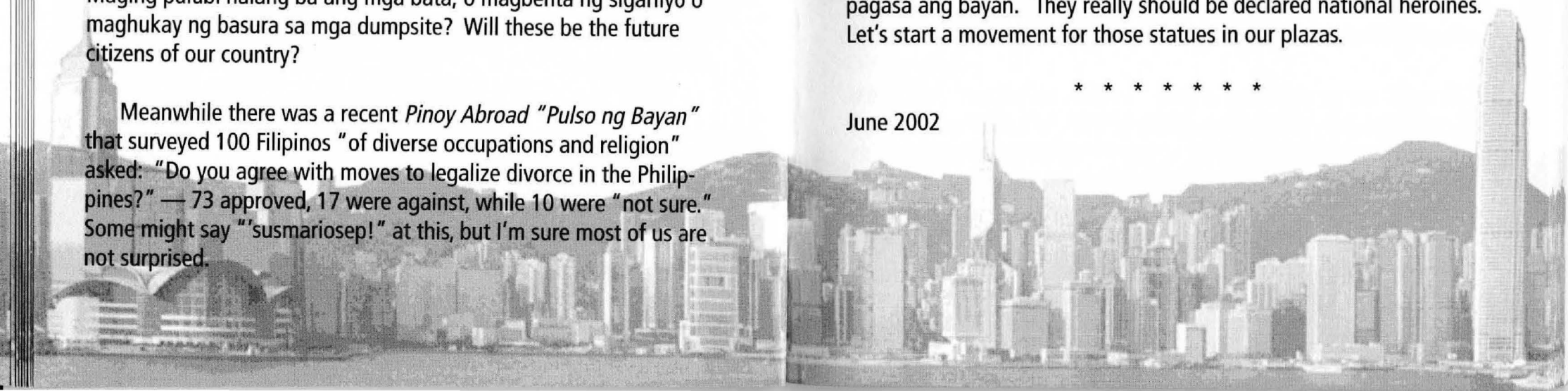
Noong dati, ang karamihang Pinoy na naghanap-buhay sa ibang bansa ay mga lalaki — in Hawaiian and Californian plantations, and Alaskan fish canneries. But starting in the 1970s, thanks to Marcos, Pinay women too fled poverty to be nurses in the U.S., "entertainers" in Japan, and nannies in Hong Kong, Singapore, Europe and the U.S. At diyan din nagumpisa ang mail-order bride business.

Why is it that only wealthy Pinoys can obtain divorces abroad or get annulments at home? Because of the hypocrisy of the government and the Church — parang akala nila na kung bawal ang divorce, walang maghihiwalay! But many men still abandon their families. If only we had a law in the Philippines, like that in the U.S., where DBD (Deadbeat Dads) are arrested and jailed if they refuse to support their children. But it's a man's world out there (even with a woman president), so this is a just dream.

What is real and not just a dream are the Lolas — sila ang pagasa ang bayan. They really should be declared national heroines. Let's start a movement for those statues in our plazas.

\* \* \* \* \*

June 2002



## AN HONORABLE PROFESSION

**T**wo years ago, flying on China Airlines to the U.S., nagtaka ako noong nag-announce ang pilot after take-off: "Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen, this is your captain speaking...." Why was I surprised? Because the captain's voice was female! Pagdating namin sa San Francisco, I watched a young woman walk out of the plane with her co-pilot and engineer — she was smaller than the two men, but she looked very impressive in her uniform with the captain's insignia on it.

Ang galing, inisip ko, 'pagkat kaunti lang ang mga female airline pilot sa mundo. (Mayroon ba kayang pilotong babae sa Philippine Air Lines?) Advanced talaga ang mga Taiwanese — but it's too bad that CAL has had some major accidents in the past (it wasn't female pilots though who were involved in those crashes).

Today, women have been able to "invade" other traditional male professions, particularly in the academic and medical fields. But there are few (if any) female nuclear physicists, brain surgeons, engineers and managing directors around the world. Sa Pilipinas, matagal na tayong may mga female doctors, professors, chemists, bankers, computer experts, journalists and poets. We hardly have any police-women or female detectives, and you don't find female construction workers tulad dito sa Hong Kong at lalo na sa China.

Marami tayong makitang babaeng kumilos sa mabigat na trabaho dito — maghukay ng lupa, magbuhat ng mabigat na bakal o bato, magesemento ng highway, atbp. Since the Communist regime proclaims that women are equal to men (Mao Tse-tung grandiosely declared that women hold up half the sky), hindi sinasabi ng mga babaeng Instik na "Wala akong lakas tulad ng mga lalaki, kaya sa bahay nalang ako." (The only ones who can say this are usually married to the Communist leaders — they're exempted from heavy

duty. But this isn't publicized because the mass of Chinese people might protest if they see that everyone isn't equal under Communism after all.)

Sa atin naman, we're well known for supplying, not just nannies but also seamen for foreign ships. Mayroon ding mga Pinay na nagtrabaho as chambermaids or waitresses sa luxury liners tulad ng "Queen Elizabeth" at ibang liners ng Cunard or Holland-American lines.

Tungkul naman ng mga "traditional professions," why is it that schoolteachers at home are mainly made up of women? And you hardly seem any male nurses. Bakit kaya ito? Is it because Filipino men don't want to earn the small salaries like those paid to teachers, and because nursing is considered strictly women's domain? Hindi ito totoo sa U.S. atsaka sa Europe. I found this out noong na-atake ako ng asthma sa Vienna, about eight years ago, at pumunta ako sa ospital. Ang mga nurse sa Emergency na nag-alaga sa akin ay young men. They were okay but I was sorry there were no Pinay nurses there to make me feel at home!

Famous talaga tayo for our nurses abroad. Recently I saw in a TV documentary about actor Christopher "Superman" Reeve (whose spine was broken in a horseback riding accident five years ago) that his nurse is Pinay. He is so fond of her that he was quoted as saying, "I hope they confiscate her passport so she can't go back to the Philippines!"

Sa palagay ko, one of the noblest professions is that of nanny. Alam natin na maraming mga pamilya sa Hong Kong (especially Intsik) ay may malaking utang sa kanilang mga amah. Many generations of Chinese children have grown up feeling closer to their Pinay amahs than to their own parents. Ang yayang Pinay ay ang nandiyan for newborn babies, sleeping with them and waking up at all hours of the night to care for them, taking them to school, cooking their meals,



helping them with their homework (especially English) and playing with them (besides having to clean the flat, do the laundry, wash the car and walk the dog). No wonder that when the children grow up, many feel closer to their *yayas* than to their own mothers!

That Taiwanese woman I saw who was a fullfledged pilot can feel proud of her achievement. But Filipina women toiling overseas, caring for children (and sometimes old folks), can feel just as proud. Their contributions to the world are just as important — if not more so — than any professional achievements.

\* \* \* \* \*

October 2002

## NOT "P. I." BUT "R. P."

**W**hy do so many Pinoys call our country "Pea Eye"? Saan ba nanggaling iyan? Did they learn this abbreviation for Philippine Islands in school, or from their Lolas and Lolos? Bakit kaya hindi tinatawag instead ng Pilipinas, o Bayan Ko, o "Pinas," o "Sa Ato" (as we Visayans say?) It's a big mystery to me.

Ang ating bayan, colonized by the Americans in 1898 when they took over from the Kastila (who ruled for over 300 years), became a Commonwealth in 1935. The country was then known as the "Philippine Islands" (P.I. for short). After we became independent in 1946, noong natapus ang World War 2, we became a republic — the Republic of the Philippines (or R.P.). Just look at our passports — citizen tayo ng Republika ng Pilipinas (R.P.).

So my question is: paano tayong mga Pinoy ay naging citizen ng mata ng pea (as in "peas and carrots")? Bakit hindi sa munggo o sitaw o bawat o patani? Bakit naging mata ng gulay ang pangalan ng ating kawawang bansa? Some of you will say: "Well, at least it isn't "Pee" (alam natin ang kahulugan niyan, 'di ba?) !

Maybe it's because we are a playful people — hilig tayong magbiro, magtsismis, kumanta at sumayaw. Palagi tayong masaya, maski mahirap ang buhay. We don't like to be depressed, so talagang experto tayo sa paglimut ng mga problema sa buhay.

Many foreigners have asked why Pinoys are a generally happy people — "even when there is not much to be happy about," sabi ng isa kong kaibigan who once lived in Manila. Alam niya na naghihirap ang karamihang Pinoy, which is why so many go abroad upang kumita. Tinanong niya sa akin kung bakit "so cheerful and good-natured" ang aking mga kababayan.

Ang sagot ko sa kanya ay: "Filipinos are a happy people because we have a tendency to be optimistic, no matter what." Pinaliwanag ko sa kanya na hindi tayo nag-gi-give up maski kung gaano kahirap ang buhay — we always think things will be better sooner or later. Alam natin na it's no use being malungkot, that's why Pinoys don't have a tendency to commit suicide — like the Japanese do or many Hong Kong people who have been killing themselves, even the young people, mainly students feeling pressure at school.

Foreigners in Hong Kong who visit the Philippines are sometimes surprised to see that most people there are always smiling. Aba, sinasabi nila, Hong Kong people have more money but few of them look cheerful, in fact the Chinese often look bad-tempered. But the impoverished Pinoys "have developed smiling into an art" kono! So, dapat yata tayong tumayo ng schools to teach the world how to smile!

Anyway, what does all this have to do with "Pea Eye," itanong ninyo? Well, actually, not much — just that our tendency to have fun is probably bakit naging "Pea Eye" ang ating bayan.

\* \* \* \* \*

March 2002

## TONGUE-TIED AND TWISTED

There was a weird report on the BBC World Service radio last month about some people in China who want so badly to be able to speak English correctly that they undergo oral surgery. Sumakit ang aking dila noong narinig ko ito, because the tongue is apparently sliced and sewn so one can pronounce English properly. (Tulad kaya ito sa pagtuli?)

We know that many Chinese have trouble pronouncing English — they have trouble with "r" and "n." Sabihin nila: "I low it's latulal for lice people of certain lations to leed rots of lespek." (I know it's natural for nice people of certain nations to need lots of respect.)

I have a friend named Robert Renquist — ang tawag sa kanya ng mga Intsik ay "Lobat Lenkiss" !

But we Pinoys shouldn't laugh at Hong Kong pronunciation of English because we have our own funny ways with the language. Marami sa atin ay nahirapang magpronounce ng "th" at "f." We say things like: "I tink I will do my pren a big pabor and gib her dis berry panee ting dat I pound in my pamilee box." (I think I will do my friend a big favor and give her this very funny thing that I found in my family box.)

May problema din tayong maglagay ng accent — we say "commiTEE" instead of "comMITtee," and "canDEEDacy" instead of "CANDidacy."

A British friend of mine once mimicked Pinoy English, thus: "The convenSHON discussed the direcSHON of that reliJON, which needs reorganizaSHON." Maski mali, we emphasize the last syllable of such words and say SHON instead of the correct unaccented "shun." Correctly, it should be pronounced: "The conVENTION discussed the



diREction of that reLIGion, since it needs reORGanization."

How many of us know some of our compatriots who work for British employers who nagbabago ang kanilang Inglis. They learn to say "nevah," "showah," "lovah," "of coss" and "hoht," for never, shower, lover, of course and hot.

Once I was told I should meet a Cebuana married to a wealthy British businessman (so we could converse in Visayan). But when I met her and she opened her mouth, akala ko na British lady ang nagusap sa akin (if I shut my eyes). Perfect talaga ang kanyang English accent! Parang nakalimutan na niya ang Cebuano.

There are Filipinas married to Americans who become more Kano than the Kano. Ang galing ng slang nila!

Maybe this is because we Pinoys are such nice people – ang wika nga ay we're always very eager to please. Also, we're very good mimics and actors. Hindi ba ang ating mga top singers ay kinikopya ang mga singing stars galing abroad? Kaunti lang ang mga original singer natin, tulad ni Nora Aunor who doesn't try to sound like someone else.

We Pinoys leery leed rots of lespek – I mean, we really need lots of respect, especially self-respect. Let us be our real selves – hindi iyong gaya-gaya sa iba. Latulal (I mean natural) lang iyon, hindi ba? At least we don't choose to have surgery on our tongues to get the right accents!

\* \* \* \* \*

September 2002

## MY KALOG COUSIN SALLY

When my cousin Sally came from Manila last month, talagang excited siya kasi first trip niya dito sa Hong Kong, as she had long wanted to come, ngunit maraming nangyari sa buhay niya, so all her plans ay hindi natuloy — first of all, biglang iniwan siya ng asawa niya (may kabit na younger woman — alam natin na ganyan talaga ang mga lalaki, ano?), at ang kanyang dalawang anak na tinedyer naging drug addict, at bumagsak ang kanyang negosyo, and then parang final blow sa buhay niya, namatay sa aksidente ang kanyang aso, so very depressed si Sally, which is why I invited her to come and visit me upang mag-relax dito sa Hong Kong para kalimutan sana ang lahat niyang mga problema — so dumating siya at ang una niyang sinabi ay, "Hong Kong looks like a big Chinatown!" at ako'y tumawa 'pagkat parang hindi niya alam na ang mga tao dito ay Instik, so I explained to her that Hong Kong is right next door to China and, after the British (who matagal nakapuwesto dito — in fact for 155 years) left in 1997, this became part of China, at nagtaka si Sally because sabi niya na she thought this was part of Japan, at natawa ulit ako sa kanya at tinanong ko, "Nakalimutan mo na ba ang ating history and geography lessons noong high school tayo?" at sabi niya, "Oo nga pala!" so when we arrived downtown from the airport, ay nagtaka na naman siya sa pagkadami ng mga Pinay na nakakalat all over the place, at sabi niya, "Akala ko sinabi mo Intsik ang mga tao dito — parang mas marami ang ating kababayan, ah!" so I explained na eto ang mga Pinay migrant workers na nagsu-suport ng kanilang mga pamilya, and some of them have employers who treat them like alipin, so dapat tayong maawa sa kalagayan nila because some of us are lucky na walang naghahari sa atin — interesado talaga si Sally sa aking ikinwento sa kanya because she had been so occupied with her problems na hindi niya inisip na may ibang tao sa mundo na may mas malubha na kalagayan, which is why so many Pinoys have to abandon their families and go abroad to earn a living, at biglang naging seryosa siya

at malapit nang umiyak, but I cheered her up and asked, "Ano, gusto ka bang mag-shopping or kumain ng Chinese food o mag-sightseeing?" at ang sagot niya ay lahat na iyon gusto niyang gawin, including "look for a rich husband," at ako'y nagulat kasi wala akong kilalang milyonaryo dito (sa totoo lang, ako ang unang hahabol sa ganyan!) — anyway nag-enjoy si Sally sa holiday niya dito, even if the only rich men we saw were those on the TV quiz show "Who Wants to be a Millionaire"!

\* \* \* \* \*

April 2002

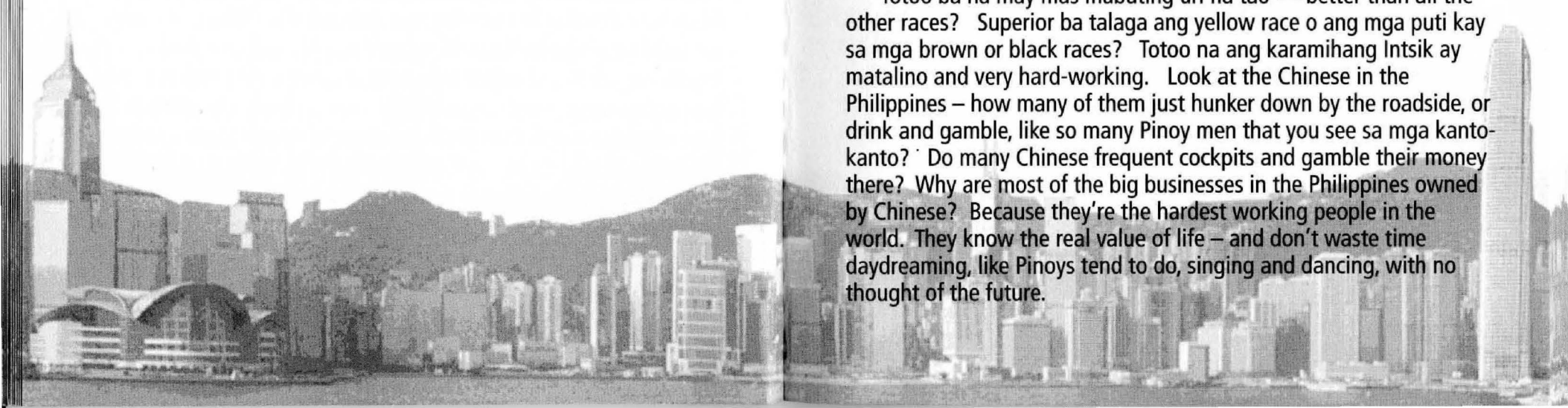
## THE YEAR OF THE KAMBING

**M**asaganang Bagong Taon! Happy Chinese New Year! Sa kalendaryong Intsik, 2003 is the Year of the Goat, which is not considered lucky like the Dragon or the Horse. Kaya hindi natin malaman kung anong mangyari ngayon na nasa inpluwensya tayo ng Kambing!

By the time this issue of *Pinoy Abroad* comes out, malaman na natin kung tuloy ba ang tax sa sueldo ng mga foreign domestic workers. Kung ganon, malas talaga. Kung hindi, kaunting suerte lang iyan — because this won't mean that life will become a bed of roses for foreign workers. We'll still have employers who overwork and underpay their helpers and who don't provide health insurance. And too many Hongkongers will still consider migrant workers as third-class citizens, not allowed to become permanent residents no matter how long they have been living here.

May mga nagsabi na ang mga Intsik daw ay mayroong "Middle Kingdom Complex." This means that the Chinese believe they are the center of the universe, and that they are therefore the most important people of all. In other words, superior talaga sila — which is why they call foreigners *gweilo*, meaning multo (ghost).

Totoo ba na may mas mabuting uri na tao — better than all the other races? Superior ba talaga ang yellow race o ang mga puti kay sa mga brown or black races? Totoo na ang karamihang Intsik ay matalino and very hard-working. Look at the Chinese in the Philippines — how many of them just hunker down by the roadside, or drink and gamble, like so many Pinoy men that you see sa mga kanto-kanto? Do many Chinese frequent cockpits and gamble their money there? Why are most of the big businesses in the Philippines owned by Chinese? Because they're the hardest working people in the world. They know the real value of life — and don't waste time daydreaming, like Pinoys tend to do, singing and dancing, with no thought of the future.





Ngayon na lumalakas ang bayang China, exporting their products to many parts of the world (halos lahat ng damit, sapatos, laruan, atbp. sa mundo ay markang "Made in China"), they have good reasons to feel proud of their country. What's strange is that although their government is a communist one, kapitalista ang kanilang isip. Sa wika ng kanilang dating leader na si Mao Tsetung: "To be rich is glorious," kaya talagang nagpayaman ang mga Intsik. Unfortunately, becoming rich does not always produce better, kinder people.

Today, with life improved materially for many Chinese, they're still controlled by a group of rigid-brained old men. Wala silang demokrasya, ngunit parang okay lang 'yun sa kanila. Of course mayroong mga nagprotesta, gaya ng mga students and workers at Tiananmen Square in 1989 when several thousands were killed by their government. So even though there are small voices here and there calling for democracy in China, parang mas interesado sila to be the richest in the world than to be the freest.

Speaking of democracy, the Chinese could well ask why a country like the Philippines that boasts of its freedom is so poor. Ang wika nga'y: you cannot eat democracy. So ano ang mas mabuti — to let a few "wise" ones have the power to run a country with strict control, or to allow the people to rule and make a mess of their country?

Should we say to those in power, "Bigyan lang kami ng pamuhay, at kayo nang bahala magpalakad ng bayan. Do what you like, basta siguraduhin lang na walang Pinoy na nagugutom." Or should we demand power for ourselves, even if we won't know how to use it properly?

It's a hard choice. Let's hope this Year of the Goat will mean a better life for all.

\* \* \* \* \*

February 2003

## ASWANG AND OTHER GHOSTS

**D**o Pinoys believe in ghosts? Is it mainly the older folks who do, or also many of the younger generation?

A survey on population I read some time ago revealed that some 50 percent of Filipinos are under 25 years of age. This makes me wonder how many of my kababayan grew up (and are growing up) with the same superstitions as I did as a child many years ago (kay tagal na noong panahon!).

As a child, I was sometimes told by my superstitious yaya never to open an umbrella inside the house — bad luck daw ito because one might die by drowning. (Natatakot talaga ako nito, kasi I don't know how to swim!)

My grandmother also told me once never to wash my hair at night. "*Porque?*" tinanong ko (she spoke Spanish to us children). Ang sagot niya ay "*Mala suerte!*" Hindi niya sinabi anong klaseng bad luck — death by drowning in the bathtub kaya?

Hindi ko malimutan that my Cebuano yaya once refused to have her photograph taken during one of our children's parties. "Ngano mang dili ka magparetrato?" I asked her — I think I was about 8 yrs old at the time. She whispered: "Duna ko'y regla karon — the picture will be blurred!" So I grew up thinking that blurred photographs were not caused by bad film or clumsy photographers but by menstruating women posing for cameras!

May nagsasabi that pregnant women should not let themselves be photographed because their babies might die. They should also not look at dwarfs or deformed persons during pregnancy because their babies might be born that way. Ay naku!

In 1970, a *"Dictionary of Philippine Folk Beliefs & Customs"* was written by Jesuit priest Francisco Demetrio. His research found that there are some 3,000 different superstitions from 47 Philippine provinces. Ngunit sinabi ni Fr. Demetrio na hindi dapat natin itawag na "superstitions" ang mga ito but "folk beliefs."

Sa kanyang listahan, may isang essay na tungkol sa Semana Santa — hindi daw dapat maghawak ng pointed objects like knives during Holy Week. (Ano kaya — would it mean death by stabbing?)

May mga tao din daw sa ilang probinsiya na, kung may patay sa bahay na dadalhin sa sementeryo, hindi nilabas ang kabaong sa pinto but through a window — to avoid another death in the family kono. Pambihira talaga — ano kung mahulog ang bangkay galing sa bintana?

Each country has its folklore, and we know that the Chinese here in Hong Kong also have their superstitious. Just think of their *feng shui*. Most of their beliefs have to do with — ano pa? — money! We might laugh to see them place food and money on graves in cemeteries (do the dead spend money and eat?). Still the Chinese could very well call us "*cheeseen*" (loko-loko) for putting flowers on graves. Tanongin nila: can the dead see and smell flowers?

As the Philippines has modernized over the years, marami pa ba sa atin ay naniniwala ng mga superstitions — I mean, folk beliefs? How many of us wake up after midnight and see ghosts? Not me — *oongoo* ang nakikita ko!

\* \* \* \* \*

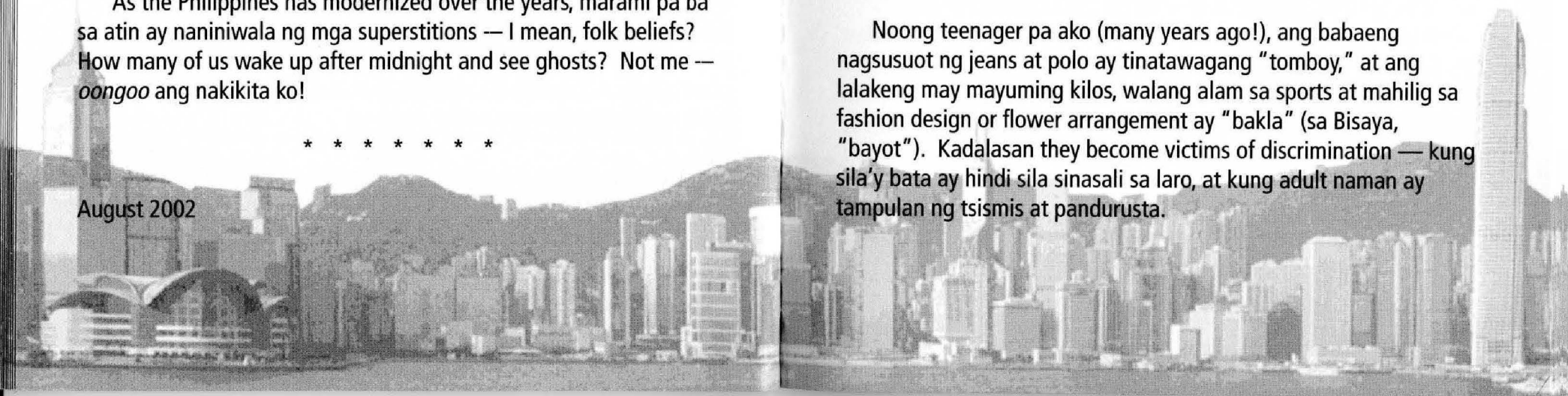
August 2002

## BAKLA, BAYOT, TOMBOY atbp.

One of my friends in Manila recently said, "Nababaliw na yata ang mundo!" This was on hearing the news about same-sex marriages. Hindi yata niya alam na matagal nang may kapwa babae at kapwa lalaking ikinakasal sa iba't ibang lugar ng mundo — lalo na sa US at Europe. Ngayon sa ating bayan ay napabalita na minsa'y mayroon ring ganitong marriage ceremonies. May pari pa daw ang nagkakasal sa itong mga couples — ngunit nga hindi pinapayagan ng Simbahan. Ang kadalasang reaction ng madlang tao ay ganito: "Ano ba 'yan?!" Most people would joke about it, others would feel uncomfortable and change the subject. And there are those who condemn these kinds of unions.

Ang nai-scandalize ay yung mga super-religious who believe that homosexuality is an "abomination." And yet some of these self-righteous people who think they are the only morally upright ones on the planet are those who feel no charity towards others and make ugly tsismis about their kapwa-tao; they simply cannot tolerate gender differences in their society. It reminds me of the saying in Cebu when I was small: "Santa-santita labunto maldita!" (Para kang santa, pero salbahe ka pala.) Iyan ang mga taong ayaw aminin na ang mga homosexual are tao rin.

Noong teenager pa ako (many years ago!), ang babaeng nagsusuot ng jeans at polo ay tinatawagang "tomboy," at ang lalakeng may mayuming kilos, walang alam sa sports at mahilig sa fashion design or flower arrangement ay "bakla" (sa Bisaya, "bayot"). Kadalasan they become victims of discrimination — kung sila'y bata ay hindi sila sinasali sa laro, at kung adult naman ay tampulan ng tsismis at pandurusta.





The truly intolerant people ay iyong nagsasabi na “unnatural” daw ang mga tinatawag na “third sex.” Hindi nila mapansin na marami nitong mga tao are bright, often extraordinary people, iyung mga very talented, sometimes exceptionally brilliant folks. Hindi rin nila iniisip na punong-puno na ngayon ang mundo ng tao (ang karamihan ay naghihirap), at kay daming taong nag-separate at nag-divorce — and that same-sex couples don’t produce children and so are not contributing to the population explosion.

There are same-sex couples who adopt children. Ang mga tumawa sa ganitong kalagayan ay nagsasabi, “Ano, may dalawang Daddy ang bata? Walang Mommy?” May kilala akong dalawang babaeng Kano who had a marriage ceremony in Hawaii and adopted two poor children from Guatemala. Wala talagang kakulangan itong dalawang Mommy sa kanilang pag-ibig at pagaalaga sa mga bata nilang adopted.

Sabi nga sa Bible, let those without sin cast the first stone. So, wala kayang sala iyong mga nagsasabi na homosexuality is a sin?

\* \* \* \* \*

November 2002

## MGA TRIBUNG PINOY

I like looking at maps. Nawiwili talaga ako tumingin ng mga atlas. I enjoy looking at the places that I’ve been to and marking those I’d like to visit someday. Hindi pa ako nakapunta sa Africa o South America (nakadaan lang ako sa Panama Canal noong teenager ako). I’ve been to Japan, Spain, Portugal, Italy, England and the U.S., and I once lived in Thailand and Malaysia. Suerte na nakabisita din ako sa Barbados, sa West Indies.

Isa kong paboritong mapa ay nanggaling sa *National Geographic* magazine. It shows how the world’s oceans would look if there was no water — the mountains and valleys na parang lunar landscape talaga. I don’t know why I enjoy looking at this map, maski alam kong hindi ako makabisita diyan.

Mayroon din akong isang lumang mapa produced by the Commission on National Integration in 1970, noong 30 million lang ang ating population (we Pinoys now number over 70 million, and growing). Ang ganda nitong mapa because it shows the 47 known ethnic groups, from the Igorots of the Mountain Province to the Badjaos of the Sulu Sea.

Nakakataka talaga ang listahan ng ating mga minority tribes na nakatira sa iba’t ibang probinsiya. Ang mga tribu sa Luzon ay ang mga Apayao, Tinggian, Bontoc, Kalinga, Ifugao, Ibaloy, Ibaleng, Iraya, Ilongot, Dumagat, Remontado at Aeta. Sa Visayas naman mayroon ding Aeta, Nauhan at Sulod. Sa Mindoro may Iraya, Tayadan, Nauhan, Pula, Alangan, Bangon at Hanunoo.

Sa Mindanao naman may mga Manobo, Bagobo, Tagabili, Magindanao, Isbanganon, Mansaka, Mandaya, Samal, Tiruray, Maranao at Bilaan. At sa Sulo may Tausog, Yakan, Samal at Samal Banggigi.

Kay daming klaseng Pinoy! Today, ano ang kalagayan nitong mga tribu, at ilan kaya sa kanila ay na-absorb sa Christian majority? Mayroon kayang sumama sa MNLF, MILF, NPA o Abu Sayyaf? Mayroon ba kayang mga taga-tribu ang mga nag-kikidnap? Alam natin na may marami pa ring problema sa iba't ibang dako ng bansa – ang mas malubha ay ang kakulangan ng pag-alaga sa mga tunay na naghihirap. The Commission on National Integration was set up 'way back in 1957, but was it able to achieve much?

Kung isipin, hindi lang ang mga minority tribe ang naghihirap ngayon, ngunit marami din ng mga Kristiyano na taga Luzon, Bisayas at Mindanao.

Sa palagay ko, hindi dapat natin isipin na tayo'y taga A, B, C o D (Abra, Bulacan, Cebu o Davao). Instead, we should be more aware of us all being Filipinos. That's how a country shows its unity, strength and pride.

\* \* \* \* \*

July 2002

## TAX OR WAGE CUT?

Ever since the 1970s when the Marcos regime started ruining the Philippine economy, forcing many Filipinos to seek work abroad, talagang umunlad ang economiya ng Hong Kong. Paano nangyari 'yun? Obviously because by freeing Hong Kong housewives who were able to leave home to work in factories, stores and offices, ang mga foreign domestic workers (who at the time were mostly Filipinas) ay ang nagtulong sa pagyaman ang Hong Kong. Ang sakripisyo ng mga Pinay ay malaking bahagi ng pagunlad sa economiya dito – while also benefiting Filipino families at home who rely on the financial support of wives, mothers and sisters abroad.

Remittances by Filipino workers abroad in the first five months of 2002 was reported at US\$3.62 billion. Isipin lang ito – kung walang nagtrabaho sa labas nga bayan, lulubog ang ating bansa.

Ngunit marami ding ibang bansang naghihirap. Sumusunod sa pagdating ng mga Pinay sa Hong Kong ang mga taga Thailand, Sri Lanka at Nepal. And now we find many Indonesian women coming to work here, showing that their country is really suffering economically. Previously, a Muslim country like Indonesia would not allow their women to leave home. But now that they are facing grave difficulties (besides the bad economy, separatism and terrorism), the authorities seem willing to overlook the old Islamic rules that don't allow women to leave their homes.

It's known that there are a number of Hong Kong employers who pay the Indonesians less than the minimum wage, which the women accept because they are so desperate. Meanwhile the Hong Kong Government pretends this is not happening – so, anong nangyari? Not only are Indonesian domestics being cheated, Pinays also lose because they either have to accept lower wages or be replaced by cheaper workers.

Ano ang dahilan nitong sitwasyon? Around the mid-1990s, noong nagumpisa ang Asian crisis, malubhang na apektado ang



my country – at Lola ako, so I can say anything I like!”

We Pinoys are conscious of our rights and of what our government does (and does not do) for us, at marami sa atin ay talagang naiinis sa pulitika. Maybe this is why we like to poke fun at our politicians, because we feel powerless – pinagbibiruan nalang natin ang mga useless (at mga crook) na opisyal sa ating gobyerno. Remember all the Erap jokes showing how stupid we were to choose that character as our leader? Hindi lang nakakatawa ito, nakakalungkot din kung iisipin. Parang wala na tayong pag-asa. Ngunit hindi ito nangahulugan na kulang ang ating pag-ibig sa bayan.

Mayroon akong nabasa noong isang araw na tunay na words of wisdom: “Today we live in a world where madmen lead the blind – but we’re not blind, we’re in the dark.”

Dapat sabihin natin sa mga senador, at sa ating pamahalaan, that we are not blind but that we’re sick and tired of being in the dark. A light should be shone on the lives of Filipinos toiling abroad by letting them exercise their democratic rights. Tama na ang lahat na pagpapasyal abroad to “dialogue.” Our officials should stay home and do the work for which they were elected. Sabi nga, stop talking and start doing!

\* \* \* \* \*

May 2002

*\*Absentee voting for overseas Filipinos was finally implemented in 2004. The turn-out in Hong Kong by the OFWs was high.*

## TOO MUCH “PO”-ING AND “HO”-ING

**W**ow! Ang galing ng bagong diyaryo natin! But I have one comment about publisher Rex Aguado. Kilala ko siya – nice guy at matalino talaga. Walang question na talented na lalaki ito, especially now that he and his group have produced the new paper *Pinoy Abroad*. Obviously, mayroon si Rex ng tatlong “I” – instinct, initiative and imagination.

My complaint about Rex is this: sobra siyang pagka-*obsequious*. Ano ‘yun, sabi n’yo? Kaparis ba ito sa OA (over-acting)? Bago ninyong sabihin na I’m showing off by using a big English word (one with four syllables), let me explain. I use this O word because, being a Cebuana, hindi ko alam ang Tagalog word for someone who is too nice, too polite, too accommodating – na para bagang he would bend down to kiss your feet (or something else) whenever he sees you.

Nakikita n’yo ito sa sinulat ni Rex sa kanyang “Kontra Punto” column sa first issue ng *Pinoy Abroad*. Here’s an excerpt, with my italics:

*“Lahat PO ng interes na pwedeng salihan ng Pinoy ay nandito. Halimbawa PO, sa isyung ito, we are doing stories on crucial community concerns. Nariyan din PO ang aming inspiring story on a local Filipino musician....At siyempre pa PO, nariyan din ang aming mba beteranong kolumnista....Kaya, sige PO, kandungin n’yo ang aming baby. Nawa PO’y maramdaman n’yo rin ang aming kasiyahan.”*

Naku po! (Ay! Ako naman ang gumagamit nitong pesteng salita!) Kailangan bang gumamit ng ganito ka daming “po”? Hindi ba pwedeng maging direct tayo kung sumulat o mag-usap, na hindi iyong para kang nag-bowing down to the ground?

To be fair, hindi lang si Rex ang ganito. Andiyan din sa mga Tagalog kong kababayan ang depektong ito: napaka-obsequious. Why do they always add "Po" (or "Ho" or "Ma'am" or "Sir") to their sentences whenever addressing an elder or a foreigner — sobra bang pagkagalang ito, o sobrang ka-artificial? Are they so used to being oppressed by rich folks, their elders and white people which is why they display this slavish attitude? Mahirap ba para sa mga Tagalog speakers magusap ng direct, with pride and self respect, without overdoing the "Po"? Tama na sana ito — let's have some pride!

\* \* \* \* \*

February 2002

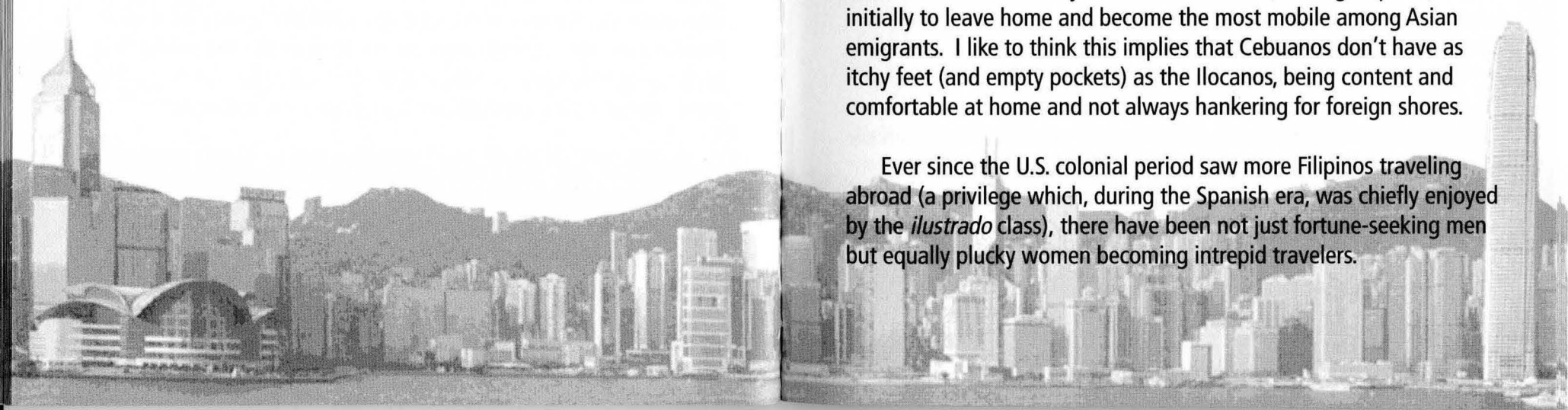
## WHY CEBUANOS ARE A SUPERIOR PEOPLE

I realize the title of this piece will make non-Cebuano Filipinos see red, so I'd better admit, at the outset, that I'm from Cebu. I'm prepared to back up my statement about our superiority — though I admit my reasoning might be somewhat colored by rosy-hued memories of my childhood days in Cebu. It was a fairly idyllic time, with doting parents and several older brothers and sisters, and quite a carefree life as the youngest in the family (I'd been number six for a spell till my mother had three more children, knocking me off my pampered perch).

My bold assertion about Cebuano superiority doesn't just spring from my long experience as an overseas Pinay, but also results from my having met quite a number of Cebuanos overseas. I'm always especially impressed by the Cebuanas. It's been in Hong Kong where I've been able to see how my compatriots from the different regions of our country behave when they're abroad.

Should a survey be taken of the regional groups among Filipino migrant workers around Asia, one would most likely find that the Ilocanos comprise about 70 percent of the total. This must be because Ilocanos have historically been the main force, among Filipinos, initially to leave home and become the most mobile among Asian emigrants. I like to think this implies that Cebuanos don't have as itchy feet (and empty pockets) as the Ilocanos, being content and comfortable at home and not always hankering for foreign shores.

Ever since the U.S. colonial period saw more Filipinos traveling abroad (a privilege which, during the Spanish era, was chiefly enjoyed by the *ilustrado* class), there have been not just fortune-seeking men but equally plucky women becoming intrepid travelers.





The early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century saw mostly men heading for those proverbial greener pastures in Hawaiian plantations, Californian farms and Alaskan fisheries. Hailing mainly from the economically depressed northern region, the hardworking and thrifty Ilocanos made up the majority of Filipinos seeking jobs abroad in those days.

Today the dialect one hears most frequently in large gatherings of Filipina workers (particularly in Hong Kong) is Ilocano, spoken by the daughters of those hardy men who were our first migrant workers.

What an irony to think that it was an Ilocano president, Ferdinand Marcos, who caused the massive diaspora of his people. Indeed, that "great" Ilocano inflicted such damage to his country's economy, politics and morale, it has taken a while for Filipinos to feel genuine pride and self-respect in the struggle to overcome poverty.

Unlike our Asian neighbors who are secure in their identities, we Pinoys sometimes tend to display an insecurity bordering on neurosis. Not too long ago, a comic strip by a Hong Kong-based cartoonist which ran in Malaysia's *New Straits Times* was the subject of a diplomatic protest by our Foreign Office, which completely misconstrued the intent of the cartoon. The strip was actually an attack on abusive Hong Kong employers of Filipinas, but some diplomat thought it was the Filipina maids who were being maligned. Such a contretemps showed that our foreign service can produce thin-skinned, humorless bureaucrats.

If it had been Cebuanos – the most comfortably self-assured among Pinoys – who'd seen the cartoon, they would have grasped the humor immediately and wouldn't have reacted in such a bizarre manner. Being sophisticated folks, by and large, Cebuanos would also not go wild with an adolescent euphoria whenever a Pinay pop star wins a foreign award, or a Pinay model wins a beauty title, or a Pinoy boxer wins the silver medal at the Olympics. Cebuanos don't feel the need to constantly seek ways to boost their morale, because it's

always up – unlike the rest of our kababayan whose sensitivities seem extremely fragile.

We Cebuanos are the original cool cats. We don't have damaged psyches, nor do we display a downtrodden demeanor when we're abroad, nor do we aggressively proclaim our patriotism (to cover up an inferiority complex). Even the most destitute Cebuano does not kowtow to anyone, nor does he adopt a smarmy deferential attitude towards anyone older, wealthy or foreign.

This natural pride has historical roots, obviously because Cebuanos were the first Filipinos to conquer a foreign invader. The native chieftain Lapulapu's victory over Ferdinand Magellan on the Cebuano island of Mactan is something about which we could constantly remind the world – like those among our insecure countrymen who always trot out that cliché about the Pinoy who produced NASA's moon buggy (neglecting to mention that he's a U.S. citizen and that the project was a team effort). Cebuanos are so secure in their image, they don't go around trumpeting their achievements. Instead, with their fine natural humor, they gave the name of our first national hero to a species of native fish! The humorless others would never have dreamed of bestowing a hero's name on a fish and would instead have littered the landscape with tacky statues and tasteless plaques of the hero.

As a Cebuana living in a place where Pinays make up the largest foreign community, I've found that many Westerners find it unsettling, even irritating, to have their maids be so servile. Most employers (unless they're Chinese of the "Middle Kingdom" persuasion) feel uncomfortable always to be addressed as though they belong to the master race.

A British friend once told me of her exasperation at constantly being addressed as "Ma'am," not just by her housemaid but also by any Filipinas she met downtown. "Where I come from, only the

Queen is addressed that way," she said. I tried to explain the workings of the colonial mentality which produces those feelings of inferiority; I spouted the usual cliché about our 300 years in the Spanish convent, 50 years in Hollywood and five years in a Japanese concentration camp. Her reaction was, "So that's why Filipinos are so religious. Apparently Hollywood didn't make a dent because they're such meek souls." Obviously she'd been meeting the more servile Filipinos, not the Cebuanos. (She also didn't know that Hollywood did indeed make a dent, as seen in the bizarre nicknames many grown Pinoy sport, such as "Tweetums," "Kring-Kring," "Bingle," "Cherry Pie," "JunJun" and "Baby," to name a few.)

Cebuanos would never dream of treating anyone like royalty – except grandmothers who are expert cooks. Long before the Americans arrived to introduce democracy in the islands, such a concept was being practised in Cebu. If Rizal had lived in my province, he wouldn't have had to coin that maxim about there being no slaves where there are no tyrants. He'd have seen that the slave mentality didn't exist in Cebu then – as it doesn't now!

An Australian friend of mine who hired an Ilocana named Mila once related how she told her, "Please call me Robyn." Mila replied, "Yes, Ma'am Robyn." It was apparently hard to shake off the deeply ingrained servility. I'm told Mila now occasionally says "Robyn" alone, but she does so tentatively while blushing furiously.

Then there was the girl from Manila who complied with her employer's request to call him "Jim." They had a conversation that went: "Presy, please buy me this brand of battery when you go shopping today." "Yes, Jim, I will," replied Presy, and when she got back, she said, "Oh Jim, I couldn't find that brand, but I got this one, Jim. Is that okay, Jim?" It seems she found using his first name such a novelty, she overdid it.

Addressing people by their first names comes naturally to Cebuanos. There's a democratic spirit of *bonhomie* among us which seems lacking in our northern relations. Now and then a Cebuano youngster might address an elder as "*Manang Nora*" or "*Manong Ricardo*," but there is no equivalent of the Tagalog "*Po*" and "*Ho*" which excessively punctuates the speech of Tagalogs, Ilocanos and other northerners – because no such word exists in Cebuano. Old-timers might use the feudal "*Nyor*" or "*Nyora*" (from *Señor* and *Señora*) when talking to their supposed superiors, but that practice isn't widespread.

Non-Cebuanos can claim they're being respectful, with all their "*po*"ing and "*ho*"ing, but it just sounds bogus and insincere. I can meet a Filipina in Hong Kong's Statue Square and, on learning that we're both Cebuanas, we'll immediately be on a chummy basis. She'll talk to me directly, and not in that obsequious way Tagalog speakers use which makes them seem like they're curtsying, or bending over backwards to please you.

Cebuanos still resent the fact that Tagalog was decreed as our national language, Pilipino, even though Cebuano speakers have historically been in the majority. But we've gotten our own back by, among other things, cleverly advertising to attract tourists, touting Cebu as "An Island in the Pacific" (to separate us from the rest of the country, both south and north, which suffer from image problems). More proof of superiority would be hard to find elsewhere. We are the original democrats – the inhabitants of our island practised democracy long before the Americans came on a mission to instill ideas of freedom and liberty among those they considered uncivilized natives. Cebuanos are patriotic Filipinos who know the true meaning of equality. That's why we're a superior breed!

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## JOSE RIZAL IN HONG KONG

*Remarks at the inauguration of the plaque at Rednaxela Terrace on 30 December 2004, the anniversary of the national hero's death*

Some years ago when I lived on Glenealy Road, which is not far from this site on Rednaxela Terrace, I would sometimes go up this amazing outdoor escalator to walk along this old wall and wonder where exactly #2 had been. This is because I had read the marvelous biography of Jose Rizal by the late Austin Coates which mentioned that our national hero had lived on this lane for almost a year. And I had seen, at the Fort Santiago museum in Manila, Rizal's calling card on which was printed "#2 Rednaxela Terrace, Hong Kong" as his place of residence when he lived briefly as an exile and practised medicine in the colony.

Back in 1891 one could surely have gazed from this site and seen only a few cottages and much greenery and the hills above; while below one would have been able to see the harbor & Kowloon in the distance, with a few ships and sampans in the water. Of course such views are impossible today, with all these high-rise buildings everywhere.

Austin Coates mentioned in his book that this area was one in which some Portuguese from Macau had their homes, which makes it interesting that Rizal chose this place to rent a house. From here he would have walked down to his clinic on D'Aguilar Street and gone to visit his friend Jose Maria Basa on Arbuthnot Road not farther away.

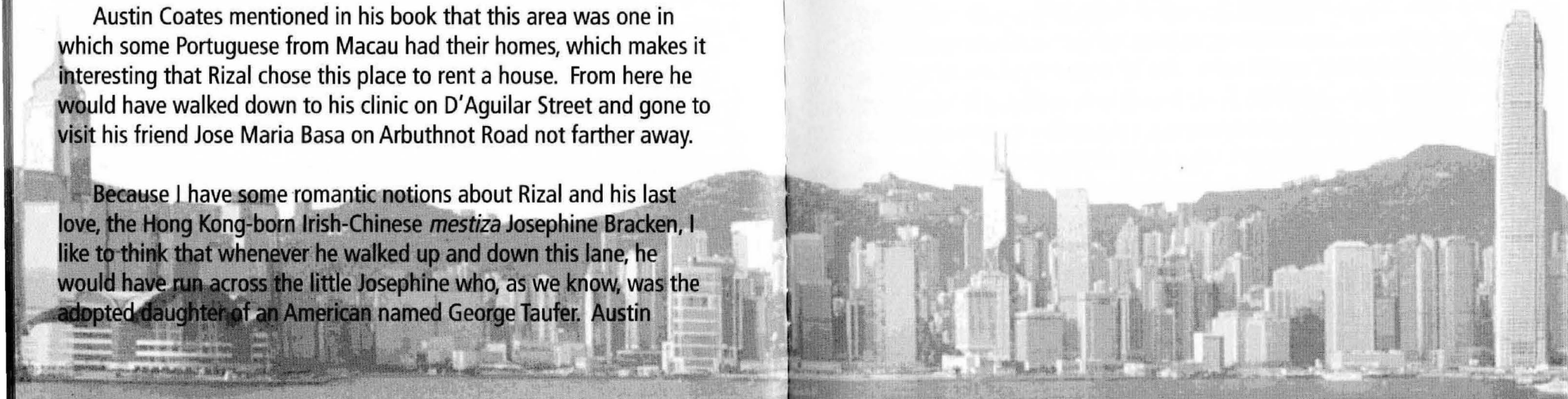
Because I have some romantic notions about Rizal and his last love, the Hong Kong-born Irish-Chinese *mestiza* Josephine Bracken, I like to think that whenever he walked up and down this lane, he would have run across the little Josephine who, as we know, was the adopted daughter of an American named George Taufer. Austin

Coates wrote that Taufer was married to a Macanese woman, so perhaps they lived in this area along with the other folks from Macau.

As we know, when Taufer was losing his eyesight and decided to consult the Filipino doctor who had achieved a measure of fame in Hong Kong during his practice of ophthalmology, Josephine sailed with her foster father to Manila and acted as his eyes. They arrived in Manila only to find that Rizal had been banished to Dapitan, so they took another boat to go to Mindanao.

The rest is history. As we know, Josephine fell in love with Rizal and chose to remain with him in Dapitan and not to return to Hong Kong with Taufer. That sad love story is something that Filipino writers and film-makers have chronicled several times. (Later, after Rizal's execution, Josephine returned to Hong Kong where she died at the age of 25. I once tried to hunt for her grave at the Happy Valley cemetery, as others have done, and found nothing — Austin Coates believed she was buried in a pauper's grave.)

I like to think that, as we inaugurate this plaque here on the lane where Jose (and possibly Josephine) lived, they would both be pleased about it.



## AFTERWORD

By Margie T. Logarta

As a journalist, eternally occupied with the business of interviewing, dashing off articles and producing a regional publication, it's not often that I take personal calls quickly, or even willingly. But when it's Isabel Escoda (known to family and friends as Betty), I have no second thoughts of turning my full attention to this special lady.

When I worked in the late '80s with the now-defunct but still well-remembered *Manila Chronicle* – resurrected by the Lopez clan during the early heady days of the Aquino administration – Isabel's writings were already known to me (I'd met her previously, albeit briefly, while visiting friends in Cheung Chau where she once lived). I was assistant editor of the *Chronicle's* Opinion page, which counted top-heavy pen-wielders like Amando Doronila (now leading commentator of the *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, then based in Canberra), Sheila Coronel (2003 Magsaysay Awardee for Journalism), political analysts Mahar Mahangas and Ricardo Malay, and commentator Isabel Ongpin in the paper's regular roster, with Isabel Escoda as an occasional contributor.

In her articles, Isabel's observations on life in the Crown Colony (those were the pre-Handover years) did not merely detail the exciting facets of a vibrant, advanced city known to Filipinos for its shopping and culinary delights, but also described its increasing lure for Filipinas who were streaming in by the score, unwittingly helping to build a burgeoning migrant community. And while Hong Kong offered these women the prospects of incomes far beyond what Manila could provide, she revealed that it also possessed a dark and heartless side. Perusing her copy, I thought I'd like to know this person better – she

cares.

I reconnected with Isabel in 2001 when I was newly arrived in Hong Kong, the continuation of my own personal diaspora which started with a decade-long stay in the garden green squeaky clean city of Singapore. We have become great friends since then, sharing a similar fate of being transplanted Filipinos and writers relying on our sense of humor as a buffer against the slings and arrows of prejudice which often is part and parcel of life in a different culture.

Too many years away from home tend to dull one's sense of nationalism as memories of the familiar fade subtly, eventually replaced by the patterns and demands of daily realities. Not so with Isabel who unabashedly proclaims her Cebuana-ness and being Filipino (despite having had Spanish and American *Lolos*) at every opportunity, using her essays – which have appeared as columns in various publications and comments in Letters to the Editors in Manila and Hong Kong – to urge our *kababayan* to be proud of their unique roots and talents, and to forego this surfeit of courtesy that has invited too many non-Filipinos to take advantage of the Filipinos' innate graciousness.

Adaptation is a gift that Filipinos are singularly blessed with, except that it's often carried out so wholeheartedly and with not much reflection, placing national identity at risk. One of our earliest OFWs (Overseas Filipino Worker) Dr Jose Rizal, who lived and practised his profession in Europe (and for a short time in Hong Kong), yearned constantly for the lush natural beauty of his homeland and the presence of his family, a theme that ran like a strong unbroken thread throughout his writings. Consumed by a burning desire to help in his country's political evolution, the national hero returned to his country, despite certain martyrdom, sealing his place in Philippine history.

We don't have to go through such lengths as Rizal did to show commitment to our country. Following Isabel's train of thought, it's enough to perform one's job – whether that workplace be in Hong Kong or Singapore, Dubai or London, or the tasks happen in an office or a household – so long as pride of one's self is always upheld.

Too many Filipinos are already adrift in the global arena – their national identity, they will eventually discover, is their ultimate anchor.

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