The Best of Tulay
CHINESE-FILIPINO DIGEST

VOICES MGA TINIG

Editors

Teresita Ang See
Caroline S. Hau
Joaquin Sy

KAISA PARA SA KAUNLARAN, INC.
MANILA, 1997

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Foreword and acknowledgements

From 1987 to 1988, *World News* Publications Inc. came out with a quarterly Literary Journal called *Tulay*. It published poems, essays and short stories by *Tsinoy* writers in English and Filipino.

The four issues of the quarterly journal brought a considerable amount of literary work together, some of them truly gems, valuable contributions to Philippine literature.

Drawing from the vast reservoir of their experiences as Chinese Filipinos, unique in their blend of the western (Spanish and American) and the Asian (Malay and Chinese), the writers produced works uniquely *Tsinoy* (the special kind of Filipino who traces his origin to the vast Chinese cultural heritage).

However, the literary journal was found to be inadequate in meeting the needs of the young Chinese Filipinos who have lost their facility in reading Chinese yet want to be in close touch with their ethnicity.

The *Tulay* journal therefore expanded to become a monthly and much later a fortnightly, Chinese-Filipino digest. It not only continued the literary page but also introduced sections on community news and affairs, opinion, history, features, business and technology, profiles, and health—all touching on or relevant to the ethnic Chinese community in Philippine society.

As we embark on the 10th year of publishing *Tulay* digest, we thought it timely to collect the best recent literary work from

Tulay and publish it in a new volume called *Voices/Mga Tinig*. These works have an underlying common theme—the *Tsinoy* experience.

The works in this volume were gathered from *Tulay* issues published from 1990 to early this year. The much earlier works from 1988 to 1990 were published in *New Horizon,* also an anthology of literary works of *Tsinoy* writers.

This volume is meant to be our contribution to the growing wealth of minority literature that is nevertheless very much a part of mainstream Philippine literature.

Whether they are written in English or in Filipino, or are translated pieces, the poems, essays and stories explore the *Tsinoy's* unique experiences in the Philippines and each piece becomes, unwittingly or not, a bridge that enhances better understanding and awareness of the *Tsinoy's* identity and presence in Philippine life.

We thank first of all the writers for their invaluable contributions; Caroline S. Hau and Joaquin Sy for lending their precious time and effort to the editing of and preparatory work for the volume; the other members of the Research Division, headed by Deanie Lyn Ocampo Go and Go Bon Juan, for their inputs; the *Tulay* staff writers and the Kaisa staff, particularly Gemmalyn Ubay for painstakingly encoding, proofreading and lay-outing the pages; Wesley Ang Chua for typing the Chinese characters; Kaisa Para Sa Kaunlaran for publishing the volume; and *World News* for making the publication of the *Tulay Fortnightly Chinese-Filipino Digest* possible.

May this volume be a start and serve as inspiration to other aspiring writers to keep on writing and sharing their experiences. You are always most welcome to send your contributions to the Kaisa office.

Teresita Ang See
Kaisa Office, August, 1997

Introduction

The pieces in this collection attest to the existence of a body of writing that foregrounds the experiences and perspectives of the Chinese in the Philippines. They are part of an emergent "Chinese Filipino literature" the representative works of which are still being—or remain to be—written. Those who have more than a passing acquaintance with the prose and poetry of such established figures as Charlson Ong, Paul Stephen Lim, and Fatima Lim-Wilson will surely welcome the opportunity to peruse the literary production of a younger generation of writers who have drunk from the same wellspring of inspiration and memories. And we may only hope that those who are reading an anthology of this kind for the first time will gain a little more understanding of whence and wherefore comes this writing.

We have used the term "Chinese Filipino" to characterize, but also delimit, the scope of an anthology that otherwise exhibits a full range of themes, styles, and genres. But what exactly does "Chinese Filipino" literature mean? In his essay "A Bridge Too Far (Thoughts on Chinese-Filipino Writing)," Charlson Ong defines "Chinese Filipino writing" as "literature written by Filipinos primarily for Filipinos." 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)." These second- or third-generation Chinese are likely to have been educated in schools which traditionally stress the use of English or Filipino, a fact that accounts for the dominance of English and Filipino over Chinese as their preferred medium of expression. They range from twentysomething professionals to grade-schoolers, from journalists to agents, from teachers to doc-

tors.

Beyond tracing the contours of a sociology of literature, however, the term "Chinese Filipino" signifies a historical and conceptual shift in the definition of who and, perhaps just as importantly, *what* is "Chinese." One might also think of it as a way of thinking through the meanings and implications of the word "Filipino." It is above all a term that attempts to account for the space between "Chinese" and "Filipino," for the complex ways in which Chineseness is exercised and reproduced, verified and challenged in the Philippines by those who live and feel its claims most deeply.

Although the distinction between "Chinese Filipino" and Filipino Chinese" is often organized around questions of language, generation, and political loyalty, it is just as implicated in questions of nationness, identity, and imagination. The greatest impulse to write often comes out of the vicissitudes of people who must lovingly inhabit a nation-state that has historically denied and repudiated the claims that they have made upon it. The *Tsinoys'* responses to the spate of kidnappings are perhaps the most poignant examples of the ambiguity that inflects their sense of who they are and how they must relate to the country they call home. On the one hand, they would point out that the kidnappings have been made possible by a specific set of historical and material relations that single out the Chinese as the principal target of extraction. On the other hand, they would deny that such a racism is at work in the kidnappings, and would prefer to argue, instead, that the kidnappers democratically victimize everybody. It seems superfluous to argue that both racism and "democratic" victimization can co-exist in a given society, that both, in fact, occupy two ends of the same political continuum—this argument can only appear academic to those who must perforce live in fear of their lives and their loved ones' safety.

We might dismiss the questions of nationness, identity and imagination as mere ideas, the province of writers, if these "unconcrete" ideas did not weigh so much. The truth is that they are funda-

mental to the experience of "being Chinese," and their effects in the concrete practices of everyday life are not any less real than those of nationalist ideas, which have the power to command absolute loyalties and sacrifice. 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. At the very least, they invite us to rethink our received notions of home and nation, the economy and the state, Chineseness and Filipinoness.

Moreover, the selections also show us how intimately "being Chinese" is linked to the lived experience of class and gender relations, of individual, family, and collective histories. There lurks the suspicion that what we understand as "mainstream" Filipino culture is often only a way of talking about a specifically middle-class, Christian, Western-educated and urban milieu. The stories, poems and essays in our anthology, whether written in English or in Filipino, sometimes assume that Chineseness is unproblematically there, yet more often than not, they invite us to reflect more carefully on just what is "Chinese" about Chineseness, and whether there is such a thing as a "pure" Chinese. Maxine Hong Kingston could very well have asked the following question of the Chinese Filipinos when, in her pathbreaking autobiographical novel *The Woman Warrior*, she wrote: "Chinese Americans, when you try to understand what things in you are Chinese, how do you separate what is peculiar to childhood, to poverty, insanities, one family, your mother who marked your growing with stories, from what is Chinese? What is Chinese tradition and what is the movies?"

Kingston's question is a dangerous one because answering it may

threaten the very foundations on which we have complacently based our identities as hyphenated Filipinos. We may unwittingly call forth perturbed spirits, disinter old hatreds and recriminations, raise issues that we would rather not deal with. It might mean asking ourselves, for example, why General Ignacio Paua can be both a revolutionary hero as well as the same "*Intsik* Paua" who captured and brought Andres Bonifacio to a trial that ended in the latter's execution. Whose history do we subscribe to? For whom do we speak? Who benefits from our claims?

But at the same time, we cannot cut the Gordian knot and insist that questions of Chineseness must give way to an affirmation of the essential humanity of the Chinese Filipino because this insistence on universalism must also bear the burden of answering to the prevailing idea and practice of humanity that seeks to preserve and maintain rather than erase cultural differences. It is, after all, this same insistence on difference that originally defined a people's right to self-determination and made the discourse of nationalism and liberation possible in the Third World, even if it also played a crucial role in shoring up the racist cartographies and policies of colonialism. As for those who believe that nationality issues are no longer relevant in the age of global capitalism, how, we might ask, do they account for the persistence of territorial and cultural difference amidst the increasing internationalization of commerce and culture?

If not for anything else, our Chineseness may be the one link we have to our past, and to the humanity of our elders and ancestors. It may be the only means we have of understanding how it is that we can be so much a part of this country and yet be not part of it, how the commerce and culture of our ancestors helped to forge a nation in which we, like many of the Filipino people, have yet to find "our place in the sun." It may finally be the only language we have in which to speak to and of our elders and our ancestors.

The voices in this anthology speak to us of love, loss, yearning, regret, anger, hope, renewal, and endurance. They speak of writing itself, of how words can cut, trap, and divide as much as they

can heal, empower and liberate. They speak, too, more often of silences, of lost and forgotten histories that may yet be reclaimed, sometimes at great cost to those who have sought precisely the safety of anonymity or the solace of buried pasts. For the greatest risk is that, like nationalism and Marxism, our Chineseness comes back to haunt us just when we think we have exorcised its ghosts. In an age of increasing turmoil and violence wrought by political and economic inequality, we must bear witness to the struggles of those in our country who have been silenced and marginalized. This means taking stock of our strengths and assets. But it also means owning up to our complicities and vulnerabilities alongside the wrongdoings of the present government and system, knowing that it is this risk of exposure—a risk inherent in the language we write in and the things we write about—that gives us *lannang*, our people, and our country our chance at justice and change.

Caroline S. Hau
University of the Philippines
August, 1997

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Amah

■ R. Kwan Laurel

The family was sitting around the dinner table talking about what to do. Mother had ordered all the windows closed. An old woman from Cebu, Franklin's mother, had to undergo medical treatment in Manila, and she was temporarily going to be our neighbor. Father said the disease ate the insides of a person. "Those who go to America to be treated, like Giat Co's sister, come home bald, and they still die anyway," he told Grandfather.

I hurriedly closed all the windows. I got out Father's electrical tape and covered the gaps and holes that could threaten our life, and the room became dimmer. But we could not understand this disease that required Americans to pull out every hair on a person's head. "Hey, don't waste the tape. We don't catch it from the air, it's in Franklin's blood," Father said. Mother told me to continue: "Just to make us feel secure."

Grandfather got up and opened his medicine cabinet. He gathered some herbs and came back to the table to crush seeds. The house started to smell. Twice Father reminded him: "Don't get involved with what even Americans cannot cure. It is none of our business. And most of all, why help Franklin when it is because of him that prices are down?"

Grandfather went on with what he was doing. He was excited at the prospect of showing once more that Western medicine was no match against his inheritance from one of the world's first civilizations.

That night we could hear a woman shouting until about two in the morning: "Stop this! Stop this! There is no use. It is hope-

less. Let me go home." It seemed the groaning and cursing did not stop until dawn when I woke up to go to school. Ongpin was refreshingly cool in the mornings, and Grandfather would usually be on the bridge, a few meters from home, doing his exercises. This time he was sweeping the ground outside our house, which he had never done before.

Franklin, our neighbor, was unlocking the shutters of his hardware store. He looked so tired that Grandfather offered to bring him coffee, "since luck did not allow us to sleep last night." Franklin apologized for the noise, and they exchanged pleasantries. This was also unusual. Our family hardly greeted Franklin; his "Good Fortune Hardware" was in the same line as our "Good Luck Hardware." Father had been furious when Franklin was accredited by American Express. It was a big thing in our street; no one else had received such an honor.

Franklin would hear nothing of what Grandfather had to say. "Ma has a doctor at the Chinese General Hospital who has just come back from studies in America. Let us leave it to him," he told Grandfather.

"How could you trust those trained by white ghosts? They will burn her hair and they will ask for all your money. Give her this, please, and ask her to constantly take a bath in water mixed with salt." Grandfather handed Franklin an old mayonnaise jar that contained herbs floating in syrup: his cure for the disease.

Franklin invited Grandfather to keep his mother company and talk to her about China. It was the best thing Grandfather could do, he said.

The old woman was originally from Grandfather's province in Xiamen. They got along because of that. Grandfather came back from his visit still recounting his stories about days in China. Father ordered Grandfather to wash his hands. The disease, which we knew nothing about, must not enter our house.

Grandfather would not let anything upset him. He was glad to have found himself a new friend. He tapped his fingers on the table, and this was a sign that he was happy. "Xiamen was one of