

Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) as Heroes: Discursive Origins of the “Bagong Bayani” in the Era of Labor Export

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ABSTRACT

This essay seeks to trace the relevant national and global contexts from which the bagong bayani discourse of OFWs emerged. It does so by discussing the evolution of labor out-migration in the Philippines from its beginnings in the colonial times, to overseas employment’s institutionalization in the Labor Code of 1974, until the administration of President Corazon Cojuangco-Aquino. It specifically presents the political, social, and economic context around which Aquino managed and continued the state-sponsored labor export program initiated by Marcos. Finally, it discusses the factors that made it possible for Aquino to designate migrants as “heroes”. The argument is that bagong bayani is a product of the global and national context. It can be best understood by examining transformations in global and political-economic structures, and discursive origins of heroism in the Philippine context. Presenting these contexts will provide a clearer understanding of why it has become commonsensical to regard OFWs as bagong bayani.

Keywords: Bagong bayani, “modern-day heroes,” labor expert, OFWs discourse, labor out-migration

INTRODUCTION

State sponsorship of overseas employment has been a key feature of Philippine political economy for the past forty years. As a “model” in migration management, the country deployed 2.2 million¹ Filipinos abroad in 2013, according to the Philippine Overseas Employment Administration (POEA), for which US\$26 billion (Bangko Sentral ng Pilipinas) worth of remittances contributed to the gross domestic product (GNP). Currently, the Philippines ranks third along with India and China as among the world’s top labor exporters in terms of money transfers sent (World Bank 4). Unsurprisingly, the government has been building a huge bureaucracy

catering to the different stages of the migration cycle, from pre-employment to reintegration. Accompanying this phenomenon is *bagong bayani* or “modern-day hero,” a discursive label attached to overseas Filipino workers (OFWs), primarily the temporary or contractual type. It is so popular that it has been appropriated in various forms. From movies, banks, and telecommunications companies, the “heroic” aspect of work and life abroad never fails to capture a nation said to have imbibed a “culture of migration” (Asis n. p.). Such is a dominant narrative anchored on the suffering and sacrifice of Filipinos whose labor abroad has kept the economy afloat even in times of economic crises. According to Bourdieu (29), “[e]verywhere we hear it said, all day long – this is what gives the dominant discourse its strength ...”

This paper tackles the historical dimension or the “extra-linguistic social structures” and “discursive ‘events’” in which the *bagong bayani* as a discourse of migrant workers are “embedded” (Leeuwen and Wodak 91-92). Specifically, this essay discusses such discursive events by responding to this question: What were the relevant national and global contexts in which the *bagong bayani* discourse emerged?

This essay’s central argument is critical of this heroic discourse. Specifically, it argues that the term “*bagong bayani*” legitimizes and normalizes the risks of migrating for work abroad and downplays the huge role of the state in labor export promotion. It also de-emphasizes why Filipinos have to look abroad for work in the first place. How this has become socially acceptable as a label for Filipino migrant workers is the focus of this paper.

The first part of this essay briefly examines the evolution of labor out-migration in the Philippines from its beginnings in colonial times, to its institutionalization in the Labor Code of 1974 under President Ferdinand Marcos, until the administration of President Corazon Cojuangco-Aquino. The second part specifically looks at the general political, social, and economic context around which Aquino managed and continued the state-sponsored labor export program initiated by Marcos. Finally, the last part discusses the factors that made it possible for Aquino to elevate migrants into “heroes.” The argument is that *bagong bayani* is a product of the global and national context from which it emerged and that it is best understood by examining the historical context in which Filipinos first went abroad for work, and the transformations, in global and local political-economic structures. Presenting this context hopefully provides an understanding of why it has become “natural” to regard OFWs as *bagong bayani*.

The Philippine State as an “Emigration State”

This paper locates itself within the purview of the Philippines as an “emigration state.” According to Gamlen, this term refers to states whose activities and practices toward their emigrants “protrude beyond their borders and operate on a transnational scale within global politics” (842). However, despite the presence of such processes, the notion of an “emigration state” “has been overlooked at least partly because it is unexpected by the modern geopolitical imagination, which sees the internationally competitive, territorial nation-state unit as the ideal model of political organization” (851-852). As a top migrant-sending country, the Philippines has been establishing institutions, policies, and programs to reach out to its emigrants in more than 200 countries and territories worldwide. But while this paper aims to look at the heroic discourse of migrants as a state response to global political-economic forces, it does so with a critical eye, consistent with Tyner’s account which argues that “to view the Philippine state as simply bowing to the spatial logic of capitalism potentially obfuscates the contradictory and contested activities of the state” (“Made in the Philippines,” 2). In other words, *bagong bayani* is looked at in this paper as an attempt by the state to manage such contradictions—that on the one hand it seeks to maximize remittances but on the other hand, it fails to protect its migrants abroad. Tracing the emergence of such a heroic discourse is therefore a vital undertaking in understanding the evolution of state response to international migration. It also contributes to the empirical armory of studies documenting the discursive construction of migrants as heroes such as those, for example, in Mexico (Smith and Bakker 47; Carling 58).

OFWs as Bagong Bayani

On weekdays, throngs of Filipino men in the Rizal Park (popularly known as Luneta) congregate near booths of manning agencies which recruit workers to be deployed on foreign ships. Unbeknownst to passersby wondering what the commotion is all about, these men belong to the nearly 300,000 Filipino seafarers plying the world’s seas and for whom the phrase *kayod marino* may have come to be equated with their hard work. The park was named after the country’s national hero, whose sacrifices under the Spanish regime is said to have influenced the term *bagong bayani* (Rafael 15; Iletto 247). However, this is probably lost on the mariners who wish to provide for their families and consequently contribute estimated total remittances of US\$ 2 billion (Amante 6-7) a year to the Philippine economy. World-renowned for their industry and competence, Filipino seafarers are continuing what their ancestors began centuries ago. Early accounts of Filipino overseas migration

are traced to those who were forced to work aboard Spanish galleons in the Manila-Acapulco trade from 1565 to 1815 (Gonzalez 26; McKay 620). They were among the first migrant workers in foreign shores to endure hard work, linking Filipino labor to the world economy. Labor out-migration, therefore, is not an entirely new phenomenon in the Philippines. It has a long history inextricably connected to the country's colonial past.

James Tyner writes that "(T)he galleon trade contributed to a substantial and significant early migration system" ("The Philippines" 16). He narrates that as part of the *polo* or forced labor system, Filipinos aged 16 to 40 years old during the Spanish regime were required to work for forty days in a year doing all sorts of chores. Most were found in shipyards and as crew members in ships plying the galleon trade. Because of extreme conditions and inhumane treatment faced by Filipino sailors, some jumped ship and stayed in the US mainland and in Mexico and worked as laborers in the fish and shrimp export industries, earning the moniker "Manilamen" and "Filipino Cajuns" (Gonzalez 26). Some also worked as divers in the pearl shell industry in Australia (Aguilar 182). They became the first Filipinos documented to have settled and lived overseas. Soon after the 1850s, Filipino crew members likewise left their jobs aboard American, Canadian, and European ships and settled in North America (Gonzalez 26).

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, toward the latter part of the Spanish era, the Philippines became increasingly linked to the world economy owing in part to the Industrial Revolution and the British occupation of Manila. According to James Tyner, these structural conditions privileged export crops produced by the landed local elite or the *principalia* even as it destroyed subsistence farming when the *indios*² were forced to transition into the cash-based economy ("The Philippines," 17-19). With land ownership concentrated on a few elite, poverty and underdevelopment defined the end of the Spanish regime in the Philippines. The worsening of this situation in the advent of another colonizer would pave the way for the migratory streams that will occur in the 1900s.³

The Spanish colonization's connection to current labor out-migration is also profoundly cultural and one which greatly framed the construction of migrant workers as self-sacrificing bagong bayani or modern-day heroes (Rafael 12-13; Guevarra 24-25). According to Jaime Veneracion, precolonial Philippines perceived bayani or heroes as a strong community leader[s] willing to defend [their] people without the promise of reward (197-200), but the aspects of martyrdom and sacrifice were only incorporated during the Spanish regime. In fact, Reynaldo Iletto explains that Spain "attempted to control the meanings of the Christian religion to more

effectively tie the indios to Mother Spain” (245). Basic education textbooks provide ample references to Christianity and its Catholic variety as Spain’s major legacy to the country. It is, however, a legacy that has indelibly and profoundly shaped Filipino culture in myriad ways. Specifically, Vicente Rafael citing Reynaldo Ileto argues that the theme of Jesus Christ’s suffering and sacrifice on the Cross (immortalized in the Lenten ritual of Pasyon which takes center stage in the Filipino psyche) is the same logic to Jose Rizal’s “messianic aura” after his death in the hands of the Spanish regime and which, has forever constructed Filipino’s concept of heroism as a form of sacrifice and suffering (12-13). According to Guevarra, especially significant is the state’s project of framing OFW exodus as “‘sacrifices’ or acts that serve the interests of both their families and the country and that the state attempts to reward symbolically and materially” (25). Ultimately, employment abroad “becomes a sacrifice akin to those made by anticolonialists: a sacrifice that requires some degree of suffering but ultimately advances the greater national good” (Rodriguez 85). Indeed, the *bagong bayani* is a representation that has cultural, historical, and religious frames, making it a potent imaginary for OFWs and their role in the national and global economy.

Corazon Aquino: Creating “Heroes” in the Era of Labor Export

When Corazon Cojuangco-Aquino uttered the words “*kayo ang mga bagong bayani*” in a speech before domestic helpers at the Saint Margaret’s Church in Hong Kong in April of 1988, the state’s active role in labor export had by then, reached its fourteenth year. This was the first time the phrase was invoked on record to refer to overseas workers.

The visit to the former British colony was one of only sixteen foreign visits Aquino would take in the span of her presidency. Known for her frugal nature and simple lifestyle, Aquino limited her foreign trips. Indeed, the Presidential Management Staff (PMS) (“The Aquino Management of the Presidency”) claims that while Aquino received forty invitations during her presidency, she did not seriously consider them all mainly because her concern was that the visits would produce results. However, the one criterion that she looked for in the countries that invited her was the presence of overseas Filipinos. According to the PMS, “(A)lso foremost on the President’s mind was the provision of encouragement and support to thousands of overseas Filipino workers whom she considered the unsung heroes of Philippine democracy. Hence, invitations to world capitals where there were large Filipino communities merited her consideration” (1). This is not surprising given that Aquino and her family were exiles in Boston before her husband’s assassination in 1983. In

the 1970s, anti-Marcos Filipinos were instrumental in bringing to the United States' and the world's attention the dictator's corruption and human rights violations. This may have been a factor for Aquino's natural affinity with overseas Filipinos. However, temporary contract workers were a different lot as they were not bound by citizenship rights and permanent residency status, therefore disabling them from bringing their families. They were also prone to abuse and rights violations especially because many of them worked in low-skilled jobs. By 1988, the year of Aquino's visit to Hong Kong, there were already nearly half a million deployed, bringing in close to a billion US dollars in remittances (Asis 80). In the now oft-quoted speech in which she described them as *bagong bayani*, Aquino lavishly praised migrant workers and their "sacrifices" not only for their families but for the state which, according to her, will forever be grateful to them. She exhorted them to raise their head up high and be proud of their labor; no matter how menial it was in the eyes of other people and ensured them that the government would do its best in providing welfare. In her words spoken in Filipino:

Nasa inyo ang lahat ng dahilan upang taas-noo ninyong ipagmalaki ang inyong gawain, ano man ang inyong gawain, gaano man ito kahamak sa paningin ng iba. Tandaan lamang ninyo na dakila ang lahat ng hanapbuhay. Tandaan din ninyo na hindi lamang ang inyong mga kabiyak, mga anak at mga kamag-anak ang magpapasalamat sa sakripisyo na inyong dinaranas, kundi ang buong sambayanang Pilipino. Kayo ay makasisiguro na ang inyong pamahalaan ay gagawin ang lahat para sa inyong ikabubuti. (Aquino n.p.)

Aquino acknowledged that her administration was aware that most of her audience in St. Margaret's Church were domestic helpers, performing work considered to be at the bottom of the social ladder in the Philippines. At the same time, the speech also subtly echoed through Aquino, who overthrew Marcos largely through staunch middle-class support, what Robyn Rodriguez terms as "middle class anxieties" over the fact that Filipino women perform domestic work in other countries, thereby putting the image of the nation to shame (95). Also, Aquino had a different reason for counting their support. In asking migrant workers in Hong Kong to hold their head high despite the work they do, Aquino may have seemed to be extolling them but was in essence, asking them to "accept" and naturalize their plight even as she reminded them that their grateful families and nation awaits them—and that they will not lose their jobs and retain the image of Filipino workers as "cooperative." In invoking the image of their families, Aquino was not only using a revered cultural characteristic of Filipinos to love their families (even extended families, in most cases) but more importantly, the reference to migrant worker families was important

in that it is to them that remittances are sent to the Philippines and therefore the link that connects them to the nation. But where is the state in Aquino's words? The entire paragraph, particularly the last sentence, hailed the state not as a promoter of labor export but as the purveyor of welfare. Certainly, the words of Guevarra fully capture this (49; emphasis not mine):

This ethos of labor migration is also fundamentally grounded in creating a *culture of sacrifice* in which Filipinos become implicated actors ... as both objects and subjects of the state. On the one hand, as the country's resources, they are commodified as objects of the state that are offered to the globe as its comparative advantage in exchange for national economic survival. On the other hand, as the country's modern-day heroes, they are integral subjects of the state, as they are symbolically and ideologically touted and molded to save not only their families but also their nation through their remittances.

The circumstances of Aquino's rise to power were in themselves framed in heroic fashion, according to Rafael (12-13) and Ileto (247). Her ascendancy to the presidency was a result of the "people power" uprising that came to be known as the EDSA Revolution in 1986. When Aquino's husband, Benigno Aquino Jr., a prominent member of the Anti-Marcos opposition, was assassinated in August 1983, the country was in a state of disarray. Enormous foreign debt and balance of payment crisis resulted in a dismal economy. Rights violations and massive corruption alienated Filipinos to the Marcos regime. When Marcos called for a snap election to bolster his waning legitimacy, Aquino became a reluctant candidate. It was only after her supporters were able to garner one million signatures in support of her impending candidacy that the widow eventually decided to run against Marcos. When reports of electoral fraud were discovered, computer technicians manning the counting walked out. Soon after, Fidel Ramos and Juan Ponce Enrile, former Marcos allies, defected to Aquino's side and called Marcos to step down. Cardinal Jaime Sin, called on "people power" to help protect Enrile and Ramos. In the end, four days of mass protest in EDSA deposed Marcos, aided in part by pressure from the emissaries of the US government.

That it was Aquino who called migrant workers as "heroes" was particularly important in shaping the discourse according to Vicente Rafael, as her entire presidency was predicated on the "logic of suffering and sacrifice" (14). The numerous coup d' etats and threats and the image of the prayerful Aquino amidst all these further reinforced this logic, according to Rafael. The immense role of the Catholic Church during the EDSA revolution and her presidency also gave Aquino and her presidency an aura of

religiosity and moral ascendancy. Moreover, the death of Aquino's husband "was widely read by the public as martyrdom and a repetition of Rizal's execution by the Spaniards" (Ileto 247) and also further added to the shroud of "heroism" ascribed to Aquino and to a large extent her presidency. Finally, her reluctance to run for president and the framing of her candidacy as a "sacrifice" to rid of and save the nation from Marcos's tyranny was in itself couched in heroic terms.

Meanwhile, Filipinos were euphoric at Aquino's rise to power and her commitment to bringing back democracy. However, realities at the economic front dampened the "Cory magic." Marcos left an economy in tatters as gross domestic product (GDP) posted negative growth in 1984 and 1985 (Asian Development Bank "Philippines: Critical Development Constraints" 14). External debt amounted to US\$27.5 billion and which Aquino, due to pressure from the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank and the United States, eventually failed to repudiate or even declare a moratorium on (Abinales and Amoroso 233), despite her political capital in the international community. Debt service became the rule of thumb in fiscal management so as to give the country good credit rating among foreign investors. By 1988, more than a third of the national budget went to debt service (Rodriguez 14). Thus, almost half of the population lived below the poverty line during this period. Several coup attempts during Aquino's presidency likewise created problems for political stability. In the labor front, the dilemma faced by the Aquino administration was likewise severe. Unemployment worsened poverty. Faced with these constraints, Aquino did not have the luxury of establishing a radical transformation of the economy and, therefore, had to rely on overseas employment to address the country's economic problems. According to Guevarra, it was during the Aquino presidency that much of the gains in labor export policies that Marcos instituted were beginning to be felt (33). At the end of 1991, months before Aquino left office, more than 600,000 Filipinos were abroad for work, almost twice the number when Aquino took over from Marcos in 1986, and though deployment declined in 1989 and 1990, it rose by nearly 30 percent in 1991 (Asis 80). While the government still viewed overseas migration as a temporary policy, the measures it took increasingly ensured that the policy would take on a degree of permanence. In its Medium-Term Philippine Development Plan (MTPDP), overseas employment was still seen as a program meant to continue while the economy was still not stable enough to generate jobs. While stressing the need for protecting migrants, it nevertheless sought continued facilitation of jobs in both local and overseas markets.

Tigno et al. argue that Aquino's overseas employment policy manifested themes of "continuity and change" in that it remained to perceive migration as a "resource

generating endeavor ... worthy of national government attention, regulation, and control,” but at the same time, it also shifted to policies geared “towards worker empowerment and welfare” (35). A year after Aquino assumed office, her government reorganized the POEA for the second time through Executive Order 247. The major reason identified for the restructuring was to expand worker protection and welfare (Asis 74). Nonetheless, EO 247 stated that the POEA reorganization was necessary “in order to enhance its effectiveness in responding to the changing market and economic conditions and to the call of the national development plan for the strengthening of the worker protection and regulation components of the overseas employment program.” As such, the EO facilitated the enhancement of market deployment programs and established regional extension units for the POEA, in effect expanding the reach of the state’s overseas employment program. The earlier Welfare Fund established by Marcos was further institutionalized into the Overseas Workers Welfare Administration (OWWA) as per Executive Order 126. The contradictory nature of the role of the state in overseas employment—ensuring worker protection while at the same time facilitating labor flows abroad—continues to this day.

Interestingly, the discursive frame with which the Aquino administration anchored the continued state sponsorship of labor export rested on the very foundation of Aquino’s regime—which is personal liberty and freedom within the rubric of democracy in contrast to that of Marcos. Essentially, this rhetoric meant that migration for work is a “natural” inclination of people in search of a better life and that the state would have nothing to do about it because to do so would be a violation of one’s human right (which the state would not do owing to its commitment to democracy) to travel and seek greener pastures, a concept of migration espoused by neoclassical economists.

Moreover, it is also an attempt by the Aquino government to veer away from Marcos’s restrictive labor export policies (forced remittances). According to Rodriguez, “(B)y characterizing out-migration as ‘heroic’ Aquino portrayed international migration as a voluntary act of self-sacrificing individuals living in a democratic society rather than a kind of forced conscription under a dictatorial regime” (84).

METHODOLOGY AND DATA

This essay draws from the methodological framework of Discourse Historical Approach (DHA). It argues that there exists a “dialectical relationship” between situations or discursive events such as for instance the three cases examined in

these studies, and the institutions and the wider sociopolitical context in which they are located (Leeuwen and Wodak 1999, 92). In other words, specific contexts shape discourses in the same way that discourses themselves shape the social and political environment and its social actors.

In specifically applying DHA to explain the emergence of bagong bayani, the paper uses the *historical dimension or the “extra-linguistic social structures,”* and all the background information and context in which the discourse is argued to have emanated and developed (Leeuwen and Wodak 1999, 91-92). Doing so is consistent with DHA’s focus on problem-oriented method which seeks to explore the historical, economic, and political context of a particular issue. It is problem-oriented because it sets out the context of why the development of the discourse becomes a problem in the first place. In other words, this describes the political and socioeconomic background when President Corazon Aquino first articulated the concept of the bagong bayani. Simply put, the historical dimension is connected with the discursive strategies or linguistic practice in language use deployed by groups of actors in responding to an event and in making interpretations of a situation.

Data for this paper were gathered from secondary sources, including government reports and academic articles. Eighteen relevant newspaper reports from the *Philippine Daily Inquirer (PDI)* were also gathered to highlight media representation of migrants during the period 1987-1988. The paper by no means aims to generalize. Its aim is to present what the author argues to be a critical juncture in the historical context of labor out-migration in which bagong bayani emerged.

Findings

Why did Aquino use the words “bagong bayani”? Aside from the general context discussed above, what was the specific labor out-migration context in which the discourse is situated that created the conditions in which it could thrive? The following sections discuss the situation of labor out-migration prior to the bagong bayani speech of Aquino:

The Shifting Terrain of Migration. While it was Marcos that officially launched the state’s labor export program, a marked shift in Filipino labor out-migration pattern occurred during the Aquino administration. Increasing globalization created new demands from labor-receiving countries where temporary labor became necessary to augment local hires. Even as labor outflows to the Middle East still constituted half of deployments, rising demand for labor from the newly-industrialized countries

(NICs) of East Asia was being felt (Tigno et al. 270). Parallel to this, the number of permanent migrants who left the country significantly declined from over 40 percent in the mid-1970s to a little over ten percent in 1990 (Orbeta and Abrigo 2). But temporary migrants obviously have different circumstances compared to permanent migrants, as earlier mentioned. As a result of their permanent residency and citizenship, permanent migrants have better social protection and welfare compared to contract workers. Referred to as *balikbayan*, they are also situated in countries in North America and Europe where there is a relatively fair degree of human rights observance. In contrast, temporary migrants are governed by a contract, and are in low-skilled jobs and in countries known for their repressive policies and very different cultural norms, such as the Middle East.

Prior to 1988, the prominent discourse which was progressively translated into state policy largely for Filipino-American permanent migrants in the United States was *Balikbayan*² (Blanc 178). It was a discourse initially used in 1973 by then President Ferdinand Marcos to draw Filipino Americans into the “nation’s imaginary,” as tourists who could spend their dollars in the Philippines, thereby increasing the country’s foreign exchange earnings (Blanc 178). At the same time, it was meant to showcase Marcos’s “achievements” to downplay criticism against the Martial Law regime in the US (Blanc 180; Rafael 5). However, a new representation of Filipino migrants emerged in the 1990s as the *bagong bayani* became omnipresent in government rhetoric Rodriguez 347; in the course of the overall management of labor export. Suddenly, Filipino Americans were no longer the symbols of Filipinos abroad but the increasing number of temporary migrant workers compared to permanent immigrants.

By the time of Aquino’s presidency, cases of deaths, abuses, and exploitation were already increasing and occupying the country’s collective attention. These were largely reported by church-based organizations and nongovernment organizations which were the first to provide assistance in the absence of government support. Stories of loneliness and stress on family separation were constant themes that accompanied stories of improved family conditions as a result of remittances. Experts and the academe also studied the effects of migration and brought to the attention of the government the social and economic impact to the individual, families, communities, and country of labor out-migration (Licuanan 103-115). In 1987, a year before Aquino called migrant workers as “heroes,” the POEA handled a total of 1,785 cases of illegal recruitment with a total of 1,514 workers as complainants. While the number of cases decreased in 1988 to 1,184, the number of workers victimized significantly increased to 2,379 which could mean that unscrupulous

recruiters were luring workers by bulk (“Overseas Employment from the Philippines” 275).

Suddenly, working abroad no longer bore the image of a balikbayan and the American slang. Instead, by the time Aquino became president, Filipinos were already familiar with *katas ng Saudi*⁴ and *Japayuki*,⁵ instilling in the Filipino imaginary that going abroad in the context of contract migration was very different from the permanent residency route in the US, Canada, and European countries. Working abroad became a *pakikipagsapalaran* (risk) rather than a sure means to upward mobility. What was becoming clearer then, however, is that working abroad may be fraught with risks, but it is definitely better than the lack of opportunities experienced in the country. Vicente Rafael argues that these accounts of “suffering and sacrifice” were the very reason contract migrants instead of permanent migrants or balikbayan, were labeled by Aquino as “heroes” or “bayani” (12).

Feminization of Migration. When Aquino visited Hong Kong in 1988 and called them bagong bayani, about half of contract workers leaving the country were women. The entry of more women into labor out-migration was a result of economic restructuring policies in both the Philippines and receiving states. In the 1970s, when Marcos initiated state-sponsored labor migration, the typical contract worker was a Filipino male construction worker in the Middle East, particularly Saudi Arabia. Gonzalez writes that in 1975 male OCWs constituted 70 percent of deployment, but this declined to 53 percent in 1987 when Filipino women represented nearly half of deployment abroad (40-41).

The rise in female contract migration was the result of varied developments from migrant receiving countries. The newfound affluence in the Middle East had created a demand for maids as a status symbol for the new rich, on the one hand. In East Asian economies, on the other hand, economic expansion brought an increase in labor force participation of native women, thus, the demand for caregivers and helpers in their aging societies.

The Philippines likewise served as the catalyst that would send women in particularly gendered-types of work abroad such as entertainers and domestic helpers. In the Philippines, years of export-led industrialization (EOI) generated employment at the local level. However, the jobs it created privileged young Filipino women perceived to be docile and having “nimble fingers” conducive to jobs in light manufacturing industries subcontracted by multinational corporations. This has been concretized by Saskia Sassen⁶ in her now classic work, *The Mobility of Labor and Capital*. In her research, which included the Philippines as one of her

case studies, Sassen singled out EOI and its prescription of enticing foreign direct investments through cheap and flexible labor which created conditions resulting in increased labor out-migration of women.

Another strategy for developing countries like the Philippines to attract foreign capital through EOI is tourism. When the country launched its tourism program to respond to this strategy, the prostitution industry flourished—the main patrons of which were Japanese men with expendable cash as a result of the economic boom of that period. Ultimately, when the so-called “sex tours” ended due to increased criticism and pressure from civil society groups in the Philippines and Japan, the activities shifted to Japan as likewise noted above. As such, beginning in the 1980s, Filipino women began flocking to Japan. According to Nana Oishi, nearly 70,000 Filipinos were working in Japan by 1986, a majority of them were women (36).

The feminization of migration and discourses surrounding it has shaped bagong bayani in significant ways. Societal discourse about their jobs and their victimization further amplified and naturalized the heroic discourse of migrants, as entertainers and domestic helpers abroad. News reports of their death and exploitation reified the “sacrifice” they had to endure abroad for their families back home. Moreover, as “entertainers,” they were depicted as either “pitiful” or “immoral” women willing to become prostitutes to provide for their families. As “domestic helpers,” migrants were cast as “mothers” caring for the children of “other” people instead of their own.

Civil Society Activism. One of the hallmarks of Aquino’s rise to power was the emergence of a vibrant civil society. As important as this institution was for democratic consolidation, the 1987 Constitution (the framers of which were appointed by Aquino) firmly guaranteed that it remain a strong feature of a post-Marcos Philippines. Civil society activism helped in bringing the situation of migrant workers abroad to the attention of government authorities and the general public. Civil society organizations or NGOs, particularly non-state groups such as the Catholic Church, had long been assisting migrants even before the state institutionalized its protective mechanisms. As mentioned earlier, migrant organizations that would later evolve into MIGRANTE International, sought the abolition on forced remittances imposed by Marcos. KAIBIGAN (Friends of Filipino Migrant Workers) was one of the first NGOs established to bring attention to the plight of migrants workers in the early 1980s. Faith-based groups, such as the Episcopal Commission of Migrant and Itinerant Persons (ECMI), were initially set up in the 1950s to respond to abuses committed against Filipino laborers in Hawaii and Guam. In the 1980s, it was very active in helping contract migrants and their families displaced by migration.

With their well-intentioned efforts to advocate the end of state-sponsored migration, NGOs had to use the victimization issue, with stories of the sad and unfortunate situation of migrants. Protest rallies, congressional investigations and the news media were venues for expressing the risks associated with migration. In doing so, NGOs have intensified the bagong bayani discourse.

Congressional Inquiries. Unlike Marcos, who ruled with an iron fist through executive fiat, Corazon Aquino had to contend with a Congress, the reinstatement of which she made possible through the 1987 Constitution. Bent on bringing back its role as a check on the executive branch's programs and policies before Martial Law, Congress brought the situation of migrant workers through investigations, proposed legislative bills and resolutions to the attention of the Aquino government. According to Asis, the Senate filed a total of sixty-two bills and resolutions on overseas employment while the House of Representatives introduced seventy-seven (101-111). The most number of bills filed by legislators on overseas employment during the period of 1987 to 1991 were those on welfare and protection. These legislative proposals focused on reported deaths, execution, and conditions of migrant workers abroad. To a certain extent, this already demonstrates the growing recognition by Congress in the late 1980s, of the "sacrifice and suffering" of labor migrants, hence the need to introduce legislation to improve their conditions. There were also other types of bills and resolutions filed that were also meant to protect OFWs. For instance, resolutions on the Gulf Crisis, which was already brewing by the time Aquino left for Hongkong to deliver the bagong bayani speech, were those that expressed concern over the plight of migrants, and their potential return to the Philippines at that time. Similarly, those that fell under recruitment, migrants' rights, and administration and procedures were also meant to ensure the prevention of illegal recruitment and the efficiency and accountability of the POEA and OWWA.

Despite these early attempts by Congress, Gonzalez argues that the economic imperative prevailed when it passed into law Republic Act 7111, known as the Overseas Investment Fund Act in 1991. Among others, the law created the Overseas Workers Investment Fund Board tasked "to encourage the greater remittance of earnings of Filipino workers overseas and to safeguard and oversee the participation of said workers' remittances and savings in the Government's debt reduction efforts and other productive undertakings" (123-124). While RA 7111 also provides for incentives to migrants such as scholarship grants, housing, credit assistance, and other programs, the policy enunciated in the law linked overseas migration to the payment of the country's foreign debt (124). In a broader context, this law extends the "heroism" of migrants beyond the greater good of the family but to the entire nation.

Media Representations of OCWs in 1987-1988. Another institution that found its rebirth during the Aquino administration was the media. Section 4 of Article III of the 1987 Constitution ensured “(N)o law shall be passed abridging the freedom of speech, of expression, or of the press ...” This constitutional guarantee resulted in the establishment of new newspapers, and television and radio networks. The newly regained press freedom also emboldened the media to be critical and reclaim its role as government watchdog. In describing the role of the media in the post-Marcos era, Article 19 (a London-based organization) and the Center for Media Freedom and Responsibility claim that “the Manila-based mass media has become a separate power in itself, in some instances compelling political leaders to change their plans or even to completely reverse them” (“Freedom of Expression and the Media in the Philippines” 28).

Parallel to this development, the news media began covering reports of OFWs and their plight abroad. News of illegal recruitment, the harsh treatment of OFWs particularly women, as well as cases of criminalities reportedly perpetrated by Filipino migrant workers became headline and front page material. In particular, the *Philippine Daily Inquirer* brought considerable amount of attention to OFWs in their news reports from 1987 to 1988, a year before Aquino’s bagong bayani speech. From the library of the *PDI*, the researcher obtained a total of eighteen news reports⁷ that related to OFWs. These reports covered stories on the brewing conflict in the Middle East and plans for the evacuation of OFWs in the region, reports of crimes committed by OFWs, and government proposals to issue guidelines for domestic helpers and plans for labor agreements with host countries. In particular, a month before Aquino left for Hongkong to deliver the bagong bayani speech, the *PDI* released a series of feature articles that documented the unfortunate plight of Filipino maids in Europe, where some had become sex slaves of their employers. For example, the *PDI* reported in its March 29, 1988 issue the plight of domestic helpers “working 19-hour days-babysitting, cleaning, washing clothes” and of “Filipinas who have escaped the cruelty of employers of various nationalities.” In all, the news reports depicted a nation beginning to grapple with the issues of labor out-migration and its inherent contradictions as argued by Ball (1997), that on the one hand it provides jobs to Filipinos and remittances to a cash-strapped economy, but on the other hand the government that encourages it is unable to protect OFWs because of their lack of jurisdiction abroad. More significantly, the media and its coverage of the ‘plight’ of migrant workers during this period, follows Ono and Sloop’s (16) argument that media present specific frames that shape the public attitudes of policymakers and the public on particular issues. Arguably, the media coverage of OFWs, and the discourses it produced (in the immediate period before

Aquino made the bagong bayani speech in Hong Kong), helped create the conditions that made it acceptable and “natural” for Aquino’s labeling of migrant workers as bagong bayani.

Aside from newspaper coverage, public affairs programs on radio stations began airing OFW concerns and issues. In the 1980s, before the advent of electronic mail and short message service (SMS), public affairs programs became the conduit through which OFWs could tell their stories to their families, to the government, and to the entire nation longing for information on what it is like to work and live abroad, away from the familiar comforts of home. A case in point is the inception of *To Saudi with Love*, a radio program that allowed OFWs to write letters expressing their thoughts and feelings. The program ran for two decades and became the iconic representation of stories of loneliness and family separation that is perceived to characterize working abroad. The program and its broadcaster, Rey Langit, received numerous awards and had in fact, garnered a hall of fame recognition from the Catholic Mass Media Awards (CMMA)—a testament to the societal approval of the show’s concept, which is the portrayal of the heroic sacrifices that OFWs experience abroad.

With increased media coverage and the resulting greater public awareness of migrant workers and their plight, popular culture followed suit. In the 1980s, a hugely popular song titled “Napakasakit. Kuya Eddie” was transformed into a movie depicting the life of a Saudi worker who discovers upon his return that his family life was problematic owing to his long absence. It became the precursor of films that would portray working abroad as a type of “sacrifice,” sometimes even at the cost of life and limb. Indeed, the heroism of migrant workers has reached popular discourse through these media. To call them bagong bayani therefore resonated with the wider public.

CONCLUSION

This paper has provided the context in which the discourse of bagong bayani can be best understood. In sum, the preceding discussion has to a large extent demonstrated the backdrop in which bagong bayani emerged: the rising number of temporary contract workers and the associated risks in the nature of their jobs and conditions abroad; the feminization of migration and the “social cost” it is perceived to bring; rising civil society activism in the 1980s; congressional inquiries relating to reports of unfavorable migrants’ situation, and, media and popular culture representations

of migrant workers. It also cites that aside from the Spanish and Christian influence on the meaning of “bayani” (Ileto 247; Veneracion 197-200). Corazon Aquino’s assumption into office further sealed bagong bayani’s resonance with suffering and sacrifice (Rafael 14).

As previously discussed, the problem with such a “heroic” discourse is that while it seemingly elevates migrants, it makes natural the risks and sufferings of going abroad. It likewise downplays the very reasons why migrants are in the first place displaced by the Philippine economy. To a certain extent, it explains why labor export has persisted over the years and why this has become such an acceptable “fact” of life in the Philippines.

The periodic and repeated enunciation of bagong bayani in media and in political texts after 1988, demonstrated the degree to which the discourse has been ingrained in the public’s collective consciousness. Since 1989, the Philippine Overseas Employment Administration (POEA) implements the Bagong Bayani Award to overseas Filipino workers (OFWs). Films about a migrant worker and a party-list for migrants have also appropriated the term. Even private companies catering to Filipinos abroad and their families have added legitimacy to the label. As Morooka says, this rhetoric has become a “naturalized discourse that is endlessly repeated and widely disseminated across the media to the point that values, beliefs, and logics underlying the discourse are taken for granted in society at large” (8).

Most importantly, this paper has shown that early on in the implementation of labor export, tensions and contradictions were already apparent. On the one hand, the state globalizes itself to expand its labor market abroad, it tends to be weak in ensuring the rights of OFWs, something that has been argued by scholars (Aguinas 3, Ball 1603, Battistella 269, Parrenas 1138, Rodriguez, Tigno, “The Politics of International Labor Migration”). Because of this contradiction, the state faces a crisis of legitimacy at the domestic level as its lack of legal jurisdiction abroad is unable to protect its migrants overseas (Ball 1618, Tyner “Made in the Philippines” 2). Certainly, the factors identified above and the conditions under which bagong bayani discourse was made possible, highlight the political nature of labor export promotion and the state and societal response to it. Nevertheless, amidst this discursive arena, the bagong bayani discourse provides a veritable lifeline by which the state “manages” potential dissenting voices and courts the loyalty of its transnational subjects even as it continues to benefit from remittances. What is silenced from such a situation is the agency of the Filipino migrant.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ This includes land-based and sea-based workers, as well as new hires and re-hires.
- ² This is a term used by the Spanish colonizers to refer to landless native born Filipinos.
- ³ The *pensionados*, (or government scholars) as they were called then, left from 1903 to 1914 but had to return to the Philippines when the Great Depression of the 1930s ravaged the economy of the US. Some who were not able to return were forced to work in agricultural plantations in the Pacific Coast and the Midwest (Espiritu 1995 in Gonzalez 1998, 28). Soon after, they were joined by Filipinos recruited as agricultural workers when American agricultural products became in demand. See for example, Gonzalez, Joaquin. *Philippine Labour Migration: Critical Dimensions of Public Policy*. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1998. Print.
- ⁴ In the late 1970s and '80s, this was a phrase ubiquitously pasted on jeepneys usually owned by OCWs working in the Gulf states. Ultimately, it came to symbolize any material good (i.e., house, appliances) bought by OCWs out of their earnings abroad. Filomeno Aguilar (112) argues that this phrase is a means through which migrant workers make known to the public how they were able to convert the hardships they have endured abroad into a more fruitful endeavor. According to Aguilar, the word "Saudi" in this phrase "becomes the fruit that is pressed and squeezed that then leads to a new fruit." See for example, Filomeno Aguilar Jr.'s "The Dialectics of Transnational Shame and National Identity," *Philippine Sociological Review*. 44 (1996): 101-136. Print.
- ⁵ This word is a derogatory term used to refer to Filipino women hired to work in Japan as "entertainers" but are widely believed to perform sex work. This is actually a shortened version of "Japayuki-san" which according to Nana Oishi (35) originated in the word "karayuki-san," a term that was used for Japanese women who migrated to China prior to World War II to do sex work. See Nana Oishi's *Women in Motion: Globalization, State Policies, and Labor Migration in Asia*. California: Stanford University Press, 2005. Print.

⁶ According to Sassen (120), these conditions are as follows: "(a) the incorporation of new segments of the population into wage labor and the associated disruption of traditional work structures both of which create a supply of migrant workers; (b) the feminization of the new industrial workforce and its impact on the work opportunities of men, both in the new industrial zones and in the traditional work structures; and (c) the consolidation of objective and ideological links with the highly industrialized countries where most foreign capital originates, links that involve both a generalized westernization effect and more specific work stations wherein workers find themselves producing goods for people and firms in the highly industrialized countries." See for example, Saskia Sassen's *The Mobility of Labor and Capital: A Study in International Investment and Labor Flow*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988. Print.

⁷ This number is by no means exhaustive. The news reports were obtained by the researcher in the archives of news clippings in the library of the *PDI* under a file titled "Filipinos Abroad." She then selected all articles and news reports whose main topic concerns were on labor out-migration and temporary contract workers. Those that dealt with balikbayans and permanent immigrants abroad were excluded.

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