

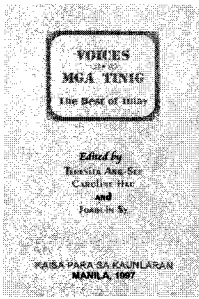
## Review Essay

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# Beyond Greenhills and Chinatown

*Danton Remoto*

*Voices/Mga Tinig: The Best of Tulay.*



EDITED BY  
TERESITA ANG-SEE,  
CAROLINE HAU &  
JOAQUIN SY. Manila: Kaisa Para sa  
Kaunlaran, 1997.  
211 pp. ISBN 971-  
8857-12-5.

In their preface to the revised edition of *Philippine Literature: A History & Anthology*, Lumbera and Lumbera noted that 'the declining prestige of New Criticism, whose rigorous aesthetic norms had previously functioned as a Procrustean bed on which Filipino authors and their works were measured, has opened a gap in the critical evaluation of literary works. The gap has allowed the entry of hitherto marginalized authors, genres and themes into the mainstream of Philippine critical discourse.'

Women writers gathered their works together and published them in *Filipina 1* (1984), *Filipina 2* (1985), and *Ani*, March 1988 issue. Later, they

would write about their bodies and the many lineaments of desire in *Forbidden Fruit: Women Write the Erotic* (1994). Along with them came the landmark anthologies of the gay and lesbian movement: *Ladlad, An Anthology of Philippine Gay Writing* (1994), *Ladlad 2* (1996), and *Tibok: Heartbeat of the Filipino Lesbian* (1998). All these anthologies explored new topics and themes in two languages—English and Filipino—with their audacity and bravado intact.

Now comes another anthology that further enlarges our definition of a national literature. It is written not in two, but in three languages, and it puts on the spotlight a minority generally absent in our literary discourse.

Teresita Ang-See, Caroline Hau, and Joaquin Sy worked together in editing *Voices/Mga Tinig: The Best of Tulay*, a fortnightly Chinese-Filipino Digest published by World News Publication, Inc and Kaisa Para sa Kaunlaran, Inc.

In her perceptive introduction, Miss Hau quotes Charlson Ong's definition of Chinese-Filipino literature

as those 'written by Filipinos primarily for Filipinos'. That definition is bold, subversive even, for in one stroke it embraces those writings that used to occupy the margins of pages, if not the margins of our consciousness.

Charlson Ong continues: '[Its main practitioners] are Filipinos of Chinese descent, usually natural-born citizens, whose first language is often Filipino or Amoy (or a mixture of English, Tagalog and Hokkien).'

But Caroline Hau's discourse on the 'Chinese Filipino' goes beyond language and the shifting tides of the generational divide and political loyalty:

Chinese Filipino is just as implicated in questions of nationness, identity, and imagination.... For those whose literary orientation puts them squarely within the tradition of Jose Rizal rather than Lu Xun, writing about "being Chinese" is an act of negotiating the spaces between silence and stereotype, survival and extinction, desire and denial. These imperatives cannot leave even the most basic assumptions about self and society unexamined. Whether it is the question of straddling cultures, of refuting or confirming racist stereotypes, or of claiming the right to belong or not belong, the texts in this collection productively intervene in issues fundamental to Philippine realities.

And they do, oh how they do! In R Kwan Laurel's story called 'Amah', Franklin's old mother suffers from a 'disease [that] ate the insides of a person'. The main character's grandfather visits her and they talk about China. The story affirms the persistence of memory, like a wall that can shore up the ruins of one's identity. The grandfather says: 'We had to fight one another [in China] just to get dog manure because the soil was so poor. We came to the Philippines because they said the streets were paved with gold. Now those of us who managed to go back are probably the happiest. Here nobody beyond Ongpin understands us. It is only here that we can truly be Chinese. You go out of this street, and it is a foreign country.'

Later, the old cancer victim and her lonely neighbor put up a restaurant called 'Little Sister'. It makes money, but in the end their paths diverge, and the ending is as sharp yet as subtle as anything you can imagine.

Jacqueline Co's 'Growing Up Chinese in the Philippines' has the simplicity and clarity of its title. Spot the difference between your childhood in the 1970s and that of Miss Co's:

'I had no trouble speaking Tagalog as most of my mornings outside of school were spent watching television reruns of movies featuring Susan Roces, Nora Aunor, and a caboodle of their leading men. In the evenings, it would be a toss-up between *Oras ng Ligaya* and *Tarwag*

ng *Tanghalan*. For movies, we watched with equal enjoyment the hilarity of Dolphy's 'Facifica Falayfay' and the dexterity of Bruce Lee's high-flying kicks. I did not find it odd that I enjoyed Nancy Drew's mystery books as well as the *Kislap nobelas* and *Wakasan komiks*. I craved *tuyo*, *santol*, green mangoes, and *bagoong* as much as I relished my *sancha* (hawflakes), cow label (beef jerky), and *hopia*. Although we own many pairs of chopsticks, we are more at home using spoons and forks. When we get sick, we ingest Chinese herbal concoction as well as aspirin.'

And, yes, not every Chinese-Filipino family is as wealthy as the stereotype makes them out to be.

Miss Hau also contributes two lovely fictional works, 'Stories' and 'The True Story of Ah To', which trace the junctures and disjunctures of the past and the present. Joaquin Sy has contributed graceful poems in Filipino, while Melchor C Te has a story called 'Ang Lotto' which glitters with all the ironies of a de Maupassant story. The other works can be edited—their narrative lines made clearer, their images sharper, their prose pruned. But then again, that may just be the formalist in me speaking.

Be that as it may, this book is a welcome addition to the monument of Philippine writing that is built with every book, every poem, story, essay, and play that we all write.