

# Who Counts as Filipino?

## Philosophical Issues of Identity and the Chinese Filipino<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

This article examines some recent philosophical attempts to make sense of “identity” in light of the intersecting categories of race, ethnicity, and culture. It addresses a perennial issue brought up recently with regard to Filipino Chinese: Who counts as “Filipino?” Behind this question are assumptions that I scrutinize philosophically: that there *is* a “Filipino” and it is possible to identify who counts as such and who does not. I begin with a survey of existing paradigms of identity which I then apply to a critical analysis of recent public discourse spawned by anti-Chinese statements made by a prominent Filipino novelist. I conclude with ethical prescriptions for conceptualizing Filipino identity in light of the complex fissures revealed by the aforementioned issue.

**Key terms** *identity, Filipino, Chinese Filipino, nationalism, F. Sionil José*

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<sup>1</sup> This article is a revised version of a paper first presented at the *Inclusion, Recognition, and Solidarity* workshops under the auspices of the journal *Budhi*, held on August 27–28, 2015 at the Ateneo de Manila University in Quezon City, Philippines. My special thanks to Ms. Rowie Azada-Palacios and Ms. Pamela Joy Mariano-Capistrano of Ateneo de Manila University and Mr. Jeffry Oca of Silliman University for their insightful comments on the original draft.

The issue of Filipino identity—i.e., who the “true” Filipino is—has recently come to the fore as the media reported two separate incidents. The first concerns a series of opinion pieces published in national newspapers and penned by National Artist for Literature, F. Sionil José. In his “Hindsight” columns of June 7, 2015 and June 21, 2015 for *The Philippine Star*, as well as an essay published in the *Philippine Daily Inquirer* on July 26, 2015, the 92-year-old Filipino novelist made no secret of his suspicions against the ethnic Chinese in the Philippines, whom he believed would side with China should war between the two countries break out. The second involves the setting of a new record for the highest grade-point average achieved by a University of the Philippines (UP) graduate since 1927. However, Tiffany Grace Uy, who graduated summa cum laude with a Bachelor of Science degree in biology, was criticized in the Internet for her Chinese ancestry. She was perceived as usurping a place in the university that could have gone to someone from a lower economic background, UP being popularly perceived as a nationally funded school for the poor. These two issues—coincidentally occurring in the month of the Philippine Independence Day—immediately became flashpoints for debate, often being referenced together by public commentators.

These very current and yet perennial questions about national and ethnic identity in the Philippines deserve to be explored anew, especially in light of today’s tense regional relations between the countries of Southeast Asia and China. The resurgence of the People’s Republic of China as a major economic and political force is evident in its immense overseas economic presence, as well as its occupation of and building activities in the disputed Spratly Islands in the South China Sea. In light of this development, the considerable

presence of the ethnic Chinese in Southeast Asia—the region that has the highest concentration of Chinese people outside of China<sup>2</sup>—can make for a politically volatile situation. In the Philippines the discourse that has sprung from the media controversies of the past two months points to a growing public questioning of what it means to be “Filipino.” Thus, in this article, I wish to present a philosophical analysis of collective identity based on the arguments and related assumptions aired in this public conversation. How is “Filipino identity” constructed and negotiated? What does the mere asking of the question, “Who counts as (a true) Filipino,” reveal? Admittedly, the commentators involved come from a distinct social group, namely the middle class and the educated. The textual analysis in this article is limited to the published opinions in newspapers and social media, as the public discussion of the issue took place mainly in this specific domain. The subject of the controversy is himself a member of the Philippine intelligentsia; the ones who responded to him are readers familiar with his work and stature. It may well be that the prevailing sentiments I have detailed here do not represent those of Philippine society as a whole. To determine such sentiments, an empirical study will have to be conducted, which is beyond the scope of my conceptual analysis.

In exploring these publicly articulated ideas regarding Filipino national identity, I hope to arrive at a preliminary ethical framework derived from metaphysical and existential considerations. I draw prescriptive conclusions about how we should conceptualize the complex issue of Filipino identity,

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<sup>2</sup> Southeast Asia accounts for 80 to 85 percent of all overseas Chinese. Tong Chee Kiong, *Identity and Ethnic Relations in Southeast Asia: Racializing Chineseness* (New York: Springer, 2010), 1.

especially in relation to one of its subsets, that of the Filipino Chinese. My recommendations are based on an evaluation of the arguments presented by F. Sionil José and his critics, respectively.

I begin with a presentation of the key philosophical issues involved in the problem of identity, followed by a discussion of different models of thinking about identity that arise from these issues. My sources for this part of the article are derived from a number of disciplines, none of which specifically relate to the Philippine situation (how these ideas may be applied to the latter is the subject of my conclusion). I then present the context of the current public discourse about Filipino identity and the Chinese Filipino. I do this through a close reading of the arguments exchanged by opposing camps on what Kyoto University professor Caroline Hau has dubbed “*l’affaire José*”<sup>3</sup> and, to a lesser extent, the hubbub about Tiffany Grace Uy’s record-setting academic feat. I discuss these exchanges in light of the evolution of the term “Filipino” in colonial and postcolonial history, and the arrival of the ethnic Chinese on these shores which is intertwined with this history. I conclude with an evaluation of the merits of José’s position vis-à-vis that of his critics, arguing for a more inclusive, authentic, and productive understanding of what constitutes “Filipino identity.”

### **Identity: Philosophical Issues and Conceptual Models<sup>4</sup>**

In metaphysics the problem of identity is usually understood as one of personal identity, pertaining to the nature of the self (indeed,

<sup>3</sup> See her July 6 blog entry entitled “There He Goes Again,” <http://letterstonarcissus.com/2015/07/06/there-he-goes-again/>.

<sup>4</sup> During the *Inclusion, Recognition, and Solidarity* workshops, Ms. Pamela Joy Mariano-Capistrano pointed out to me that my study might benefit from mentioning the important contributions of Will Kymlicka, who advocates liberal multiculturalism. Inasmuch as Kymlicka describes an entire political philosophy, rather than adopts a specific stance on the metaphysics and ontology of identity, I have excluded his book *Multicultural Citizenship* (1985) from the scope of this article.

whether there is such a thing as a “self”), and if there were such, how its persistence may be explained, that is, in what sense one can be said to be the same person over time.<sup>5</sup> However, I am concerned with identity in the collective sense, which is explored in philosophy, social psychology, critical race theory, and cultural studies.<sup>6</sup> In this section I present interdisciplinary articulations of collective identity, especially in terms of ethnicity.<sup>7</sup>

Paradigms of identity represent a range of positions with regard to at least three key issues: (1) whether identity is an essence or a process; (2) whether authenticity is located in the subject or in relations between subjects; and (3) whether identity or difference can be the basis of determining what rights accrue to a person. The first concern is metaphysical, the second existential, and the third ethical; all of these dimensions are present in the discourse of who counts as a “true” Filipino.

The first issue pits essentialism on one extreme and social constructionism on the other. The essentialist considers identity as primordial, i.e., natural or inborn. The social constructionist conceives of it as a process or activity, created or achieved in light

<sup>5</sup> For a comprehensive coverage of the philosophical problem of identity, see Raymond Martin and John Barresi, eds., *Personal Identity* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2003).

<sup>6</sup> In philosophy, the works of Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir deal extensively with the idea of the social Other. Sartre presents a phenomenological description of class-consciousness in terms of the “us-object.” Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: A Phenomenological Essay on Ontology*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Washington Square Press, 1956), 534–56. He applies this notion to the so-called “Jewish Question” in the (now dated) essay, *Anti-Semite and Jew*. Meanwhile, de Beauvoir uses an existentialist framework in tackling the problem of gender, exposing the social construction of women’s oppression as Other. Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. H. M. Parshley (New York: Knopf, 1952).

<sup>7</sup> Stephen Spencer notes that the term “race” has become problematic, especially in light of its association with the nineteenth-century rhetoric of racial superiority, which in turn has been used to justify slavery and genocide. Following his lead, I use instead the term “ethnicity,” which encompasses not only physiological and genotypical characteristics but also, in a wider sense, cultural markers such as religion, art, language, and social structures and norms. Stephen Spencer, *Race and Ethnicity: Culture, Identity, and Representation* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 33–34.

of a person's situation or circumstances. Stuart Hall evinces a productive view that recognizes the *paradox* of identity as simultaneously given and constructed, "necessary" and "impossible." For Hall, identity may be intuitively thought of as "in the blood," at least in some respects; however, it is also largely dependent on imaginative storytelling:

[T]his is the problem or 'impossibility' of racial and ethnic identities, they are more fictive determinations than objectively real entities even—or perhaps especially—when they are most keenly presented as the latter.<sup>8</sup>

This reference to the fictional nature of identity echoes Benedict Anderson's classic theory of the nation as "an imagined political community," which is determined not so much by geographical boundaries as by a shared sense of comradeship, based on myths of foundation or idealized commonalities.<sup>9</sup> Ultimately, Hall tends toward the pole of anti-essentialism, preferring the more process-oriented term "identification" to "identity." The process of identification is subject to "historicization" and involves the "narrativization of the self."<sup>10</sup>

The second issue concerns the matter of authenticity, whether it is embodied by the subject or produced through intersubjective relation. Authenticity pertains to the desideratum of being "true to oneself," as developed by the existentialist and Romanticist

<sup>8</sup> Brett St Louis, "On 'the Necessity and the 'Impossibility' of Identities,'" *Cultural Studies* 23, no. 4 (July 2009): 563.

<sup>9</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso, 1991), 6.

<sup>10</sup> Stuart Hall, "Introduction: Who Needs Identity?" in *Questions of Cultural Identity*, ed. Stuart Hall and Paul Du Gay (London: Sage Publications, 1996), 3–4.

movements.<sup>11</sup> To illustrate the first position, being black may be thought of as a transcendent or universal ideal embodied by all “authentic” subjects. This notion is problematic because the ideal often reflects the characteristics of the privileged members of the group (e.g. black heterosexual males), ignoring the phenomenon of interlocking oppressions.<sup>12</sup> In contrast, the second position considers truthfulness to an ethnic identity as determined by what Andrew Pierce calls “intersubjective relations of trust.”<sup>13</sup> We can avoid the trap of racial essentialism by thinking of authenticity as being “in the relation between individual and group, and not ‘in’ the group or the individual.”<sup>14</sup> Possible barometers for authenticity include sincerity and consistency, which together make for trustworthiness.<sup>15</sup>

The third and last issue is whether identity can serve as the basis of rights. Should aspects of identity, such as ethnicity, sex,

<sup>11</sup> Andrew J. Pierce, “Authentic Identities” *Social Theory & Practice* 41, no. 3 (July 2015): 435.

<sup>12</sup> Audre Lorde sheds light on the experience of multiple levels of oppression by adopting the position of a “black lesbian feminist socialist” (Audre Lorde, “Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference,” in *Women in Culture: A Women’s Studies Anthology*, ed. Lucinda Joy Peach [Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1998], 69). This experience affords her a unique point of view as a woman within the male-dominated black community, a person of color within the overwhelmingly white American feminist movement, and a lesbian among mostly heterosexual women.

<sup>13</sup> Pierce, “Authentic Identities,” 436.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 451.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 445. The case of Rachel Dolezal is illustrative. Dolezal, a former leader of the Spokane chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, had presented herself as a black woman but had recently been outed as racially Caucasian (Justin W., “Philosophers on Rachel Dolezal,” *Daily Nous*, June 15, 2015, <http://dailynous.com/2015/06/15/philosophers-on-rachel-dolezal/>). A subject-centered view of authentic identity, with its concomitant appeal to a set of racialized traits, fails to account for the vast number of individuals who could pass as a member of a different ethnic group, based solely on the attributes (typically physical) that they exhibit. It also fails to account for the extent to which performance can also be a marker of identity—for example, white rapper Eminem produces music traditionally associated with blacks. Pierce’s intersubjective paradigm solves the Dolezal conundrum by considering the truthfulness (or lack thereof) of her *relations* with others. Her deception, which is at the heart of the controversy, has deeply affected other people. Thus, her identification as black—*notwithstanding* her physical appearance or her immersion and advocacies in the black community—must be deemed inauthentic.

sexual orientation, and others determine how an individual ought to be treated? Or should ethical considerations be based instead on the idea of a universal personhood? The discussion is typically polarized into the classic liberalist view, which puts a premium on egalitarianism, and the multiculturalist view (associated with identity politics), which rejects the leveling of difference thought to accompany liberal egalitarianism. Colin Bird presents a cogent critique of identity as an object of respect, arguing that it tends to be ill defined: “Identities are notoriously fluid, open to interpretation, and they don’t usually exert an unambiguous or determinate pull on our practical deliberations.”<sup>16</sup> He believes that there is no “closed, uncontroversial, and determinate set of conditions that dictates in any given instance how an ‘identity’ or a ‘difference’ bears upon how we should behave.” Advocating a “status-based conception of equal respect,” Bird argues that egalitarian social policies should be undertaken for the correction of “preexisting imbalances in status” rather than “for the sake of identity.”<sup>17</sup> In light of the idea that racial essentialism often justifies discriminatory practices, Bird’s view follows from the social constructionist and intersubjective paradigms of identity discussed above. It attempts to liberate the discourse of rights and respect from the essentialist language of identity and difference.

### **“L’affaire José” and the Chinese Question in the Philippines**

Not for the first time, prominent Filipino writer F. Sionil José has written recently about his sentiments concerning the ethnic Chinese in the Philippines. His June 7 column for *The Philippine Star* begins

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<sup>16</sup> Colin Bird, “Status, Identity, and Respect,” *Political Theory* 32, no.2 (2004): 218.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 225.

with his memories of the Japanese occupation during the Second World War. He denounces the actions of the native “collaborators” who fought the anti-Japanese guerrillas, but who were subsequently granted amnesty. The point of the recollection becomes clear when José makes an analogy between the Japanese-era collaborators and present-day Chinese Filipinos. He claims that about 60 percent of the Philippine economy is dominated by the Chinese, and points to the Chinese occupation of portions of Philippine territory in the Spratlys. He concludes, “I know now that in the event of a war with China, many of our ethnic Chinese will side with China. . . .”<sup>18</sup>

A week after José’s June 7 column comes out, two Chinese Filipino intellectuals respond. In his own column for the *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, lawyer Oscar Franklin Tan mentions the discrimination against Japanese Americans during the Second World War, opining that José similarly wants to force Chinese Filipinos into internment camps. Citing anecdotal evidence gleaned from his conversations with friends, Tan claims that few if any of them would actually side with China. He shares his hurt and outrage at the seeming invisibility of racial slurs against Chinese Filipinos that José’s writings exemplify, especially in light of José’s stature in Philippine letters and the fact that others agree with him and even quote him on Facebook. Writes Tan,

I cannot celebrate [Independence Day] when I can be so casually told in public that I am less of a Filipino or a person solely because my grandparents were immigrants. Do we subconsciously insist on defining

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<sup>18</sup> F. Sionil Jose, “A Memoir of War (Then) and China (Now),” *Philippine Star*, June 7, 2015, <http://www.philstar.com/sunday-life/2015/06/07/1462943/memoir-war-then-and-china-now>.

patriotism as an accident of birth instead of a lifetime's conviction? How do we continually decry mistreatment of Filipinos overseas yet tolerate such vitriol at home?<sup>19</sup>

Meanwhile, Caroline Hau, an academic based in Kyoto University and the author of *The Chinese Question: Ethnicity, Nation, and Region in and Beyond the Philippines* (2014), published in her blog a seven-point critique of José's piece, exposing the fallacies in his reasoning. She accuses him of committing hasty generalization in regard to Chinese Filipinos; making claims that are not supported by evidence, such as the alleged Chinese majority control of the Philippine economy; appealing to the supposedly popular opinion concerning the "Chinese problem"; citing the wrong experts; engaging in demagoguery by exacerbating "existing anti-Chinese sentiments"; conflating the actions of the People's Republic of China with those of the ethnic Chinese in the Philippines; and being plainly inconsistent in denying that he is a racist.<sup>20</sup>

José's June 21 column in *The Philippine Star* continues with the theme of "the Chinese transgressions on our country." Apparently as a response to his critics, he writes that his conclusion concerning Chinese Filipinos' likely collaboration with China is based on "informal surveys I've made in the past." He also writes,

After that last article on China, I realize that many of our ethnic Chinese love China as much as they hate me. They called this tired old hack a bigot, a racist, a Hitler. How I wish now that I had Hitler's power and

<sup>19</sup> Oscar Franklin Tan, "Anti-Chinese-Filipino Slurs Are Invisible," *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, June 14, 2015, <http://opinion.inquirer.net/85851/anti-chinese-filipino-slurs-are-invisible>.

<sup>20</sup> Caroline Hau, "F. Sionil José's Seven Deadly Sins," <http://letterstonarcissus.com/2015/06/16/f-sionil-joses-sin/>.

legions so I can rid this country of our internal colonialists.<sup>21</sup>

He then proceeds to demand a show of loyalty from Chinese Filipinos:

If you say you are with us, how wonderful! How reassuring! Then go shout it from the rooftops—the least you can do is demonstrate before the Chinese embassy, and denounce as well the Filipino leftists for not doing the same. Otherwise, leave this country which has made you comfortable, and go to China which you so love, and stay there.<sup>22</sup>

In his June 23 column for the *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, addressed to “Manong Frankie,” Boying Pimentel unequivocally states that José is wrong about Chinese Filipinos, and that his views are dangerous. He points to the recent massacre at the Emanuel African Episcopal Methodist Church in South Carolina, USA as a tragic consequence of popular intolerance against minorities. Like Tan, he also invokes the internment of more than 100,000 innocent Japanese Americans during the Second World War. He writes, “It’s troubling that a writer who so eloquently chronicled the rise of Filipinos as a more united nation would now focus on what divides us.”<sup>23</sup> Pimentel then quotes José to himself.

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<sup>21</sup> F. Sionil José, “The Rizal Monument, the Supreme Court, and Patriotism,” *The Philippine Star*, June 21, 2015, <http://www.philstar.com/sunday-life/2015/06/21/1468065/rizal-monument-supreme-court-and-patriotism>.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Boying Pimentel, “Why F. Sionil José Is Wrong on Chinese Filipinos,” *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, June 23, 2015, <http://globalnation.inquirer.net/124997/why-f-sionil-jose-is-wrong-on-chinese-filipinos>.

Toward the end of your novel *Poon*, Apolinario Mabini expounds on the importance of unity in a conversation with the main character, Eustaquio Samson, “If only we could learn to trust one another—Tagalogs trusting Ilokanos, Pampangos trusting Tagalogs. . . . More of this and, Eustaquio, we have a nation! . . . There is so much that the past can teach us.”<sup>24</sup>

A day after Pimentel’s column came out, another Chinese Filipino intellectual, Clinton Palanca, wrote an open letter published in *Spot.ph*. As José has failed to be specific about who the ethnic Chinese are, Palanca—who is coeditor of the anthology *Chinese Filipinos* (2013)—provides the historical context of the issue:

You yourself point out that [the ethnic Chinese’s] presence in what we now call the Philippines preceded Western colonization, and that intermarriage and acculturation took place over the centuries. If this were so then the Chinese would have been absorbed into the Filipino, racially and culturally. That there is a separate and identifiable group of Chinese in the Philippines is because of the large number of migrants who arrived in the years between the American occupation of the Philippines, when the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act extended to these islands, up to 1975 when they were allowed to take Philippine citizenship. By this time they had formed a distinct identity: not one of enmity, but a

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

migrant's mindset of a community that had to stick together as a minority group.<sup>25</sup>

He then identifies at least three things that set apart Chinese Filipinos: that they have business networks amongst themselves; that they are a closely connected “migrant ethnic group”; and that they share a cultural identity with other overseas Chinese. However, he argues that “None of these is a political identity,” reminding José that the Chinese Filipinos such as Palanca’s own family had taken an oath to defend the Philippines against foreign invasion. He also writes that while it is reasonable to wonder who would actually stay and defend the country, “I do not believe it is anyone’s right to demand an answer. That way lies McCarthyism.”<sup>26</sup>

Another open letter addressed to “Manong Frankie” was published on July 14 in *Rappler.com*, written by Lisandro Claudio, a researcher at the Center for Southeast Asian Studies at Kyoto University and an assistant professor at Ateneo de Manila University. Claudio takes José to task for the “incendiary” and “inquisitorial” tone of his June 21 column, which references Hitler and asks for proof of loyalty on the part of Chinese Filipinos. Claudio points out that national identity should not be thought of in racial terms. After all, not all Chinese pay allegiance to China, such as the citizens of Taiwan, China’s pro-democracy dissidents, the artist Wei Wei, and the Tiananmen Square protestors. In regard to Filipino identity Claudio writes,

I reserve the term ‘genuine Filipino’ for those who believe and work for the strengthening of our democracy, not

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<sup>25</sup> Clinton Palanca, “An Open Letter to F. Sionil José,” *Spot.ph*, June 24, 2015, <http://www.spot.ph/newsfeatures/the-latest-news-features/62743/an-open-letter-to-f-sionil-jose>.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

those from one race. . . . Being Filipino. . . is a decision, a matter of calling one's self something. Thus, to be part of this country means choosing to be part of a political project. . . .

I am proud to be Filipino because Filipino is non-racial. My fear, Manong, is that your recent columns may contribute to a further racialization of a category that was never racial to begin with.<sup>27</sup>

Notably Claudio mentions the racial slurs directed at Tiffany Grace Uy, the recent graduate who set the postwar record for garnering the highest weighted average in the history of the University of the Philippines. Uy's case will also be invoked by *Inquirer* columnists Pimentel (July 7) and Tan (August 3) in their respective follow-ups to their initial piece on *l'affaire José*.<sup>28</sup>

José's most recent salvo in response to his critics was published on July 26 in the *Inquirer*. Here he dismisses the demand that he back up his claims with empirical evidence. He differentiates between knowledge and wisdom, likening himself to the persecuted philosopher Socrates. Writes José, ". . . it is only the stupid, the blind and the third-rate scholars who demand evidence: opinion based on truth is validated in itself."<sup>29</sup> He reiterates his views about the alleged Chinese control of the Philippine economy, and the "capital

<sup>27</sup> Lisandro Claudio, "'Filipino' Is Not a Race: Another Open Letter to F. Sionil José," *Rappler.com*, July 14, 2015, <http://www.rappler.com/thought-leaders/99216-filipino-race-open-letter-sionil-jose>.

<sup>28</sup> Boying Pimentel, "Hateful Nonsense and the Bashing of Chinese Filipinos," *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, July 7, 2015, <http://globalnation.inquirer.net/125604/hateful-nonsense-and-the-bashing-of-chinese-filipinos>; Oscar Franklin Tan, "A Racist and a Bigot," *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, August 3, 2015, <http://opinion.inquirer.net/87271/a-racist-and-a-bigot>.

<sup>29</sup> F. Sionil Jose, "To Tell the Truth About Chinoy and Love of Country Are Not Racist," *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, July 26, 2015, <http://opinion.inquirer.net/87045/to-tell-truth-about-chinoy-and-love-of-country-are-not-racist>.

hemorrhage” caused by Chinese Filipino entrepreneurs investing in China. Citing Amy Chua, author of *World on Fire: How Exporting Free Market Economy Breeds Ethnic Hatred and Global Instability* (2003), he writes that “a latent anti-Chinese feeling suffuses all of Southeast Asia.”<sup>30</sup> He believes that Chinese Filipinos have the duty “to stop it from growing,” and gives them an ultimatum: “either they recognize their loyalty to China then go to China, or integrate.”<sup>31</sup> On the subject of love of country and patriotism, the eminent author of nationalistic novels writes,

[W]e should be prepared for the worst and if the worst does come, we should be able to identify and weed out the collaborators amongst us for they are the *anay* (termites) that weakens the internal structure of this nation. Remember the collaboration is not just a political issue—it is basically a moral issue.

All over the world, racism exists in various hues and severity. But let us not mistake love of country for racism. It is basic logic—we are the sorry victims for the simple reason that we are poor and they are rich.<sup>32</sup>

Hau responds to José’s July 26 piece in an essay for *Rappler.com*. She derides his appeal to folk wisdom and argues that, unlike José, Socrates subjected beliefs to the test of logic and factual evidence. She characterizes José’s patriotic diatribe as an example of the “empty calls for action made by hate-mongering armchair commandos on the basis of hypothetical

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

scenarios.”<sup>33</sup> She also claims that Amy Chua’s popular book, *World on Fire*, is dismissed by academics and challenges Chua’s simplistic division of Philippine society into the rich Chinese and the Filipinos who work for them. Hau also reasons that Chua’s 50 to 65 percent estimate of Chinese economic control is a misunderstanding “given that Chinese Filipino contributions to the Philippine economy are contributions made by Filipinos.”<sup>34</sup> She concludes by condemning the “anti-Chinese baiting” committed by José and the historical tendency of the Filipino elite to scapegoat the so-called “Chinese.”<sup>35</sup>

By the end of July, young Chinese Filipinos also responded to José in the media. Twenty-three-year-old Kathleen Yu, author of a popular piece<sup>36</sup> previously published in *Rappler.com*, identifies herself as “a Chinese-Filipino, a Filipino national with Chinese heritage and ancestry.” She writes,

Being a Filipino is hardly about blood, since we are as a country a melting pot of different cultures and races. Rather, being a Filipino is about your words and your actions.

To be a true Filipino is to love your country and to show this love in the things that you do in service of that country. And part of this love, part of this sense of

<sup>33</sup> Caroline Hau, “Beware of False Prophets,” *Rappler.com*, July 26, 2015, <http://www.rappler.com/views/imho/100500-beware-false-prophets>.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> In “My Tsinoy Dilemma,” published on January 27, 2014, Yu shares her heartbreaking experience of being othered by a couple of Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) during a plane trip from China to the Philippines. The OFWs expressed astonishment when Yu joined their Tagalog conversation, saying that they thought she was Chinese. She explained to them that “Both of my parents are Chinese. . . . But I was born in the Philippines. I’m a Filipino.” The other woman shook her head. ‘No,’ she said. ‘You’re not a Filipino. Both of your parents are Chinese. You’re Chinese.’ Her friend agreed.” (Kathleen Yu, “My Tsinoy Dilemma,” *Rappler.com*, January 27, 2014, <http://www.rappler.com/move-ph/ispeak/48525-my-tsinoy-dilemma>).

nationalism and belongingness, is rooted in how we look at our fellow countrymen.<sup>37</sup>

She believes that the kind of patriotism espoused by José is unproductive and divisive. “It does not promote camaraderie between different cultures of Filipinos, but it serves to promote suspicion and encourage racism. This will not help our society in the long run. . . .”<sup>38</sup>

Meanwhile, Joshua Cheng, a third-year student at Ateneo de Manila University, shares in an essay published in the *Inquirer* that “F. Sionil José has scared me since I was in high school,” when the columnist was already threatening Chinese Filipinos with pogroms.<sup>39</sup> Like Palanca, he goes back to the history of the ethnic Chinese in the Philippines in order to expose José’s racist bias:

Recall our Spanish colonial period, when ethnic Chinese, who had mostly not yet converted to Catholicism at the time, were segregated into Manila’s Parian. Our colonial masters cultivated a distrust for them, making them an easy scapegoat. I would like to believe that we have moved past that time, when the ethnic Chinese were Sangleys and the ethnic Malays were Indios, and no one had yet thought that we are all part of a single country.<sup>40</sup>

<sup>37</sup> Kathleen Yu, “Revisiting my Tsinoy Dilemma: A response to F. Sionil José” *Rappler.com*, July 29, 2015, <http://www.rappler.com/move-ph/ispeak/100798-revisit-tsinoy-dilemma>.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Joshua Cheng, “F. Sionil José and the Crime of Being Born,” *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, July 30, 2015, <http://opinion.inquirer.net/87153/f-sionil-jose-and-the-crime-of-being-born>.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

Cheng poignantly describes what it is like to be a member of an ethnic minority group being publicly accused of possible treason. Like Tan and Pimentel, he refers to the Japanese Americans who were unfairly branded as traitors and herded into internment camps during the Second World War. He writes,

Let us turn this around: Do Filipinos with no Chinese blood have to live under the constant fear that their countrymen who happen to look a little different are secretly plotting to destroy our country? Do we have to live in this atmosphere of hatred and distrust created by the ravings of a novelist living in a twisted caricature of a forgotten decade? Do we want to give our nation's enemies the satisfaction of seeing us turn on each other when we feel endangered?<sup>41</sup>

Two more responses to José's July 26 piece are worth mentioning. One is a two-part essay written by OFW Patricio N. Abinales for *Rappler.com*. He disagrees with the National Artist's monolithic view of the ethnic Chinese, arguing that our language and culture reflect the multiethnic nature of Filipino society. "This is the attractiveness of our culture—it's [*sic*] being chop suey,<sup>42</sup> and yes, the term is Chinese in origin but now part of the local argot."<sup>43</sup> He also defends Tsinoy<sup>44</sup> against José's charge that they cause a "capital hemorrhage" in the

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> A local dish made of mixed vegetables, meat, and eggs.

<sup>43</sup> Patricio Abinales, "Why F. Sionil José May Just Be Our Donald Trump, Part 1," *Rappler.com*, August 7, 2015, <http://www.rappler.com/thought-leaders/101173-f-sionil-jose-donald-trump>.

<sup>44</sup> According to Teresita Ang See, "Tsinoy, a colloquial term meaning *Tsinong Pinoy* or Chinese Filipino, was coined by Kaisa Para sa Kaunlaran in the late 1980s to mean people who are Filipino in identity, albeit of Chinese descent. It was popularized in 1991 after producing the epic show, 'Tsinoy,' in celebration of Kaisa's 5th anniversary. Its use is now increasingly popular and acceptable. Kaisa believes that the Tsinoy is a unique breed of Filipino and not a special category of Chinese" (Teresita Ang See, "Cultural Persistence and Change: The Case of the Tsinoy," in *Chinese in the Philippines*, vol. 3 [Manila: Kaisa Para Sa Kaunlaran, Inc., 2004], 165, n. 1).

national economy, citing a 1994 study that shows that “Tsinoy companies were one of the groups that invested heavily on domestic industrialization” from the Cold War era to the Marcos years. Meanwhile, on the military front, he tells of a group of Chinese guerillas—the Wha Chi guerillas or Squadron 48—who fought the Japanese in the Philippines.<sup>45</sup>

The other response is, as of this writing, the most recent opinion piece concerning *l'affaire José* that has been published by a major news outlet. With the possible exception of Hau’s writings, Tan’s August 3 column in the *Inquirer* seems to be the most caustic in tone. Tan considers José’s “persistent gospel of racism and bigotry” as a direct attack against the youth, such as Tiffany Grace Uy and Joshua Cheng. He characterizes José’s attempts to clarify his position as “more offensive than the original statements.” Recognizing that the constitutional right to free speech renders José immune from legal prosecution, Tan opts instead for a popular social condemnation of the prominent novelist’s views:

I thus condemn José’s gospel of racism and bigotry. I condemn how a Filipino can be made a stranger in his own country solely because he is Muslim, gay, or ethnic Chinese. I condemn our straw man José’s proposition that singling out any group of Filipinos on the basis of race, religion, gender or sexual orientation is love of country, because neither my parents nor yours marched to Edsa to etch racism and bigotry onto our national values. . .

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<sup>45</sup> Patricio Abinales, “Why F. Sionil José May Just Be Our Donald Trump Part 2,” *Rappler.com*, August 8, 2015, <http://www.rappler.com/thought-leaders/101173-f-sionil-jose-donald-trump>.

We have no excuse . . . for being so poor in spirit that we fail to defend each Filipino's dignity and let racism and bigotry go unchallenged in our democracy.<sup>46</sup>

## Conclusion

This ongoing media conversation about nationalism and Chinese Filipinos reveals how the Philippines' contemporary intellectuals—writers, academics, OFWs, young professionals, students—are conceptualizing what it means to be “Filipino.” This preoccupation with the idea of a coherent Filipino identity is not new, and it appears to be revived in part as a response to the resurgence of China as an economic, cultural, and political power, especially in the Southeast Asian region. As Hau notes,

Continuing tensions over the Spratly Islands and, more recently, Scarborough Shoal, coupled with China's recent assertive behavior on the regional stage, have stoked anti-China sentiments that have occasionally spilled over into racial rants against the ethnic Chinese in the Philippines.<sup>47</sup>

That no less than F. Sionil José has voiced anti-Chinese opinions makes the issue particularly controversial. José is best known for his quintet of loosely connected novels set in Rosales, Pangasinan, the author's own hometown. Having a timeframe that spans the nineteenth century all the way to the 1970s, the novels constitute a “modern national epic.”<sup>48</sup> José is counted among four major Filipino

<sup>46</sup> Tan, “A Racist and a Bigot.”

<sup>47</sup> Caroline Hau, *The Chinese Question: Ethnicity, Nation, and Region in and beyond the Philippines* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2014), 34.

<sup>48</sup> Mina Roces, “Filipino Identity in Fiction, 1945–1972,” *Modern Asian Studies* 28, no. 2 (1994): 294.

writers who, through their works of fiction, gave voice to the search for who we are as a nation.<sup>49</sup> In denouncing Chinese Filipinos as possible “collaborators” with China José, the nationalist intellectual, wields more power of *exclusion* than if he had been any other public commentator. Nonetheless, the fallacies in his rhetoric and his insufficient and questionable sources undermine his message. The status and expertise of his critics, as well as their masterful articulation of the shared colonial and postcolonial history of Filipinos and Chinese Filipinos, expose the inconsistencies and unacceptability of old paradigms. They also reinvigorate the question of the meaning of “Filipino identity,” revealing that it has by no means been settled.

The search for who the Filipino is was particularly intense from 1945 to 1972, that is, after the postwar independence of the Philippines and just before President Ferdinand Marcos’s years of dictatorship. The following theme emerges from the Philippine literature of that period:

[T]he quest for identity was in reality the Filipino’s attempt to come to terms with his colonial past. The intellectuals had come to perceive the Filipino as a ‘lost soul’. He was lost because of the historical circumstances of a long colonial rule. There was a consensus that colonial rule had negative effects on Filipino identity formation.<sup>50</sup>

Indeed, the current discussion about how Chinese Filipino identity is related to being Filipino, and its ramifications for

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<sup>49</sup> Apart from José, the other three are Amado V. Hernandez, Nick Joaquin, and NVM Gonzales. Except for Hernandez, all wrote in English. *Ibid.*, 281.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*

nation-building, can only be understood in light of our colonial history. “Filipino” and “Philippines” are derivatives of the name of Philip II, the Spanish king at the time when the Philippine islands were “discovered” in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Initially, the term “Filipino” referred to a Spaniard born in the Philippines.<sup>51</sup> Spanish Philippines was stratified into four social groups: Spaniards and Spanish mestizos, *indios* or the indigenous ethnic Malays, Chinese, and Chinese mestizos.<sup>52</sup> As merchants who had a thriving trade between Manila and China, the Chinese played a key economic role at the time. However, Chinese immigrants continually faced periodic segregation, expulsion, and massacre due to Spanish fears that their great numbers would revolt. Those who converted to Catholicism and married *indias* prospered more, becoming Chinese mestizos.<sup>53</sup> It was not until the late nineteenth century, close to the end of Spanish rule, that a sense of nationhood was developed by the Philippine elite or the *Ilustrados*. These were mostly Chinese mestizos (who identified as Filipino and not as Chinese) who were educated in Europe and helped lead the Philippine revolution.<sup>54</sup> The *Ilustrados* were the first to call themselves “Filipinos.”

In spite of the miscegenation between the Chinese and the *indios*, there has remained an ethnically distinct group of Chinese in the Philippines. This distinctiveness manifests today in “the three bastions of traditional Chinese culture,” namely Chinese schools, Chinese newspapers, and Chinese associations.<sup>55</sup> This was partly a

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<sup>51</sup> Edgar Wickberg, *The Chinese Mestizo in Philippine History*, with Chinese translation by Go Bon Juan (Manila: Kaisa Para Sa Kaunlaran, Inc., 2001), 49.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 8–9.

<sup>54</sup> Teresita Ang See, “The Ethnic Chinese as Filipinos,” in *The Chinese in the Philippines: Problems and Perspectives*, vol. 2 (Manila: Kaisa Para Sa Kaunlaran, Inc., 1997), 28.

<sup>55</sup> Ang See, “Cultural Persistence and Change,” 159.

result of developments during the American era, after the Philippines was ceded to the US at the conclusion of the Spanish-American war. The Chinese Exclusion Act prohibited Chinese immigration, isolating the existing Chinese community in the country.<sup>56</sup> This law accounts for why the Philippines has some of the lowest Chinese populations in Southeast Asia, and why there is no wide range of speech groups among Chinese Filipinos, most of whom have come from the province of Fujian.<sup>57</sup> This necessarily close-knit community was eventually integrated into Filipino society when the Marcos government allowed the mass naturalization of the Chinese in 1975.<sup>58</sup>

Despite the integration of Chinese Filipinos and their relatively peaceful coexistence with other Filipinos, ethnic stereotypes prevail, occasionally erupting during certain cultural moments, as in the case of the media discourse sparked by José's incendiary writings. It has highlighted at least "two popular myths" about the ethnic Chinese: that they have economic control of the Philippines, and that all of them are rich.<sup>59</sup> To explain this antagonism, we need only return to the Filipino experience of colonization:

The more than three centuries of Spanish rule and five decades of American occupation left indelible marks on

<sup>56</sup> Tong Chee Kiong, *Identity and Ethnic Relations in Southeast Asia: Racializing Chineseness* (New York: Springer, 2010), 205.

<sup>57</sup> George H. Weightman, "The Philippine Chinese: From Aliens to Cultural Minority," *Journal of Comparative Family Studies* 16, no. 2 (Summer 1985): 167.

<sup>58</sup> The Philippines is unique in Southeast Asia for having *integrated* its ethnic Chinese, who kept their cultural identity in a two-way exchange of values with the host country. In contrast, the Chinese in Thailand were assimilated or culturally absorbed, whereas the Chinese in Malaysia and Indonesia continue to experience conflict and discrimination (Tong, *Identity and Ethnic Relations*, 3–13, *passim*).

<sup>59</sup> Teresita Ang See, "Cultural Conflict and Integration in the Philippines: The Case of the Ethnic Chinese Minority" in *Chinese in the Philippines: Problems and Perspectives*, vol. 2 (Manila: Kaisa Para Sa Kaunlaran, Inc., 1997), 11.

the Philippines, especially on the relations between the ethnic Chinese and the native Filipinos. True to the dictum of divide and rule, both the Spanish and the Americans separated the ethnic Chinese from the Filipino mainstream. The Spaniards put up a physical barrier by confining the Chinese in their exclusive enclave, the *Parian*, and the Americans perpetuated a psychological barrier by encouraging the Chinese to live a separate existence by having their own schools, press, chamber of commerce, and other associations. Both colonizers, as well as the short-lived Japanese rulers, exploited to the hilt the art of scapegoatism—blaming the Chinese for the economic ills that befell the country caused by their maladministration and ineffective economic policies. The deliberate anti-Chinese policies of discrimination and the tendencies of the colonial administration to blame the ethnic Chinese for their own failed policies are legacies which have been passed on and perpetuated to the present.<sup>60</sup>

The rituals of exclusion and marginalization that fuel colonialism—i.e. us/them thinking and the creation of necessary Others—also infect nationalism, if José's claims are anything to go by. Thus, any attempt to construct a Filipino identity must be cognizant of such pitfalls. The moves of José's critics are promising: They retread our colonial history in order to go beyond it.<sup>61</sup> They question the idea of a racialized essence.<sup>62</sup> They locate national

<sup>60</sup> Ang See, "Ethnic Chinese as Filipinos," 34–35.

<sup>61</sup> Hau, "Beware of False Prophets"; Palanca, "Open Letter to F. Sionil José."

<sup>62</sup> Claudio, "'Filipino' Is Not a Race."

identity not in ethnicity but in moral and political action.<sup>63</sup> They celebrate cultural diversity.<sup>64</sup> They argue for equal respect in spite of ethnic differences.<sup>65</sup> Finally, they remain optimistic about the possibility of national unity.<sup>66</sup>

In conclusion, the themes that emerge from the discourse of Filipino identity as an imagined identity correspond to the conceptual models presented in a previous section. Filipino identity, of which Chinese Filipino identity is a subset, is anti-essentialist, intersubjective, and compatible with the creation of a universal ethical community. By responding to the issue of “Who counts as Filipino?” as precipitated by F. Sionil José’s columns, Filipino intellectuals, both ethnic Chinese and not, emphasize the fictive or imaginary elements of identity. They point out that being Filipino is not an eternal or Platonic attribute, but a constructed idea with a history. They assert that “Filipino” became a coherent category only as a nationalistic response to the logic of colonialism, a common enemy of all subjugated inhabitants of the Philippines regardless of their ethnicities. They also locate the authenticity of identity not so much in the individual subject as in his or her relations with the community. As Yu writes, “being Filipino is hardly about blood”; rather, it is manifested by “how we look at our fellow countrymen.”<sup>67</sup> That a National Artist for Literature known for his nationalistic novels cannot get away with ethnic slurs, shows that Filipino identity is not a hegemonic concept controlled by a few. Rather, it is shaped

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<sup>63</sup> Yu, “Revisiting my Tsinoy Dilemma.”

<sup>64</sup> Abinales, “Why José May Just Be Our Donald Trump, Part 1.”

<sup>65</sup> Tan, “Anti-Chinese-Filipino Slurs”; Tan, “A Racist and a Bigot”; Cheng, “José and the Crime of Being Born.”

<sup>66</sup> Pimentel, “Why F. Sionil José Is Wrong”; Cheng, “José and the Crime of Being Born.”

<sup>67</sup> Yu, “Revisiting my Tsinoy Dilemma.”

through a dialogical process where our understanding of our own history is continually reevaluated and exclusionary moves are contested. Finally, with regard to the ascription of individual rights, there is a clear preference for equal status rather than unique identity as an object of respect. The metaphor of “chop suey” as used by Abinales recognizes undeniable ethnic and cultural differences under the rubric of “Filipino,” a term that applies universally to the individuals having such differences.<sup>68</sup> The insistence that “Filipino” should be thought of as a *political* rather than *racial* category eschews the essentializing discourse of identity politics in favor of a more humanistic view. All these are promising developments toward the articulation of a contemporary Filipino national identity that encompasses—without eradicating—our very real differences, not only in terms of ethnicity, but also in terms of economic class, religion, gender, sexual orientation, and other aspects of being a person.

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<sup>68</sup> Abinales, “Why José May Just Be Our Donald Trump Part 1.”

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