

## Introduction

# Korea-Philippines as Method: Interfaces in Literatures and Popular Cultures

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This special *Suvannabhumi* issue is a product of an eventually expanded collaboration among Filipino colleagues which emerged from the Philippine panel delivered virtually at the 2022 International Conference of the Korea Institute of ASEAN Studies and the Busan University of Foreign Studies. Taking to heart the theme “ASEAN Subregionalism and Korea-ASEAN Relations: Towards Complementary Cooperative Relationship,” the authors explored and explicated Korean and Philippine cultural relations through the following fields of inquiry—television, film, literary studies, culinary studies, and urban studies. These relations were foregrounded by the following contexts: the ASEAN regional integration; the vigorous socioeconomic relations between the Republic of Korea and the Republic of the Philippines; and the ever-growing global phenomenon of Hallyu or the Korean wave. Some of the panel’s questions were as follows: How has Philippine culture been receiving Korea, as a whole? What ideas have already been formulated to explain this cultural interface? How can this encounter be used as a means to critically account for a “complementary cooperative relationship”?

Certainly, the issue contributes to the currently burgeoning

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Korean Studies in the Philippines, which academically began at the University of the Philippines Diliman (UP Diliman) when its Korean Studies program was developed in the 1980s (Palumbarit 2018: 51). Initially devoted to Korean language courses and "overshadowed by the popularity of China and Japan studies" (ibid.) in the 1990s, it soon began flourishing in the 2000s, as soon as the Hallyu wave reached Philippine shores and increased Korean investments particularly in culture and education intensified scholarly interest in everything Korean (ibid: 51-53). The many initiatives, conversations, and research produced from that moment of flourishing up to the present may be said to have evolved a distinctly Filipino-inflected Korean Studies, a sensibility we also imbibed in this pursuit of exploring the "complementary cooperative relationship" of Korea and the Philippines. Clearly, the interventions presented here emerged from this intellectual history of revaluing shared histories, economic engagements, and cultural ties, as the authors answered the abovementioned questions, among others. Of course, the issue offers more.

As the authors continued to work on the papers based on conference commentary and blind refereeing, some important insights became clearer, particularly on the fascinating comparative analysis of Korean and Philippine relations, with culture as a matrix of study. The methods deployed by each of the authors, all trained in Literary and Cultural Studies, ventured to provide comparisons that departed from conventional dualistic and often differential thinking to display in their variousness similitude, correlations, parity—indeed, a "complementary cooperative relationship" between Korea and the Philippines. Drawing from the disciplines available to them, the authors endeavored to formulate what might be called "Korea-Philippines as method," a mode of comparativity, in progress as we speak, that emphasizes an interest in the very interface of cultures [Korean on the one hand, Filipino on the other] that generates new texts or ideas. It expands on current modes of Hallyu studies in the country as it offers exploratory comparisons in order to properly appraise the discourses that took place between Korea and the Philippines. Chen Kuan-hsing (2010) and his work on "Asia as method" obviously animate the earlier conception and final

production of this issue. Thus, the issue's set of intersecting inquiries may be seen as considering "Korea-Philippines" as an "imaginary anchoring point" (Chen 2010: xv) that allows for both countries involved to be "one another's reference points" (ibid.), at least in the critical practices of the individual authors. It turned out to be a productive exercise as the issue in effect carried out "decolonized, deimperialized, and de - cold war" articulations, as Chen posited (ibid). In hindsight, the issue also brought about a "(transformed)···understanding of the self··· (and also a rebuilding of) subjectivity" (ibid).

As a "critical proposition" (ibid.), "Korea-Philippines as method" was used by the authors in their own ways to attend to an enduring cultural dialogue, teasing out the "transnational dynamics" (ibid: xii) of both countries in their objects of studies. Louie Jon A. Sánchez, a media studies scholar from UP Diliman whose specialization is television, revisits his work from a decade ago which postulated a "Korean turn" in the production of local TV drama series or teleseryes. Simply put, this means that Philippine producers were slowly but surely patterning their televisual products after K-Drama, commonly known then as "Koreanovela," in order to maintain their viability in the local and international markets. In this issue, he expands his observations on other Philippine popular cultures and phenomena and refines his formulation through the prism of cultural appropriation. Meanwhile, Jose Mari B. Cuartero, a UP Diliman comparative literature scholar with an interest in anthropology and folklore, explores what he calls the "modular imagined community" of downtown Manila's Koreatown. His springboard for the project were conversations with a Manila-based Korean who seemed skeptical about the phenomenon. It led to an adventurous exploration of the significations of Korea's placemaking in Manila at a highly globalizing time, which ended with a thoughtful rumination on the samgyupsal, the Korean barbecue currently popular in the country. Meanwhile, Asian film studies scholar Miguel Antonio N. Lizada of the Hang Seng University of Hong Kong, in his paper on Boys Love (BL) narratives, triangulates his discussions by including another Southeast Asian nation, Thailand. He examines the complex and creative opportunities of

the transnational circulation of BL in Korea, Thailand, and the Philippines, and reveals the geopolitical and domestic influences in the representations of gender and sexuality through the aforementioned genre popular among young televisual audiences across the region.

On the other hand, approaching literary texts from Korea and the Philippines through the lens of trauma studies is literary scholar Raymon D. Ritumban of Ateneo de Manila University. He takes up the cases of Hyun-Kil Un's short story "Dead Silence" and Annette A. Ferrer's "Pablo and the Zebra" to talk about mnemocide. He offers a critique of historical forgetting usually facilitated by regimes of atrocities and tyranny. In the end, he suggests that Filipinos have a lot to learn from Koreans who have mustered the courage to institutionalize remembrance and regret, particularly in relation to the so-called "Jeju April 3 incident." Lastly, Ralph Edward P. Sekito, an emerging media studies scholar from the University of Santo Tomas, investigates the traversals of transnational adaptations. His paper looks into the Korean and Philippine reboots of a popular British TV drama and demonstrates how adaptation caters to cultural contexts amidst a clearly economic imperative.

The prominence in the issue of popular cultural texts—the teleserye, the Korean and Philippine culture industries at large, Manila urban landscapes, BL—asserts that signifying practices are not only to be confined to literary texts. This leveling of the playing field of inquiry, as deployed in the entire issue, shows the necessity for an open and encompassing exploration of the Korea-Philippines interface, where everything becomes text and may be submitted to various modes of reading, a lasting legacy of Cultural Studies. This is also the authors' way of re-evoking Raymond Williams' critical recognition of the culture concept's very complexity, much needed to create more nuanced and responsive engagements on "complementary cooperative relationships," which are complex to begin with. By doing this, the authors intervened "in local spaces without losing one's commitment to be in dialogue with general theoretical arguments" (ibid: xi). In the end, what the authors hoped to achieve in this issue was the surfacing of the "object of dialogue" (ibid) that both empowers and informs, that "grounds ourselves in

the cultures of our own" (ibid). This way, pace Chen, we are able "to address the issues arising out of our own puzzling environments."

In light of "Korea-Philippines as method," and as this issue finally opens its pages to readers, some answers to the questions posed by the panel are in order. While requiring a longer and more sustained discussion, it may be said that Philippine culture has been receiving Korea very cordially, but not passively as some "soft power" scholars seem to submit. In many instances, Philippine culture may be seen as absorbing hallyu not simply to consume it, but much so to reinvent it, particularly for the purposes of local reception and culture industries. Soft power, as regarded in the sphere of international relations, aims to persuade through culture and/or investments. A country from the global south like the Philippines tends to be on the receiving end of these soft power impositions in the time of globalization. What does the Philippines do? The texts and ideas featured in this issue illustrate some of the more clever evasions of being totally, albeit softly, conquered, as the country produces its very own iterations and interpretations of Korean products and practices. "Resistance" may be a key idea to this, especially as we continue critically accounting for what *Suvannabhumi* has been projecting as "complementary cooperative relationships." The papers here swerved from the local scholarly norm as each looked closely at the "complementary cooperative relationship" of Korea and the Philippines in texts and ideas, and derived from comparativity a more methodical approach that further clarifies both the mystifying effects of hallyu to the Philippines, and the country's own ventures and adventures into making it its own.

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