

# **philippine studies: historical and ethnographic viewpoints**

Ateneo de Manila University · Loyola Heights, Quezon City · 1108 Philippines

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**Soon Chuan Yean**

## **Tulong: An Articulation of Politics in Christian Philippines**

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*Philippine Studies: Historical and Ethnographic Viewpoints*  
vol. 65 no. 1 (2017): 126–29

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home for the Nissei and Sansei, third-generation migrants, who are now living in Japan) for further study in this yet-to-be concluded engagement with Japanese identity and citizenship.

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SOON CHUAN YEAN

## **Tulong: An Articulation of Politics in Christian Philippines**

Manila: University of Santo Tomas Publishing House, 2015. 275 pages.

The author, Soon Chuan Yeon, is a Malaysian political scientist based at the Universiti Sains Malaysia with research interests in local and cultural politics “from below” in Malaysia and the Philippines. The book grew out of his doctoral thesis submitted to the Department of Southeast Asian Studies, National University of Singapore. Because Soon was supervised by the eminent Filipino historian Reynaldo Ileto, the book is arguably yet another elaboration of the long-standing concerns of his mentor.

In 2001 Ileto had thrown down the gauntlet at scholars imbibing an Orientalist mode of interpreting and representing Philippine politics. With the scholarship of the influential American political scientist Carl Lande serving as the paradigmatic example, Ileto (“Orientalism and the Study of Philippine Politics,” *Philippine Political Science Journal* 2001:1–32, p. 28) observed “how a certain kind of politics, which is really never understood from within, gets to be constructed as a negative ‘other’ of the Euro-American post-Enlightenment political tradition.” By positing an impervious binary of “personal versus public” and “personal versus impersonal,” these so-called Orientalist scholars depict the “peculiar” nature of Philippine politics as an undesirable confounding of these two domains. More to the point, studies on Philippine politics and society have been stereotypically portrayed in terms of instrumentalist patron–client relationships animated by the shared cultural values of *utang na loob* (debt of gratitude) and *hiya* (shame) but deployed in an hierarchical register.

Soon’s rendition of the “everyday politics” of Barangay Angeles, a lowland settlement situated close to the shores of Lake Taal and a short distance away

from the poblacion (town proper) of Tanauan City, Batangas province, is an attempt at a post-Orientalist scholarship. He argues that elites stationed at the higher echelons of a political hierarchy are not always able to shape the terms of the aforementioned relationships. Conversely, nor are the articulations of the *masa* (ordinary people) manifested in a monolithic or predictable fashion. To support his claims, Soon paid close attention to the reflections of his informants, made up of “clients” and *lider* (sub-leaders). For this purpose, Soon had to acquire a working fluency in Tagalog. He also adopted a research strategy associated more with anthropologists than with political scientists—ethnographic fieldwork. Inclusive of his language training, he spent a total of thirteen months between 2004 and 2005 in his fieldwork site.

Besides drawing his key theoretical coordinates from Ileana and Benedict Kerkvliet, Soon also appropriates the work of Filipino philosopher Fr. Leonardo N. Mercado to decipher recurring Tagalog phrases that his informants use as indicative of their worldviews “from below.” Oddly, the pioneering work of Virgilio G. Enriquez and his colleagues in the Sikolohiyang Pilipino (Filipino psychology) movement, which arguably shares a similar objective in decentering the use of Western epistemology in understanding Filipinos, is left out in Soon’s literature review and subsequent discussion.

The book is organized into six chapters. Three of the chapters situate the research problem theoretically while the remaining chapters—chapters 3 to 5—form the empirical spine of the book. Chapter 3 unpacks the nuances between *tulong* (help) and *pera* (money) as played out between patrons and their recipients, and chapter 4 continues in the same trajectory by turning our attention to the lexicon and politics of emotions in everyday life. Chapter 5 examines key religious idioms that undergird these meanings and expectations.

Briefly, the author maintains that expressions as espoused by the *masa* (ordinary people) need to be better appreciated as complex utterances that exhibit various nuanced layers of meaning. In the context of receiving *tulong* from political patrons, these meanings include notions of *mabait* (good), *loob* (inner being), *lakaran* (journey), *sariling sikap* (self initiative), *malapit/malayo* (closeness/alooftness), *pagsubok* (trial), *pagmamalasakit* (compassion), *kaligtasan* (salvation), and *liwanag* (light). Nevertheless, undergirding this melange of idioms and values are popular religious ideas stemming from Christianity, which frame the Tanauan residents’ understanding and experience of everyday politics.

Tulong thus cannot be reduced simply to the material act of *paghahandog* (gift giving)—as with “patrons” providing a range of commodities and favors like money (*pera*), food supplies, medicine, jobs, and so forth for the singular purpose of securing and deploying loyalty. In order for the patrons’ deeds and actions (*gawa*) to be valued as tulong, the masa scrutinize their body language for signs of being approachable or accessible (*malapit*) and possessing a good inner being (*magandang loob*). They must also be seen as performing ways of reducing social distance through mingling (*pakikisama*) with the masa on different occasions. *Gawa* will not be appreciated if the politician’s loob is perceived to be tainted with insincerity.

Moreover, rather than taking the verbal promises (*pangako*) of their patrons at face value, seen as part of the competitive game of *pulitika* (politics), the masa evaluate the sincerity of the patrons through a dialectic of feeling and knowing (*pakiramdam*) that is weighed against the former’s own individual life journeys and struggles (*lakaran*) (163). To a large degree the author argues that there is a parallelism between these idioms and that of tulong, which emanates from the *Panginoon* (Lord God) (198). For human patrons, however, only when the masa feel “a sense of harmonization” with the loob of the patron will *gawa* be transformed into tulong and linked to the moral health of the patron’s loob—whether it is *mabait* (good), *masungit* (crabby), *mapagkunwari* (deceptive), or *talagang totoong-totoo* (sincere) (142). According to Soon, it is the reflexive intermixing between the two spheres in ordinary people’s judgements that is agentive, a crucial point undervalued in earlier functionalist and positivist formulations.

From a wider perspective this book shares some of the concerns that have been the mainstay among scholars working in the areas of “subaltern studies,” “resistance studies,” and “postcolonial studies” for the past two or three decades. Despite discernible differences in terms of how their proponents have framed their respective understanding of power relations, what characteristically has been foregrounded are the discursive, spatial, and nonverbal practices of “ordinary people” laboring to make sense of their material life, circumstances, and predicaments, an approach that may not be unusual for anthropologists but arguably less so for political scientists.

The key focus of the book is on excavating the emotional landscape of key informants as shaped and generated by the Tagalog language. Taken as a whole, Soon’s meticulously written and tightly argued exegesis reveals a remarkably reflexive and articulate group of persons able to harness to

their benefit a moral vocabulary shared by their patrons. Indeed, it is this intersubjective affective landscape that appears to enable its choreographed coherence and performativity by differently positioned social actors in the first place. What is suggested is a finely calibrated and knowing local community that is equally “mundane” and sublime. Whether these relations are splintered or further differentiated by other variables like gender, class, sexuality, and political ideology within the local community has been less explored given the specific intent and parameters of the project. As a first step in making the case for the intricacies of tulong as experienced and articulated by Barangay Angeles residents, however, there is much to commend about the book, and it deserves wide reading and debate.

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SIR ANRIL PINEDA TIATCO

## **Entablado: Theaters and Performances in the Philippines**

Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press, 2015. 209 pages.

*Entablado: Theaters and Performances in the Philippines* gathers six essays on local theaters and performances framed by an introduction to theater and performance studies in the Philippines and a concluding chapter on the future of these fields. Using “the trope of *entablado* [stage] as a central idiom” (18), the book’s “itinerary” takes the reader from the performance space of the theater auditorium to the entablado of a theater festival, the streets, the river, the foyer of the Cultural Center of the Philippines (CCP), and the gathering of people engaged in an academic debate. It is a lively and critical journey: Sir Anril Pineda Tiatco assesses his chosen sites through the interdisciplinary lens of performance studies, which, consciously or not, is laden with a heavy dose of sociology’s debunking motif. In this motif existing social arrangements are not what they claim to be. Rather, these are social constructions borne out of negotiations and compromises that seek to privilege something or the other.

The first leg of this itinerary, an academic debate, sets the debunking tone. “What is Philippine Drama?” asks Nicanor Tiongson in an influential