

Mexicanovela and Chinovela in the Philippines: A Trans-Pacific Cultural Product Reverberating from the Galleon Trade in the Days of the Empire

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Abstract

My paper traces the historical and sociocultural factors which make mexicanovela and chinovela (soap operas) popular in the Philippines. Philippines during the galleon trade (1565-1815) served as a transshipment port not only of goods and services but also of culture as well. The galleon trade was basically a trade between Mexico and China with the Philippines as a stopover. I have surveyed 15-20 mexicanovelas and chinovelas. The mexicanovelas' popularity in the Philippines can be attributed to the feudal and cacique setting which both Mexico and Philippines experienced under the same colonial master = Spanish empire. The soap's characters particularly the heroine depict the feudal mentalite and behaviour reminiscent of the colonial years in spite of a 20th century contemporary urban setting. Chinovelas' (Taiwan soaps) heroine differ in that they have more freedom and independence from their male partners. The Chinese in the Philippines have been typified to be mercantilist and/or aggressive traders. Taiwan soaps showcase the material development of Taiwan with skyscrapers and corporate settings. Filipino audience shifted to the Taiwan soaps not solely because of the popularity of the F-4 pop group but because the material prosperity (urbanization/citification) projected in these soaps have become a symbol of the Filipinos' own aspirations towards a better life.

Lately, the Koreanovela has eclipsed the Chinovela. This later development although not the focus of my paper will be briefly discussed if only to update information about the current trends in soap opera ratings on Philippine television. The reason why Korean soaps have dominated the boob tube is also cultural.

I. Culture Industry and Popular Culture in the Philippines

In an age of cyberspace and global transactions, the Philippines is a veritable market of foreign soap operas. Soap operas are locally known as telenovellas, a derivative of television as a popular medium, and novella, the Spanish word for the English novel. Telenovella is thus, a long playing drama on television.

In the 1980s, two American soap operas, *Dallas* and *Knots Landing* were so popular on Philippine television. These soaps were a favorite of mostly middle-aged middle-class women which included both working women and domestic mothers. This was also the time when teenaged students were hooked into reading romance novels such as the Mills & Boon, Harlequin Romance and the more recent *Sweet Valley High*.

But it was only in 1995 when the soap opera genre became phenomenal with the showing of *Marimar*, a Mexican soap. *Marimar* topbilled the pop singer Thalia now married to the Sony executive Tommy Mottola who was the ex-husband of the queen of pop songs Mariah Carey. *Marimar* is the name of the lead character which actually means Maria del Mar or Maria of the Sea. It is a story of an orphan girl living with his adoptive grandparents beside the seashore. With her youthful innocence, *Marimar* charmed the rich scion of the hacienda Santi Banez. Unaccepted by the feudal lord's family, *Marimar* suffered all sorts of humiliation and came back as an avenging angel from the city.

Filipino audiences from all walks of life, male and female, gay and lesbian, old and young were swept by what was then coined as the Mexicanovella. Cutting across economic classes, *Marimar* enjoyed a wide range of viewership. This included highly esteemed university professors such as sociologist and critic Prof. Randolph David who in his newspaper column in the leading newspaper *The Daily Inquirer* wrote "Why I Watch *Marimar*" in 1996. In his column, Prof. David underscored the historical relations between Mexico and the Philippines during the Spanish colonial years. It was then no surprising when the Philippine Government under the presidency of Fidel V. Ramos prepared a red-carpet welcome for Thalia during her visit in the country the same year bestowing upon her an informal title of ambassadress of goodwill from Mexico. After *Marimar*, Mexicanovellas flooded primetime Philippine television.

The new millennium introduced the Chinovela, which are actually soap operas from Taiwan. Filipino young audiences went crazy over F-4, a very popular group from Taiwan which were the stars of the most popular Chinovela, *Meteor Garden*. Since they were Chinese, the Filipino tv production and audiences alike came to call it Chinovela lumping altogether images of the modern urban Chinese culled from the Taiwan soap making no distinction of Taiwanese from mainland Chinese. *Meteor Garden* is an original Japanese anime with the title, *Hana Yori Dango*. It was adopted as a drama series in Taiwan and exported

to other Asian countries such as the Philippines. The popularity of the *Chinovela Meteor Garden* can also be attributed primarily to the pop group F-4 not only as tv actors and singers but also as product endorsers of the global softdrink company Pepsi. After *Meteor Garden*, *Chinovelas* dominated Philippine primetime television. Eventually, *Chinovelas* replaced the *Mexicanovela* as the leading foreign soap opera in the country.

[Almost at the same time that *Chinovela* soared to high ratings, Korean soap opera or *Koreanovela* we call it have become the latest craze among Filipino tv audiences. This recent development shall be discussed at the end of this paper since the focus of this study are the *Mexicanovella* and *Chinovela* being reverberations from the galleon trade in the age of material adventurism. But let me preempt a little the paper's findings here by stating that, to date, it is the *Koreanovela* which has supplanted the popularity of the *Chinovela* after the latter supplanted the *Mexicanovella*.]

These two foreign soap operas (*Mexicanovella* and *Chinovela*) exported to the Philippine tv market as cultural products have enjoyed tremendous audience share, with each, leading the entire drama series at a given period of time. Canned soap operas as cultural products are not only commodities peddled by globalized culture industries. Unlike the earlier postulations on popular culture by the Frankfurt School that capitalists dictate and impose standards and tastes upon the mass thereby creating false consciousness, recent cultural studies by David Morley (1980), Stuart Hall (1988) and Mica Nava (1991) have less emphasized the high-low or elite-mass culture dichotomy. Instead, these new studies look into the signifier and signified meanings which contribute to the acceptance of such product as popular culture.

With the *Mexicanovella* and *Chinovela*, their acceptance and popularity in the Philippines are not entirely dependent on foreign capitalists' dictate on the market. The audience are not passive recipients of cultural commodities but are as well social actors who make or break a program's success. Why do Filipinos love the *Mexicanovella* and *Chinovela*? What signifying patterns, motifs and symbols do we find in these telenovelas appealing to the Filipino audience?

In this study, I have retraced Filipino fascination over *Mexicanovella* and *Chinovela* to its earlier relations with Mexico and China in the once flourishing galleon trade from 1565-1815. The galleon trade was basically a trade between Mexico and China with Manila as its transshipment port.

II. Galleon Trade and Globalization

Economic theories on globalization emphasize the formation of a 'unified economic network' or a

'modern world system' (Wallerstein, 1974) which obscures the existence of national economies. But Immanuel Wallerstein himself admits that globalization is not simply a matter of 'global economic integration' or 'cultural homogenization' since transnational companies still need to address the important issues attendant to culture. Victor Roudometof and Roland Robertson (1995) came out with the term 'glocalization' as a recuperative term of globalization. Putting significance to cultural practices which shape globalization, 'glocalization' intends to present the interface between the global and the locale.

Globalization in the 20th century in line with the cultural paradigm used by recent theorists such as Roudometof and Robertson, is therefore, not something new in the Philippines. The galleon trade was actually the first global transaction that opened the East to the West for a period of 250 years, from 1565-1815. Historians consider the galleon route as the most significant commercial pathway between the orient and the occident, with 9,000 nautical miles from each direction. The galleon trade was basically a trade between Mexico and China through the Pacific Ocean with Manila as its stopover and/or transshipment port. According to historian William Lytle Schurz,

“To the peoples of Spanish America, they were the China ships [nao de China] or Manila Galleons that brought them cargoes of silks and spices and other precious merchandise of the East. To those of the Orient, they were the argosies, laden with the Mexican and Peruvian pesos that are to become the standard of value among its coasts. To California, they furnished the first occasion and motive for the exploration of its coast. To Spain, they were the link that bound the Philippines – and, for a time, the Moluccas – to her, and it was their comings and goings that gave some substance of reality to the Spanish dream of empire over the Pacific.” (*Manila Galleons*; 1985)

The trade saw an exchange of goods between Mexico and China. Mexican silver was the principal product delivered to China while Chinese silk, porcelain, filigree and other precious items proliferated in the market. But it was mercury from China which was the most indispensable trading item used to smelt silver and other metals, pursuant to a mercantilist economy that Spain was still dependent on at the time. The Philippines was for the first 200 years under Mexico receiving an annual subsidy known as the *situado*. Thus, the Philippines was considered interestingly as “a colony of a colony” with Mexico as the

most favored colony of Spain renamed as Nueva Espana or New Spain.

Eventually, other countries became interested and began participating in what they perceived as a lucrative trade. These countries included Japan, Britain and its colonies, even the distant Americas. The galleon trade officially ended in 1815 but became the impetus in the opening of the Philippines to world trade by the British in 1834.

Jonathan Fast and Jim Richardson (1987) assessed the galleon trade as an economic failure owing to Spain's reliance on the outdated mercantilist philosophy in a modernizing 19th century. But if the galleon trade incurred deficit in terms of economy, it however, earned cultural mileage in the exchange of cultural products between Mexico and China, including other participant countries. For instance, flora and fauna from Mexico cross-pollinated with Philippine's own natural resources producing a different variety of cacao, chili, horses, etc. The Mexican word *tiangge* (flea market) is until now enjoying popular usage. At the same time, Filipinos appropriated Chinese fireworks, drugs, cuisine, beliefs and habits. Nowhere in China can you find *pancit bihon* or *pancit sotanghon* (noodles) but only in the Philippines.

The galleon trade did not only transport goods and products but even people and their stories. The Philippines which at first, merely served as a transshipment port became the exporter of Filipino bodies via the galleon in the days of the empire.

Mexico-Philippine Historical/Cultural Relations

The first Filipinos in Mexico were those who came aboard the galleon ships. Most of them married native Mexicans but established Filipino communities with their growing families. The Filipino historian Dr. Jaime Veneracion (1998) discovered a small town in Oaxaca said to be founded by the Filipino Lorenzo Paulo. The town is called Salina Cruz but the district is known as *Filipinenses*. Dr. Veneracion curious about the district's name found more about Lorenzo Paulo. Paulo was a fisherman's son in Manila. He stowed away from home and found himself in a galleon ship together with another Filipino Fernando Javier. Arriving in Mexico, Paulo and Javier resided in Salina Cruz. Paulo built the port there with his own skills learnt from his experiences as a child of the sea. He was made head of the maritime security of that port by the governor of Oaxaca Benito Juarez who would eventually be the first Indian president of Mexico. Paulo sired a lot of children by his two marriages to Mexican women. Paulo founded the district of *Filipinenses*. Every year, the Paulos' reunion produced more children and grandchildren until the entire district is made up of the Paulo clan.

Similar stories of Filipino migrants arriving in Mexico in the old Baja California strait trace their

beginnings to the galleon trade. The first Filipino population in America is said to be those who came via Mexico in the age of the galleon. Even the Mexican revolt against Spain from 1810 included in its list prominent Filipino names aboard early galleon ships. Historians consider the Filipino involvement in the Mexican revolt as having contributed greatly to its success. In Mexico, Filipinos brought with them their own customs, traditions, habits and even technology. Tequila-making is said to be a technology introduced by early Filipinos in Mexico. The Filipino settlements until now are distinguished from the general native Mexican population because of their love for singing, loud conversations and boisterous laughter, their drinking sprees and spicy food. Filipinos in Mexico are thus known to be a 'happy people'.

On the other end, Manila galleons transported Mexican prisoners/exiles to the Philippines. One was a Mexican Yanqui Indian with the name of Nakabeba. Together with other Mexican prisoners, Nakabeba was brought to the province of Pampanga. Nakabeba settled here with other Mexican prisoners leaving the names of the towns they settled in as Mexico and Macabebe (from Nakabeba?) in this province of Pampanga. More Mexican prisoners were exiled in the northern part of the Philippines so that in the town of Vigan in Ilocos province, the Mexican *empanada* is up to this day a favorite streetfood by the residents and even by local tourists.

Thus, Mexican-Philippine relations spans back to the galleon era under the Spanish empire. The two Spanish colonies, Mexico and the Philippines underwent the same colonial experience -- oppressed by feudal apparatus of control, contained similar revolutionary sentiments, and struggled to be free as a nation. This colonial history framed the Mexicans and the Filipinos alike so that much of their literatures (including contemporary popular culture) reverberate with the feudal-cacique setting of their past. This sameness has constructed signifying patterns and motifs in the Mexicanovella which may explain Filipino's fondness of the Mexican soap opera. Why Filipinos love the Mexicanovella shall be discussed in the next pages.

Chinese-Philippine Historical/Cultural Relations

Chinese link with the Philippines dates back to prehispanic times (or before Spanish colonization in the 1500s). In fact, the first recorded history of the Philippines was made by the Chinese chronicler Chao Ju-Kua. In 1575, a Chinese pirate Li Ma Hong established a kingdom in the town of Lingayen, in the northern province of Pangasinan. Li Ma Hong killed the prominent Spanish conquistador Martin de Goiti and eluded capture and arrest from the valiant Spanish soldier Juan de Salcedo. Li Ma Hong left hundreds of Chinese in Lingayen who intermarried with the natives. The Chinese population in the province increased by 17th century creating a Chinese community or a Chinatown in Lingayen and thereafter, in the

commercial city of Dagupan.

But it was not until the galleon era when droves of Chinese came to the Philippines as adjunct of the galleon trade. Since not all Chinese could participate in the galleon trade, the enterprising Chinese came personally to the Philippines to engage in direct trade. They brought with them luxury items such as Chinese silk, porcelain, brass, ornate furniture and other domestic products. This whetted the appetite of the aristocratic Spaniards inside the colonial capital of Intramuros or walled city. The Chinese established a Chinese commercial district outside of the Intramuros called the Parian. The Chinese engaged in buy and sell, put up retail outlets and eventually became landowners. The Spaniards who became envious of their newfound economic status were suspicious of the Chinese. With discriminatory policies which conflagrated into racist purge from the 17th century, the Chinese at Parian were driven to nearby Pampanga. With British occupation of Manila from 1762-64, it was not surprising if the Chinese became conduits of the British. They were also with the British when the latter opened the Philippines to world trade in 1834.

One interesting historical data about early Philippine-China relations is the visitation of the Sultan of Sulu in southern Philippines to the Emperor of China in the 13th century. The Sultanate of Sulu was considered to be the most advanced political formation in prehispanic Philippine archipelago. It was a tributary principality of China. The royal visit of Sultan Paduka Batara to China however ended in tragedy. Sultan Batara suddenly became ill and consequently died in China. He was buried in a royal manner and his wife and two sons, including other relatives remained in China since then. Hence, a Filipino community was born in China and remained so after several centuries. Finally, it was only in 2004 when Batara's descendants now all Chinese nationals first rekindled their ethnic ties by visiting Sulu and other parts of southern Philippines. This sentimental journey is both historical and cultural, and thus, symbolic of the age-old ties between China and the Philippines.

How has modern Filipinos of today look at the Chinese? With a very significant Chinese-Filipino population in the Philippines similar to those in Singapore, Indonesia and even in Malaysia, the *Chinoys* as we fondly call them are perceived by most as the dominant economic force in the country. The entry of Taiwanese investors in recent times has reaffirmed the historical perception that indeed the Chinese wield economic power and dominate the business sector. With the globalized if not stereotype image of the Chinese as *kung fu* masters or martial arts experts, including their women (such as in the much hyped Hollywood movie *Crouching Tiger*), the Chinese are also looked up to as possessing mystical powers, profoundly philosophical yet with a sense of freedom and discipline. Both images of Chinese as progressively economic and flying *kung fu* masters are very evident in the Chinovelas which continue to entertain Filipino audiences of today. These images conjured through time shall explain the Filipino's

fondness for the Chinovelas.

III. Why Filipinos Love The Mexicanovela

Filipinos love the Mexicanovella....

1. Because of its feudal setting, backdrop and characters =

The *hacienda* system which was a land-grant provided for by the Spanish Crown was experienced by both Philippines and Mexico as Spain's colonies. *Haciendas* comprising of several acres of land were self-contained communities where the peasants work in the field and live within it. Peasants' children, particularly, the beautiful girls work as domestic helpers in the house of the feudal lords reifying the cacique relations in a landlord-tenant relationship.

Hacenderos or feudal lords of the manor were the affluent mestizo classes whose looks and demeanor approximate the idealized persona of the Spanish colonial master. The mestizo hacendero or his rich scion becomes the object of desire by the women in the *hacienda* or even by rich heiresses of other *haciendas*.

Filipino audiences of the Mexicanovella, particularly the women, are thrilled by the romantic or rather romanticized courtship between the rich mestizo hacendero and his beautiful peasant girl. This is a classic formula which we find in the following Mexicanovellas: *Marimar*, *Paloma*, *Por Ti*, *Esmeralda*, *Maria del Carmen*, and *Pasion de Amor*. This Cinderella formula of a love story is always a sure fire hit especially among the female young audiences who suffer from various forms of poverty and deprivation and dream of their own Prince Charming. Exactly, what the satirical movie *Shrek* intended to spoof.

A typical scene which titillates Filipino female viewers is when the mestizo hunk-looking hacendero rides on his horse barely clad in jeans surveying his hacienda against the setting sun. The beautiful faces of Mexican actresses add to the vicarious experience of poor Filipina women who would want to see themselves adorned and adored (like the Mexican lead actresses) in the midst of their economic and domestic difficulties. This penchant for mestiza beauty is another colonial vestige. Filipino cultural studies expert Dr. Nicanor Tiongson wrote about one Filipino value. And this is the belief that a Filipina is considered beautiful if she is fair and mestiza. This is exactly how it is in the Mexicanovellas. We usually find the mestiza Mexicans in the lead roles while the native Yanqi or Appalaquian Mexicans getting the marginal roles as vendors or domestic helpers.

There are actually 3 Mexican soap operas which featured ugly heroine to emphasize the beauty that is within. However, this was not sustained in these soap operas. At the end of the story, the three Mexican

ugly heroines Alicia, Tina and Betty La Fea (same as the title of the Mexicanovellas) were transformed to real physical beauties like the ugly duckling which turned into a beautiful swan.

A significant number of Mexicanovella has the setting of the hacienda near the sea. Again, the scenic view of the sea easily captures the heart of Filipino viewers since they live in an archipelago surrounded by seas. In fact, the 'hacienda'- 'sea' settings have been used a cliché to romantic love stories, especially for the forbidden rich boy-poor girl love affair.

Most heroines in Mexicanovellas are always depicted as fallen angel, maltreated and humiliated by the family of the rich hacendero's family. At the end of the story, she bounces back as an avenging angel equipped with all the cunning and wily ways she has acquired from the city. Filipino audiences just love that since the Mexicanovella provide them not only a mirror of their realities but also a way of release or catharsis by fitting into the shoes of the Mexicanovella's avenging angel.

Because the hacienda system and the feudal culture that it bred has been a part of Filipino life, Filipino audiences could easily relate to the Mexicanovella's setting, backdrop and characters.

2. Because of its thematic love story which always has a happy ending =

The metrical romance mode in Philippine Literature under Spain in the 19th century has greatly influenced the succeeding literary and cultural texts in modern Philippines. The metrical romances (awit and corrido) are Euro-Hispanic literatures enjoyed by colonial Filipinos which dwelt on the lives and loves of the members of the royal family in a monarchical setting. It is usually an incredible love story between royal families beset by intrigue, jealousy, and hate. After the metrical romances became popular in colonial Philippines, the zarzuela followed suit. Similarly, the zarzuela is also a love story only that it involved secular characters. Lead characters are no longer members of the royal family but ordinary mortals who are also victims of love, deception, and betrayal.

The Mexicanovella in many terms have similar characteristics to that of colonial literatures such as the metrical romance and the zarzuela. The love stories have always the ingredient of passionate love, hate, betrayal, and in the end redemption. The Mexicanovella like the metrical romance and the zarzuela is a long and winding narrative with a lot of twists and turns. Convoluted by a lot of subplots and pop-up characters, the lead characters in a supposed suspense scenes are always saved by the use of *deus ex machina*. In the end, the heroine triumphs and wins her man.

The long and winding Mexicanovella narrative is reminiscent also of the first Filipino novel by Pedro

Paterno entitled, *Ninay*. Like a soap opera, *Ninay* is a story of a girl who underwent a lot of trials, sufferings and pain. With a very loose plot, *Ninay* the novel suffered from formalist's requirements of coherence and organic unity.

But Filipino audiences go through the twists and turns of the Mexicanovella, feeling the heroine's own ups and downs. By relating to her sufferings, the Filipino viewer journeys through her own travails in life and find company in misery. At the end of the journey, with the heroine's triumph, the Filipino viewer also feels triumphant and at a certain moment, feels good. Indeed, Filipino audiences love Mexicanovella's 'happy ending'.

Filipinos' love for 'happy ending' is further celebrated in Mexicanovellas about children such as in *Chabelita*, *Little Amy*, *Luz Clarita* and *Good Morning Teacher*. This type of Mexicanovella usually dwells on the miserable and uncertain life of orphaned children. Bullied by antagonist adult actors/actresses, the protagonist child finds refuge either in a school or in a caring environment such as in an adoptive family. The bullying continues until it ends up with the bully being beaten up by police authorities. The 'happy ending' is drummed up by musical numbers from the children and the protagonist adult characters. This formula is a sure fire hit among Filipinos who not only love happy endings but love musicals as well dating back from the earlier forms of drama, the *komedya*, the *zarzuela* under Spain and *vaudeville* under the Americans in the 20th century.

3. Because of its didacticism based on Catholic religious orientation =

As product of Spanish colonialism, both Mexico and the Philippines have a very strong Catholic population. This religious faith has made both Mexicans and Filipinos firm believers of the Miraculous Virgin Mother. This firm belief in the Virgin is very much evident in Mexicanovellas such as *Maria del Barrio*, *Rosalinda*, *Marimar* and in *Alondra*, among many others. As a favorite icon among the Mexicans, the Virgin of Guadalupe is always invoked upon by the Mexican lead actresses in times of trouble. Filipinos could very well relate to this invocation and veneration of the Blessed Virgin. This display of religious fervor in the Mexicanovella translates not only a commonality of religious icons but importantly translates both cultures' fervent hope and reliance on the Blessed Virgin as the Mother of Perpetual Help.

Thus, seemingly hopeless situations suddenly are resolved by a stroke of faith and miracle. The heroine derives strength from praying to the Virgin of Guadalupe. Once renewed with spiritual energy, the embattled heroine arises and is again ready to confront her evil foes. This formula in Mexicanovella is very Filipino in treatment and character. Filipino viewers own desperate lives have only the miraculous intercession of the Virgin Mother to resort to as its hope and promise. This belief is reinforced in the

Mexicanovella. Watching the Mexicanovella, Filipino viewers are able to validate their belief system which provides them a sense of being.

Here is a list of Mexicanovella which I have monitored for the past 10 years:

La Traviata	Paloma	Maria la del Barrio	Lazos de Amor
Marimar	Por Ti	Rosalinda	Diana
Esmeralda	Alta Gracia	Alicia	Siempre te Amore
Alondra	Pasion de Amor	Betty La Fea	Pura Sangre
Maria del Carmen	Maria Mercedes	Taba Tina	Rubi
Little Amy	Chabelita	Luz Clarita	Good Morning Teacher

IV. Why Filipinos Love The Chinovela

Filipinos love the Chinovela....

1. Because of the highly urban setting and cosmopolitan lifestyle of its characters =

The influx of Chinese during the height of the galleon era into the Philippines radicalized the idea of commercial trade and mercantile economy in the islands. It was through the Chinese that the native economy (i.e. agriculture) was reconciled with the Spanish economy (i.e. galleon trade) by becoming its intermediary. The Chinese engaged in buy and sell (retail trade) of both agricultural based products and goods from the galleon which facilitated the distribution of commercial goods throughout the archipelago. The prosperity that the Chinese attained conjured images of this race as very successful traders and businessmen.

Since the colonial years, the Chinese dominated what is now to be known as Philippine economy both in the Chinatown capital of Binondo and in the posh Makati business district. From the sari-sari store (small retail stores found in almost every corner), the rich Chinese businessmen started to build commercial buildings in the 20th century which in time changed the overall landscape of urban spaces in the Philippines. And in the 21st century, the strong presence of Taiwanese investors in the country brought new infrastructure projects including innovations in construction such as the floating restaurant and floating casino along the tourist district in Roxas boulevard.

Looking at the Chinese as powerbrokers, successful businessmen and entrepreneurs, the Chinovela, particularly the soap operas from Taiwan, reiterates this perception. Filipino young audiences are awed by the display of hi-tech buildings/skyscrapers and the general corporate setting of Taiwan soaps. This is very evident in the Meteor Garden 1 & 2, Love in the City and Whitebook of Love among others.

The material affluence of the Chinovela is exemplified by the citified ways of its lead actors and actresses. Meteor Garden's Dao Ming Sui for instance, is the very rich son of the owner of the biggest company in Taiwan whose manner of dressing is fashionably cosmopolitan and whose ways reflect the young restless hip culture of the city. Suddenly, every Filipino young male looks like Dao Ming Sui with his signature hip and cool attire and attitude. The F-4 mania is actually more than idolizing the group members of F-4 who are the lead characters of Meteor Garden. The F-4 represents the look of the future predicated upon the material progress of a nation. This is what Filipino viewers desire every time they watch Meteor Garden or Love in the City.

The towering buildings, the electronic-run structures, the citified girl or boy in a mad rush to the train or to busy streets instill in the minds of Filipino viewers images of a postmodern life in a hi-tech globalizing world. This is what Filipinos see and secretly desire when they watch Chinovela.

2. Because the lead actresses are young, with a lot of freedom and mobility =

Unlike the Mexicanovella where heroines are usually in their 20s or even 30s, the Chinovela lead actresses are much younger. They are usually the teenagers who are most of the time fashion conscious. If the Mexicanovella heroines are depicted as full fledged women with their worldly beauty capturing the hearts of men, the Chinovela heroine is usually a fashionably innocent, naïve restless girl out to discover the world.

Filipino young audiences nowadays have shifted their interest to the Chinovela heroine. The changing times would have young, impetuous Filipina wanting to become successful in all fields of endeavor. This change is a far cry from the 'clinging' women of earlier decades who were dependent on their captive men. The Filipina of today is more independent and determined.

Chinovela heroines such as San Chai in the Meteor Garden, Magie in the Lavender, Marian in The Promise of Love at the Dolphin Bay and many others enjoy a lot of freedom and mobility. These Chinovela heroines although are a picture of innocence and naivete are actually decisive, aggressive and focused girls who know what they want in life. They may be in love with men but are not feudal dolls destined to be merely wives of powerful lords of the manor.

This is what Filipina viewers love about the Chinovela. They see in San Chai, Magie, Marian the relative freedom of women who can make choices, go places, and mingle with the rest of humanity in a highly urban setting.

3. Because Chinovelas represent the aspirations of a third world audience for a progressive nation =

The popularity of the Chinovela over the earlier Mexicanovella can be attributed to the Philippine's state of economy. The Mexicanovella brings back the feudal colonial past, reaffirming the cultural parallelisms between Mexico and Philippines as colonies of the Spanish empire. But the Chinovela forwards the march of the Philippines towards progress and development, at least through popular culture.

Filipinos loved the Mexicanovella because it reminded them of their own beliefs, customs and history. However, watching the Mexicanovella also reminds the 'political unconscious' of the Filipinos of the backward state of economy shared by the majority of Spanish colonies including Mexico. In an age of globalization and electronic communication, it is the Chinovela which projects the postmodern images of urban spaces and cultural spheres.

The third world aspiring Filipino finds himself longing for the techno-cosmopolitanism of a progressive Taiwan. This longing can be translated to the 'political desire' of Filipinos to rise above their poverty and deprivation. With young lead characters and just a few old ones, the Chinovela also represents the new generation whom societies consider as the promise of the future. This is perhaps why F-4 group was chosen the product endorsers of Pepsi with its corporate slogan, 'the new generation Pepsi'.

Here is a list of Chinovelas I monitored for the past 4 years:

Meteor Garden 1 &2	The Poor Prince	Love in the City
First Love	Secretly in Love	The Promise
Twin Sister	Love's Scar	The Frog Prince
In Love with an Angel	Westside Story	My MVP Valentine
Whitebook of Love	Love Storm	Lavender
The Farewell Firefly	Snow Angel	Eternity
Amazing Twins	Scent of Love	The Promise of Love at the Dolphin Bay

V. Soap Operas in the Philippines and Recent Developments

As early as the history of television in the Philippines in 1953, imported programs, mostly American, flooded the market. These canned tv products were encouraged since they were cheaper than producing local Filipino programs. It has been the trend since then. From the 1950s, Filipino viewing was dependent on American – Hollywood produced films and tv programs until the 1990s.

The phenomenal success of Mexican soap opera in 1995 and consequently the Taiwan soap opera in the Philippines brought new trends and insights into what we may call Filipino viewing habits. The Mexicanovella and Chinovela redirected the consumptive appetite of Filipino viewers from the usual American programs to the transpacific cultural products from Mexico and China.

Filipino patronage of the Mexican and Taiwan soaps was not an accident or something dictated upon by tv producers. Tv audiences are not passive recipients of cultural products such as soap operas because it is they who define the market. The demands of the market are not either based on whimsical, arbitrary proclivities of tv audiences nor on an overnight sensation but are important sites of cultural studies.

The Filipino craze over the Mexicanovella and the Chinovela is rooted in the country's historical and cultural links with Mexico and China. While the Philippines had a strong pre-hispanic trading relations with China, it was only during the galleon period when droves of Chinese came to the Philippines to engage in direct trade. The Mexico-China route of the galleon trade with the Philippines as a transshipment port was the longest commercial navigation in the world during that time. The galleon trade did not only transport material goods such as Mexican silver or Chinese silk or even Philippine pearls. It also facilitated an exchange of culture, ideas and knowledge which affected and effected the habits, norms and mores of the natives or folk. These cultural exchanges went as far as igniting the 1896 Philippine revolution against Spain.

But a revolution cannot entirely obliterate the cultural legacies and vestiges of colonial experience under Spain. The feudal-cacique relations, the Catholic religious faith, the Euro-Hispanic literatures remain in the cultural psyche of the Filipinos. These account for Filipinos' acceptance and enjoyment of Mexicanovella like a visual diary of their historical past.

The Chinese diaspora to the Philippines during and after the galleon trade contributed to the colorful tapestry of cultural mix in the country. Coming as aggressive traders, the Chinese galvanized the moribund colonial economy into what we now know as Philippine economy. Constructing commercial

districts into urban spaces with malls and corporate buildings, the Chinese image is that of a successful businessman and economic manager. The Taiwan investors' arrival in the Philippines in recent times reestablishes this image of the Chinese. Making no distinction between the Taiwanese and the mainland Chinese, the Filipinos continue to construct this same image of a generic Chinese businessman.

The Chinovela reaffirms such image of the Chinese. The Chinovela's corporate setting, the urban landscape and the cosmopolitan lifestyle are the exact ideals envisaged by young Filipinos who wish to be part of the global village. Reeling from its third world stigma, Filipinos would want to move ahead. The Chinovela offers this promise, even if only in vicarious terms.

In 2003, a new soap opera craze swept the country. The Korean soap opera or Koreanovela somehow eclipsed the popularity of the Chinovela. While both project the images of a highly progressive nation that Filipinos can only dream about, the Koreanovela offers a new package that is changing Filipino viewing habits once again. But of course, Filipinos admiration over Koreanovela's display of material affluence and hi-technology compared to Taiwan, is explained by the transnational success of Samsung, LG, Kia and Daewoo.

The Endless Love 1, 2 & 3, the Lovers in Paris and Stairway to Heaven are short soap operas that have simple plots and few characters. Filipino telenovela audiences have been tired and perhaps bored of the long-playing soaps with new characters popping out in the middle of the story. Koreanovela is able to sustain the viewer's attention and enjoyment because it has less storytelling frills, no subplots and does not suspend emotional scenes unlike the previous telenovelas.

What Filipinos love about Koreanovela is its fast-paced story, its very good editing and blocking which is a directorial job, and its minimalist but engaging dialogue. Of course, the Koreanovela is dubbed in Filipino but if the translation approximates the original, the dialogue is less wordy yet very succinctly put. Lately, the Filipino audiences are offered a variety of Koreanovela – from the tearjerkers Endless Love, Green Rose, and Stairway to Heaven, the light and comic Lovers in Paris, Oh Feel Young and Full House, to the historical Koreanovela Jewel in the Palace. Filipinos as well love the musical soundtrack for instance of Stairway to Heaven and the snowcapped setting of Endless Love winter sonata. One Filipino after watching an episode of Endless Love winter sonata quipped, “suddenly I feel cold under a tropical sun”. Filipinos' wish list will always include an experience with snow or winter.

These recent developments usher in a vibrant if not renewed ties with Asian countries. The tremendous popularity of Koreanovela on Philippine television comes at a time when a significant number of Korean students come to the country to learn intensive English. The curiosity of Korean culture is heightened and

the interface between Filipino and Korean grows. To date, Filipinos consider Korea as the soap opera capital in Asia and the capital of digital technology as well. All these references to Korea as capital contribute to a level of exoticization in terms of how Filipinos construct and interpret the Koreanovela from their point of view.

But what makes the Mexicanovella, Chinovela and Koreanovela a welcome cultural product in the Philippines is its powerful decolonization of a people framed and dominated by the hegemonic American-Hollywood media. In an age of globalization, it is heartwarming to note that Asians are constructing their own cultural spaces and cultural spheres in this part of the globe. It is also reassuring that cultural phenomena could be interrogated and negotiated within and in spite of culture industry. In this sense, the soap opera genre is not merely an imposed cultural product on weak nations such as the Philippines. It is because the Mexicanovella, Chinovela and Koreanovela resonate with Filipinos cultural history as well as articulate a people's quest for a better life.

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