

OPINION & FEATURES

The JPEPA math

GUEST EDITORIAL

AS has always been the case since the foundations of our republic were laid down in 1935, the question of the Philippines entering into economic agreements with other nations has been fought with a maximum of rhetorical violence and a minimum of sober, much less constructive, consensus-building.

The debate on the Japan-Philippines Economic Partnership Agreement (JPEPA) was fundamentally a showdown between those suspicious of capitalism, foreign investments, and the government's capacity to protect national interests, on one side; and those impatient with protectionism and eager to embrace opportunity and therefore skeptical of cautionary nationalism, on the other.

As it has generally been the case going back to the plebiscites that ratified the economic ordinances appended to the Constitution in 1939, and the Parity Amendment in 1947, Philippine presidents have been able to convince the electorate and the legislature to take the risk on greater cooperation with—including concessions to—the global economy and its biggest players. On the other hand, those mobilized against such proposals have suf-

fered defeat. As they have done for three generations, politicians engaged in posturing to see which way the political wind was blowing, and by so doing gauged the political risks, if any, of flouting the conventional protectionist wisdom. In the end the Philippine Senate in 2008 was no different from past legislatures: it dragged out the deliberation on the JPEPA for as long as the rhetorical battle proved useful in doing the political math.

But the moment the political strength of the contending parties could be clearly weighed, the Senate lost no time in putting matters to a vote. And obviously, in the eyes of the majority in the Senate that ratified the JPEPA, the time for debate was past and whatever safeguards could be wrung out of the Japanese had been achieved. The point being that overall, the JPEPA itself has proven more inviting than the risks that accompany an outright rejection of the treaty.

What the broad coalition of critics of the JPEPA achieved, then, was to help ratify the treaty. The intervention of the Senate helped force a reluctant executive department to extract concessions from the Japanese without significantly affecting the prospects for ratification of the treaty (the critics' aim was to secure senatorial rejection of the treaty), or the economic and political worldview that pushed Japan to negotiate the treaty and the Philippine government to accept it.

This only serves to underscore how isolated the hard-core critics of the JPEPA are from the political mainstream and even public opinion. The treaty would have achieved smooth sailing

if it weren't for the environmental questions raised. Which also indicates how mainstream environmentalism has become (and deservedly so). But other criticisms that mobilized opposition—increasing and facilitating Japanese investments, opening up Philippine markets and providing a slender chance for Filipinos to have access to the Japanese economy, and opening up a tiny niche for Filipinos to work in Japan—did not inspire either public understanding or public support.

A last-gasp opposition can still manifest itself before the courts; but the ultimate arbiter will be a Supreme Court that, many perceive, is firmly in the administration's pocket.

As far as it goes, the ferocious opposition to JPEPA has helped clarify matters and stiffened what was a weak-kneed executive attitude during its negotiations with Japan. It bought some breathing room. Not much of a consolation. But if it hadn't been for the fire-breathing rhetoric from critics, the Senate would have faced a done deal rushed to ratification.

It was not an agreement a self-respecting executive would have permitted to be signed; all the energy spent so far has been to provide a backbone to an executive tasked with standing up for the national interest. The treaty leaves much to the discretion—and ability—of bilateral panels to work out the details. If these panels operate outside the reach of public view and watch, we see no reason why the gains achieved by the Senate's scrutiny won't be dissipated, ignored, and abandoned altogether by an executive department who proved unable to identify, much less prevent, the loopholes in the original JPEPA. (Inquirer.net)

The spirit of America

SETTING a precedent gender-wise, American Ambassador Kristie A. Kenney presented American conductor Laura Jackson in a resoundingly successful concert last Oct. 10 at the CCP main theater.



SUNDRY STROKES
Rosalinda L. Orosa

The *Spirit of America* concert featured brisk, exuberant, breezy, jaunty, free-wheeling, progressive music which encapsulated the spirit of America—indeed the kind which, if this reviewer might be permitted an aside, keeps Senators McCain, Obama, Biden and Gov. Palin claiming, in their campaign speeches, that America is the greatest country in the world.

Except for John Williams' *Five Sacred Trees*, the selections were familiar, popular, well-loved. Gershwin's folk opera *Porgy and Bess*, based and inspired by Negro life, rituals and culture, included such songs as *Summertime*, *I Got Plenty of Nuthin'*, *It Ain't Necessarily So*, *Bess*, *You Is My Woman Now*.

Gershwin's tone poem for orchestra, *An American in Paris* had a film version starring dancers Gene Kelly and Leslie Caron. The surging music described an American dancing with abandon on

the streets of Paris or excitedly viewing the sights; the slow, lyrical passages conveyed his homesickness and nostalgia.

A story goes that when Gershwin was commissioned to compose a symphony, he crossed the street from his lodgings to buy a book on symphonies from a music store. The anecdote is probably apocryphal but Gershwin did lack formal music education, with musicologists pointing to his "awkward modulations, strained transitions and obscure instrumentation."

Nevertheless, his genius is obvious in his original juxtaposition of jazz and syncopation with the classic idiom, in the quaint, charming and spontaneous manner he composed. He was, in fact, a supreme melodist, and no matter how often the audience hears his songs, they always sound fresh and enchanting.

In Bernstein's *Symphonic Dances* from *West Side Story*, both the Broadway musical and the film version came to mind. The songs *Maria*, *Somewhere*, and the riveting clash between the Jets and the Sharks crept in, the latter in the most stirring, robust manner.

The young, slim, attractive Jackson, wearing



a black pantsuit, waved the baton over the Philippine Philharmonic Orchestra, her left hand as graceful as that of a ballet dancer. Demonstrating tremendous vitality and dynamism, she articulated the emotional content of each work at its most urgent, arresting and appealing, the dynamics—the surges of tone—reaching the most daunting volumes, yet fully controlled. She drew the best from the PPO which, in fact, outdid itself while thoroughly inspired by her sparkle, her perceptive and interpretive skill.

After the opening Gershwin composition, Jackson explained Williams' *Five Sacred Trees*. Each movement, she said, was a song rendered before each tree was cut down, the fourth and fifth movements being jagged and angular. Actually, each movement sounded jagged and angular to this reviewer, innovatively and distinctively orches-

trated.

Bassoon player Adolfo Mendoza began the composition with a long solo: here and thereafter, he proved his technical expertise, particularly in the rapid, florid passages, as well as his sensitivity in the emotive, lambent lines.

In the second movement, *Tortan*, the concert master, the second violins,

violins and cellos predominantly accompanied the bassoon; in the third, *Eó Rossa*, an extensive dialogue between bassoon soloist Mendoza and harpist Lourdes de Leon-Gregorio ensued. The finale, slow and melancholy, featured the bassoon and the flute. The work was strange, weird, yet intriguing and fascinating, with the orchestra under Jackson eloquently etching and delineating Williams' craft.

During the standing ovation, Ambassador Kenney placed a lei on Conductor Jackson after which she joined the rapturous applause. It was doubtless an evening of masterly music-making, with the PPO, under Jackson's direction, pointing up the brilliance of the composers and, not the least, the rousing spirit of America. Irving Berlin's *God Bless America*, coming up next! (Philstar.com)

Who we are

I am Filipino. As a title of a local newspaper article, *I am Filipino* wouldn't have been considered extraordinary, but this article appeared in *Sino-Fil Daily*, a local Chinese paper, so "I am Filipino" was in Chinese characters. It was enough to catch my father's attention and have him clip out the article and pass it on to me.

The writer, Cheng Lay Jr., was describing a recent encounter he had in Singapore with a taxi driver. He and his wife were talking in Chinese and the driver asked where they were from, and he had answered "We are Filipino." The driver, an ethnic Chinese, responded, "I am Singaporean." Cheng Lay's article urges local Chinese to consider more of this "I am Filipino" and to talk about the Philippines as "our country."

I thought I'd share my thoughts, because the issue here is not just about being Filipino or being Chinese but about identities, about who we are in an age of global movement and migration.

Our people
Let's focus first on the Chinese in the Philippines. There have been many waves of Chinese migration to the Philippines, long before Magellan "discovered" the Philippines. Many of the earlier Chinese visitors went back home. Others stayed and married local women, their descendants very much integrated into the mainstream Filipino population. In the 19th century, the *mestizo* and *mestiza* offspring of Chinese men and Filipina women, often with a fair amount of wealth, were swept up by emerging nationalism. The descen-

dants of those generations of Chinese mestizos and mestizas were, again, totally integrated into the mainstream Filipino population.

Another wave of migration in the early part of the 20th century brought poor Chinese mainly from Fujian province. These migrants retained a strong Chinese identity, some of them returning to China to retire and die. But there were many who stayed. Again, intermarriage proved to be a powerful force for integration. The offspring from these marriages took on a Filipino identity quickly, often within one generation, abandoning everything Chinese except their surname.

Exposure to the mother's side, with local languages and culture, was the main reason this integration took place so quickly, but there was a less pleasant side to this and this was the way the "*chut-si-a*" (Minnan Chinese term for *mestizos* and *mestizas*) were excluded from the Chinese community, no longer considered "*Jan nang*" (a Minnan Chinese term that means "our people").

For the other Chinese who did stay, but did not intermarry, there was an emerging hybrid identity of a Filipino-Chinese, Chinese still being the primary identity. There was a conscious effort to preserve Chinese culture, including a prohibition on marrying non-Chinese. The rule was always being broken, but often it did mean excommunication from the Chinese, especially if it involved a Chinese woman and a Filipino man because the woman would have married herself out, entering her husband's Filipino family.

The discrimination worked both ways. Anti-Chinese sentiment was also present, fanned in part by policies of the American colonial government. The United States had tried to restrict the entry of Chinese and this policy extended into their colony, the Philippines. The Chinese who did enter the Philippines could not engage in many businesses and could not become Filipino citizens.

Nevertheless, many of the 20th-century Chinese migrants began to accept the possibility that they, and their children and grandchildren, would eventually be adopted by the Philippines. Even then, they were conscious about preserving Chinese culture. Wherever there were Chinese, there would be a Chinatown, with Chinese schools, restaurants, temples, groceries, even drugstores. The turning point, my father likes to point out, were the Chinese cemeteries, built when the Chinese realized many of them would never return to China.

Home
After 1949 and the establishment of the People's Republic of China, many of the Chinese realized the chances of returning to China had become even more remote. Eventually, when it became easier to become naturalized Filipinos, many Chinese became Filipino citizens but the distinctions remained, with the Chinese still using "*Jan nang*" for fellow Chinese and the Filipinos still calling the Chinese, "*Intsik*."

In the last two or three decades, there has been much soul-searching among the descendants of earlier 20th-century Chinese migrants. Tessie Ang-See and the group Kaisa, representing a younger generation of Chinese, have advocated the use of the term "*Tsinoy*," from "*Tsinong Pinoy*" or Chinese-Filipino, the primary identity now shifting to Filipino.

When I entered the University of the Philippines (UP) in 1971, there was a UP Filipino-Chinese Students Association, which I didn't join because I felt it was "too" Chinese. Ironically, I agreed this year to become one of their faculty advisers but they had now been transformed into the UP Chinese Students Association. During my first meeting with them, I mentioned how I particularly liked their newer name.

Maybe it's my anthropological training that

has helped me to better appreciate cultural diversity, and the importance of being Filipino without abandoning one's Chinese-ness. I believe we do have choices, of how much we want to retain of a Chinese cultural heritage, including joining a campus Chinese students' association.

I believe learning Chinese is important, not just to do business with China or to get a discount when shopping in Chinatown but also because it offers first hand insights into Chinese culture and its accumulated wisdom. That, precisely, is the Singaporean way: they have molded a distinct Singaporean identity but see no conflicts with learning and using Chinese language and culture.

For overseas Filipinos, it may be time as well to think about the experiences of the Chinese. I think that the local Chinese may have overemphasized their Chinese-ness to the point of racism, but I do value, as well, the pride that older Chinese tried to build up for Chinese culture.

R. Kwan Laurel's *Ongpin Stories*, recently published by Kaisa Para sa Kaunlaran, captures the complexities, tensions and ambivalence as one grows up "hyphenated," wanting to be Chinese yet unable to meet the norms of speaking Chinese, of staying in Chinese high school. And while Kwan Laurel vividly describes how important the family is for our identities, there is, looming in the background, a broader context. I feel that for Chinese-Filipinos, understanding who we are is made even more difficult because we grapple with our Chinese-ness in a nation, the Philippines, that is itself still in search of an identity.

We need to better appreciate our heritages, including our hyphenated, hybridized identities. Just as I can say, with pride, "I am Filipino, of Chinese descent," I would hope our overseas Filipinos' children can eventually say, "I am American (or Canadian or British), of Filipino descent." (Inquirer.net)



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