

# Middleman Minority: Ethics, Ethnicity, and the Chinese Middleman in *The Woman Who Had Two Navels*

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**Abstract** By adopting the notion of the “middleman”—how the Chinese migrant merchants had straddled between the Spanish conquistadors and the local indigenous peoples in colonial New Spain, this paper investigates the representation and intermediation of the “*middleman minority*” in Nick Joaquín’s seminal novel, *The Woman Who Had Two Navels* (1961). While the mysterious Chinese deity adds spice to “pagan fatalism,” there is no doubt that the intermediation of the middleman minority plays an important role in the narrative tapestry. In this paper, by drawing on the work of David Parker, Nie Zhenzhao, Shirley Lim, Rey Chow, and Emmanuel Levinas, I look into the intermingling of ethics, ethnicity, and the representation of the Chinese “middleman” in Joaquín’s work. Moreover, I apply Edward Said’s thoughts on postcolonial exile to the setting in Hong Kong and investigate how the island space, as a site of Foucauldian heterogenic intermediation, is also a “middle place” that provides Filipino expatriates with a sense of postcolonial exilic agency.

**Key words** Nick Joaquín; *The Woman Who Had Two Navels*; middleman minority; ethics; ethnicity; heterotopia; postcolonial exile

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### Introduction

In 1973, sociologist Edna Bonacich at the University of California, Riverside published an essay “A Theory of Middleman Minorities,” in which she argued that “there is a general consensus that a number of ethnic groups in the world have occupied a similar position in the social structure. Among these are the Jews in Europe, the Indians in east Africa, and the Chinese in Southeast Asia... . In contrast to most ethnic minorities, the middlemen occupy an intermediate rather than a low-status position. They tend to concentrate in certain occupations, notably trade and commerce, in the host country” (583). Updating the notion that was first conceptualized by Hubert Blalock in 1967, Bonacich’s “theory of middleman minorities” has gained a wide recognition in the field of ethnic Chinese studies. For example, Charles Hirschman, a sociologist at the University of Washington, states in his essay “Chinese Identities in Southeast Asia: Alternative Perspectives” (1988) that “the historical experience of the Chinese in Southeast Asia is rather different. Perhaps a more appropriate model is the ‘middleman minorities hypothesis,’ proposed by Edna Bonacich (1973; also see Bonacich and Modell, 1980: Chap.2; Turner and Bonacich, 1980; van den Berghe, 1981: Chap.7). The theory [underscores] the intermediate position of ethnic Chinese minorities concentrated in the small business sector” (23).<sup>1</sup> Moreover, Evelyn Hu-DeHart, a historian at Brown University, in her study of Chinese migrant merchants in the Spanish empire claims that “European trading posts in Southeast Asia, such as Manila and Batavia, attracted a large number of Chinese migrant merchants. Because imperial China

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1 Cecilia Green and Yan Liu in their study of the Chinese in the Caribbean also observe that as Brereton and others have noted, soon after their arrival, the Chinese in the British West Indies “quickly emerged as a classic ‘middleman minority,’ a small ethnic group carving out a niche in the shop keeping sector” (2).

did not allow direct contact with Europe, Chinese migrant merchants became the ‘middlemen’ in the Sino-Spanish maritime trade network” (31).

By adopting the notion of the Chinese “middleman”—as Bonacich, Hirschman, and Hu-DeHart have observed, I use the “middleman” as a trope in my reading of the representation of the Chinese in *The Woman Who Had Two Navels* (1961), a canonical Filipino fiction by Nick Joaquín. Whereas most critics have paid attention to the “two navels of the Philippines”—for example, Rocio Davis argues for the notion of “cross-culturality” of both the Spanish and the American cultures (269); Mina Roces states that “the Filipino having two navels representing the Spanish and the American colonial heritage” (303)—I aim to examine the representation of the Chinese, the ethnic group that constitutes about 25% of the present population in the Philippines.<sup>1</sup> According to Edgar Wickberg, the well-known historian who pioneered in the study of the Chinese in the Philippines, “direct contact between China and the Philippines had existed at least from the Sung Dynasty (A.D. 960-1279)” (3). The role of the Chinese and the Chinese mestizos has been “of great significance to Philippine historical development” (*The Chinese Mestizo* 1). Wickberg notes that the Chinese demonstrated their talents in commerce and “rose to prominence as ... middlemen wholesalers of local produce and foreign imports” (*The Chinese Mestizo* 47). It is clear that the role of the Chinese in the Manila Galleon, or *la nao de la china*, signified the intermediation of the Chinese merchants in the Manila-Acapulco maritime trade network that had connected the Pacific and the Atlantic for 250 years (1565-1815). As we know, the term “Sangleys” was used by colonial Spaniards to refer to Chinese migrant merchants who went back and forth between Macao and Manila. Their children born in Manila became the “mestizos de Sangleys.” By the time Chinatown, the first of its kind, was established in Binondo, Manila in 1594, it testified to the settlement and thriving of the Chinese in the Philippines. The growth and concentration of the Chinese community in Manila was remarkable. By 1603, the population of the Chinese was estimated around 20,000 while that of the Spaniards was only about 1000 (Wickberg, *The Chinese* 3-4). To sum up, the history of the Philippines, as Chinese Filipino historian Richard Chu claims, may have been “more Tsinoy than we admit.”<sup>2</sup> In the words of Bernardita Reyes Churchill, “What is important insofar as the history of the Chinese in the Philippines is to weave it into the history of the Philippines so that the Chinese are included in the national

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1 25% refers to the mixture of the Chinese and the Chinese mestizos. For the population of the Chinese in the Philippines, please see <[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chinese\\_Filipino](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chinese_Filipino)>

2 This is the title of Chu’s book, “more Tsinoy than we admit” (2015).

narrative, not as immigrants or a separate community, but as Filipinos.”<sup>1</sup>

Accenting the historical prominence of the Chinese in the Philippines, the purpose of this paper is twofold. Firstly, I aim to investigate the representation of the Chinese as an ethnic group in *The Woman Who Had Two Navels*, one of the most well-known Filipino novels in English. By drawing on the work of David Parker, Nie Zhenzhao, Shirley Lim, Rey Chow, and Emmanuel Levinas, I look into the intermingling of ethics, ethnicity, and the representation of the Chinese “middleman” in Joaquin’s seminal novel. Secondly, I draw on Edward Said’s postcolonial theory of exile and argue for a postcolonial contrapuntal mirroring and intermediation of the spaces between Manila and Hong Kong. I contend that Hong Kong, the Chinese quarter, literally becomes the space of Foucaultian heterotopia, where the exilic Filipino revolutionaries could achieve a sense of postcolonial agency. In other words, in addition to the representation of the Chinese middleman, I examine the heterotopic intermediation of the Chinese middle place, i.e. Hong Kong. My arguments are divided into four parts. In part one (the current section), I explain the notion of the “middleman minority” by drawing on the work of Edna Bonacich, Charles Hirschman, Evelyn Hu-DeHart, and Edgar Wickberg. In part two, I give a theoretical account of the relationships between ethics and ethnicity by drawing on the work of Shirley Lim, Rey Chow, Emmanuel Levinas, David Parker, and Nie Zhenzhao. In part three, I analyze the Saidian exilic space of Hong Kong and examine how it is taken as a space of heterogenic and postcolonial intermediation of Manila. In part four, I make the conclusion.

### **Ethics and Ethnicity**

Shirley Lim in her critique of US ethnic studies turns the focus to the sense of ethical responsibility in relation to the other. She welcomes studies that focus on “the relationship between ethnicity and ethics to foreground readings that investigate politics, history, social values ... class, nation, race, gender and all kinds of multiplicity inscribed in ethnic- and nation-bound cultural productions” (4). She cites Rey Chow and her book *Ethics after Idealism* to accent “a practice of a ‘supplementing imperative’” that aims to “counter [the] tendencies to a totalizing rhetoric about the other” (qtd. in Lim 4). Moreover, she relates Chow to Emmanuel Levinas and argues for the commonality in their mutual concern about the ethical responsibility toward the other. She argues that “Chow pushes further Levinas’ thesis on the ‘ethics of responsibility,’ rising out of the recognition of the obdurate

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1 This is cited from Churchill’s review of Chu. Please see <<https://shop.vibalgroup.com/products/more-tsinoy-than-we-admit>>

existence of the unknowable others, to the determination, nonetheless, for a practice of interpretation that is informed by close studies of other cultures” (4).

Lim’s insight is applicable to the case of the ethnic Chinese in the Philippines. Despite their active presence in the history of the Philippines, the Chinese have suffered from a sense of ethnic otherness. Caroline Hau observes “by the early twentieth century, the Chinese mestizo class in the Philippines had largely disappeared as an entity into a nascent ‘Filipino’ national community under American colonial rule, a Filipino community that came to see itself as standing apart from the ‘Chinese’ who were now considered [as] an alien minority” (106). She argues that is why “the novels of the Filipino national hero, José Rizal, who was technically a Chinese mestizo, are revered and studied as masterpieces of *Philippine* literature” (106). Hau’s observation could be related to the notion of “ethical unconscious” that is coined by David Parker. In his book, *Ethics, Theory and the Novel* (1995), by alluding to Frederic Jameson’s *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (1981), Parker argues that “post-structuralist theory has been largely unconscious of its ethical bearings, in much the same way as the old humanist criticism was often unaware of its allegiances to the interests of a particular race, class, and gender” (4). The fact that José Rizal, “a Chinese mestizo,” is being taken as “a Filipino national hero,” crystallizes the assimilation of the Chinese into the mainstream Filipino society. As a result, Rizal’s Chinese ethnicity has been foreclosed.

Given the historical presence of the Chinese in the Filipino history, it is important to be reminded that “the Filipino has a three-fold historical heritage: the Oriental-Malayan, the Spanish, and the American” (192),<sup>1</sup> as Lourdes Busuego Pablo had pointed out back in the fifties. Pablo also indicated that “it is obvious that [Joaquín] cannot afford to ignore any of these” (192). I argue that the representation of the Chinese as an ethnic group is therefore noteworthy in the novel. It manifests not only the “ethical unconscious” that Parker illuminates in relation to the “humanist allegiances to the interest of a particular race, class, and gender,” but also, in more active terms, the “ethical responsibility” that Lim argues with regard to the “interpretation of other cultures.” It is notable that the presentation of the Chinese in the novel is handled with a sense of “liminal virtuosity” that reveals the distinct and ubiquitous presence of the Chinese in the Philippines. In the words of

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1 To be precise, there are at least four aspects in Filipino heritage—the indigenous Malay-an-Austronesian, the Chinese, the Spanish, and the American. The conflation of the “Oriental” and the “Malayan” reveals the misconception of the dominant Filipino society, which however has not dealt with in this paper.

Nie Zhenzhao, it elucidates the un/conscious “ethical choice” made by Joaquín.<sup>1</sup> According to Nie’s theory of ethical literary criticism, Joaquín “zooms in on the various factors of the ethical contingency, in which the character would have to make an ethical choice” (“Towards” 88). That is to say, Joaquín literally acts out the “ethical responsibility” of being in the surroundings of the ethnic Chinese in the Philippines. By placing the novel at the intersection of ethics and ethnicity, I aim to examine not only the presentation of the ethnic Chinese, but also how this figure of the middleman—as Chinese migrant merchants had played in the Manila Galleon trade—is achieved through the spatial intermediation of the exilic space in Hong Kong, which I turn to in the next section.

### Postcolonial Exilic Agency

Joseph Galdon argues that one “basic theme in Philippine fiction is the theme of alienation and the failure to communicate. This is reflected most clearly in the theme of exile that recurs time and again among writers of Philippine fiction particularly in the post-war period” (xiv). *The Woman Who Had Two Navels* would fit the bidding—not only because the theme of the novel centers on exile, but also because the narrative time is set in the post-war era—right after the Philippines gains independence after WWII in historical actuality and after the trip made by General Monson who has been on exile since the country is taken over by the US in the novel. While the theme of exile is self-evident, the locale of exile—Hong Kong—is noteworthy. As Galdon points out, “Hong Kong in *The Woman Who Had Two Navels* is a symbol of exile” (xiv). Similarly, Marie Rose Arong argues that the significance of Hong Kong lies in its historical association with Filipino revolutionaries, expatriates, and historical figures such as José Rizal, Emilio Aguinaldo, and Artemio Ricarte. She points out that Hong Kong was the place where Dr. Rizal practiced medicine, where General Aguinaldo led his government-in-exile, and where General Artemio Ricarte went on exile—whom she actually considers as a source that might have inspired the characterization of General Monson.<sup>2</sup> In this section, by drawing on the work of Edward Said and Michel

1 Please see Chapter 2 “The Sphinx Factor and the Ethical Choice” in Nie (2014: 32-49).

2 Arong writes, “Hong Kong is an important locale for Filipino revolutionaries and expatriates. Jose Rizal practiced as an ophthalmologist in Hong Kong prior to his exile in Dapitan, and the first Philippine republic led by General Emilio Aguinaldo used Hong Kong as its base for its government-in-exile. Doctor Monson’s character is loosely based on another Filipino general—General Artemio Ricarte—who spent time as an exile in Hong Kong (Zialcita 222) after refusing to pledge allegiance to the US and controversially returned to the Philippines at the request of the Japanese during the occupation of Manila” (463).

Foucault, I contextualize the Filipino exilic experience, examine the exilic space of Hong Kong, and analyze how the “Chinese quarter” is able to create a postcolonial exilic agency by being a space of heterogenic intermediation.

In “Reflections on Exile,” Edward Said depicts the condition of exile and the possible solution out of the predicament. He says,

Exile [is] an alternative to the mass institution that dominates modern life. Exile is not, after all, a matter of choice: you are born into it, or it happens to you. But, provided that the exile refuses to sit on the sidelines nursing a wound, there are things to be learned: he or she must cultivate a scrupulous [sense of] subjectivity.” (2)

Said cites the works of post-war German intellectuals, such as Theodor Adorno and Erich Auerbach, who wrote their representative works on exile.<sup>1</sup> According to Said, “[*Mimesis*] owed its existence to the very fact of Oriental exile and homelessness... . [It is] a work built upon a critically important alienation from [the west]” (1984: 8). Comparing Said with post-war German exilic intellectuals, David Morgan argues that Said, as an Arab living in the West, is able to “name a space and a subjectivity that allows the postcolonial subject to critique power from a distanced perspective while also acknowledging the subject’s grounding in the cultural and political milieu” (19). He maintains, “Said’s exile both acknowledges its embeddedness in a network of discursive powers and resists them through exilic criticism” (23).

By drawing on Morgan’s work of the Saidian “model for critical postcolonial agency” (1), I argue that the exilic subjectivity is what characterizes the political and ethical action of the postcolonial project that Joaquín aims to do in *The Woman Who Had Two Navels*. To start with, it is this political and ethical practice of “postcolonial exilic agency” which motivates the Monsons’ expatriation in Hong Kong. It is therefore important to observe the series of flights made by General Monson, Connie Escobar, Senora de Vidal, and Paco Texeira. They want to escape from Manila in order to get away from the shackles of colonial trauma in terms of the US regime, mother-daughter betrayals, bodily stigmata, and gothic hauntings (94). Most crucially, it sets the tone of postcolonial defiance in the case of General Monson, who goes Hong Kong to assert “the secret pride, the secret exultation” (42) of Filipino nationalism.

Moreover, I argue that the island space of Hong Kong, while being outside of

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<sup>1</sup> Adorno wrote *Minima Moralia* (1951) while on exile in the US and Auerbach authored *Mimesis* in Turkey (1946).

the colonial regime of the United States, becomes the “transitional stage” (San Juan, 174) that mediates between the pre-colonial Manila and the present US colony. It literally occupies the Foucauldian notion of the heterogeneous space. According to Foucault, “there are, in every culture, real places—which are something like counter-sites—in which the real sites ... are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted” (3). In the case of the novel, Hong Kong is undoubtedly a real place, but it is also the “counter-site” of the homeland in Manila, which has, by force, become a US colony. In other words, there is a mirroring relationship between the real site (Hong Kong) and the heterotopia (Hong Kong as the counter-site of the homeland in Manila). Laura Rice elaborates, “heterotopias ... are real (that is, material) places that serve as mirrors of other real (material) sites, destabilizing them” (38). That is to say, the material place of Hong Kong mirrors the imaginary homeland in Manila, destabilizing both. Moreover, I argue that the island space of Hong Kong is therefore a Foucauldian heterotopia, mirroring pre-colonial Manila, while contesting, inverting, and destabilizing both. In the following I analyze how the heterogeneous space of Hong Kong is able to break free from the confinement of US colonial power and functions as a postcolonial space of heterotopic intermediation.

The novel starts with an emphatic confrontation with the heterogeneous space of Hong Kong—where Connie Escobar seeks surgical help from (the young) Dr. Monson and where an exilic homeland is displayed in the clinical room—

And why *here*? wondered Pepe Monson, removing bewildered eyes from her face and looking rather dazedly around the room; feeling the room’s furniture hovering vaguely—the faded rug on the floor; the sofa near the doorway, against the wall; the two small Filipino flags crossed under a picture of General Aguinaldo; the bust of the Sacred Heart upon the bookshelf, between brass candlesticks; the tamaraw head above each of the two shut windows.” (4)

While the opening powerfully sets up the chronotope of the story, it is also charged with the effect of Gothic haunting—where the furniture hovers and the eyes are bewildered<sup>1</sup>—as if the clinic is not real. It is riveting how Joaquín zooms in on the

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1 What follows the descriptions of the furniture and decorations is the “fog [bulging] against the windowpanes, as though elephants were wedging past” (4). Arong also points out that “in Gothic literature, mist or fog is conventionally used to blur objects not only to reduce visibility, but also to usher in terror, be it in the form of a person or a thing... . Hong Kong’s infamous fog, especially during winter, generates the ideal Gothic atmosphere for the novel!” (463).

immediacy (“hereness”) of Hong Kong in order to highlight the forsaken homeland “away” in Manila. In this way, the spatial mirroring between Hong Kong and Manila sets off the heterotopic relationship between the two cities. Moreover, like Manila, Hong Kong is a harbor city surrounded by water—where there is always a view “of the harbor, gay with junks and ferryboats; where the Monson family would swim with the English, the Chinese, or the Portuguese in Deep Water Bay,” (9) and where they would realize that they are stranded “on the foreign sands of a foreign shore” (9). In other words, the harbor city of Hong Kong is situated at a “critical distance”<sup>1</sup> that wavers as a space of “intermediation” between the Philippine archipelago and the US continent.

If the setting of Hong Kong is introduced by Pepe Monson, the elder brother of the Monson boys, it is reiterated by Tony Monson, the younger brother, who like Joaquín, is sent to the monastery to be trained as a Catholic priest.<sup>2</sup> Being presumably the persona of the author (Joaquín) himself, Tony gives another spellbinding picture of the heterotopic space of Hong Kong—

[H]e stood by his cell window, felt a sudden bitter tenderness for the city spread out and humming joyously beneath him, for this doomed heathen town that was home and not home, that was birthplace but not native land, that he had loved and feared and finally rejected, but whose beauty—soggy in spring time, steamy in summer, perfect in autumn, perverse in winter—his foreign bones knew like a wife and regarded like a stranger; never quite familiar, never wholly embraced, being still the rented habitation of his childhood, where he had dwelt in body though not in spirit, and in whose streets he had walked the streets of that other city, the true native city he had had never known ... whose clear image had always overlaid these hilltops that he had climbed as a boy, ... and the sea, and the harbor with the ferryboats, and Kowloon beyond, smoky and sprawling black and gold in the sunshine, where his father lay dying in exile.” (88)

In his vivid and sensual descriptions of the houses, streets, seasons, hilltops, harbor, and ferryboats, Joaquín gives a most fascinating heterogenic picture of Hong Kong, the “rented habitation” of the Monson family on exile. While the mirroring relationship between Hong Kong and Manila is emphatically accented by the

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1 Please see Morgan.

2 It is also important to note that like Joaquín, Tony Monson refuses to go back to St. Andrew’s after his meeting with Connie (197).

hallucinating repetitions of the contrast between home and exile, native and heathen, wife and mistress, spirit and body, etc., it clearly unveils the “critical distance” between Hong Kong and Manila, the uncanny similarities between the two (material) places. Most importantly, from the point of view of Tony, who is standing by the cell window at this juncture, the sight “beneath him” (the streets, roofs, harbor, and ferryboats sprawling beneath and beyond) allows him to see the other place (Manila,) where he is not. It reminds us of the visual and spatial mirroring that Foucault comments—“the mirror functions as a heterotopia in this respect: it makes the place that I occupy at the moment when I look at myself in the glass at once absolutely real, connected with all the space that surrounds it, *and* absolutely unreal, since in order to be perceived it has to pass through this virtual point which is over there” (4, *italics added*). Following the Foucauldian theory of mirroring, Hong Kong thus becomes the heterotopia of Manila.

Moreover, the mirroring relationship between Hong Kong and Manila is doubled by Pepe Monson and his buddy, Paco Texeira. While they share the same experience of an exilic childhood in Hong Kong, Pepe’s imaginary of Manila is associated with the waters and Paco’s is with the mountains. Born in Hong Kong, both Pepe and Paco get to know Manila from their fathers. For the Monsons, they like to swim in Deep Water Bay, where the father and the sons would “race each other all the way to an island across the bay” (9) and where the mother would sit “knitting beside the lunch basket” (9). It is by the waters “while [his mother] handed the sandwiches around, his father would tell them about the waters back home he had swum in when a boy. But what [his father] most loved to talk about was the river that ran right behind their house in Binondo” (9). Like the harbor sight viewed by Tony, that provokes the mirage of Manila, the waters in Deep Water Bay mirror those in the Pasig River, flowing through Manila.<sup>1</sup> It is needless to say, a relationship of mirroring heterotopia is created between the two watery cities.

As for Paco, his imaginary of Manila is associated with mountains. His father tells him that the mountains in Hong Kong are

bald and wrinkled like old dogs that had lost their hair, and so small you could climb up to their tops and down again in half an hour ... [They are] not like the mountains back in the Philippines that took days and even weeks to climb and were thick with trees and shrubbery and dangerous with wild animals. Then he had begun to tell Paco about a range of mountains just across Manila Bay that looked like a woman stretched out in sleep. (26-27)

1 For details, please see <[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Laguna\\_de\\_Bay](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Laguna_de_Bay)>

This imagery of “a range of mountains stretching out like a woman in sleep across Manila Bay” then becomes the dominant landscape that registers the imaginary of the motherland. The imagery later repeats twice in the narrative. It appears again when Paco goes to Manila for the first time, seeing “from the railing of the ship ... with a shock of recognition, a range of mountains that looked like a woman sleeping” (27). It makes such an impact that Paco feels powerfully “a stirring of clan-emotion—a glow, almost, of homecoming” (27). Then, most intricately, this “stirring of clan-emotion” re-surfaces when he meets the senora de Vidal, who embodies “a combination of primitive mysticism and slick modernity” (27); who symbolizes “the mountains and the [mythic] woman sleeping in a silence mighty with myth and mystery” (27); and who reminds him of the “range of mountains that looked like a woman sleeping” (28), which his father had told him back in Hong Kong. Thus, the narrative at this juncture runs a full circle by going between Pepe and Paco, between waters and mountains—the seascape and landscape that invoke the memories of the Filipino motherland—and between Hong Kong and Manila, the (almost) homed and unhomed harbor cities—to render Filipino nativism, postcolonial exile, and heterotopic mirroring full force in the narrative tapestry of the novel.

### **The Chinese Quarter**

Most importantly, in the geopolitical context of the story, I argue that the “Chinese quarter” of Hong Kong plays an important exilic place of intermediation to counter colonization. On the one hand, Hong Kong, the “Chinese quarter,” is the place where the Monsons seek refuge in defiance of the US empire; in other words, as San Juan points out, Hong Kong “functions as a quasi-utopian standard for measuring the subversive potential” (187). That is to say, the island serves as a space of subversion. Moreover, Hong Kong, as the Chinese quarter, is related to Chinatown, which also functions as a space of subversion. Back in the Philippines, it is the “Chinese quarter” of Manila Chinatown, where Connie goes for shelter when she denounces her parents. This incident takes place when Connie discovers that her father, who works in the colonial US government, is involved in bribery and embezzlement. Refusing to be “educated on stolen money” (Joaquín 14), she decides to quit school, runs away, and goes to Chinatown. She finds a job, “working as dishwasher in a chop suey joint in the Chinese quarter” (15). Connie, the lead female protagonist, and her action to denounce her parents, then, should be taken as a symbolic gesture to rebel against US colonialism. It also explains why she wants

to see old General Monson before she elopes away with Paco. By paying tribute to the old hero whom “they had all betrayed” (204) and to whom she confesses her sins, she is finally able to make peace with the past and exorcize the “ghost from her childhood” (204). Here in the small room in Hong Kong, “two generations that had lost each other *here* met in exile” (204; *italics added*). That is to say, more than anyone else, Connie is the female counterpart of the old hero. Likewise, she’s the young revolutionary, fighting for free will and self-autonomy. Her choice to run away and go Chinatown manifests how the heterogeneous space of the Chinese quarter is engaged in a postcolonial project to counter colonization—just like what Hong Kong does in the geopolitical context of the novel.

It is also interesting that Joaquín picks on small details to present the Chinese heterogeneity in Hong Kong, which echo a general impression of Chinatown. I’d like to provide three instances. First, it is the Chinese house-boy who allegedly gives the “drug” to General Monson after he returns from Manila. The mention of the opium brings to mind the morbid picture of the opium dens that Arnold Genthe had captured in the Old San Francisco Chinatown photographs. Second, when Pepe visits the Texeiras, Mary offers him a cigarette and apologizes for its poor quality—“It’s just a Chinese brand” (39). So, the understatement is that Chinese brand is cheap in price and quality, which suits the general impression of Chinatown groceries. Third, it is also important to note that Paco’s mother, who is originally from Macao<sup>1</sup> and who marries a Filipino musician, works in a Chinese clothes factory in Hong Kong, which brings to mind the labor-intensive sweatshop industry and which hires mostly female garment workers in Chinatown.

If Joaquín is able to showcase his “liminal virtuosity” in the representation of the Chinese by picking up notable details, such as the Chinese house-boy, the Chinese cigarette, the Chinese clothes factory, and the Chinese chop suey joint—in presenting the ethnic-scape of the Chinese quarter, it is also interesting to observe how the heterogeneous space of Hong Kong is later toned up by a more exquisite and exotic sense of Orientalism. When Mary visits the senora, she admires the latter’s dignified regal appearance—“[the senora] was wearing a Chinese dress of black wool, slit at the knee, with a stiff collar and a golden dragon prancing up in front” (26). This image of a mysterious, prancing dragon comes to an accent in the jazz music played by Paco and his band in the night clubs in Manila—the “Manila-Hong Kong” and the “Boulevard Shanghai”—“which would be reminiscent of

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1 It is very likely that his mother is mixed-blood as her family name is “Texeira,” which is Portuguese (22-23). In other words, Paco is also mixed-blood, having Chinese, Portuguese, and Filipino lineages.

nightlife in those cities; ... to accentuate an atmosphere to be created by Chinese prints, lanterns, and mirrors on the walls, Chinese cigarette girls on the aisles, White Russian hostesses on the dance floor, and armed Bombay bouncers under the tables” (23).

This picture of a cosmopolitan Hong Kong being transported to post-war Manila, however, brings us to the ancient Oriental heterogeneity that is at home in Manila Chinatown, which however serves as the nodal point in support of native Filipino postcolonism. When Paco eventually meets Connie in Manila, he accompanies her in one of the city tours to the Chinese quarter—“They drove through the cramped slums where the Manila Chinese are kenneled: wet walls, wet cobbles, bridges arching over stagnant canals, craggy tenements dripping rain into tight twisting streets, a raggedness of black roofs and the arrowy silhouette of a pagoda soaring in the rainy moonlight” (36). Paco follows Connie to a temple, where he sees “an old bearded Chinaman, sucking a long pipe” (36)—just another familiar image of old heathen Chinatown. It comes to the climax when Paco overlooks Connie worship “an old fat god, with sagging udders, bald and white bearded and squatting like a Buddha; and the sly look in its eyes was repeated by the two navels that winked from its gross belly” (36).

The figure of Biliken has been rendered as a fetish of “pagan fatalism,” which has strangely become “a source of comfort” to Connie (Arong 468). It is the statue of the laughing Buddha that she searches for most desperately when they return to the family garden after the Japanese occupation. It is Biliken, who not only redeems the sacrifice of Minnie,<sup>1</sup> but also suffers from the war-ridden destruction of Manila, where he is found being “fired twice ... [with] two small black holes peered like eyes from the top of the great belly” (166). It is important to realize that Connie feels a strong sense of self-identity with Biliken, the heathen deity, as, he, like her, also suffers from the colonial trauma of physical disfiguration and psychic schizophrenia (being a symbol of savage evil). It is San Juan, who not only appreciates how Joaquín makes avail of the “mythopoeic power of the Chinese culture” (187),<sup>2</sup> but also gives the Chinese pagan deity a most promising interpretation:

While war destroyed Manila and its fabled ramparts, ravaged the gardens and fairgrounds where Connie played, Hong Kong remains the promise materialized: Biliken’s dominion, the self-renewing carnival which overthrows

1 It refers to the doll, Minnie, which helps Connie “discover” her two navels.

2 It is also important to understand the temporality of the Chinese New Year and the imagery of the Chinese Moon in Chapter 4. Please see San Juan.

Platonic Ideas and sanctifies the heterogeneous drives of the body, the transversal orgies of *jouissance*.” (188)

Here, I argue that the “heterogeneous drives of the body,” as well as the “transversal orgies of *jouissance*” in association with the pagan deity Biliken worshipped in the old temple in the Chinese quarter, provide the material space for Filipino postcolonial exilic agency. Most importantly, it is the Chinese quarter—either Hong Kong or Chinatown, Manila—that provides a space of heterogeneous intermediation for subversion. Thus, it is interesting to point out that the old family house of the Monsons is located in the neighborhood of the Chinese quarter. General Monson, while swimming in Deep Water Bay, would always tell the Monson boys,

[H]ow their old house in Binondo had a large stone azotea behind, with steps going right down to the water, and how you could go out on that azotea and buy everything you need—rice, fish, honey, eggs, live poultry, feed for the horses, fruits and vegetable—from villagers rowing into town in small boats that looked something like American Indian canoes. (9)

## Conclusion

I hope that my theoretical elaborations and textual readings so far would have driven home the trope of the Chinese middleman minority that I started with. I would conclude by turning to the relationship between ethics and ethnicity again. I argue that against the historical racist discourses of the “inscrutable Chinese,” Nick Joaquín is able and willing to present the Chinese “otherness” as a practice of “supplementing imperative” that aims to counter [the] tendencies to a totalizing rhetoric” about the marginalized Oriental others. Most importantly, as I have argued in this paper, Joaquín has done so by providing a heterogenic spatial mirroring relationship of intermediation between Hong Kong and Manila. In a seemingly centrifugal manner, his baroque swing of narrative intermediation is however anchored in Binondo, the oldest part of Metropolitan Manila and “the most labyrinthine” (8). It is the place of the old Monson family house, where General Monson reminisces about the old days of precolonial Manila, and it is also the place where the Monson boys would dream about—humming “*the house of our fathers is waiting for us to come home*” (73, *italics original*), which runs like a refrain throughout the novel. We would imagine centuries ago when the Chinese fathers came to do business, selling silk and tea, in Manila, they would have mixed

with the native Malay peoples in the archipelago, who were as old as Native American Indians. General Monson may have been a Chinese mestizo like Dr. José Rizal. Well, he may be.

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