



# MOVING PORTRAITS

Life Stories of Children of Migrant  
and Multicultural Families in Asia



**Edited by** Maruja M.B. Asis  
Karen Anne S. Liao

**SMC** SCALABRINI MIGRATION CENTER

 **THE TOYOTA FOUNDATION**

Moving Portraits: Life Stories of Children of Migrant and Multicultural Families in Asia

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## Introduction: Children in Asia's Moving Portraits

Maruja M.B. Asis and Karen Anne S. Liao

Asia is no stranger to international migration. The most recent stock estimate of international migrants in the world stood at 244 million in 2015, with Europe (76 million) and Asia (75 million) accounting for two-thirds of the total (UN, 2016: 3).

Temporary labor migration has been the most prevalent type of migration in the region's landscape since the 1970s. The search for workers by more economically developed but labor-short economies and the search for jobs by workers from developing areas in the region have unleashed the comings and goings of people across national borders in the last four decades. Although designed to be temporary, labor migration continues and shows no signs of waning. In addition, other types of international migration also developed. Marriage migration—which involves mostly women from developing countries in the region crossing national borders to marry nationals in the more developed economies—emerged from about the 1980s in Japan and the 1990s in South Korea and Taiwan. Unlike labor migration, which labor-receiving countries have tried to keep temporary, marriage migration has somehow forced destination countries to face questions and prospects of immigrant incorporation, settlement, citizenship and the management of diversity.

To date, research, advocacy and policy discussions about labor migration and marriage migration have focused on adults—the men and women who move as well as family members who are involved in decision-making and managing families and households. The attention to adult migrants and other actors is not misplaced, but excluding children from the discussions will not give a full picture of migration and social change. The Enable Kids Project is an attempt to help fill this gap.

### **The Enable Kids Project**

The full name of the project is *Towards an Inclusive Environment for Children of Migrant and Multicultural Families in the Philippines, Japan and South Korea*. These three are among the countries in Asia which have been greatly affected by international migration and increasing cultural diversity triggered by population mobility. Focusing on children, the project asks: how are children considered in migration and integration policies? What are existing initiatives in a country of origin, such as the Philippines, and countries of destination, such as Japan and South Korea?

In tackling those questions, the project set out to pursue the following objectives: (1) to document existing programs that provide support to children with a migrant or multicultural family background; (2) to promote the exchange and sharing of programs and good practices; and (3) to disseminate lessons learned and to offer policy recommendations towards the inclusion of children with a migrant and multicultural family background in origin and destination countries.

When we speak of children, following the Convention of the Rights of the Child, we define a 'child' as a person below the age of 18 years, unless the laws of a particular country have set a the legal age for adulthood at a younger age. As a category, the status of being a child is transitory and it is a rather short phase of the life stage compared to the extended and multiphase period of adulthood that follows it. In terms of programs and services, this suggests that the window for delivering appropriate and timely interventions is narrow, and thus, missed opportunities could have long-term implications for the life chances of children in their adult years.<sup>1</sup>

### **Initiatives in the Philippines**

The Philippines is a major source country of international migrants. Between 2013 and 2015, some 1.8 million overseas Filipino workers (OFWs) left every year to work abroad. As an origin country, the Philippines has established institutions, laws, policies and programs to govern the different stages of international labor migration (IOM and SMC, 2013). The migration of large numbers of temporary migrant workers has raised concerns about the potentially adverse impact of separation for husband-wife relationships, parent-child relationships and the well-being of family members, especially children. The migration of mothers, which became notable from the 1990s, increased the anxieties about family impacts and the welfare of children. These con-

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<sup>1</sup> Further details about the Enable Kids Project are available at <https://enablekidsproject.wordpress.com>.

cerns continue to be seen in the Philippines—by policymakers included—as social costs of migration that must be mitigated (IOM and SMC, 2013).

Prior to mapping child-focused programs and policies in the Philippines, a survey of the (possible) universe children of migrant and multicultural families was done. This exercise identified the following groups: (1) children affected by international migration—which includes the “left-behind children” of OFWs, children migrating with or reuniting with family, family, children migrating under international adoption, children of OFWs returning to the Philippines, children “passing” off as adults migrating for work; (2) Filipino children with a multicultural background—which includes children born to a Filipino national and a foreign national who are residing in the Philippines; and (3) children of foreign nationals born and raised in the Philippines or residing in the Philippines. Although the list is not exhaustive, it suggests that apart from the “left-behind” children of OFWs, there are other sub-categories of children in this group.

Children with a multicultural background actually have a long history in the Philippines, dating back to the emergence of the *mestizo* or mixed-race population, children born to Filipino and Spanish, Chinese, or American parentage. Since the 1980s, this group has expanded to include children born to Filipino and Japanese parents. A big part of this phenomenon has been shaped by international migration, primarily the migration of Filipino women to work as entertainers in Japan and marriage migration (as a program of selected local governments in Japan for a few years, and later the facilitation by marriage brokers and social networks) (Nagasaka and Takahata, 2016; De Dios, 2015; Celero, 2015). Previously, these children were called *Japinos*, a term which referred to children whose mothers worked as entertainers and their Japanese husbands or partners. The stigma attached to entertainers gave the term a negative connotation. Later, the more neutral term, Japanese-Filipino children (JFC), came to be the preferred term. In the 1990s, labor migration and marriage migration of Filipinos to South Korea, combined with the large volume of Koreans visiting the Philippines, have given rise to children born of Filipino and Korean parentage. The term *Kopino* surfaced to refer to children born to Filipino and Korean parents. Like the term *Japino*, *Kopino* acquired negative nuances as children who are “abandoned,” “illegitimate,” “poor” and “offspring of a sex worker” (Garcia-Son, 2015: 51). They are distinguished from the children born in Korea to Filipino and Korean parents, who are called “multicultural children” in Korea. Among the children with a multicultural family background in the Philippines, the JFCs and *Kopinos* have been visible in the Philippines because of the involvement of NGOs providing support to children (and their mothers). The former has had a longer history of being organized, although the

initial focus was on the women and mothers, and later branching out to include assistance to the children.

Except for government programs (mostly scholarship and educational support) implemented by the Overseas Workers Welfare Administration (OWWA), existing initiatives for children of migrant and multicultural families in the Philippines are not national in scope. What is interesting in the Philippine experience is the involvement of different stakeholders—selected local governments, selected private schools, NGOs (including faith-based groups) and the private sector—in addressing this particular group.

Programs for the “left-behind” children in the Philippines include: scholarship or educational support, psycho-social support and counselling, formation of peer and support groups, values formation, and awards and recognition programs. For child migrants, the Commission on Filipinos Overseas provides pre-departure orientation seminars to help them adjust in their destination countries. Selected private schools, local governments and NGOs implement programs dealing with psycho-social support, peer groups and values formation. The awards and recognition programs are initiatives that not only recognize outstanding children of OFWs, but also convey to the wider public a more positive picture of the “left-behind” children. A faith-based organization and a bank have been implementing these awards programs for several years now.

Programs for JFCs and *Kopinos* are offered by NGOs. While mapping the programs of different NGOs, we were alerted to some questionable activities or practices of some NGOs. Garcia-Son (2015) discusses the deceptive and money-making activities of some NGOs, both on the Philippine and Korean fronts. Long-standing NGOs who extend support to JFCs and *Kopinos* provide the following: legal assistance, psycho-social support and counselling (especially in dealing with abandonment and bicultural identities; it may also include locating and arranging meetings with their fathers), formation of support groups, and cultural programs (e.g., Japanese language to JFCs, Korean language to *Kopinos*). For JFCs, organizations like the Development Action for Women Network (DAWN) and Batis Center for Women offer creative programs like theater and arts. DAWN established a theater group called Teatro Akebono which stages plays that deal with issues of women migrants in Japan and JFC concerns. The plays are a creative means to raise awareness about women's and JFCs' issues in the Philippines and Japan. DAWN and Batis Center for Women have given birth to youth organizations, the DAWN-JFC for Change and Batis-YOGHI (Youth Organization that Gives Hope and Inspiration), which are managed and implemented by youth members.

To date, we did not find programs for children born to foreign parents and raised or residing in the Philippines, as well as children of other multicultural families residing in the country. Moreover, although some initiatives for children of migrant and multicultural families are in place, they are available only in some places where NGOs are present, or offered in selected private schools or communities.

### **Initiatives in Japan and South Korea**

On the destination side, the more developed economies of Japan and South Korea have attracted migrant workers from other countries in the region and even beyond. As mentioned earlier, both have also become important sites of international marriage migration in recent decades. Both countries have adopted different approaches in dealing with international migration in general, and addressing the children of migrant and multicultural policies.

Japan remains the only destination country in Asia which does not accept migrant workers in less skilled occupations. To meet the need for less skilled workers, Japan brought in descendants of Japanese emigrants after the 1990s (i.e., *Nikkeijin*, many of whom are from Latin America, especially Brazil, and later, those from other countries, such as the Philippines), facilitated by the amendment of the Immigration and Control Law in 1990 (Nagasaka and Sakahata, 2016) and through the trainee program. Japan's response to the growing share of international marriages can be characterized as *laissez faire*—it does not restrict such marriages, but it also does not provide support programs for families. Although *tabunka-kyōsei* (broadly understood as multiculturalism in Japan) has been talked about, a national framework to develop policies and programs to integrate foreigners have been lacking or ambiguous (Flowers, 2016: 77). The initiatives have been at the level of local governments, especially those with a sizable population of foreigners. Osaka City started in 1998 to establish policies for foreign residents, which was followed in 2004 by similar initiatives in the Tokai region, the prefectures of Mie, Aichi and Shizuoka, introducing the term *tabunka-kyōsei* (Flowers, 2016: 78). National-level policies concerning foreign children in the area of education started in 1989, prompted by the growing presence of newcomer foreigners (as opposed to the oldcomers, i.e., Koreans in Japan) (Yamoto, 2014: 113). Until then, foreign children were not expected to stay and the education of foreign children was premised on the assimilation approach, that is, foreign children learning to adjust to Japanese education. In 1994, the Ministry of Education started the project of sending assistant instructors who speak the same language as foreign children to help them with school work and to coordinate with their teachers. These assistants are variously called supporters, interpreters, instructors or subsidiaries (Yamoto, 2014: 114). The project was implemented, with some variation, by local governments.

In 2013, the School Education Act was revised to provide for the teaching of Japanese language to foreign students in the formal curriculum beginning in school year 2014.

A significant change in Japan's nationality law was the Supreme Court ruling in June 2008 that removed barriers to Japanese nationality to children who were born outside of marriage to a foreign mother and a Japanese father. Previously, in cases where the child's parents are not married, the law only allowed the granting of Japanese nationality to a child of a foreign mother and a Japanese father if the latter acknowledges paternity before the child was born, or if the couple marries before the child reaches 20. The amendment allows the father to acknowledge paternity after the birth of the child and does not require the parents to be married for the child to be eligible for Japanese nationality (Nagata, 2008 as cited in De Dios, 2014: 109). This amendment contributed to the return migration of JFCs to Japan and increased the population of naturalized JFCs.

In 2008, the Lehman shock interrupted the growth of the foreign population in Japan. The crisis also changed the composition of the foreign population. With many Japanese Brazilians returning to Brazil because of the crisis, by 2011, the Filipino population displaced the Brazilians as the third largest foreign residents after the Chinese and Koreans (Nagasaka and Takahata, 2016). Filipino migration to Japan had been distinctive because of significant entertainer migration from the 1980s to 2004 and marriage migration, both of which were female-dominated. The current profile of Filipinos in Japan suggests a more diverse population—which includes children—and a trend towards long-term residence and settlement (Nagasaka and Takahata, 2016). Briefly, the classification of children in Japan with a Filipino background comprises the following: (1) children of mixed parentage born to Japanese men and Filipino women who grew up in Japan; (2) children of marriage migrant mothers who are fathered by their mothers' former partners in the Philippines; (3) children of *Nikkei* Filipinos or of descendants of Japanese immigrants to the Philippines; (4) children of mixed parentage born to Japanese men and Filipino women who grew up or spent part of their childhood in the Philippines; and (5) children of professional and skilled Filipino migrants in Japan. Their diverse migratory routes, living environments, and family backgrounds have implications for the support that they need and the existing support mechanisms in Japan (Nagasaka and Takahata, 2016). Based on the review of the literature and the insights we gained from the study visit in Japan in 2016, the institutional support to children of migrant and multicultural families in Japan—Japanese language programs, deployment of supporters to public schools—are mostly local government initiatives supported by NGOs, community organizations and volunteers.

In its early years as a destination country, South Korea adopted Japan's migration approach, using the trainee system to bring in migrant workers. Due to problems bred by the trainee system, South Korea moved to implement the Employment Permit System (EPS) in 2004, following the passage of the Act on the Employment of Foreign Workers in 2003. The EPS recognized the need for migrant workers and established a system for the recruitment and treatment of foreign workers. Acknowledging the increasing presence and different types of foreigners in the country, South Korea enacted the Act on the Treatment of Foreigners in Korea in 2007 and the Multicultural Families Support Act in 2008, with the latter specifically addressing the rising trend in international marriages and "multicultural families." The 2008 law defines "multicultural families" as those formed by Korean nationals and immigrant spouses (including those who naturalize after their marriage) and their children. The country has drafted two editions of the Basic Plan for Immigration Policy to "facilitate the life and settlement of foreigners in Korea" anchored on five policy goals: openness, social integration, human rights, public safety and cooperation" ([http://www.moj.go.kr/HP/TIMM/imm\\_07/image/bro\\_eng.pdf](http://www.moj.go.kr/HP/TIMM/imm_07/image/bro_eng.pdf)).

In contrast to Japan's more local approach, in South Korea, the policy response to multicultural families is more national, as indicated by legislative measures and the institutionalization of programs and services. The support to multicultural families, in particular, has been institutionalized under the charge of the Ministry of Gender, Equality and Family (MOGEF), and establishment of multicultural family support centers which offer various programs (education, counseling, and cultural activities, including Korean language education). There were 217 centers in 2014, which increased to 234 in 2015 (Kim YS, 2016). The speed with which Korea seems to have transformed from a mono-ethnic society to a multicultural society and the Korean brand of multiculturalism have been analyzed and critiqued by various observers (e.g., Kim A, 2016; Kim, 2015). The First and Second Basic Plan for Immigration Policy (2008-2012 and 2013-2017, respectively) contain provisions concerning multicultural children. In the First Basic Plan, under the objective of pursuing quality social integration, Plan 2.3 specifically provides for "creating a sound environment for multicultural children," with much emphasis placed on supporting the school life and school performance of multicultural children. These are retained and elaborated in the Second Basic Plan which makes references to the plan for providing "a friendly environment for children with a foreign background," "assisting the initial adjustment of children with a foreign background," "help foreign-born children of immigrant spouses to adjust to Korean society," "offer better career services for youth with a foreign background," and "establish multicuture-friendly education environment" (Choi, 2016). One palpable change between the two plans is the expanding scope of children of foreign back-



ground, which includes the foreign-born children of immigrant spouses, and the 1.5 generation, who may have specific concerns (see Nagasaka and Fresnoza-Flot, 2015).

The absence of a child lens in existing migration and integration policies render children invisible and unprotected in areas which matter most (Choi, 2016). For example, while the Framework Act on Education, which provides for nine years of compulsory education, does not exclude foreigners, the main beneficiaries are Korean nationals. The labelling of multicultural families can have unintended negative effects when children are singled out and treated differently, even if they were born in Korea and are Korean nationals. Children whose both parents are foreign nationals and those in an unauthorized situation are left out in migration and integration policies. The lack of legal status of undocumented children puts them in a very precarious situation. They can go to school, but this is subject to the approval of the school principal, and their access to health care is not guaranteed. Policies also need to consider the needs and concerns of foreign-born children who join their birth parents in Korea; studies show that these children encounter difficulties in school (Choi, 2016). Thus, while Korea's approach is national in scope, much remains to be done in designing support programs that include children of diverse cultural and immigrant backgrounds (i.e., not just immigrant spouses, and not just multicultural children), and not to forget, children in an unauthorized situation.

### **About the book**

The mapping of policies, programs and good practices in the three countries uncovered initiatives that specifically address children affected by migration. In the study visits, these examples have been shared and discussed with relevant stakeholders—officials, researchers, NGOs—through meetings and dialogues and disseminated through the project's website. Some of the examples are very local, some can be potentially replicable, and others may need improvement. Further conversations about these can broaden opportunities for exchange and learning from each other. The voices of children of migrant and multicultural families are important in these conversations, which led to the idea of compiling the life stories of these main actors.

In each country, we requested colleagues working on migration and/or children's issues to identify potential participants who would be willing to share their life stories. Initially, the plan was to invite the participants to write their own life stories. We later decided to make this optional to encourage participation—for example, this requirement might prevent younger participants from sharing their stories. Of the 27 life stories in this volume, seven were written by the participants themselves, while the rest were based on interviews. In some instances, a life story may have been shared



to someone who conducted the interview, another person wrote the story, and yet another person was involved in translating the story into English.

Guide questions were provided to participant-authors and interviewers, mainly to guide the process of writing. The guide questions included personal and family background; growing up in the context of the family's migrant or multicultural background; family relationships, friendships and support systems; school experiences; work experiences (for those who are older); and dreams and aspirations.

The main criteria for the selection of participants were having a migrant or multicultural family background, 12-30 years old, and willing to share their experiences. The 12-30 age range was aimed at including children in different stages: school age, adolescence and young adulthood. We adopted an upper limit of 30 years old for the purpose of providing a comparative perspective of the lived experiences of older and younger cohorts of children. The participants whose life stories are featured in this volume were between 12 and 28 years old.

The whole process, from the conduct of interviews to the writing of life stories, took place between November 2016 and early April 2017. We adhered to ethical guidelines in the recruitment of participants and the preparation of each life story. The participation of life story sharers was entirely voluntary; before each interview, the purpose of the project and consent taking was carried out. For those below 18 years of age, the consent of a parent or guardian and securing the assent of the child were undertaken. Pseudonyms and in some cases, the names of places were changed to protect the identity of participants who chose not to reveal their identities. Participants and/or their guardians or parents had a chance to review and comment on the the life stories before they were finalized.

Although each life story is personal, each person's biography plays out in the larger canvas of history where the personal acquires a social dimension, especially when personal experiences are felt and experienced by many. It is our hope that these life stories will expand our understanding of crafting solutions in the best interest of the child in mobile and transnational contexts.

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# THE PHILIPPINES





## Anna\*

De Facto Mother

**Interviewed by:** Alicia G. Follosco  
**Written by:** John Patrick Allanegui

Anna claims there's a lot to see up North.

In La Union, the paddy fields extend the most vibrant shade of green to the foot of the nearby sierras. In Tuguegarao, the city's low-rise skyline gives off a laid back vibe that's in contrast to the city's sweltering heat during the summer. In Pangasinan, the sunlight glimmers on the waters of the Lingayen Gulf, peppered with hundreds of small islands that define the protected seascape.

The South, which Anna has been to, has its own charm too. She's been to Surigao and Camiguin Island in Mindanao, where she has walked along the swash zone of beaches and buried her two feet in sand.

Anna says she has taken photos of all these places with her point-and-shoot camera, a gadget which was gifted to her by her mother Fe, who shares the same passion for photography.

In her photos, she'd always capture the scene ever so candidly, picking her favorite ones to post on her Facebook account. In Anna's photos, there's always the unfolding of the visible landscape, from the surface of an open sea to the silhouettes of mountain

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\* The names of persons have been changed to protect their identities.

ranges from afar. Yet, something invisible rests behind her photographs: a kind of freedom that has allowed her to move unreservedly to different places.

Yet, despite the trips Anna's been to around the country, she always traces back her roots with her family in the mountainous terrains of Benguet.

Born in October 2002, Anna lived most of her life in La Trinidad. She is the eldest of three children. Her younger brother is twelve while her youngest sister is only seven.

Anna's mother and father were both born and raised in Baguio City. Her mother Fe finished a bachelor's degree in tourism in a private university in Baguio. Her father, on the other hand, had professional training in the military, and continues to be educated by virtue of scholarships given to him by the government. In fact, he was an awarded officer, earning a special citation under then-President Benigno Aquino III in 2015.

The couple tied the knot in college and had to live with their respective families during the early years of the marriage. For a while, it seemed the stars were aligning for the young couple as their household was blessed with three children. But fate seemed to have something else brewing for them in the end as the two had to eventually part ways. Anna remembers that difficult day.

"My parents were going to separate... That time, Mommy was crying..." Anna said. "[Papa] was wearing his usual poker face; my brother was not listening and my sister kept asking why my mom cried... It seemed like I was the only who understood what was going on..." she added.

Anna's father is currently in a common-law relationship with a woman he met while he was stationed in a province outside Baguio City. Mother Fe, on the other hand, has been able to work overseas at least twice, as a domestic worker. In spite of her college degree, Fe still had difficulty finding a stable job that would fill the family's dining table on a regular basis.

Fe had the same reason as the many other mothers who left the country to work abroad: to find better opportunities elsewhere. Although Fe moved on to find greener pastures for herself and the family she left in Benguet, life was not always kind to her.

It was in 2005 when Fe first left the Philippines for Kuwait as a domestic worker. Anna was only three or four years old when her mother took flight. However, Fe returned to the country in less than two years, not spending enough time to earn and save

## Anna: De Facto Mother

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enough money upon her homecoming. It was only a little later that the family found out the unfortunate reason behind her abrupt return.

While in Kuwait, Fe's male employer attempted to rape her. Fe managed to escape her assailant and sought the help of a fellow Filipina in the city. Fe's employer later filed a case against her, claiming she let the contract unfinished. The case of the attempted rape was brought up, but fell only fell on deaf ears. Fe was told her the attempted rape was not a justifiable reason for her to abandon her work. She was sent to jail shortly after.

Back at home, Anna's maternal grandmother decided to work on the resources she had to help from a distance. The grandmother personally approached the then-mayor of Baguio City, who in turn, wrote a letter of intervention to the Philippine Embassy in Kuwait. It was impossible for the family to find out the effect of the letter on the decision to finally release Fe from jail. The mayor's interference with the whole affair also stirred controversies in the Embassy. But none of this mattered to Anna, her grandmother, and the rest of the family—what only mattered was that their mother was safe back home.

Was Kuwait a stroke of bad luck? Perhaps Fe asked herself that question when she returned to the Philippines and contemplated on leaving the country again. In September 2013, Fe tried her luck elsewhere. This time, to the Holy Land, where her prayers for another opportunity were answered.

Fe is now working as a caregiver to an elderly woman in Israel. Aside from tending to the needs of the elderly woman, Fe is doing other domestic chores without any added compensation.

Fe's departure to Israel wasn't just a case of answered prayers. It was also a stretch of resources, her family claims. While processing her paperwork for the domestic worker post in Israel, she asked a hefty loan from her cousin in South Korea which amounted to P750,000 just so she could handle the necessary fees. With her monthly salary, Fe ensures that she pays back her loan on a regular basis. In spite of the amount she has to pay, Fe never fails to send home a box full of chocolates and used clothing for Anna and her two other siblings as a memento of her affection.

Anna keeps in touch with her mother on Facebook and talks to her weekly over the phone. The conversations usually revolve around her younger siblings. It's easy for Anna to respond to all the queries about her siblings, especially now that she's the

one taking the role of her mother and father. Anna's the one to provide a motherly presence in the house, by cooking meals, doing the laundry, and helping her sister do her homework.

At times when it gets too stressful, Anna does wish for her mother to return home.

"Actually, many times, I have asked her to come home because I cannot handle things... It is very difficult to be both mother and father to my siblings..." she said.

It gets more difficult, she says, when the absence of their parents only exacerbates her brother's rebellious behavior at school and her sister's difficulties in coping with the school requirements. Anna claims that her position as a de facto mother in the house grants her more freedom to do whatever she wants, but fears the consequences of not having their real parents around.

Anna's grandmother stands behind her in the household. A blind masseur at a private clinic in Baguio, the grandmother often works ungodly hours and requests Anna to watch over her siblings for her.

Anna sometimes sees her father who is currently detailed in Mindanao. During long school breaks, the father would sometimes bring the three siblings all the way to Mindanao to explore unspoiled white beaches that line the island's coasts, and experience the cultural charm of the South. When the beaches aren't readily accessible, Anna says they'd stroll around the city parks and malls, places which still provide the necessary escape for the family.

In spite of the difficulties Anna faces at home, she still manages to channel her energies into something positive at school. Anna says schoolwork has been easy for her. She recently ranked third place in her entire grade level. Although she has managed to breeze through her subjects, she remains unimpressed with some of her teachers, whom she claims to be unsupportive and uninspiring.

And so she draws support and inspiration from her small circle of friends, many of whom are boys. Anna says she enjoys having boys as company because girls only seem to be only good at two things: giggling and talking about boys. Never mind, she says, if the entire school labels her a flirt for doing so.

Anna believes that having a spiritual life is important in making sense of the things she has been through. She cites the importance of her dance ministry in a Pentecostal

## Anna: De Facto Mother

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Church, which she found by accident the previous year. Once, she was looking for a place to photocopy her school materials and saw a group of young people dancing in one of the halls she had entered. She stayed a little while to watch and was later invited to attend their service. Since that day, Anna has been attending the service regularly.

It's been two years since Anna's mother returned home from Jerusalem. Anna is not hopeful that she'll be seeing her anytime soon again, admitting that she is okay with the idea of her mother working from afar. If anything, she'll just wait for the next brown box full of chocolates and hand-me-down clothes.

Anna builds on her ambitions of gaining her freedom from their domestic troubles by focusing on her education to be someone big in the future.

"Actually, I want to become an engineer, or a lawyer, or a doctor, because they have high incomes," Anna said, bursting in laughter.

When she achieves one of her dream jobs, Anna says she has no plans of working abroad. Should she go out of the country, she says she'll only do it to study.

"I will study abroad, but I prefer to work in the Philippines because our country is not doing well, which is a reason in itself not to leave," she said. "Whatever I will learn abroad, I will use it for the betterment of the Philippines."

Anna knows that becoming successful for her family entails more than the monetary compensation. It involves something that goes beyond the places she's been to up North and down South, may it be in the photos she has taken or the travels she has made.

To her, it involves something more meaningful—her freedom from the conditions that her parents had withstood for her and her siblings, the same conditions that drove her own mother to take risks outside just to have a fighting chance at life.





## Michelle\*

Waiting for Her Father

**Interviewed by:** Alicia G. Follosco  
**Written by:** John Patrick Allanegui

There is a fog that looms over the city of Baguio, one that shrouds the scenery of surrounding mountains and gives an icy feeling all over the place especially during the last few days of January.

Somewhere in the city, a twelve-year-old girl named Michelle sits in one of the classrooms of a public science high school, holding a pen with one hand, and clutching a borrowed copy of *The Chronicles of Narnia* with the other. Michelle holds on to these two things as testament to the things she loves doing in school: writing and reading literature.

Having been a member of her elementary school paper, where she did sports writing in Filipino and feature writing in English, writing is no strange craft to Michelle. She writes prose for her paper and poetry during her free time.

Reading fiction, too. If there's one thing that she probably found out about Narnia is that it can be like Baguio: cold, mountainous, and shrouded with mystery. But Michelle doesn't read fiction only to be entertained. Perhaps, fiction is also her way to clear the fog in her head, to reimagine a world where her father waits for her outside the school to fetch her in their family jeepney.

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\* Not her real name.

## Michelle: Waiting for Her Father

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Born in Baguio City, Michelle is the second of three children. Her younger brother is eleven while her older brother is twenty, a son from her father's first wife.

Michelle is proud to say that she is a full-blooded Cordilleran. Her mother is, after all, from Kalinga. Her father, on the other hand, is from the Mountain Province. Both of Michelle's parents were born and raised in their respective provinces and met in Baguio City, where they settled down and raised a family. Despite Michelle's tiny frame, it's easy to sense the strength that emanates from her eyes.

Michelle lives in one of the many neighborhoods in Baguio City, a perch of many other families who had come down from Kalinga.

"Our neighborhood is peaceful," Michelle said.

And the peace Michelle speaks of is evident in the way she shares her life with her neighbors. The shared Kalinga origin is a source of community among the neighbors. It has allowed a sense of kinship to permeate beyond the walls of adjacent houses, to extend one's own nuclear family into the neighborhood's winding streets.

Michelle's mother illustrates this way of life in the simplest way possible: Mothers all over the neighborhood could leave their children in the care of other mothers while they go out and work or do errands in town.

In spite of this common practice, Michelle's mother said that she has raised her only daughter in their immediate family.

This, especially, after the frequent departures of Michelle's father outside the country.

In 2007, when Michelle was only three years old, her father left his job as a taxi driver in Baguio to work in Guinea. What was supposed to be a contractual job as a KFC delivery man in Malaysia turned into a stint as a welder under a British company in the African country. While the former seemed a safer and easier job, the higher offer of the latter was impossible to turn down.

The money Michelle's father earned and sent back from Guinea made it possible for her mother to acquire a lot and build a house in Baguio. Michelle sees the house as a modest one, its rooms large enough to accommodate a family of five. Michelle does remember, however, how the faulty rooftop during the monsoon season would create puddles of water inside their house.

After five years in Guinea, Michelle's father returned to the Philippines. Soon after his return in 2012, her father used some of his earnings to purchase a jeepney which he drove around the city for income.

One day, Michelle sensed something strange when she saw her father waiting for and boarding the bus for Manila. Michelle later found out that her father's frequent trips to the capital were not without a purpose. Ever since his return, her father had been focused on leaving the country again to find work.

One time, Michelle's father applied for a job in Hong Kong. The Manila hostage crisis in 2010—when Hong Kong tourists were held hostage in a tourist bus—strained the relations between the Philippines and Hong Kong for some time. At the last minute, her father was told that the overseas company withdrew the job offer.

In early 2016, Michelle's father acquired yet another contract as a driller in New Zealand. But just before he was about to pack his bags and leave, the recruitment agency that mediated his contract was blacklisted as a bogus one.

"Papa's applications left our family in debt," Michelle said, citing how her family was left almost empty-handed with every fee they had to pay and lose in the process.

But Michelle's father was determined to take flight once again. It was only in August 2016 that he was finally able to pursue a successful application, which eventually landed him a job as a driller for a company in Qatar under a two-year contract.

Behind the father's cycle of departing the country to work, Michelle's mother remains a low-profile homemaker. Having been able to finish only her elementary education, Michelle's mother finds it difficult to find a stable job in the country. Once, she asked her husband if he could help her apply for a job as a domestic worker abroad. The husband was quick to refuse the request.

"Working abroad is not for a married woman," he said to her.

These days, Michelle's mother does whatever she can to help cover the family's expenses by taking on various odd jobs, dividing her time as a laundry woman and a house cleaner.

As a kid, Michelle was never consulted about her father's decision to work abroad. She was always left behind her parents' hushed conversations at night over the dinner table. In her mind, she only has an image of her father patiently waiting for the bus in

## Michelle: Waiting for Her Father

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Baguio that would take him to Manila. She can't even vividly recall the sound of her father's voice the day before he left for Qatar. Michelle only remembers one advice his father gave her on the day she woke up with her parents' room vacant, cupboards empty of her father's clothes and all.

"Study hard. Education is important for you to get a good job," he said.

Michelle is certain to not fall short of her father's appeal.

In elementary school, Michelle was a consistent honor student, ranking third place in her entire graduating class. Her involvement in the school paper allowed her to be part of the many press conferences conducted by the Department of Education. She also represented her school at the district level, when she was chosen to represent Baguio at a regional press conference in Ifugao. Furthermore, Michelle was able to sail farther shores when she represented her school for a national competition in Koronadal, South Cotabato.

Now in a public science high school, Michelle breezes through math and science, even doing advanced topics in the subjects. As a scholar, Michelle receives a monthly stipend of PHP500, which she hands over to her mother to save money for her own college education.

Michelle cites this good relationship with her mother as an inspiring force behind her successes in school. In the absence of a father, Michelle says her mother provides everything she needs, from her presence to the provincial trips for her school activities to a simple nod of affirmation that she can stay out late with her classmates to finish their school projects.

Michelle says she feels no resentment to her father for being away. She considers herself no different from other children, whose fathers who have to leave the country for greener pastures so that their children could have a better shot at life.

Michelle's father will be away for at least two years in Qatar, and Michelle isn't hopeful that he will be coming home while he's tied to his contract. Michelle eagerly waits for her father's monthly calls from abroad, which seem to happen less frequently nowadays. Whenever Michelle's father calls, the conversations don't last long, but are punctuated with the same advice she was given the day he left home.

"Study hard. Education is important for you to get a good job," he'd say again and again.

Michelle always assures her father that she's honoring his words at school. With help from her mother and two brothers, she gets by easily.

What she doesn't get to tell her father, however, is how difficult it is to not yearn for his presence during school activities, especially when she sees her classmates with two parents standing with them side by side. It gets a little easier, Michelle says, when her mother would bring her aunts and uncles to make up for her father's absence.

But Michelle does miss those days before her father's departure.

It was the time when her father drove the family jeepney all the way to school to fetch her in the middle of the afternoon. It was the time when her father would bring her to one of Baguio's parks, where they'd walk the long stretch of grass under the shade of pine trees, against the cool breeze coming from the nearby mountains. It was the time when her father's voice bounced off the walls of their modest house whenever he sang a tune just to make the entire family burst into laughter.

Aside from her mother and two brothers, Michelle relies on her spirituality to gain guidance in her life. She says she used to attend mass in a Catholic church with her mother. Recently, however, she found a new Protestant church where she regularly attends and enjoys singing lively Gospel songs—a stark contrast to the more solemn hymns she sings in a Catholic church, she says.

Like her father, Michelle yearns for a good future. She says whatever the future holds, it's bound happen in the country, not abroad. She's doesn't want to be separated from her mother and two brothers, she says. When asked about what she wants to be in the future, her eyes only light up with a glimmer of hope.

"I want to be a teacher or a policewoman," she said.

Today, Michelle still carries with her a pen for her writing poetry and prose, and reads a good piece of fiction whenever she gets the chance. Yet unlike the stories she writes and reads, her own story remains unfinished and needs more telling.

Michelle is not the one to know how her story with her father will turn out for now. And yet, despite such uncertainty, Michelle remains hopeful that, like the ending of the books she has read, her story will turn out good – perhaps with an ending in which the fog that looms over Baguio will clear out, showing her father outside the school, waiting for her in their family jeepney, ready to take her home.



## Mahadi

From “Left-behind” to Future Policeman

**Interviewed and written by:** Anderson V. Villa

### **Mahadi’s family**

Mahadi Kusin is a Muslim Tausug born on November 3, 1998 in Davao City. The city has been his home since birth. He is part of a large household comprising his older brother and his wife and members of his extended maternal family. Before Mahadi could form memories, his biological father had left him to the care of his mother’s family. According to his uncles, his father originated from Surigao City, in Western Mindanao. His mother is mum when it comes to his father. Mahadi and his older brother were both very young age when she left in the 1990s to work as a domestic worker in Saudi Arabia. His mother left to work abroad not only to support him and his brother but her extended family too.

His grandmother and late grandfather reared him since infancy; his aunts would also act as surrogate parents. His grandfather was a devout Muslim who taught him the Islamic traditions and brought him often to a nearby mosque to pray. Although he has yet to be as devout as his grandfather, he does hope to go to Mecca to perform the *hajj* [pilgrimage]. For him, Islam brings order to his life, shields him from negative influences and helps him overcome his loneliness over his parents’ apparent absence.

Mahadi finished grade school at Quezon Elementary School. He got along very well with his classmates; nonetheless, “sometimes” he and the other boys would get into

a fistfight. Mahadi recalled that this would happen at least once a month. The times when he figured in these fights, his older brother was informed and requested to go to his school. Later, he and his older brother agreed not to tell their family about his misdemeanor to avoid upsetting his old grandparents and his mother who was far away.

Presently, Mahadi goes to Agro-Industrial Foundation College as a senior high school student. The school has a young faculty, which makes studying fun for Mahadi and his classmates. His teachers are like *barkada* [group of friends]. There had been a few instances when he got into a fight. For the most part, Mahadi is a quiet 18-year-old who enjoys playing basketball, volleyball and badminton. Aside from being athletic, like most of his generation, his hobbies also include using Facebook as well as playing Counter-Strike.

After completing high school, he hopes to study Criminology at either the University of Mindanao or Rizal Memorial College. He then plans to enter the Philippine Military Academy to achieve his dream of becoming a policeman. Ever since he was a child, Mahadi was exposed to crimes in his immediate environment. His uncles were illegal drug users who eventually became drug dealers to sustain the habit. Mahadi's older brother kept reminding their uncles about the trouble their illegal activities would cause the family. Regrettably, their uncles did not listen to any of the advice and they are now in jail. This incident inspired Mahadi to become a policeman. He wants to prevent any crime from happening again within his family and his neighborhood. Closer to home, he also wants to become a role model to his younger cousins, to veer them away from following the footsteps of their uncles. Mahadi is confident that he will realize his dreams because of the moral and financial support of his brother and mother.

Mahadi and his brother are nine years apart and have different fathers. He also knows little about the circumstances of his older brother's birth, and he does not ask lest it will hurt his mother's feelings. What he knows is that his older brother's father was an Arab man that their mom met him when she was working abroad. The two brothers are very close. His brother also wanted to be a policeman, but their mother begged him not to because she was afraid for his safety, after seeing the risks and dangers policemen face on TV shows. Instead, his brother studied nursing and is presently working as a nurse in Davao City. Mahadi's older brother is now married but remains supportive of his endeavors. Mahadi is confident that should his mother lose her job abroad, his older brother would be there to support his education and to fulfill his dream.

**A mother’s sacrifice, a son’s longing**

Mahadi’s mother, Norama, started working in Saudi Arabia when she was just 19 years old. She became an overseas Filipino worker (OFW) to provide a better life for herself and for her family. Twenty-seven years later, Norama is still working in Saudi Arabia.

It was hard for Mahadi to understand why his mother was absent and why it was his grandparents who were raising him. At the tender age of three, he began to realize the reason why she had to work abroad. Still, he felt that he was unloved by his mother. Growing up, he called his grandmother “mama” because she was more of a mother to him than his biological one. Nevertheless, the love of his grandparents was not enough to make him feel that his family was whole. He sometimes felt envious of the other children in his neighborhood and his school who had both parents with them. Norama tried to make amends for her absence by sending him gifts from abroad as well as calling him and his brother once a week or twice a month before mobile phones became popular.

Ultimately, the love and care of his grandparents and maternal aunts helped him cope. He eventually accepted that his mother sacrificed her time with her family so she could provide them a better life. Now that he is more mature to understand the intricacies of life, he believes that his mother’s work in another country is proof of her love for him and his older brother. He is fully aware that the steady income from his mother’s toil abroad enables him to complete his education and attain his dream. To cope, he sometimes humorously remarks that because his “boisterous mother” is away, the house is peaceful.

The fast-paced developments in technology and the rapid spread of social media have helped improve Mahadi’s relationship with his mother. In the past, Mahadi could only talk with his mother through his older brother’s phone. Now that he also has his own cellphone, he can talk to her more often. Almost every day and usually for 30 minutes, he chats with his mother about her work in Saudi Arabia, her workmate’s experiences, and other things that keep her occupied apart from her job. Frequently, their conversation would also include his mother’s stories on how tiring her job is and that regardless of how much cleaning and cooking she does, still her employer thinks her efforts are not enough.

Mahadi’s mother does not inform the family when she would come home; she would just surprise them. She comes home every two years when her job contract ends. Typically, she cannot be present during his birthdays. The year 2016 was memorable



for Mahadi because his mother spent Ramadan with the family. Despite the great distance between him and his mother, he feels happy about his relationship with his mother. But he still longs for the day when his family would be complete.

### **To be a policeman**

Mahadi resides in a Muslim-dominated neighborhood which has an active peace-loving community association working for the development and well-being of the residents of the *barangay* [village; also, the smallest political unit in the Philippines]. Located along the coastal reclamation area, their *barangay* is considered a depressed area. It is frequented by flooding as it is located on low-lying land. Children could be seen playing along the thoroughfares and walkthroughs of the neighborhood. Anecdotal police reports often cite the area as prone to illegal drugs, youth gangs and petty crimes. His environment is both a source of anxiety and motivation for Mahadi. He worries that the discouraging conditions of his surroundings might pose hurdles in achieving his dream. At the same time, his desire to improve the conditions in his neighborhood motivates him to finish his education and become a good policeman someday.

He had always wanted to be policeman. For him, the “men-in-uniform” are “superheroes” who work to clear society of menacing and criminal elements. As a child, his direct experience of his erring uncles stirred his aspirations to do something about the situation. The recent arrest of his uncles (and their wives) for illegal drug offenses strengthened his resolve to reach his goals someday. He hopes to help them someday and perhaps facilitate their rehabilitation and eventual release.

Mahadi acknowledges the need for religion in life. To have faith in God (Allah), was the greatest gift of wisdom his grandfather gave him. Though he experiences loneliness, difficulties, and mishaps in life—and even personally witnessed his uncle’s misdemeanor—faith in God taught him a lot of lessons. Even when he was helpless, Allah never failed provide for his needs; despite parental absence, Allah sent his grandparents, aunts and his brother to guide him in the right direction.

Finally, according to Mahadi, his motivation to study hard is not only to attain his dream but also to bring his family together. His mother regularly tells him to take his education seriously, to refrain from participating in any scuffles and fistfights, and not to skip class. Mahadi takes his mother’s advice to heart. He does not want to waste his mom’s efforts and hard-earned money to send him to school. He looks forward to the day when he would finish college and would have a stable job. That

## Mahadi: From “Left-behind” to Future Policeman

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would be the day when it would be his turn to support his mother, the day that she would finally be able to stay with him and their family, for good, in Davao City. Once he is financially stable, Mahadi hopes to have a family of his own. He also dreams of going abroad—not to work as an OFW, but to go on a *hajj* to Mecca and fulfill one of the five pillars of Islam.



## Vincent\*

A Family of His Own

**Interviewed and written by:** Ma. Fideles Basas-Dianala

“I plan to work in Hong Kong but I will let my family follow. My wife can also work there. When we have saved enough, we will come home and lead a simple life in Iloilo City.”

Vincent’s looks belie his age. Lanky and towering at 6’1”, he has the face of a 15-year-old. It’s hard to believe that he’s turning 20 in less than a month. It’s harder to believe that in less than two months, this young man will become a father.

The eldest of two kids of overseas Filipino workers (OFWs), Vincent has lived in Iloilo City since his mother agreed to settle in Hong Kong a year after his father was employed as engineer in an international manufacturing company there. His younger sister, Nikka, currently lives and studies in Hong Kong. Corazon, Vincent’s mother, is employed in a private office as secretary.

Jed, Vincent’s father, was initially posted in Vietnam. After a year, he moved to Hong Kong for a more permanent assignment. He then requested his wife to follow. Vincent and his younger sister who were both in school at that time were left to the care of their maternal grandparents in Cavite. It took another year after Nikka, then 10 years

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\* The names of persons and places have been changed to protect the identities of the persons mentioned in this account.

## Vincent: A Family of His Own

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old, moved to Hong Kong to be with her parents and to continue her studies there. Since Vincent was already on his last year in high school, the family decided to let him stay in the Philippines. Knowing the high cost of college education in Hong Kong, it was eventually decided that Vincent will pursue BS Information Technology in a prestigious school in their hometown, Iloilo City.

Hong Kong is where Vincent's parents tried to pursue their dream for a better future for the family. Vincent was too young to remember but he knows they were living a simple life in Iloilo City. His parents were gainfully employed but for not for the long term, hence, the uncertainty about the family's capacity to deal with the challenges of the future. Jed ventured to look for a job in Manila where he was hired for an assignment in Cavite. He then relocated his family from Iloilo City so they can be together in Cavite. It was a well-paying job that enabled them to acquire a house and a car in a short time. His mother easily found a job in an international agency in a nearby province, which also paid well. Sometime in 2008, however, Jed was again recruited by a large international manufacturing company and was posted in Vietnam. Then the opportunity to be based in Hong Kong came. The compensation package was guaranteed to be several times more than what he was already getting. That was when the family decided to relocate to Hong Kong.

Vincent was fully informed about the decision to let him stay in the Philippines. He didn't resent being left behind, assured that he will be spending time with the family during Christmas and summer breaks. After all, Hong Kong is only less than three hours away. Besides, he will be studying in a reputable school and will be staying with his paternal grandmother in Iloilo City. "At first I was happy because that meant I could do whatever I wanted. They sent me money. But later I realized that it's hard to be separated from your parents because there was nobody to guide me."

He knew that with his parents' overseas employment, they would be better able to provide for the family's needs. Vincent admits though that while he didn't really mind when his father first went abroad, it was quite tough when it was time for his mother to leave. "Mama was my constant companion, my confidante, my number one supporter."

Being left in the Philippines at a young age wasn't easy at first. It took two years for Vincent to adjust to the set-up. Coming home from school every day and not seeing his father, mother or sister caused a feeling of emptiness, especially when he imagines the three of them happily together in Hong Kong. He resorted to hanging out with

friends who are also his schoolmates, food tripping, watching movies or simply going out for a few drinks, which his grandmother, *Lola Rosal*, strongly frowned upon.

On the one hand, Vincent was thrilled that without his parents, he had the freedom to do whatever he wanted with his friends. But, he missed his mother, who doted on him so much, and the warmth of her embrace. Constant communication with the family through video chat helped him cope with the loneliness. Through video chat, Vincent updated them about things he did on a daily basis, including exploits with his friends, school activities, even the food he ate. Conversations were mostly with his mother and his sister, since his father would always be on the go, traveling from one country to another on account of his job. During video chats, some misunderstandings could not be avoided.

The separation was intended to be temporary. When he finishes school, his parents promised to return to the Philippines, just in time for his younger sister to enter college in a local university.

Vincent looked forward to those vacations in Hong Kong when he would stay for at most two months, bonding with his younger sister and relishing the attention of his mother. Unfortunately, his father was not always around as his job required him to travel to Indonesia, Vietnam, Germany and Pakistan. Vincent didn't really mind as long as his sister and his mom were around.

Vincent admits he's really closer to his mother with whom he can freely open up to. Direct communication with his father seldom happened, and in recent months, was non-existent. In fact, when he used to stay with his paternal grandmother, he knew his father was calling her but he never asked to talk to his son.

Vincent was left to the care of *Lola Rosal* for almost three years. But the constant nagging about his studies and his forays with friends became unbearable for him. His mother, *Corazon*, said her in-laws had a tendency to unfairly compare Vincent with his father who was a conscientious student during his time and with his uncle who graduated with honors. She further related that a disagreement with Vincent's uncle led to a scuffle, which became the last straw, forcing him to pack his bags and leave his *Lola's* home.

Vincent then lived in an apartment with friends. There, he enjoyed more freedom and learned to do things by himself without the watchful eyes of elders. Vincent has

## Vincent: A Family of His Own

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a big circle of friends mainly from the same school where he is enrolled. Some of his teachers were his mother's classmates and friends. He might not have been an outstanding student but he was on track and on time. After all, he is determined to become a computer programmer after graduation.

As a young boy, he envisioned himself donning a policeman's uniform. Later on, he wanted to become an engineer, perhaps drawing inspiration from his father. This changed during one of their visits to his mother's friends in Hong Kong. He observed that they were working at home on their computers. "They are programmers," his mother said, "and they're earning a lot." Earning big bucks while working from home struck him and he resolved to become a programmer, too.

Amira became Vincent's girlfriend when they were both junior students in the same university. In their senior year, Amira got pregnant. He wondered how to break the news about the unplanned pregnancy to his mother.

Corazon learned about Amira's pregnancy from a college friend. Doubting that Amira could indeed be pregnant, the young couple went to see an OB-Gynecologist on the third week of August 2016 for an ultrasound test, not knowing that the doctor was his mother's friend.

"Aren't you Corazon's son? Does she know already?" the doctor asked. Vincent would have wanted to tell his mother directly, as she was due to arrive in Iloilo from Hong Kong in a matter of days. "I feared she might have a heart attack during the flight." But his mother's friend beat him to it. Corazon said she was crushed by the news, but her love for her son prevailed. She hastily flew to Iloilo City by herself and discussed wedding plans with the family of Amira.

They were married in Islamic rites less than three months before the expected delivery of their baby girl. A former Catholic, Vincent converted to Islam earlier, his wife's religion. His mother Corazon and his sister Nikka flew in from Hong Kong to attend the wedding. "No, I didn't invite my father to the wedding." In fact, nobody from his father's side attended. He isn't aware of how his father reacted to the situation.

Corazon informed Jed about the wedding of their eldest son but he said he had a lot of other things to attend to. Nevertheless, he still continues to extend financial support to Vincent and even paid for the plane tickets of Corazon and Nikka during Vincent's wedding.

Vincent is determined to become a programmer after finishing his BS Information Technology course. His wife, Amira, hopes to become a physical therapist but had to quit school because of the pregnancy. At present, Vincent is financially dependent on his parents but he has set his eyes on earning his keep right after he graduates so that he can support his young family.

Despite the delay, Vincent is confident that both of them will finish college, work and live in Hong Kong with their baby. He has set his eyes on Hong Kong because it will give him an opportunity to rejoin his family. He believes that the only thing that will stand in the way is if he won't put his heart and mind into his studies. He agrees with his parents' constant reminder that education is the only thing they can give him because they don't really have many material possessions.

Vincent longingly looks back to those days in Cavite when his family was complete. His father was a young and promising engineer in a multinational corporation while his mother was enjoying her job with an international institution. He and his sister were enrolled in respectable private schools. All four of them lived together in one home, sharing meals in the dinner table every day, enjoying each other's company.

Jed somewhat gradually drifted apart from the family when they moved to Hong Kong. His frequent absence from home was expected because his job requires traveling to different countries. But over time, they noticed that he became detached, less interested particularly on matters concerning his wife and his son. Vincent says his father is a perfectionist and he might have failed to measure up to his father's expectations, hence, his disappointment with his eldest child, leading him to become withdrawn.

"I don't really understand. It's complicated," Vincent says. "If the family stayed put in the Philippines, my parents could still be together."

Jed remains responsible in his financial obligations to his family and is particularly generous to his daughter. He also stays with the family when his job takes him to Hong Kong. Christmas used to be the time for the family to be complete except this year when Vincent would rather be with his wife and his newborn baby. The season after all is no longer special for the new convert to Islam.

Looking back, Vincent said he had no regrets. Despite the hardships, he is happy with his life now. He and his wife live with his in-laws with whom he has a good

## Vincent: A Family of His Own

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relationship. He enjoys tending to his goats, feeding his dogs and taking walks with his pregnant wife. This young man beams as he anticipates fatherhood. Vincent admits having caused marital problems this early. One time, he missed his friends so he went out with them and didn't go home to his wife for two days. "I did something wrong," he said.

For Vincent, OFW parents don't really differ much from other parents. "They're still parents. They do what's best for their children." The soon-to-be dad's advice to other children, "Avoid mischief. Obey your parents. They know what's best for you."

Vincent wants to raise his child in the Philippines, the place where he was born and where he grew up in. "This is the best place for my daughter."





## Mariel

Everything Will Be Well

**Written by:** Mariel Dianne A. Caguimbal

My name is Mariel Dianne A. Caguimbal. I am a Grade 10 student of Canossa Academy Lipa, proud daughter of Arnel and Marites, and a fulfilled member of an organization called *Anak ng Nangingibang-Bansa Aruga at Kalinga* [Love and care for children of overseas migrants] or ANAK Batangueño [*anak* is Filipino for child; the name of the organization means Child of Batangas Province].

Membership in ANAK Batangueño does not immediately translate to pure fun and enjoyment like other organizations people of my age join because they want to develop their skills or talents, or find an avenue where they can express themselves. A major requirement to become part of ANAK Batangueño is to have a parent or both parents working overseas, something that does not apply to all children.

I believe that the members of the organization, myself included, are special—special in a way because young as we are, we already undergo certain pains and struggles in the family. Every morning, our parents could have been the ones waking us up from bed or preparing breakfast for us, but they're not. Every afternoon, our parents could have been the ones waiting for us to be dropped off by the school service or school bus by the gate side of our houses, but they're not. Instead, we have relatives or *kasambahay* [domestic worker] who would temporarily fill the absence of our parents, who are working really hard to provide us a good life and stable living conditions.

## Maribel: Everything Will Be Well

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I know that those of you who share the same thoughts and experiences can truly relate to what I'm saying. There are times when we would want to talk to our moms and dads personally, but we can only reach them via Facetime, Skype, text message, or whatever technology offers now.

I long for my parents' presence. They've been working outside our country for 22 years now as engineers. Currently, they're in Russia. My aunt serves as my guardian for the time being until they get back. As my father's sister, she has taken care of us ever since my parents started working overseas. My aunt has a daughter and her family had lived with us so she could take care of my brother and me. Now, my cousin is already married and has a son, but they just live a few blocks from our house in the same subdivision.

My parents' schedules are more flexible compared to those of other parents working overseas. They would always ensure that they'll be with us during the holiday season in December, and they return to the Philippines every two months to stay for almost a month with us. I'm lucky enough to get a chance to talk to them every day via Facetime or text message. Despite the distance and difference in time zones, I would sometimes ask them to help me in my assignments and seek their advice whenever the need arises. No words can express how grateful I am to have them as my parents. They always show their full support to me in whatever I do despite my occasional wrongdoings to them. I can say that without them, I am nothing—I wouldn't be who I am right now without their guidance. My older brother, Ranel Marco, helped compensate the absence of my parents. Though he doesn't stay in our house most of the time ever since he was in college at Ateneo de Manila University, and now that he's working at Nestlé in Makati, he never fails to come home and make sure that we bond all the time. Like my parents, he calls every day and makes sure that we stay close no matter the distance. My brother and I both freely express that someday, we will not go overseas because we know the struggle of living without parents by our side. We want to stay together with our family and shower them with all the love that should be given to them.

As a daughter of overseas parents, one of my main support systems is ANAK Batangueño, as mentioned earlier. We would have a one-hour session every Monday. The moderators would show video presentations and documentaries of children who also have overseas Filipino worker (OFW) parents with the goal of enlightening our minds so that we may fully understand our situation and be guided toward the right path. The school would also invite motivational speakers from the ANAK organization, who would encourage us to do better in school and become closer to God. In fact, one

of them was the founder of a social networking site called “Faithbook.” This website really resembles Facebook but the materials posted are Bible passages, readings, and other resources that can help us with our faith life. Apart from the talks, ANAK encourages interactions and sharing of experiences with other ANAK members from La Consolacion College, Tanauan City, Batangas.

These activities are helpful to children of OFWs—we feel that our concerns are given attention and that we can have someone to go to if we need help. Our school adopted a tool that was developed by the Episcopal Commission for Migrants and Itinerant People (ECMI) to assist children of OFWs know themselves better. I found this instrument useful in discovering who I am.

ANAK also conducts the Peer Facilitators’ Program. This program has improved my relational skills. Among others, we carry out activities that aim to promote positive messages about the children of OFWs. We meet every Monday and discuss different topics that can help us define ourselves and how to be a person for others. These activities and our interactions have helped me and other ANAK members gain more friends and develop leadership skills.

To the readers who also have OFW parents, we need to accept the physical distance between our parents and us, but that the situation does not dictate our direction in life. We, ourselves, choose how we interact with the world. Yes, there will be times when we would long for the love, affection, or guidance that our OFW parents and even our relatives cannot provide. That’s why we have secondary support systems in our schools to help us with our needs. We need to keep an open mind and think that whatever happens, with the best efforts of our parents, relatives, and programs or organizations in our schools, everything will be well.



## Caryl

Through Life on a Wing and a Prayer

**Written by:** Caryl Joanne A. Nonato

I was born on April 23, 1996 in Iloilo City. Prior to the ultrasound results, my parents thought that I was a boy and had chosen a name for me: Patrick Jason. My mom presumed that I was a boy because I was restless; I was kicking and moving about in her womb.

The day I was born, my mom took a taxi by herself to go to the hospital. It was the same way with my older sister. My dad had been working as a seafarer even before my parents' marriage, thus my mom managed many things on her own. From childhood up until now, it was my mother who raised us and was both mother and father to my sister and me.

At the time of my birth, my parents and my then five-year-old sister lived in a lightly constructed *bahay kubo* [nipa hut] beside the gasoline station where my mom worked as a bookkeeper. My mom quit her job when she carried me through delicate pregnancy. A couple of years after my birth, my parents were able to construct a more comfortable yet humble home for our family to live in.

### **My dad: A good provider**

I had accepted as a fact of life that my father's work as a seafarer requires moving and being away from home. As an able-bodied seafarer, my father's earnings were modest. We were able to manage our finances since we were living in the province, where

the cost of living was affordable. My sister and I always worked hard to do well in our studies and to support our mother in every way. We all wanted the hard-earned money of our father to be put to good use and to lighten his burden by doing well in school.

The contract of a seafarer is usually 9-10 months, thus, we had gotten used to his absence from home. My father was not much of a 'dad' to us. Because he is not around, you would not see him working around the house or tending to our needs when we were children. He has always been a good provider though and he usually makes time to call us almost every week. He and my mom would usually discuss about finances and how we were doing in school. Whenever he comes home, we would allow him to spend time with his brothers so they can go around engaging in their favorite activity, *sabong* (cockfighting). We see him happier when he is with his siblings rather than being cooped up at home to be with us. *Sabong* is a way of life in my father's family of orientation. My grandfather worked in a poultry farm, raising roosters to be used in cockfights. On the side, he earned extra money as a gaffer, which helped fund the education of my father and his siblings.

Whether he was away working or at home during his vacation times, my mother took full responsibility of managing our family and household. My father insisted that he be the 'breadwinner' and my mom be a full-time homemaker. My father did not want my mother to tire herself further by getting a job or engaging in business. The single-earner set-up, however, was not enough to meet our needs. My father's 'hobby' of *sabong* further put a strain on our family's financial resources.

At one point my mother had a short stint as an overseas Filipino worker to meet our family's financial needs. She worked as a domestic worker in Hong Kong for six months until she and my father reached an agreement on how they can support the family. When my mom was away, my aunt and her daughter stayed at our home during the weekdays to look after my sister and me. Despite financial difficulties, our mother made sure that we study in good schools. Our parents had always stressed to us that we were not born with wealth, and that the only thing that they could give us is a good education. If we have dreams and aspirations, we had to strive to reach our dreams and they will give us all the support that they can possibly give.

Our family has discussed that my father would continue working for the next 5-6 years to be able to pay off our loans and mortgages. My father plans to run a small business in the outskirts of our province in my grandfather's farmland. We are praying to discern the best way to prepare for my father's return and life after seafaring.

### **My mom: The wind beneath my wings**

My sister and I are very close to our mother. Every day we would always take time to talk about school and anything under the sun. A big part of our conversations is about what my sister and I would want to pursue in terms of career and family life and how we can realize our dreams.

Our mother always encouraged us to value education in school and beyond. She encouraged us to take part in volunteering and community activities hosted by our schools or by our church. Furthermore, she instilled in us that we should always base our actions on the Bible for it is the only way to know and discern God's will for our lives.

Our mother taught us significant values, such as, to be God-fearing, honest, diligent, hardworking and more. We learned the value of money, that it is a tool that can help uplift the lives of others and that it should not be squandered on unnecessary matters. We also learned that life is a learning experience. She would also encourage us to go to church and read the Bible despite my father's opposition; because of this, my sister and I grew up to become God-fearing individuals. Our father does not know God the same way we do. The best that we could do is to pray for him and for his safety while he is away.

I could recall fond memories of our family being together, of how my mother and father would play with us and would scold and discipline us because of our playful nature. When he was home, there were times when I would hide my father's cigarettes and throw his beer bottles because I did not want him to drink and smoke. It made me sad that my father would prefer to be with my uncles rather than spend time with us. We try to understand that his work is very tiring.

### **Academic journeys and more**

I lived and studied in Iloilo City until I started university.

I had kindergarten in Doane Baptist Academy; this is the institution where I started learning more about the Bible. I was in kindergarten when I got to know God as my personal Lord and Savior.

When I was about to start second grade, my mom asked me if I wanted to take an exam at the Iloilo Scholastic Academy (ISA), a new Chinese private school at the time.

Thrilled with the idea of learning Chinese language and culture, I took the exam, had an interview, and was admitted to the school. I appreciated my mother for allowing me to make the decision to study in this school. ISA taught me a lot about ‘Virtue and Excellence,’ the school’s motto. The tuition and school fees, however, were getting steeper each year. Our family was getting burdened by the costs, despite our various belt tightening efforts. Sometimes we had to borrow from our neighbors to pay for the commute to school. Often, my sister and I went to school having no more than just commute money or sometimes with just PHP20 in our pockets. As my sister was about to start college, I told my mom that we needed to focus on my sister’s college expenses. After some discussion, we decided that I would apply to public science high schools after graduation. Going to a public high school would not only ease our financial situation a bit but it will also ease my way into earning a scholarship for college. I wanted my parents to support my sister’s dream of becoming a doctor.

I was admitted to the Special Education (SPED)-Integrated School for Exceptional Children High School for the Gifted, a science-oriented public school. High school was a memorable experience. I had the chance to travel around the Philippines for both academic and extra-curricular activities. These experiences allowed me to get to know people from all walks of life and to learn valuable life lessons.

In anticipating university, choosing what course to take was a difficult decision. Ever since I was a child, I considered many professions because of my interest in different fields—engineering, medicine, Bible studies and the humanities were among the fields that I thought about. When I was in third year high school and college exams were around the corner, I had been praying for months about what to take up in college and what to pursue as a career in the long run. I wanted to find out what God would want me to pursue. In my discussion with my mom and sister, I realized that a course in business would be most suitable for me. It was my sister who told me about the University of Asia and the Pacific (UA&P). She wanted to study there too, but it does not offer a pre-med course. UA&P was my dream school—it pioneered the Entrepreneurial Management Program in the Philippines. However, the tuition fees plus living expenses in Manila would be costly. My prayers were answered because I was accepted as a 100 percent Merit Scholar in the university. Currently, I am a senior Entrepreneurial Management student and will be graduating in August 2017.

UA&P exceeded my expectations. The school taught and practiced its motto of ‘UNITAS’ wherein one is educated not only to be professionally competent but also to understand your role in society. During my stay in the university, I was able to balance my time to include having time for studying, loved ones, friends and extra-curricular

activities. Every day, I would plot out a to-do-list, I would read my lessons in advance and then bring up the topics that I do not understand during class discussions. On the days when there were seminars at school or school activities, I would allot time to help out. Most importantly, I made time to pray and read the Bible. I would also reflect about the day, spend some time wandering and daydreaming, rest and wait for the new day to come.

### **Faith in God and the future**

Currently the world is under pressure of relativism, where everyone has different opinions and beliefs regarding spirituality. Since I have accepted Jesus Christ as my personal Lord and Savior since my kindergarten days, I know that I am guided by Him on how to discern His will in my life by reading the Bible and going to Him in prayer. Moreover, having a relationship with God allows me to ground my choices and actions based on His word as it is written in the Bible. Personally, I have come to a realization that if you do things for yourself, you are a selfish individual; if you do things for others, you are selfless; but if you do things for God, you are living your life the way He wants you to live it and thus through prayer and supplication, He will guide you through it.

Given the opportunity, I would like to study further abroad and hopefully establish businesses that can either be located in the Philippines or in other places. As for the specifics, I would need to lift these up to God in prayer as no one knows what the future would hold for everyone. I have been praying for three years now, on how to tackle the next chapter of my life. Gradually I have been trying to discern the next steps in my life. Right now, as I transition from college into the real world, I am envisioning what I must do in the next five to ten years. I am dreaming the path while finding my way; I pray that God will be with me every step of the way. If someday I will go abroad, I would choose to return to the Philippines and run the businesses here so that they will not only touch the lives of other people, but also contribute to nation-building.





## Ralph

Entrepreneur in the Making

**Interviewed and written by:** Ma. Fideles Basas-Dianala

“I also once dreamed of becoming a seafarer,” said Ralph Nester Tubongbanua, 15 years old and son of Nestor and Rebecca Tubongbanua.

His father Nestor, has been a seafarer for 35 years and counting. Ralph understands that his father loves his job, which enabled him to support his own parents and a sibling until they passed away and to send nephews and nieces to school.

Ralph’s mother, Rebecca, a Chemistry graduate and a dynamic entrepreneur dedicated to mango-based food production, is tirelessly innovating and fostering linkages to help push the mango industry in her island province, Guimaras. The business is named McNester Food Products, after her two beloved sons. A former overseas Filipino worker (OFW), she worked as domestic worker in Hong Kong for six years, when she was still single.

Ralph has an older brother, Raymund Michael Castro or Mac, aged 25, single, and also a seafarer. Mac is his mother’s son from a previous relationship. Not having known his own father, Mac is treated by Nestor as his own son and is adored by his younger brother Ralph.

In fact, Ralph never referred to Raymund Michael as his half-brother. He is simply his brother, his *Kuya Mac* [*kuya* means older brother], with whom he shares the

## Ralph: Entrepreneur in the Making

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passion for basketball and online games among other things. Sometimes, they play antagonists in an online basketball game, the outcome of which determined who will wash the dishes after dinner. They also shared responsibilities when their garage was constructed, with Ralph shoveling the sand and his *Kuya Mac* pushing the wheelbarrow. “But I also sometimes resent it when he tells me to do things and I’m not in the mood,” Ralph says with a smile.

Their mother Rebecca said that when the kids were younger, Ralph made sure that whatever is given to him by his father, his *Kuya Mac* should also get his own. So if Nestor came home with a pair of rubber shoes for Ralph, there should also be a pair for Mac.

Ralph is the product of his parents’ love story that spanned almost 20 years from the moment they met until the time they got married. The relationship blossomed from a casual encounter, waned due to distance and lack of communication, but was later briefly rekindled. The bond faltered again due to family responsibilities, but was eventually revived and finally sealed at the altar when the bride was already 38 and the groom 40 years old.

Thus, when Ralph was born, his parents were more than ripe for parenthood. Nestor did not accept any contract for seven months after Ralph’s birth so he could be a hands-on dad. No wonder Ralph is evidently raised well with a keen understanding of his parents’ dedication to their respective careers, balanced by a desire to help others, including relatives, workers and less fortunate members of the community.

Ralph knows that his father and subsequently his brother are seldom home because of the nature of their jobs and their desire to better provide the family’s needs. Communication is not a problem anyway, given the availability of Skype calls and messaging. As long as there’s a signal, Ralph’s father calls his family everyday during his break time. Mac, on the other hand prefers to communicate with Ralph through Messenger or text messaging, and with his mother through calls on the cellular phone.

Phone conversations with Ralph’s father tend to be lengthy with repeated reminders for him to study well, to look after the house and to help his mother. His brother, on the other hand, would ask what he wants his *Kuya Mac* to buy for him. Both seafarers do not always buy what Ralph wants though, especially if they think it’s not yet time for him to own the requested item at his age.

Ralph looks up to both his father and his older brother as seafarers, such that at one point, he also planned to take up a Marine course when he reaches college. But his *Kuya* dissuades him by saying that seafaring is not an easy job especially if you're a newbie.

"It's worse than being a construction worker," *Kuya* Mac said. His father is also lukewarm about Ralph's desire to become seafarer but says that he will support him if he really wants to. At present, Ralph has set his sight on becoming a businessman, perhaps inspired by his mother's flourishing homegrown business that produces dried mangoes and other mango-based products—butterscotch, catsup, jam, juice, pickles, and sauce, among other things. *Calamansi* [Philippine lime] juice and *calamansi* concentrate are also among its major products. Ralph joins his mother during deliveries to outlets in Iloilo City on no-class days and learns a few things about the business along the way.

Ralph is at present a Grade 9 student at St. Joseph de las Hijas de Jesus in Jordan, Guimaras where he has many friends with whom he plays basketball and computer games, like League of Legends. His friends gather at the Tubongbanua residence during the local fiesta in the month of May. Ralph's parents know all of his friends and their parents.

Ralph plans to pursue a business or IT course in Iloilo City after high school. This young man, who once dreamed of becoming president of the Philippines and to become an astronaut, believes that education is the key to success. He heeds his parents' constant reminder to take his studies seriously, to read the questions carefully during exams and to read books.

With two seafarers in the family, only Ralph and his mother reside in the modest Tubongbanua home most of the time. The house stands under a cool canopy of chico, mango, and other fruit trees. The food processing plant stands a few meters away but still within the sprawling compound. The Tubongbanua home is usually quiet with only two people living in it. The silence is occasionally broken by the chirping of the birds, by the faint whimper of the two-week old abandoned puppy Ralph picked up in the streets and the occasional roar of tricycles navigating the sloping terrain. Ralph would then enjoy the solitude by listening to love songs in his room.

The place comes to life when the two seafarers, Nestor and Mac, happen to be home at the same time. The boys play basketball although Nestor has played less in recent

## Ralph: Entrepreneur in the Making

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years due to his age. The head of the family would regale the family with stories about his experiences at sea, like how they protect themselves from possible attacks from pirates. He also takes upon himself to clean the house, to do the laundry, to do minor repairs in the house and practically everything except ironing. In addition, he tells his wife not to worry about getting up early in the morning because he will take charge of preparing breakfast and of packing Ralph's lunch. Ralph is fully conscious of the fact that when his father is home, his mother automatically relinquishes to his father the responsibility of minding him so that she can focus her energy on the business. Between the two, Ralph considers his father as the disciplinarian. His constant reminder whenever he leaves for a new contract is for Ralph to focus on his studies and to help his mother in household chores. "Don't worry, Tay [abbreviated form of *tatay*, which means father]. I will bear that in mind," Ralph reassures his father.

Ralph has gotten used to the frequent absence of his father and his older brother. He'd rather not compare himself with other families whose members are always present. He proudly says that he has learned to be independent and has become a stronger person because of the responsibilities assigned to him as "man of the house" in the absence of the two older men.

Raised as Aglipayan [Philippine Independent Church] by his mother, Ralph considers himself religious. "God is my creator, my protector, my guide. I ask for His help when I need to do something—like when I need to work on a term paper. With God, we are afraid to commit sins."

Whenever Ralph's father is due to arrive after the end of a contract, mother and son usually go to Manila to meet him at the airport. Then they would eat, buy a few things, go to places that interest him and then head back to Guimaras—simple pleasures Ralph enjoys.

On December 4, 2015, the Tubongbanua family was bestowed the Model OFW [Overseas Filipino Worker] Family of the Year Award (MOFYA), sea-based category, by the Overseas Workers Welfare Administration (OWWA). Ralph accompanied his mother during the recognition rites at the Philippine International Convention Center in Manila because his father was already sailing at the time of the ceremony. The award moved his mother to tears and gave Ralph a sense of great pride but he also feels that he should serve as model among the youth especially those with OFW parents. "I should really strive to finish my studies so as not to put to waste my parents' hard work and sacrifices." After all, they have always provided him with all the support and

guidance he needs. It is not surprising, therefore, that Ralph considers his parents as his role model and inspiration in life.

“If my mother will pass on to me her food production business, I will take over and do my best to manage and make it prosper. If not, I want to put up my own business venture here in Guimaras specializing in farm animals. I envision a business that can break into the world market. I think positive, but I know there will be challenges. I will just pray to God to help me hurdle the them,” Ralph declares with confidence.



Ralph (left), his mother Rebecca (center) and a relative (right) attending the 2015 MOFYA awards ceremony. Photo courtesy of the Tubongbanua family.



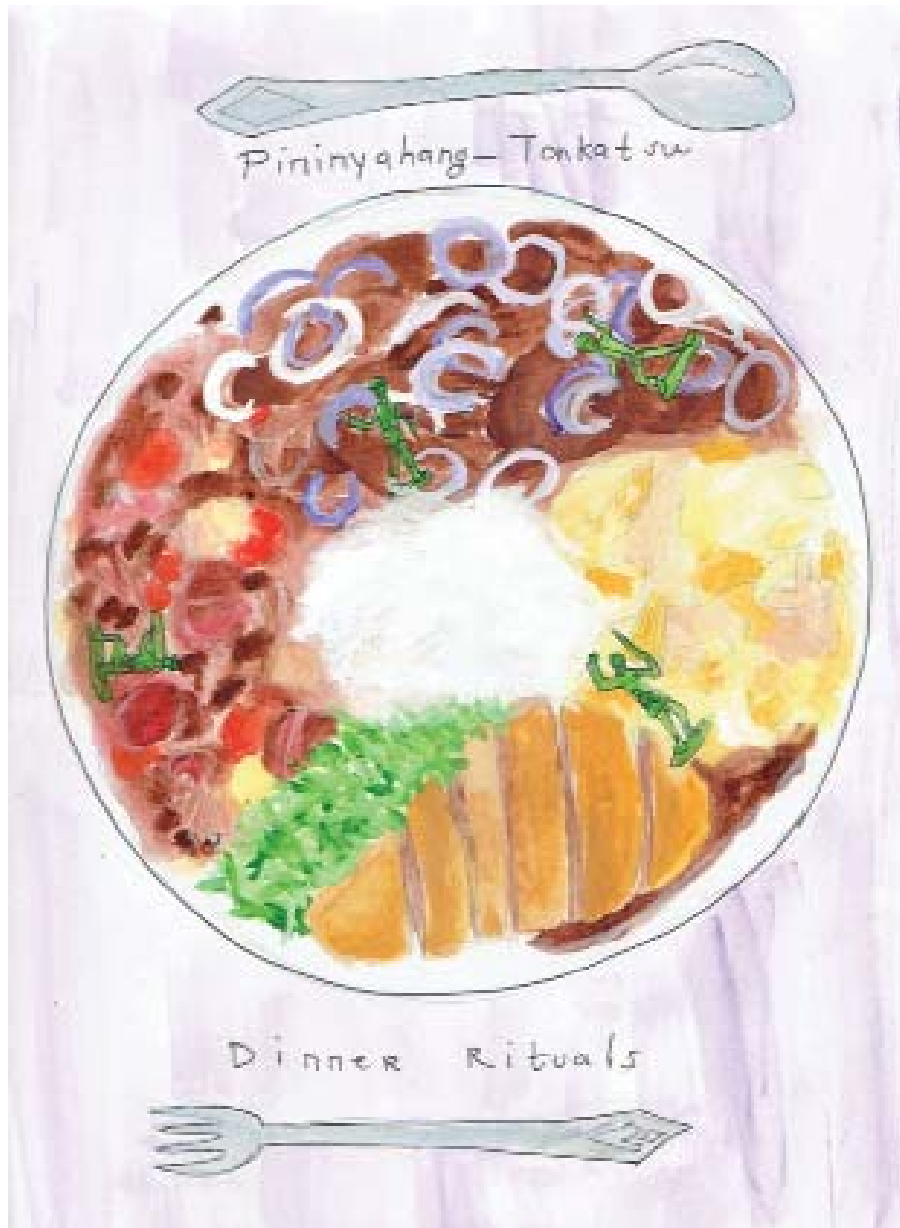
## Hanna

### *Pininyahang-Tonkatsu* Dinner Rituals

**Written by:** Hanna Norimatsu

There is always more than one dish cooked per meal in our house. The people living there have learned to jump between my father's Japanese cuisine and my mother's Filipino creations over the decades. It's a tradition we've set on the granite countertops long ago, though we do serve the rush hour staple of canned goods, packed hotdogs, and the leftover pasta surprise. Dinners are especially tricky, the platoon of children and the husband general always asks for special orders from lieutenant mama: fried chicken, carbonara, *adobo* [Filipino dish—meat, fish or vegetable marinated in vinegar, soy sauce and garlic], *tempura* [Japanese dish of seafood or vegetable that has been battered and deep fried], *soba* [a type of Japanese noodle], *liempo* [Filipino dish, grilled pork belly]. There is something about surviving the day that entitles those living within that house of tall windows, wispy curtains, and white walls to a good celebratory meal. We wait for the last feast of every day to replenish our will to keep moving forward, to consume good omens, and to quench our flickering resolve. Life hasn't always been easy here in this country of endless summers—many terrible memories flicker alongside the beautiful ones, all of them we choose to keep. All of them became contributors to who we are today, and I like who we have become even if it didn't make sense at first.

Here is how every dinner preparation pans out: my mother will try her best to cook the food that she thinks will best satiate us all, and there is a 50 percent chance of



Artwork by Hanna Norimatsu.

it being up to par with my father and my first brother's palate. My mother always complains that their taste buds might be a blessing but they are a curse to her. To my second brother, little sister, and myself, all food is good food (although I'm allergic to the golden seafood of both lands). She will push through it like the veteran she is; cut the carrots into coins, cut the potato in half and then quarter it, chop the onions, mince the garlic, prepare the meat and spices. The steady motion of her hands, and the rhythmic, "tok, tok, tok" of the knife hitting the chopping board accompanies her focused eyes and strategizing mind. You wouldn't notice this precision the first hundred times; her brilliance is somewhat hidden as she talks and gossips with anyone who'd listen. She'll cook the onions and the garlic on a pan first, add the meat and let it simmer until the juices come out. She won't cook it all the way through, the rest will be up to the broth. She'll add everything to the pressure cooker, making sure there's ample time for the ingredients to be acquainted with each other. This is important, she'd say, "Some ingredients won't marry well if a certain amount of time has not been met." I know she's thinking about all the differences between my father and her. She always said they were too in love to care back then, and were quick to promise forever. We were born when "back then" was over, caught in the middle of getting to know each other again and again and again. I know the instant she opens the lid that she's been preparing my dad's favorite curry with the thick brown sauce, the notes of honey, and the strong aroma of spices. Star anise would be in the forefront, telling my nose to follow my stomach and my feet to go trace the invisible trail of scent.

Next to this curry, my *lola* [grandmother] would be preparing her fried *bangus* [milkfish], or her *paksiw* [meat or fish cooked and simmered in vinegar], or her famous Filipino style beefsteak (marinated for hours in smashed garlic, soy sauce and vinegar). She never completely liked the strangeness of the flavors my dad brought; she likes it simpler, more vinegary. She'll start by "beating up" the meat, she'll pound it using that small narra paddle, with the ugly hippo design, until it reaches the point of being tender while at the same time not overdoing it, so it won't fall apart, so it won't bruise like unwelcomed memories. She'll massage the mixture to the soft flesh, make sure it's well tended, tender, and then let it soak in a pool of sauce overnight. The next day she'll sauté it in a pan with ring-cut onions, she'll cook it until the sauce is no more than a small puddle. "Only then will the optimal flavor be achieved," she'd say in Hiligaynon [one of the major languages in the Philippines], her words a gentle purr as she wags her index finger. The beefsteak will always taste sweet despite the soy, the vinegar, and the garlic. I believe she adds sugar to her concoction whenever no one is looking, that's usually the Filipino way of cooking. "Filipinos like sweet," she once said and then added, "to hide the bitter." There wasn't much to say after that.



Occasionally my father cooks. He's actually very skilled in the art of stews and vegetable dishes, a fact I found out only when I lived with him for a month in Japan a few years ago, when I took a Japanese Language and Literature summer course in another university. There, in our other home 24 floors from the ground, he prepares all the meals, save for the lunch that I usually get from school with friends. He makes the best tomato stew I know, with the most tender and rich meat my teeth has ever sank on, and even today my taste buds remember the buttery taste of the tomato and red wine in the soup. They were flavors my mom never made, my grandmother never knew. Back here in the mountain tops of Rizal, in our square white house with the vast green outdoors and the singing birds, the city a picture image far away, he rarely touches a pan—maybe it's because he's busier here, he's the head of the family business, but then again I'm not entirely sure why. It's funny how much I don't know about my own parents; sometimes I forget they have lives beyond being mama and papa. They have their own lives too, that's something I acknowledged when I grew past childhood and outgrown most of my childhood selfishness. I can count the times my father cooked meals for us, I'm pretty sure it's less than two dozen within the last 20 years or so. The last time he brought out a pot he made me royal milk tea, it was lovely in its mild sweetness, the creaminess softening the weight of the conversation, and then we chatted about my plans for the future over bean paste mochi [sweet glutinous rice used in Japanese cooking]. It won't be too long from now before I move to Japan to pursue a different future. I wanted to take Japanese Studies to fully understand the world of my father. It took me a long time to get to this conclusion, but I have decided that this is for me, and I will not fear the world different from the Philippines where I grew up. I just needed something more than here, to see the world past the vicinity of my hometown, farther even than Manila the city I have grown to love and where I've spent the past three years in. I've always had other people tell me who I am, that I am one thing or the other, and I used to let them because I wanted to belong. It never felt right, it is I who must decide who I am, and I have decided to go away and meet myself elsewhere.

When it's time to eat, we never ate together. I've never asked why my father ate upstairs in his room in front of the TV watching NHK, CNN, or whatever anime has taken his fancy (he wasn't a fan for such a long time but he came to be when it was the only place where his beloved language was spoken), and I've never questioned my mother why she'd always eat and chat with my grandmother at the kitchen. Mom and Dad don't eat together nor do they eat with us. Maybe it is because my father couldn't stand the noise and my mother couldn't bear the silence. We love them both and they both love us, but there has just been an ocean of misunderstanding between them,

## Hanna: *Pininyahang-Tonkatsu* Dinner Rituals

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an ocean children had tried to bridge for as long as they can remember. In the big dining table there sits four kids, two of which are technically adults. I always make my siblings eat together, it is our tradition, but lately my youngest brother has started eating like my father, in his own room watching cartoons. My sister would go with him sometimes too. At least they watch together. It doesn't matter though, at least for the time being. We ate our curry and beefsteak and enjoyed our own company. The aroma drowns all my questions. I'll ask them how the food is, add more of it to their plate, and then help our youngest eat. I watch our baby girl as she tries to wipe the soup off her face, her small fingers sometimes forgets the fork; it's cute when she grabs a potato with her bare hands. It's funny how my life here is different from my life elsewhere. In Manila, I only needed to worry about myself, need to prepare only my own meals. It was only a couple of months ago that I had to move back here in the quiet, but not for long, I'm moving yet again farther now, to the land of the rising sun to pursue higher education and a new chapter to my story. I got used to living by myself in the city amidst the noises, and now life in this quiet subdivision up one of the many mountains of Rizal holds its silence. Sometimes I feel the urge to run back to the place where a packet of chicken noodles with the addition of an egg is the equivalent of a satisfying meal, it was a college student's life, it seems easier, but the weight of my future is here as of the moment, the weight of my responsibilities sits before me, and I scrap the last bits of curry and beefsteak and ladle it onto my siblings' plates. One day if I get a family of my own, I vow to eat most of my meals with them. It won't be like this.

I feel like our lives revolve around the preparation and consumption of the next meal. Maybe that's how every family functions, I sure wouldn't know since this is the only one I've consistently participated in. This is the only one I have. My brother's favorite food is *tonkatsu* [Japanese dish of pork cutlet] and as for me it's *pininyahang manok* [Filipino dish of chicken with pineapple sauce]. According to my grandmother we've sworn allegiance to different generals though we've taken a liking to our enemy camps' cuisines. They say I am my father in they way I compartmentalize my life, and they say my brother is our mother in his relaxed hold of it. They say it's too early to tell what the junior platoons' decision will be. Hopefully they won't need to choose. I hope they never get sorted to a camp, never call the other side their enemy. Actually that's the destination I aim to reach. That's what we broken, first-generation china plates, part-time damaged plastic soldiers are trying to teach them. Why should we only be likened to one? Aren't we the products of both? At the same time, are we not our own? The food laid out on the table is to be enjoyed, and thanked for regardless of where they originated, I say. The table isn't a battlefield; children shouldn't be forced to choose, I say. Next time I'll cook dinner, it'll be broccoli and cauliflower

casserole with their favorite cream cheese and cheddar sauce, I want the children to be acquainted with vegetables too. A balanced diet is key to healthy boys and girls. Maybe I'll teach them how to bake cupcakes and cookies too one of these days, I love baking, I love sweet things—it helps with the bitterness. It's good to have sweet things occasionally. For now, I eat every meal offered, I finish every cup of water given, and I thank both for providing us with everything we ever needed. I'll put all the dishes on one plate. I won't be too careful in separating them, it doesn't matter what they were in the end. Pile more curry, pile more beefsteak, on other days pile the *tonkatsu* and the *pininyahang manok* together, everything is always delicious. Everything will end up the same. For that I am grateful.



## Arisa

Raised by Empowered Women

**Written by:** Arisa Junio

My life revolves around the saying “everything happens for a reason.” Whatever has happened to my life during the 23 years of my existence, I consider every action, decision, and challenge as brick roads towards what I plan for my life. I am honored to be raised by empowered women, who painstakingly endured all hardships to support my sister and my needs. Peculiar as it may sound, I am delighted with how my life has become; without these detours in my life, I would never learn how to love myself and appreciate life at its fullest.

To start off, let me tell you a love story. There was once an overseas Filipina worker (OFW) and a Japanese contractual agent who met in an entertainment club in Takamatsu, Kagawa-ken in 1992. Their relationship blossomed, and in 1993, she found out that she was pregnant with her first child. In January 1994, she gave birth to a healthy baby girl and named her Arisa. Coincidentally, that day as well, the Japanese father was scheduled to arrive in Manila. Baby Arisa was lucky to be with her father; however, due to unfortunate circumstances, the baby was only able to be with her father for the first two weeks of her life. Upon his return to Japan, the mother kept calling him, but the number seemed to be out of coverage. She was terrified upon recalling what some of her Filipina friends had experienced with their Japanese partners. Until one day, she came to the realization that she and her child had vanished in his life. The man had cut all potential communication he had with her. The baby, now 23 years old, grew up without having a glimpse and memory of her Japanese father.

While baby Arisa was growing up, she kept on asking questions about her father: on his whereabouts, his condition, and even his presence. She was curious about how her father was, how he looked like, what his hobbies were, and much more. She wanted to see him, and to be with him. At the age of four, she became an older sibling to her younger sister.

While she was growing up, she felt jealous of her classmates during family day celebrations at school. All she has is a mom, a grandma, two aunts, and a little sister. She would force herself to brush-off the fact that she will never experience having a father during family gatherings at school. It was during her teenage years that she started getting angry with both her mom and dad because of his absence in her life. She oftentimes locked the door and cried, questioning God why her father left her.

Years passed, and adulthood came. She was already taking up her undergraduate degree in International Studies, majoring in Development Studies and taking a minor in Gender Studies in Miriam College. Her anger changed to an understanding of why certain things happen in one's life. She may have grown up without having a father figure at home, but she has four strong women who have stood both as father and mother to her and her little sister. She was determined to excel at school, to chase her passion, and to follow her dreams. She has also become an advocate of gender equality—fighting all forms of inequality among men and women. This led her to participate in various activities promoting gender equality, and wrote papers regarding neglected issues on gender and development which she presented in postgraduate and international conferences abroad. Her burning passion in promoting ideals of feminism was ignited through the exposures available to her during her undergraduate days.

It was during her third year in college when she attended the annual Women's Summit held by the Women and Gender Institute in Miriam College, and came across the parallel discussion on women and migration. Ms. Carmelita G. Nuqui, the Executive Director of the Development Action for Women Network (DAWN), was talking about the non-government organization (NGO) she founded in 1996. The organization deals with cases of Filipino women migrants from Japan and their Japanese-Filipino Children (JFC). The parallel discussion was an eye-opener to her, and later on, she decided to apply at DAWN as an intern. After communicating with their staff, DAWN accepted her to be one of their interns.

During her internship at DAWN, she felt that for the first time in her life, she has found another family outside of her real family. She was welcomed by co-JFCs, and had fun activities together. She was also able to hear their stories and experiences

## Arisa: Raised by Empowered Women

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of bullying at school because of their being JFCs. The negative perceptions about them have affected their view of themselves. She was also exposed to the realities of her co-JFCs. Despite her busy schedule at school, she would find time to share her knowledge and passion helping other JFCs by participating in several activities facilitated by DAWN. In 2014, she led the review of the Vision, Mission, and Goals of DAWN-JFC for Change, an organization established by DAWN JFC members on August 22, 2010 to capacitate members through activities for self-development.

As Research and Advocacy Officer of DAWN, she has used her acquired competencies to provide technical assistance, as well as research expertise on issues regarding women and JFCs.

Currently, she is taking her Masters degree in Development Studies, majoring in Human Rights, Gender and Conflict Studies: Social Justice Perspective, at the International Institute of Social Studies of the Erasmus University Rotterdam, The Netherlands. She is maximizing each opportunity available to expand her knowledge and spark interest on issues regarding sexuality in timely development concerns. She lives her life to the fullest by engaging with diverse groups of students coming from different cultures, professional and academic backgrounds, and at the same time participating in international activities in Europe relating to her advocacy.

The baby, who is now a proud and fearless sister to her younger sister, has become a woman who aims to achieve her goals and dreams without grieving over the absence of her father in her life. With the help of different people surrounding her, she has acquired a new and fresh perspective in life—doing the things she loves, fighting for what she believes is right, and empowering people around her with pride and dignity.

I am Arisa, and this is my story.



## Masako

Happiness Is a Choice

**Interviewed and written by:** Maruja M. B. Asis

### Early trials

Masako's cheerful countenance masks the storms that she has weathered in her young life. Her happy existence started to take a downward spiral at age four.

Masako was born in Yokohama, Japan on June 23, 1997. She recently discovered old VHS tapes of her early life with her parents; watching the tapes helps her reconstruct the bits and pieces of the times when her family was still together. It was her parents' decision to return to the Philippines, her mother's home country. She had no idea that the return would be permanent and her family life would fall apart. Unlike many Japanese-Filipino children (JFC) in the Philippines who never knew or were abandoned by their Japanese fathers, Masako knows her father, has memories of him, and longs to see him one day soon. Through the hazy details, she found herself in the Philippines being cared for by her *tita* (aunt), her mother's sister, who became Masako's parent. At one point, her Japanese father joined her in the Philippines while her mother remained in Japan. He got sick and became bedridden while he was in the Philippines, and it was also Masako's aunt who took care of him. The caregiving responsibilities and the lack of resources prompted Masako's aunt to ask for help from the Japanese Embassy. The embassy facilitated the return of Masako's father to Japan. There was some discussion about Masako joining her father in Japan, but her aunt decided that she should stay in the Philippines.

## Masako: Happiness Is a Choice

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She was in third grade when her father returned to Japan. She felt absolutely helpless. She did not want to be separated from her father, but she was just a child and she cannot do anything about the situation. With her father gone and the infrequent contact with her mother, Masako turned to her aunt for support. Unmarried at the time, her aunt would introduce Masako as her eldest child. She had started schooling in St. Scholastica's College, one of the expensive private schools for girls in Manila. Despite their limited means, her aunt was determined that Masako will continue studying in the said school. Transferring to a public school was simply out of the question. Luckily, the school allows installment payments. The only hold of the school over students with unpaid fees is to withhold the school card until the payment has been completed. Year in and year out, Masako and her aunt went through the same routine of finding money to cover her tuition fees. Masako finished elementary and high school in St. Scholastica's.

### **Feeling different**

Masako felt different from the other kids at school because she did not come from a rich family and because of her half-Filipino, half-Japanese background. The first difference was all too real for her—the annual struggle to complete her tuition fees payment was testament to this, and the daily reminder was how her *baon* [packed lunch] was different from her classmates.' She recalled, "My classmates were not familiar with *bagoong* [fermented fish or tiny shrimps]. One time my classmate asked me what my *baon* was; I told her that it was Filipino corned beef. She tried the *bagoong* and she thought it was good." The second difference, her "half-half" background as she termed it, was as evident for her and for her classmates. She knew she was different because she could not understand Filipino and nobody could understand her Japanese. Through immersion and years of stay in the Philippines, she gained Filipino language but lost her Japanese. And then her name and her looks marked her as not being a "pure" Filipino. Her classmates would ask her why she had such a name. Her name sparked conversations and jokes among her friends—which she took good-naturedly. The one time when her Japanese background caused her anxiety and discomfort was the discussion about World War II and the issue of comfort women in her history class. Although aware of the class difference in relation to her classmates, being poor did not stop her from enjoying learning and school life. She was active in various school organizations and did well in school. With a smile, she said, "Happiness is a choice."

It was difficult to grow up without a father and mother by her side. She is deeply grateful for the love, care and support that her aunt gave her. As she put it, "It was not



my aunt's obligation to raise me, but she did." When her aunt got married and gave birth to her first-born, she got anxious, afraid that her aunt would love her less now that she has her own child. Her aunt continued to love her, and her uncle and cousin also became family to Masako.

When she finished high school, she got what she wished for: her mother's presence. Masako's contact with her mother was irregular and infrequent. Perhaps, according to Masako, her mother did not get in touch as regularly because of the pressure of expectations about overseas Filipino workers. The physical distance and the lack of



One of Masako's treasured pictures of her family. Photo courtesy of Masako.

## Masako: Happiness Is a Choice

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communication did not forge closeness between mother and daughter. Masako feels sad about the emotional gap with her mother. She learned that her mom felt bad that Masako was not open to her. Indeed, Masako said that if she needed to discuss something with her mom, she would ask her aunt to speak to her mother. She and her mom are working on rekindling their relationship.

She lost touch with her father when he returned to Japan. She was a kid when he left and she had no idea how to contact her dad. She thinks about him a lot. In high school, many of her writings and musings were about her father. When she graduated from high school, her mother visited her father in the home for the elderly where he is staying to deliver a picture of her graduation. It was very important for Masako to let her father know what she has achieved. Her ultimate dream is to see him again.

### **Joining DAWN**

After high school, Masako was unable to proceed to college because of financial difficulties. She worked as a tutor to earn some money. Upon the suggestion of a friend, she went to the Japanese Embassy to inquire whether they offer assistance to children of Japanese nationals. The embassy did not have such a program; instead, she was advised to contact non-government organizations which might be able to help her. The Development Action for Women Network (DAWN) was included in the list. She searched the web to find out more about DAWN and thereafter dropped by to visit. She was delighted to learn about DAWN's programs for Japanese-Filipino children. The term Japanese-Filipino children (or JFC) was new to her and a better alternative than "half-half." Another first was meeting other JFCs and not feeling alone. She immediately connected with the other JFCs and got involved in DAWN's various programs and activities. She joined DAWN's Teatro Akebono, which stages plays to raise awareness about women's migration to Japan and JFC issues. Masako was part of the theater tour in Japan twice, and during those occasions, she met her mother, her mother's husband, and half-sister and half-brother.

She credits her involvement in DAWN's activities in helping her grow. She has had opportunities to meet and interact with various people who visit DAWN. In the process, she developed new skills and gained more confidence. She is also learning and appreciating Japanese culture and language from classes offered by DAWN. Now, she considers herself both Filipino and Japanese.

Through the help of DAWN, she learned about scholarship opportunities at Santa Isabel College. She successfully passed the exam and qualified for a scholarship which

provides free tuition and board and lodging. In exchange, she renders four hours of work each day for the college. Masako is in third year of Bachelor of Secondary Education, majoring in English. She liked literature in high school and she is happy that she continues to study literature in college. She has two years to go to complete her studies.

She has many plans in the years to come. She is also thinking of pursuing further studies abroad, inspired by the example of her *Ate* [older sister] Arisa, a member of DAWN-JFC [see also the story of Arisa in this volume]. She wants to help JFCs and children in similar circumstances. She hopes to visit Japan, visit her mother and her family, and to realize her dream to see her father. Another aspiration is to give back to her aunt. Her aunt did her best to send her to St. Scholastica's College; she wants to do the same for her cousin. She hopes to have her own family someday: "I will be there to support my children; I will make sure that they will not experience not having a father and not having a mother."



Masako is now rediscovering and appreciating her Japanese side. Photo courtesy of Masako.



## Chong Min

Transnational and Thriving

**Interviewed and written by:** Emely D. Dicolen

Being the son of a Korean father and a Filipino mother, 23-year-old Chong Min Park straddles two worlds and two cultures. He has lived in the countries of his parents and he speaks their languages, Korean and Cebuano, one of the major languages in the Philippines.

Chong Min's parents met when they were students at the University of the Philippines. Moving has been part of his family's journey and history.

### **In his father's country**

Chong Min was born in the Philippines, which was home to him until the family moved to Korea when he was three years old. Chongan, who is six years younger than Chong Min, was born in Korea.

Chong Min was schooled in Korea from kindergarten to first year in middle school. He did not have problems in studying in Korea because he can speak Korean. They spoke Korean at home. He remembers his father teaching him Korean when he was young. In addition, he also spoke English, which gave him an edge over his classmates.

His darker skin color, however, did not go unnoticed. In school, this was an object of teasing by his Korean classmates. One time, he came home from kindergarten class,

crying. His mother asked him why. He said his schoolmates teased him, calling him an ape and telling him that he was from Africa because of his skin color. His mother's advice helped him to deal with such reactions. She asked him, "So, are you really from Africa?" He answered, "No." His mother asked him further, "And, are you really an ape?" "No," he replied. His mother continued, "Then stop crying. There will always be ignorant people. YOU know what you are. YOU know where you are from. They don't."

His classmates were also curious about other things. They would ask him about the food he ate in the Philippines. He said, "I tried to ignore them because their questions were due to lack of knowledge. So, I just tried to understand them."

### **In his mother's country**

When his parents divorced in 2005, his mom, Chong Min and his brother returned to the Philippines while his father remained in Korea. At the time, Chong Min was about to start high school and his brother was entering first grade. "I was very young then and I had no memories about it. I just had to move because that was the way it was," he said.

Back in the Philippines, they lived with his maternal grandmother and family. Having become accustomed to the comfortable life he had in Korea, initially, he wondered how he could survive without Internet, no Korean television shows, and the hot weather. After ten years of living in the Philippines, he is now more adjusted to the food, weather, and enjoys traveling around the country. Immersed in the culture and day-to-day life in the Philippines, he also developed competency in English and Cebuano. He has gained many friends. "I feel one with them. Sometimes I feel different from them physically because I'm a Korean but that's all." He added, "Sometimes I feel left out when they share Filipino jokes. So I need to learn them. But I don't feel bad because I know they are just for fun."

The return to the Philippines introduced him to his mother's side of the family. He describes his mom's relatives as "very welcoming and very loving. When we have family gatherings, my relatives would tell stories about my grandparents. They always tell me that I was their favorite. They repeatedly tell stories about my childhood days which make me feel so loved." He used to be close to his cousins because they grew up together in his grandmother's house when he was in high school. But now that they are grown-ups and busy with their studies and with work, they only get to see each other during special family gatherings.

## Chong Min: Transnational and Thriving

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Their family of three—his mom, brother and himself—has been a constant in his life. Though he and his brother have different activities and interests, they take time to spend time together—traveling together, eating out and watching movies. While he is close to his mother, he acknowledged that “a man to man talk is really different.”

The divorce created physical and emotional distance between Chong Min and his father. They did not see each other for almost ten years. Three years ago, the brothers and their father reconnected and every year since then, Chong Min and Chongan spent some time with their father in Korea.

### **Student life in the Philippines**

Chong Min studied and completed his secondary education at Xavier University High School in Cagayan de Oro City. After high school, Chong Min’s family moved to Cebu City, where he continued his college education. Currently, he is taking up Bachelor of Science in Mechanical Engineering at the University of San Carlos. At the time of interview, he was working on his thesis and was looking forward to graduating soon.

In university, he actively participated in several competitions that were featured in local newspapers. He was a member of the university’s Team Lahutay [*lahutay* means endurance in Cebuano]; the team makes car designs and submits them to local and international competitions. His team’s entry, power hand-drill kart, won third place in the 2013 Regional Invention Contest and Exhibits which carried the theme “Inventions and Innovations for a Smarter Philippines.”

Comparing the educational system in Korea and the Philippines, he said, “There is much to compare. Education in Korea is good. I am not saying that education in the Philippines is bad. Both systems have advantages and disadvantages. In terms of content, facilities and technology, education in Korea is better. But it’s too competitive. The system gives emphasis on academics. Private tutoring is a must. People feel that public schools are useless so they send their children to academies or *hagwons* [cram schools] to learn more advanced lessons. Parents’ expectations of their children are too high, putting a lot of pressure on their children. The education system in the Philippines is less competitive and students are taught about life itself. They are taught life skills that will eventually help them in their future lives. I consider the content of education very good but what I appreciate is the integration of other important skills such as socialization.” He made special mention of the junior–senior prom organized by schools which he sees as a good opportunity for interaction. More generally, in the Philippines, he appreciates *fiestas* [festivities—in the Philippines,

these celebrations are religious in nature] and other family and social gatherings as occasions promoting community building. “If I had studied in Korea, I could have excelled academically but I could not have, perhaps, learned about life, about being happy, and about understanding other people. Studying in the Philippines or Korea has its pluses and minuses,” he added.

Chong Min has a very positive regard of his teachers in the Philippines: “I find my teachers in the Philippines more approachable and down to earth. They really touch me. Korean teachers give more emphasis to academics.”

He is currently at a crossroads, trying to figure out what exactly he wants to become 10-15 years hence. He candidly said, “That is also the same question I’ve been asking myself recently. Before, I thought I had well-laid out plans: to finish college, to finish military service [in Korea] and get a job abroad. However, with the exposure I am getting from my current part time job as a translator/interpreter for a Korean spa



Chong Min will soon finish Mechanical Engineering. In 2013, his team’s entry, power hand-drill kart, was adjudged third place in a regional contest. Photo courtesy of Chong Min.

## Chong Min: Transnational and Thriving

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[where he is a manager-trainee], my plans became unclear. I need more time to think about my options.” Working as a translator/interpreter got him interested in pursuing further studies in translation, which is a different field from his undergraduate training in engineering.

He describes himself as a “doubting Thomas” because of his tendency to ask questions: “I pray and I follow those beliefs, but I question myself, asking why and how we think. I just ask a lot of questions and keep on thinking and looking at things from different perspectives.” This “doubting Thomas” is making his way towards an examined life and what can become a well-lived life.



JAPAN





## Miyuki

Santa Catarina girl in Atsugi

**Interviewed and written by:** Johanna O. Zulueta

Fernanda Miyuki Sakamoto Tanaka is a shy, 12-year-old girl born in Santa Catarina, a state in southern Brazil (approximately 900 kilometers from São Paulo). Miyuki, as she likes to be called, was born in 2004, and was only four years old when she came to Japan. She is a Brazilian national like her parents, who are both *Nikkei* Brazilians, or Brazilians of Japanese descent. An only child, she moved with them to Japan in 2008, settling in Atsugi City in Kanagawa Prefecture, close to Tokyo. It was the second trip for her mother, Heloisa, who had lived and worked in Japan from 1991 to 1996 in Gunma Prefecture (approximately 120 kilometers from Metropolitan Tokyo).

Miyuki is currently a first year junior high school student in Japan, but she attended nursery and kindergarten in Brazil. One of her childhood memories in Brazil was frequently dancing with her friends in school, even when she considered herself not good at it. It was a Brazilian dance, she said, but she forgot what it was called. The dance was typical of those being performed in festivals in June and July. Miyuki also fondly described her four childhood friends: Bianca, Carie, Luisa and Nayara. She remembered what they were like. Bianca was good, Luisa was fun, and Nayara loved rock music. Of all the girls, though, it was Carie she felt closest to. However, Miyuki was no longer in touch with any of her Brazilian friends upon relocating to Japan. All of her friends in the old homeland were non-*Nikkei*. She added that when she was

growing up, she had less interaction with *Nikkei* Brazilians since there were very few *Nikkei* in Santa Catarina.<sup>2</sup>

One of her fondest memories in Brazil was talking to her grandmother and grandfather, as well as talking and playing with her cousins. Miyuki and her family had to go all the way to São Paulo to visit her grandparents, who were from that part of the country. Miyuki and her parents also lived in São Paulo for a year before coming to Japan. They stayed with Heloisa's parents. Unfortunately, Miyuki barely remembers anything more from her childhood in Brazil aside from attending nursery and kindergarten, and spending time with her grandparents and cousins in São Paulo.

Upon arriving in Japan in 2008, the family settled in Atsugi City. Miyuki said that she felt happy (*ureshii*) when she set foot in Japan. It was her first trip and her first time to ride an airplane. But she also remembered the 20-hour journey, during which the family got on a flight via Germany to Tokyo.

In Atsugi, Miyuki initially got by with very little Japanese. She would talk in Japanese to the Japanese, and Portuguese to the Brazilians. She initially attended a Brazilian school before transferring to a local (Japanese) elementary school in the city. This was where she started studying Japanese. While Atsugi City has more Peruvians than Brazilians, she said there were many Brazilians in the school she attended, and her stay there was a delightful one. Apart from basic Japanese lessons, they were also taught writing skills in the language. The children in the school were also taught the Portuguese language.

Miyuki shared that when she was studying at the Brazilian school, some of the most enjoyable activities during her two years there were the birthday parties. There would even be cake, with candles the celebrant would blow out. She also mentioned a time when she and her friends had a pajama party at a friend's house, eating, drinking, and having fun, although does not remember what they ate during those parties. Aside from these parties, she does not recall any other significant moment in her stay at the Brazilian school. She does remember the friends she met there, including an older student—about one or two years older, with whom she talked to.

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<sup>2</sup> Santa Catarina has a large population of Italian and German immigrants, but very few *Nikkeis* (Conversation with Heloisa, Miyuki's mother).

## Miyuki: Santa Catarina Girl in Atsugi

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At the local Japanese school, Miyuki uses the name, “Miyuki Tanaka.” When she first entered the local elementary school, she felt nervous, although she said did not have any problems in school. She became good friends with Hina, a Japanese girl, whom she describes as a nice (*yasahii*) person. Both Miyuki and Hina now attend the same junior high school. Another friend is Alicia—a girl who has both Japanese and American parentage, though she moved with her parents to Korea and now attends an American school there. According to Miyuki, the local elementary school offered Japanese language support for foreign students (*kokusai kyoushitsu* - “international classroom”), which included, aside from herself, four other students: three Peruvians and her friend, Alicia. She enjoyed her school, but laments that there are no birthday parties in Japanese schools unlike the Brazilian school she attended.

Now in junior high school, Miyuki shared that she still gets to talk to Hina, who is in another section. Some of her elementary school classmates attend the same junior high school as she does, while the others chose to go to a different junior high school. Meanwhile, she sometimes calls Alicia on the social networking application, LINE.

Miyuki shared that she used to get high grades in elementary school, but now that she is in junior high school, her grades went down as she found arithmetic difficult. In addition, she also finds difficulty with her Japanese (*kokugo* or national language) and science (*rika*) subjects. Though she thinks that the teachers are strict, she enjoys studying in her current school. She sometimes studies with her friends and attends cram school (*juku*) every day, even on Saturday mornings.

When she is not in school, Miyuki usually goes out with her parents, or visits a friend’s house. After cram school on Saturday mornings, and sometimes on Sunday mornings, she takes walks with her parents. Unlike other South Americans who are predominantly Christian (Catholic), they do not consider themselves as having a religion, thus they do not go to church nor to any place of worship. At home, Miyuki enjoys playing with her dog Lua (Portuguese for moon). While she speaks in both Japanese and Portuguese to her parents, she admits that she is not proficient in the latter language and has an easier time expressing herself in Japanese.

On summer and spring breaks, she and her friends hang out together and they usually go to shopping malls and take pictures there. Being in a local school, most of the people Miyuki hangs out with are Japanese, and she barely has any Brazilian friends. However, she emphasized that she does not feel any different from her Japanese friends and that she enjoys a lot of things in Japan.

In her eight-year stay in Japan so far, Miyuki has not yet gone back to Brazil even for visits. However, she regularly keeps in touch with her grandparents in Brazil and calls them on special occasions. She also sends them handwritten letters during Christmas, writing them in Portuguese.

Miyuki is still undecided about her plans and dreams for the future, but she hopes for a bright and happy one. She expressed her wish to live in Japan for a long time, but also said that she wants to regularly visit Brazil to see her friends and relatives. However, she does not see herself going back to her birthplace for good despite considering herself Brazilian. She is still the Brazilian girl from Santa Catarina, who has found a new life, new friends, and will perhaps discover a new future, in the city of Atsugi.



## Paul

### Breaking the Mold

**Written by:** Paul Carley

I was born in 1994 in a small town in Ehime Prefecture, Japan, where I spent most of my life. My mother is Japanese and my father is an American of German descent. Growing up, I had been living with my parents, grandfather, and younger sister until I moved to Tokyo for college. But since both parents were usually busy with teaching, it was my grandfather who took care of me most of the time. I went through the Japanese education system like most Japanese students—except for a year of studying in the University of Delaware in the United States (US) as an exchange student in college. I am now 23 years old, and I spend most of my free time cooking, reading and running. I plan to go to a graduate school in the US to study and research about race and ethnicity.

I had various experiences as a child of a multicultural family. I didn't have any trouble with who I was and how other people saw me. However, my sense of identity is not fixed; it is constantly shaped by the views of the people around me, whose response to me is also shaped by their experiences in interacting with those who are “different.” The following paragraphs help explain my changing self-identity.

I went to a local nursery school where most kids in the community went. I don't remember much about what I did then; I think I had a few experiences that raised some questions about my identity. Since my Japanese grandfather brought me to kindergarten most of the time, most of my friends were unaware of my background. I

spoke the same dialect and behaved like they did, and we didn't think much about differentiating people by nationality or race. However, according to my nursery school teacher, when we were having lunch I suddenly told my friends and teachers that I was a person of the world, a "cosmopolitan" or someone whose identity belongs to a global community or something like that. I guess I didn't fully understand the meaning of what I said at that time. I must have repeated what my grandfather taught me. I just wasn't aware that I was different from others.

However, there were a few times when I felt that I was different compared to my friends. My father, an English teacher, came to the nursery school once a month to teach English in our class. Everyone, including me, enjoyed learning English. To our class, my father was just a foreign teacher who took us to an interesting and different world once a month. However, when my father came to pick me up once a week—not as an English teacher but as a "regular" dad—the people around me acted differently. They would ask me why my father was American and why I spoke to him in English, although my English wasn't that good at that time. Whenever my dad came to school to pick me up (i.e., not to teach English), I tried not to speak to him in the hope that my friends wouldn't notice that I was different. Even though I wasn't aware of being non-Japanese, I sometimes felt that I was somewhat different from most of my friends.

The way I saw myself changed gradually when I started elementary. Most of my classmates were the same ones from nursery school. Thus, we had known each other since then and we did the same things together. The one thing that made me feel that I was different was what was inside my *bento* [single-portion takeaway or home-packed meal] lunch box. This feeling would surface especially during school trips. When it was time for lunch, I would prefer to be alone or to be with a small group of friends. I did not want to eat lunch with my classmates because I was conscious that while they had rice balls, I would have sandwiches in my *bento* lunch box. In Japan, it is common to have rice balls for lunch, especially when on school trips. However, I always had peanut butter and jelly sandwich because I liked it. I was fine about eating a sandwich until some of my friends started asking why my lunch was different, why I was eating *Americajin no tabemono* or food that Americans eat. They were all curious about the sandwiches and would ask me to share them. I remember feeling rather happy because my lunch—sandwiches—made me feel that I was different from, but not rejected by, my other Japanese friends. They were interested in my "difference."

I didn't think much about being "different" until I came to know the meaning of the word *hafu*, a term that refers to someone who is half-Japanese and half-non-Japa-

nese, which often means half-Caucasian. As the word *hafu* gained popularity among my peers, the way my friends at school looked at me changed. I was no longer a boy who was somewhat different from the others, but a half Japanese and half foreign boy who spoke a Japanese dialect that didn't match my Caucasian appearance. Many people around me, including my friends, started to ask me to speak in English. Some of my friends' parents even thought that I was a foreign student. Despite these perceptions, I tried to behave like other Japanese students because I couldn't speak fluent English and I didn't see myself as a *hafu* at that time. I got confused with who I was and what people expected of me. When I entered junior high school, English was a required subject. Because I was half-American, I was expected to be perfect at it. Until junior high school, I learned English from my family, particularly from listening to my father. I didn't have much trouble in learning it because I was good in listening and comprehension. But I started to struggle with studying English as the materials got more complex in junior high school. Furthermore, I found the teaching of English unhelpful—the teacher would explain grammar in Japanese and make us memorize the Japanese translations. As a result, I did not learn to communicate well in English. I was seen as a lazy student who was not doing his best. The fact that my father was an English teacher also created expectations that I should be fluent in English.

I had been to the US a couple of times before I entered junior high school. When I was little, there was no need to communicate in perfect English. However, when my grandmother learned that I entered junior high school and started studying English, she would ask questions and would use more complex sentences. That didn't go well, to be honest. I was unable to answer her questions well and struggled with expressing my opinions, which must have disappointed her. That made me feel that I wasn't American like my father and American relatives. I loved the food, culture and atmosphere of American society, but I couldn't completely fit in. My cousins looked different, acted different, and perceived the world differently. I wasn't a foreigner, but I wasn't completely an American either. As I went back and forth between Japan and the US, I noticed that I was gradually losing my sense of identity, not knowing where I belong. Learning both in English and Japanese, I felt that I didn't belong to a single country.

After graduating from junior high school, I decided to go to a private school that had a course specializing in English. It wasn't an international school, but it offered various special English classes and students can go to a language school overseas for a few weeks as a school trip. I met another *hafu* in school who had a similar background as me. I knew some multicultural families and *hafu* friends, but most of their parents were from non-English speaking countries. Because of that, English was a



foreign language for most of us and other *hafu*; we were connected, however, by our “Japaneseness.” For us, being half foreign didn’t matter much because we all grew up in Japan and spoke Japanese. The *hafu* I met in high school had an American father. Our names didn’t sound Japanese, we didn’t look Japanese, and we weren’t fluent in English. We became close friends just because we were *hafu*. However, he quit school, and I was the only *hafu* in the class. When he left, I was somewhat afraid of becoming an outsider, a *hafu* who couldn’t speak English. Fortunately, my teachers helped me to improve my English skills.

With my Japanese language and improving English skills, my identity gradually shifted from a non-English speaking *hafu* to a bilingual *hafu*. The change made me happy and confused at the same time. Being good at English matched my *hafu*-White American part. At the same time, I felt that something inside of me was missing or I was behaving like a different person who wasn’t the real me.

Leaving my hometown for college in Tokyo, and then studying in the US for a year as an exchange ended my self-identification as a *hafu*. In college, I was on my own and I met many people who had multicultural backgrounds. In my new environment, I did not feel pressured to act according to the expectations of other people. My identity became more flexible—i.e., I can be who I am or who I should be depending on who I am interacting with. For instance, when I was interacting with a Japanese who had little experience meeting people like me, I chose to behave like a *hafu* so that both of us would be comfortable in communicating with each other. When I talked to a foreign student, I chose to be a student with a multicultural background who could speak English and Japanese. Thus, I could be both Japanese and American at the same time, depending on the environment. I saw this as a means of avoiding an identity crisis and of managing my identity, regardless of how the people around me would react.

I am still young and who I am might change in the future. Regardless, I am resolute in my aspiration to become a social scientist to understand the world. Some people often ask me about my preferred country, but I am not interested to choose one country based on some criteria. I find most countries interesting no matter how different their cultures are. What really matters to me are people and their experiences. I can’t say that the world I might encounter in the future will be better than the one I am living in right now, but I do feel that there are many possibilities to carve a better future. And I hope to be part of that better future.



## Ha Eun

### Finding Her Multicultural Self

**Interviewed and written by:** Dukin Lim

“Everyone has their own cultural background that shapes who they are as an individual,” says Ha Eun Kim, a student at an international school in Japan. “Children who are raised in several cultures have lives that can be full of challenges, demanding a lot of effort in overcoming pains.”

As a child of Korean immigrants in Japan, 18-year-old Ha Eun’s reflection comes as no surprise. She belongs to the second generation, born and raised in a country different from their parents’, and who may, at some point, raise questions about their identity. She and her brother, Won, have lived in Japan all their lives, but they also know of their inseparable ties to their parents’ history and homeland, and how these shape who they are.

Ha Eun does not remember exactly how her first language became Japanese instead of Korean, her parents’ native tongue. But spending her childhood in the local Japanese community and having Japanese friends, all the way until elementary school, played a huge role. As a result, whenever Ha Eun talks to her parents, she speaks in Japanese, and they reply in Korean. She understands what they are saying, but she feels more comfortable conversing in Japanese, and hardly bothers to translate. Whenever she talks to her friends at school, she usually speaks in English, although she sometimes includes Japanese and Korean expressions.

Ha Eun never really considered herself different from the others. She always felt that she was part of the community where she lives, where her family interacts daily with neighbors who have multicultural backgrounds. When she became a teenager and transferred to an international school, however, she began to realize that she was slowly becoming different. While studying English to apply to an international school, Ha Eun noticed something she never did before. When people first learn English, they start with simple greetings. They ask, “What is your name?” and “How old are you?”, or “How are you today?” But the question she struggled to respond to was, “Where are you from?” This question seemed easy at first when she was in elementary school. She would confidently answer, “I am from Korea.”

But Ha Eun began to doubt her answer when she went to the United States for summer school. In class, the teacher asked students where they were all from. Some cited local areas while others mentioned their country of origin. When it was her turn, she paused and thought, “Where *am* I from? My nationality is Korean, but I live in Japan and was raised there all my life. Do I need to say, I am from Japan because Japan is where I live? Do I have to say my nationality is Korean? Or do I say, I am Korean but I was born and raised in Japan?”

It was a confusion that continued until middle school and high school. She gradually started to feel that she did not fit into Japanese society. She would always get this feeling whenever she visits relatives in Korea with her family, almost every year. In one of their vacations with relatives in Seoul, after hearing her talk to her brother in Japanese, a relative later asked her upfront, “Can’t you speak Korean?” As Ha Eun grew up, many of her relatives have constantly asked her and her brother this question. It used to be a simple question, but it was only during her first year in senior high school when she deeply reflected on this.

“Maybe it was part of going through adolescence.” Ha Eun says. “You begin to question things, challenge other people’s views, and you tend to wonder so much about yourself. I am probably experiencing this phase towards becoming an adult.”

She recalls how she felt bad about herself whenever her elderly Korean relatives would repeatedly question her Korean language ability, as if her membership to the clan is being heavily interrogated. It was during these moments when she questioned her identity. But she refuses to believe that she owes them any explanation for not being fluent in Korean, since she did not grow up with them. To her, it made more sense to identify with Japan, its language and culture, because she has been living

## Ha Eun: Finding Her Multicultural Self

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there for the longest time. Despite this, however, she still feels uncomfortable to speak Japanese in front of her Korean relatives.

Once, when she went shopping with her mother around Seoul, she spoke Japanese to her. Her mother asked her to speak Korean while she is in Korea. Ha Eun, in refusal, replied, “*Doushite? Nande?*” (Why do I need to do that? I do not understand.”). The conversation drew the attention people around them. Deep inside, Ha Eun knew her mother wanted her to speak Korean while in Korea to avoid catching local people’s attention. Though she was concerned about what her Korean mother felt at the time, she did not care about what others thought of her since “they are also just strangers to me.”

Meeting Korean relatives and friends gradually became uneasy. Ha Eun could not express herself fully, even to her own family. She has kept her feelings to herself. She also avoided opportunities to meet people in the Korean community in Japan. In school, she did not seek out or associate with anyone or anything Korean.

When she transferred to an international school after attending public Japanese elementary school for three years, she struggled to socialize and was exposed to the advantages and disadvantages of studying in a multicultural classroom setting where students like her have to adapt to cultural differences. Because this was the time when she was trying to sort out her sense of belonging to either the Korean or Japanese community, she had difficulty adjusting to a third culture.

Her first instance of culture shock was seeing her classmates’ casual friendliness towards the teachers. The way students would pass their assignments to the teacher with just one hand contrasted with how students would formally interact with teachers in her previous school. Though she could speak in English, it was not at a level in which she could communicate comfortably with her teachers. She felt like she was in a completely different world, confused and baffled, and so she became quiet and reticent especially during the beginning of the school year.

Despite the confusion and complexity of interacting with people of different cultural backgrounds, she sought her own solutions. To build up her confidence and to be able to communicate with friends at school who were neither Korean nor Japanese, she knew she had to improve her English, which was neither her first or second language. She listened to English audiobooks and watched movies almost every day. When reading books, she would read the words out loud to practice her pronunciation.

Teachers and friends also helped her adjust and cope with school life, and her English eventually improved. Half a year passed, and with great determination to learn, she accelerated to the advanced class in English. She also began to talk more often, especially with her friends. She was able to express herself again, like she used to.

In the classroom, she became more confident in raising her hand and contributing to class discussions, unlike in the past when she would shy away from in-class participation despite encouragement from teachers. Ha Eun learned that she only needed courage and the right timing to overcome shyness. She also mentions her math teacher, who, among other teachers and friends, helped her stand with self-confidence in front of other people, to take pride in sharing about where she comes from, which languages she can speak, and the culture she would like to identify with, regardless of how people would like to define her.

Surviving in a new learning environment and appreciating new experiences often required certain strategies. Ha Eun remarks that people's first impressions can be unfavorable at times; sometimes young people like her can be awkward when meeting new people. But being in an international school where there are many other foreign students, Ha Eun has learned to devise ways on how to make new friends and connections. For one thing, smiling became an effective and positive way of dealing with situations when she could not understand what the other person is saying, or when she feels shy meeting new people. Smiling was a way of overcoming the uncomfortable silence between conversations.

There were also many situations in school where she could not understand the behavior, mannerisms and even the views of some friends and fellow classmates. Initially, she avoided reacting and stayed neutral, but it gave some the impression that she was aloof and too cool to hang out with their classmates. She realized understanding others despite differences was part of the process of becoming a real friend. She chose to be more positive, and to make an effort in actively communicating with others despite differences in culture, language and even perspectives.

With Ha Eun's success in making friends at school, her attitude towards her Korean background also changed. She started joining a circle of Korean friends at school. Realizing there was not much that she could share with them during conversations, she searched all the K-Pop (Korean pop) idols online and listened to their songs. Ha Eun had never been interested in Korean entertainment before, but interacting with Korean friends changed her tastes in music and personal hobbies. She surfed Korean dramas and variety shows online, which also helped improve her Korean.

## Ha Eun: Finding Her Multicultural Self

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Ha Eun wanted to break away from her old image of a girl who was embarrassed or refused to speak Korean, so she worked towards improving her language ability little by little, by chatting with her Korean friends, though sometimes interlaced with English and Japanese words. It was a change that surprised her friends as well. Now, she is opening up to them even more, asking them to practice with her and using Korean whenever she feels like sharing stories with them. Meanwhile, so she would not forget her Japanese, she tries to use it as much as possible by switching the language setting of her phone to Japanese and taking Japanese language classes at school. With her parents, she still speaks Japanese, although they encourage her to speak Korean as much she can.

Japanese language “is part of who I am,” Ha Eun says. “I may be Korean as my parents so dictate, but I believe that there is no rule or condition that forces me to speak Korean. I will speak the language that will give me ease in connecting with people from different cultures and orientations.”

As a multicultural kid, Ha Eun cherishes her varied cultural experiences which have opened her mind towards respecting personal differences, as well as cultural and linguistic diversity. She has been living a unique life that is special in its own way, and there is nothing to complain about. For others, it might seem strange when she talks to her parents in Japanese and they reply in Korean. These are dynamics not all families can easily manage. But her family remains firm and strong in love, understanding and reciprocity, despite the different cultures they have been exposed to. She is proud of how she has maintained a good relationship with her parents until now—in three different languages.

Adapting to different cultures, discovering one’s identity and negotiating boundaries and labels of defining oneself are no easy tasks. It may be difficult, and can be a failure or a struggle, but Ha Eun believes that with effort and understanding, the barriers to accepting one’s multicultural self can be broken. In her own words, she says, “There is no guidebook for determining our identity; we are in charge of realizing our own.”



## Minami\*

Two Centerstages as One

**Interviewed, written and translated into English by:** Jocelyn Celero

She did not think twice about grabbing the microphone. With the encouragement of her friends who cheered for her from the crowd, she sang a duet with Yoshi Narumi, a Japanese pop singer based in the Philippines. It was in a small yet crowded bar in central Manila. Although it was her first time to be on stage, singing has always been close to Minami's heart. They sang Donna Cruz's *Isang Tanong, Isang Sagot* [One Question, One Answer], to the delight of many hopeless romantics in the audience. After their duet, Minami talked to Yoshi backstage. She was invited to perform with his band, to which she joyfully accepted. The band tours across the Philippines and performs three to four times a year. In September 2013, she held a birthday concert with them.

That fateful night of 2012 was truly unforgettable because it did not only give her opportunities to fulfill her passion for singing, but also brought her back to her childhood. Young Minami used to sing in front of her Japanese father and grandfather. Teresa, Minami's Filipino mother, has kept all the video recordings of her performances all these years. Born and raised in Japan, she was exposed to Japanese culture first. Japanese was her first language, although her annual summer vacation to the Philippines since she was five years old with her mother helped her learn the Filipino

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\* The names of persons and places have been changed to protect the identities of the persons mentioned in this account.

## Minami: Two Centerstages as One

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language. While running around the narrow streets of Malabon, where her mother's natal family lived, she was also exposed to OPM (original Pilipino music) songs playing on the loud radios of the neighboring houses. Contrary to her Filipino relatives' claim that she got her talent from her mother who is a Filipina, she credits Nobu, her Japanese father, and Toshio, her late grandfather, as her major influences. They were both fond of singing *enka*, a genre of Japanese traditional music. While Filipinos may identify singing as their national talent, Minami believes that it is her source of attachment to her Japanese side of the family, and to Japan as her homeland.

Childhood was the happiest part of her life. She was in grade school when her Grandpa Toshi passed away in 2000. Minami's father did not take his passing lightly. Nobu's attitude began to change. He gradually became cold towards her and Teresa. Her parents' constant verbal argument, with Minami witnessing it at times, put a strain on their marriage. To deal with this difficult time, Teresa drowned herself in work, managing a nearby bar. Minami's mother, in fact, never stopped working even after marrying her father.

Teresa was only 18 years old when she came to Japan in 1984. Through her friends who first tried their luck in Japan as entertainers years earlier, she was motivated as the eldest child to support their family of seven. She met Nobu in 1987. Although she was not a singer, her friendliness and caring demeanor drew him, while his occasional singing in front of the crowd swept her off her feet. They married in 1989. Minami, their only child, was born in 1990. They rented an apartment near the bar where Teresa worked. Her loyalty to the bar earned her a managerial position, which has enabled her to send remittances to support the schooling of her five siblings. As the only child who made it abroad by getting permanent residence, marrying a Japanese and raising a family in Japan, she has been the most successful member of their household. In 2006, she opened her own bar through the help of her former boss.

While Teresa was preoccupied with her newly-established business, young Minami, who was a junior high school student at this time, experienced abuse from her depressed father. When she developed interest in playing tennis in her club at school, she put aside singing for a while. However, she later realized that excelling at this sport can be more physically demanding compared to singing, which one can do effortlessly. Nevertheless, being active in tennis motivated her to come to school regularly, apart from her mother's frequent advice to persevere at her studies, something which her mother failed to accomplish for herself. Training for this sport, made her skin several tones darker due to prolonged exposure to the sun unlike her Japanese classmates whose skin would usually turn red. It became the subject of her being



bullied at school. “They said that I was only pretending to be Japanese, that I was really African and they asked me to go home.” It was not this incident, however, that discouraged her from becoming a tennis player. “In one of our training sessions, I had a serious injury. I lost my balance and I could not walk, so I was in crutches for a month. When I took a train ride one time, I noticed that nobody assisted or offered a seat for me. People just looked at me as if they were somewhat disappointed at me for being clumsy or careless. I felt unwanted and alienated.” Worse, her father was displeased with her school grades, and would either scold or hit her in the head. Unable to manage her problems at school and her emotional rift with her father, Minami left home. She stayed for a few days at her friend’s house. Minami’s running away was the last straw to Teresa and Nobu’s marriage. In 2009, Minami and Teresa temporarily moved to the Philippines. Even though Teresa was extremely worried about the difficulties Minami had to go through while adjusting to daily life and schooling in the Philippines, she was convinced that living in the Philippines could help her recuperate from the trauma she incurred from the abuse and bullying she experienced in Japan. Teresa left Minami to Lourdes, her sister, as she had to resume managing her business in Japan.

Minami felt the warm welcome and care of her aunts and cousins in Malabon, just like in the previous years when she visited them during vacation. The family’s embrace contrasted sharply with the alienating stares of the Japanese passengers on the train when she was in crutches. She immediately bonded with them, as if she were never away physically. Through them, she felt home again and learned Filipino faster even though communicating with them in Filipino inhibited learning English. One day, her aunt Lourdes found a language school where she could study advance English for three months in order to take a proficiency test in preparation for a university entrance exam. After taking the intensive English course, she took and passed the language exam, but failed the entrance test at De La Salle University.

She returned to Tokyo in December 2009 to be with her mother. Although the idea of spending Christmas with her relatives and singing Christmas songs for the first time in the Philippines excited her, she felt that her mother would appreciate her presence more. She has never been away from her every December. Six months was the longest time they were separated. It was also her way of repaying her mother’s support for her. At the bar, she would wipe the tables and chairs, wash the hand towels or dishes in the sink, and even sing Filipino or Japanese songs at her mother’s request. While singing the songs of Filipino artists such as Regine Velasquez, Yeng Constantino or Sarah Geronimo, her mother noticed that she has been singing OPM more than ever before. She herself admitted to changing her taste in music, identifying and appre-

## Minami: Two Centerstages as One

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ciating more the Filipino artistry. Unlike before when she would associate singing solely with her Japanese family, she is now singing to connect more to her Filipino mother. She attributed these changes as consequences of several months of living in the Philippines together with her Filipino kin. These changes also signaled that Minami has somehow recovered from her painful past, from the last time she was in Japan. Sometime in January 2010, she received news from her aunt Yuri that her father has remarried and has been living with them in Yokohama. “He is still bossing us around. He still thinks that women should serve men. He has not changed,” her aunt Yuri revealed to her. Frustrated over the attitude of her father, she realized that she has not been healed completely.

Before June of 2010, Minami returned to the Philippines to take the university entrance exam once again. She attended a reviewing center for three months before applying at another private university in Manila. She fortunately passed the entrance exam and interview this time around. She first thought of pursuing a degree in music since her passion for singing has always been there. However, the negative representations on the Philippines by Japanese and international media, alongside the intensified campaigns on TV and radio promoting ecotourism in the Philippines contributed to her decision to major in tourism. “In Japan, Japanese people think lowly of the Philippines because the media only shows images of it as dangerous, dirty and congested. They also think and feel negative towards Filipinos, so they are disinterested in knowing Filipino culture. Studying tourism will allow me to learn more about how I could change these images and help promote the beauty of the Philippines.” When she saw the TV commercials of Regine Velasquez which featured the different scenic spots around the country, she once imagined singing the promotional song herself.

Through a phone call, she told Teresa about her admission to university as well as her plans, which Teresa happily supported through sending the money to pay for her tuition and schooling needs. Before the year ended, Teresa visited Minami and her family. Together, they applied for her certificate of recognition as a child of a Filipino national. Because she wanted Minami to become independent and practical, Teresa supported her decision to live in the dormitory close to the university. Minami visited her relatives in Malabon especially when there were family gatherings or special occasions. At the dormitory, she gained new friends who helped her adjust to university life, and with whom she shared her love for OPM music. They were the same friends who went with her to the bar in central Manila, where she met the Japanese singer Yoshi Narumi.

Meeting Yoshi did not only give her initial break in the music scene. As a native Japanese, Yoshi’s love for Filipino music won Minami’s admiration and affirmed her ap-

preciation for Filipino music as a Japanese-Filipino. More importantly, their musical collaboration since 2012 has convinced her not to give up on her dream of becoming a successful singer someday.

Before completing her degree in Manila, Minami made plans to return to Japan to explore getting a professional job and to be reunited with her mother. However, she foresaw a stiff competition in the labor market, between Japanese who were educated abroad like her and locally-educated ones. Her university required her to do an on-the-job training, which she could not complete in Japan due to lack of a scheme that links her Philippine university to on-the-job training programs in Japan. Her tertiary education in the Philippines also may mean nothing in the fast-paced, business-oriented, global city of Tokyo. She did not aspire for a 9-to-5 job in an office. She would like to be a performer and to promote both Japanese and Filipino cultures through her music.

Upon graduating in 2015, she moved back again to Tokyo to briefly work for a recruitment company. Before the year ended, she was transferred to its branch in Manila, which gave her the opportunity to occasionally sing at bars, hoping to get record deals. Dissatisfied with her job and finding a professional career still elusive, she returned to Tokyo in early 2016 to formally resign from her company and to look for another job. Her next job was in a hotel. On the side, she continued to accept performing gigs in bars. In 2016, in one of her performances, she was discovered by MUSIQ, a Japanese talent agency for budding performers. Through their assistance, she underwent vocal training for a few months. The agency linked her to several successful Japanese composers and talent managers. Her success so far included auditioning for Mr. Akira Tanaka, who is notable composer for a famous J-pop group, and performing as back-up vocalist for some notable Japanese singers in their concert, and for some Filipino artists who hold shows in Tokyo. Minami is, indeed, inching closer to her dreams. Her mother occasionally watches her performances. Each time she finishes a show, she never fails to thank her for supporting all her life. She owes her Filipino identity to her, her love for Filipino music, genuine family warmth and care in the Philippines, her second home. In return, she completed her education and returned to Japan to be with her.

When Minami returned to Japan in 2015, she sought out her father. When he visited her once, she had a chance to meet his new family, her stepmother and two siblings. "There was no sight of remorse, and I wish he apologized for what he did. But I chose to forgive him and move on in spite of it all. He is still my father. I began to sing because of him and with him when I was a child." Minami also recognizes that her father gave her a sense of attachment to Japan, her first homeland. Her website draws the

## Minami: Two Centerstages as One

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attention of a growing number of her Japanese, Filipino and Japanese-Filipino followers not only to her recorded performances, and her photos together with famous recording artists in Japan and the Philippines. More importantly, she conveys a meaningful message to them written in Japanese. Just as her parents gifted her with two homelands, where she began and learned to love music, she will continue to aspire bridging these two center stages through her music.



## Rumi and Sachi\*

Sisterly Love that Binds

**Interviewed, written and translated into English by:** Jocelyn Celero

“Could you wake me up at 5 AM, please? I have to rush a paper due tomorrow. I will try to catch some sleep. I am too tired to write now. Bye.”

It was how a typical conversation on Skype would end between Rumi and her sister Sachi. No “I love yous,” no “good nights.” Due to the one-hour time difference between the Philippines and Japan, Sachi would usually get up earlier in the morning to prepare for school., which means that Rumi’s 5 AM wake-up call request is Sachi’s wake-up time. Rumi, on the other hand, would not go to the university until 10 AM. Although their online conversations may not include sweet messages, Rumi recognizes that getting Sachi’s wake-up call in the morning via Skype is a gesture of sisterly love. They are sisters who have been living apart for most of their lives, yet, their lives have often been intertwined by family and personal circumstances.

For the most part, the two sisters did not live together when they were growing up. Rumi is eight years older than Sachi. Rumi was born and raised in Japan. Her parents never married. Lorna came to Japan as an entertainer when she was nearly 18 years old and met Taka, Rumi’s father, there. She dreamt of getting married to him and raising a family together. This dream was shattered when she discovered that Taka was

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\* The names of persons have been changed to protect the identities of the persons mentioned in this account.

## Rumi and Sachi: Sisterly Love that Binds

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already married to a Japanese woman. From Yamanashi, pregnant Lorna ran away to eastern Tokyo. Through the help of a Filipino friend, she gave birth safely. When she gained strength, she immediately went home to the Philippines to leave baby Rumi to her sisters. She returned to Tokyo to resume her work, this time at a bar in Tokyo. When Rumi was four years old, Lorna brought her back to Japan. She would take Rumi to work since no one could look after her at home. When Rumi started attending grade school, Lorna met Ryo, manager of a nearby club. Unlike her previous relationship, Ryo was more generous and affectionate towards her. Ryo accepted Rumi as his own child. His marriage proposal revived Lorna's dream of having a whole family. They married and soon after, Lorna got pregnant with Sachi. With two children in need of utmost care, Lorna decided to stop working to focus on raising Rumi and Sachi. For a while, Ryo was dedicated to the family, supporting them financially through his business. One day, Lorna learned through a friend that Ryo has been dating one of the women at his bar. She confronted him once, filed for divorce in 1999 and sent one-year-old Sachi to the Philippines. Nine-year-old Rumi, on the other hand, stayed on to continue attending grade school in Tokyo.

Lorna kept herself busy with work at the bar in order to support Rumi's schooling and Sachi who is being cared for by her sisters in the Philippines. Whenever she felt the need to rest, she would go on vacation with Rumi in the Philippines. Each time, she had to renew her long-term visa, a status given to single mothers with a Japanese national child, in order to return and remain in Japan. Thus, Rumi's childhood involved frequent moves between Tokyo and Manila, which alternately reunites and separates her from her mother and Sachi. These moves affected her in terms of making friends and developing adequate language skills. She recounted her grade school life: "I was not only bullied because I was Filipino, but mainly because I did not fit into a group. I did not want to be with backstabbers. Whenever I turned my back, I could sense that they were talking about me, because they would do the same thing to other students when I was with them." She was trilingual at an early age: "I learned Tagalog first through my mother and aunts. I learned Japanese at school, and English when I studied in the Philippines. I can speak three languages, yes, but I do not have deep knowledge of each." Afraid that Rumi might get bullied, which is a problem among Japanese high school students, Lorna sent Rumi to the Philippines. To Rumi, this return to the Philippines was an opportunity both to "straighten out" her broken English and Filipino, and to reconnect with her Filipino relatives. Rumi attended a private all-girls high school close to her aunts' home. Her uncle would send her off in the morning and pick her up in the afternoon.

Sachi, who was raised in the Philippines, attended preparatory and early primary education in private schools in the Philippines. Fearing emotional distance and wanting

her child to experience Japanese schooling, Lorna took then eight-year-old Sachi to Tokyo to be with her. She enrolled her at a nearby public Japanese grade school. This sudden move to Japan also affected Sachi's language skills formation. Her first language was Filipino. She started learning English at school in the Philippines, which was discontinued when she moved to Japan and she had to learn Japanese. She was admitted to the second grade, instead of repeating grade one because of her age, which meant learning a higher level of Japanese. Sachi recalled: "I speak these three languages but I tend to mix them together. I can speak these three, but I do not know how to use each properly. It was tough for me."

Sachi experienced severe bullying at her school in Japan. She was bullied for being fat, for her strange Japanese accent and broken English. Although she had tutorials after school to improve her Japanese, she suffered emotionally for having difficulty making friends and lacking family support. Lorna was at work most of the time, and she was too tired to attend Sachi's school activities. When she was in the third grade, Sachi was once tempted to tell Lorna about her struggles at school. However, she was overcome with doubt: "At first, I wanted to tell her, but then, if I told her, she might rush to school and complain. My mom's Japanese is not good. Had she come to school and talked to my teachers, I would be more embarrassed. I had to cope with it on my own. I cried so hard each time because I did not know what to do." Sachi was too young to phone her sister who was miles away.

Sachi's hardships were unbeknownst to Rumi, who did not have any serious difficulties when the latter was living in the Philippines. In fact, Rumi's Japanese name and ability to speak Japanese won her new friends, who eased her adaptation to school life in the Philippines. "When I moved to St. Mary's, I instantly liked the people around me. I also liked that in school, everybody accepts differences. It does not matter if you are fat, ugly, or weird, people just laugh about it. At the same time, I also realized how horrible my life as a student in Japan was. There, if you stood out because of a certain trait, people would exclude you. You are out of the group. How would you appreciate this?" With good grades and graduating on time, Rumi thoroughly enjoyed high school. She wanted to continue her university studies in the Philippines, but Lorna did not agree. Having big dreams for her children since she did not finish school, Lorna initially wanted Rumi to attend university in the United States. However, after considering Rumi's safety and the cost of tuition fees, she decided to take Rumi back to Japan instead. The sisters did not reunite because Lorna decided to send Sachi to the Philippines in 2009. Rumi's good experience influenced her decision.

Sachi's unresolved bullying experience in Japanese elementary school continued to haunt her when she started studying in the same private high school Rumi had pre-

## Rumi and Sachi: Sisterly Love that Binds

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viously attended. She was aloof and had difficulty forming friendships. “I am not sure about what true friendship is. I fear being with people. How friends were to me back in grade school in Japan...they come and go; they get close to me now, but they would bully me later. It affects how I deal with people now.” She hardly bonds with her aunts or cousins at home. She eventually found a few friends in class towards the end of her first school year, although she would not open up about her personal life to them for fear of rejection, which she experienced in the past. She could not talk much about her vacation in Japan, for instance, because she did not want them to think that she was boastful. Similar to Rumi, Sachi reflected on school life in both countries: “It is still far better to make friends here in the Philippines because I can easily sense who are real or not. Unlike in Japan, besides the language barrier, it is hard to tell people’s heart and mind. I feel all of them are unreal there!”

Rumi’s return to Japan after four years was not an easy transition for her. She had to refresh her knowledge of Japanese. Because Japanese and Philippine education systems are different in terms of the number of required years of schooling, Rumi needed another year in high school to be eligible for admission to university. She attended a night school, a type of school which accommodates non-Japanese and Japanese students who failed to complete compulsory education for reasons, such as, economic hardship and severe bullying. When she completed it the following year, she wasted no time to prepare for university admission. Her knowledge of English gave her an advantage, successfully passing the entrance exam of a private university in Tokyo which offers English courses. It was also during this time when she finally met her father, Taka, who pledged to support her university education to make up for lost time. Reuniting with her father heightened her motivation to finish her studies. She received a mobile phone and laptop for school use. Lorna permitted her to have a part-time job, which is common to many Japanese youth. Rumi worked as a staff in a restaurant for four hours, three times a week after school.

Sachi lived with Rumi a year before she left for high school. It was the first time they shared a household. Being able to save money for her own expenses and ticket to the Philippines, Rumi has now managed to see Sachi and spend vacation together either in Tokyo or Manila. Their online communication became more frequent because each of them owned a laptop. These visits and online chats made Rumi realize that she has finally become a sister to Sachi. Rumi became more protective of Sachi. One time, when they arrived in Manila, handing their passports to the staff, Rumi caught the officer’s curious look. She remembered: “She was looking at the three of us up and down. She was suspicious about the details of our passports, especially because the two of us carry Japanese passports, yet, we do not share the same family name. More



than my mother, I cared more about my sister. Sachi was still young then to understand what was happening, but I was sensitive to such an inquisitive glance. I gently pushed her so she could walk ahead of us and not notice it." Moving back and forth between Tokyo and Manila, Rumi knew that their family is not normal compared to others. Despite such a complicated arrangement, she drew strength from her hard-working mother. Lorna may not have been a hands-on parent to them, but she tried her best to meet their needs in spite of being a single parent. Their aunts lived in the house Lorna built for them. When she was living with them, Rumi saw the remittances her mother would send them. These were the things that made her grateful to Lorna as their mother and father. She has helped her see her father again. Rumi can easily express herself to her mother. Even though Rumi believes that Lorna is the most authoritative figure in the family, they treat each other as friends.

Sachi, on the other hand, was rather indifferent to Lorna, perhaps because Lorna was very strict towards Sachi. In high school, Sachi was hardly allowed to attend parties and other events that were unrelated to school. She had to ask permission to meet friends outside school. Although she could use a laptop to talk to her sister, there was a limit to how much time she could use it. Because she was not close to their relatives, Sachi would spend most of her time inside her room chatting with Rumi. They became close sisters through these online conversations. Sachi began to open up about her high school life and how she has found a few true friends. She would also contact Rumi whenever she needed help with her homework, particularly in math and English. To Sachi, Rumi was her mother, the person who devoted time, attention and care for her.

One summer vacation, Sachi told Rumi about how she envied her for having known her father, how she admired her for being open to their mother, and how she almost attempted to commit suicide when she was in fourth grade. When she finally talked about it, Rumi immediately hugged and comforted her sister. As they embraced, Rumi felt her sister's pain. At that moment, Rumi assured Sachi of her constant support and attention. They promised to talk more openly about themselves to one another regardless of time and place. From then on, Rumi made it a point that no matter how tired or busy she is, she would communicate with Sachi everyday. Rumi encouraged her mother to talk to Sachi as often she could. It may take time before Sachi will completely overcome the traumas of the past, but talking about it with Rumi was a crucial starting point towards mending their family relationship.

Communicating online since 2009 has not only built the foundation for the sisterly relationship of Rumi and Sachi. The sisters have also established a more open com-

## Rumi and Sachi: Sisterly Love that Binds

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munication line with their mother, something they missed during the earlier, difficult episodes of their personal and family life. Rumi graduated from university in 2012, while Sachi finished high school the following year. Rumi found a job at a Japanese IT company in Tokyo, which permitted her to go on occasional business trips to its branch in Manila. Knowing all the hardships her sister went through during her university years in Tokyo, Sachi decided to pursue university studies in Manila. In 2014, Rumi transferred to another Japanese company based in Manila.

Rumi and Sachi are finally home together.



## Jenna\*

A 1.5-Generation Kid in Transition

**Interviewed, written and translated into English by:** Itaru Nagasaka

When 12-year-old Jenna thinks about her hometown, Capiz, she thinks about the shoaling beach near her house, where she'd walk to the shore easily. Jenna said that, at times, she'd go far beyond the shore to reach the salty depths.

"We were scolded when we went far. I was frequently reprimanded because I went far," Jenna said. "We could play there as much as we wished. We didn't need money to play there," she added.

Jenna often thought of her mother who migrated to work in Hong Kong when she was only two years old. She saw her mother every two years when her mother went home, usually for Christmas vacation. Each time her mother came home for the holidays, Jenna wished that time would move slowly. "I wanted to spend more time with my mother," she said.

Jenna and her two older brothers lived with their father and paternal grandmother, who cared and cooked for them. She recalled that her father cooked delicious dishes of fresh fish. The dishes were quite memorable, but the local language not so, as Jenna cited there were "too many languages" in her head.

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\* The names of persons and places have been changed to protect the identities of the persons mentioned in this account. The interview was conducted in Tagalog and Japanese.

## Jenna: A 1.5-Generation Kid in Transition

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“You will study in Manila.”

Jenna was in fourth grade when she heard those words from her maternal grandmother who came to Capiz. And before she could make sense of the statement, she was onboard a plane to the capital.

In Manila, she lived with her two brothers, her maternal grandmother, as well as an aunt and her family. They lived in the house that her mother acquired with her savings from working in Hong Kong. Her unforgettable memories in Manila were mostly school-related. Jenna recalled the days when she would join camping activities organized annually by the Girl Scouts, and the time when she and her friends created a poster to discourage littering.

While her mother was working in Hong Kong, she met and married a Japanese man, Furukawa-san. After their marriage, her mother migrated to Japan and gave birth to a son. Jenna eventually learned that she had a new brother when her mother and her new family visited Manila.

Her stepfather told Jenna that he would bring her to Japan. Although she wanted to spend more time with her mother, she was also apprehensive because she barely knew her mother.

Jenna arrived in Japan in July 2015. Her two older brothers remained in Manila: the oldest one was already 20 years old and was studying, while the second brother was not her mother’s biological son. “My first days in Japan were good,” Jenna said. “My father (*otohsan*) was nice to me,” she added.

Jenna did not have to return to the Philippines because her application for a long-term settler’s visa was approved. She was able to enroll at the local primary school when the school year started.

In Japan, Jenna noticed the differences between her home country and her new one.

For one, Jenna said that there are too many rules (*kimari*) in Japan, where she sometimes gets into trouble for not observing them.

“During wintertime in Japan, sunset time is earlier. We are told to go back to our house by 5 PM,” Jenna said. “We are not told such things in the Philippines. We could play until around six-thirty,” she added.

Second, her school was vastly different from the one she attended in Manila. Jenna went to a rural school in Japan. Unlike other schools near the city center, each grade had only one section with 20 pupils. She mentioned that she did not feel comfortable in her school in Manila, recalling their cramped classrooms because of the very large class sizes. The school had to divide pupils into two groups and had two sets of classes, namely “morning class” (*pang-umaga*) and “afternoon class” (*pang-hapon*). In Manila, she could not hear well what teachers said in class.

“Here in Japan we only have 19 or 20 pupils in our section, so [the classroom is] quiet,” she said.

Jenna enjoys her physical education class, which she did not have back in Manila. In the summer, they would swim for hours in the pool and in the winter, they would play basketball at the gym.

Jenna opined that the way mathematics is taught in Japan is more advanced, and that Japanese primary school students are already studying lessons being taught in high schools in the Philippines. English education also differs between the two countries. “In the Philippines, students learn English when they go to kindergarten. But here, they start learning in fifth grade,” she said.

On her first day of school, she had difficulty understanding her classmates. Everything sounded foreign to her, even if she had already learned basic Japanese before she started school. It wasn’t just the words. For instance, when she played tag with her classmates, she could not follow because it turned out that the rules of playing tag in Japan are different from those in the Philippines. She would ask help from her teachers when she could not understand what was going on.

In school, she had great difficulty with Japanese language, especially *kanji* (Japanese writing system using Chinese characters). Social studies was a difficult subject for her because the textbooks were mostly in *kanji* and they had to memorize the names of Japanese historical figures. Jenna noted, however, how her teachers exerted effort to help her understand the lessons. The teachers communicated to her in broken (*gucha-gucha*) English, to make sure that Jenna did not lag behind in class because of the language barrier.

Jenna only started to understand Japanese three months after she started school. Her Japanese language tutor, who was referred to them by the local Catholic church, taught Jenna privately at home for over a month to help her with her day-to-day

## Jenna: A 1.5-Generation Kid in Transition

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lessons. When she started attending the local school, the local educational board deployed a teacher to help her. She took a special class given by the teacher, during which time, the teacher taught Japanese and helped her with the subjects that she could not understand. Her classmates also helped her: “Many of my classmates taught me the meanings of the words that I couldn’t understand.”

When she was in sixth grade, she was given a *kanji* assignment by the special language teacher. A male classmate looked at her assignment, and asked why she was doing such an easy assignment, saying that he did that assignment when he was in third grade. The teacher came to Jenna’s defense and asked the boy if he was able to study a foreign language in a new country. Jenna never received any disdainful remark from any of her classmates again after that.

Her two brothers came for a visit and stayed with them for a few months, which made Jenna very happy. When asked about how she maintains contact with her family and friends in the Philippines, she said that she does not have regular communication with them.

“I only communicate with them sometimes. I want to focus on my studies now. I will graduate from primary school soon. After a few weeks of spring break, we will enter junior high school,” Jenna said.

To prepare for the next school level, she asked her mother to buy textbooks and workbooks for first year students of junior high school. She wanted to learn her subjects in advance; she is aware that she would need to work harder to catch up with the lessons. Her concerns are valid. Studies suggest that many 1.5-generation Filipinos encounter difficulties in their studies and relationships with their friends when they reach junior high school.

“In primary school, you can catch up with the lessons even if you do not do homework (*jigaku*),” Jenna said. “But in junior high school, there are so many assignments that must be done. Maybe I need to do the assignments on my own.”

Looking towards the future, Jenna mentioned that she wants to become a police-woman. She dreams of becoming one because she wants to help people. Jenna also wants to become a Japanese language teacher.

“I understand English and Tagalog. If my Japanese would improve, I could teach Japanese language to foreigners,” Jenna said.

Jenna also said she also wants to study in a university or college in Japan. If she could find a job in Japan, she would be able to help her younger half-brothers. She said it will be her way of giving back to her stepfather who has been supporting them.

“*Otohsan* (father) is spending money for me now. I want to return what I have received,” she said.

Jenna had a lot of things to say about her experiences as a migrant child in Japan. When asked about what she can share with other children in the same situation, after a long pause, she shared the following reflection:

“[The children] may be anxious, especially when they arrive here. They can’t speak [the language]. They can’t understand anything if they do not learn [Japanese].” she said.

“Perhaps, they need to try to have fun and be happy.”

SOUTH  
KOREA







## Hina

### Two Worlds

**Interviewed and translated into English by:** Seonyoung Seo

**Written by:** Maruja M. B. Asis

Hina Han was born in Daegu in 2003 to a Korean mother and a Pakistani father. As an only child, she nurtured a close relationship with her cousins and friends. Although her cousins, her aunt's daughters, were older than her, she really enjoyed their company.

"I preferred to get along with my female cousins more than my friends when I was in elementary school," Hina said. "I felt I was understood better by them. It was fun."

Growing up, Hina has a treasure trove of happy memories: the time when she and her aunt's family visited Jeju Island; receiving a SmartPhone when she was in fourth or fifth grade in elementary; taking fun photos with friends; learning ukulele at school; and field trips. Now that she is in middle school, she says that they rarely go on field trips. She misses their field trips when they went to different places, visited museums and had *kimbap* [seaweed rice rolls] on the grass.

When she was in first grade in elementary school, Hina experienced being teased as a foreigner. She learned to deal with the situation by smiling and getting along with her classmates. Looking back and comparing the situation now, Hina thoughtfully notes what she has learned in the process and what has changed in Korea over time.

"When I recall it, I sometimes think I could have dealt with it with fun or reacted with confidence. These days, friends don't do that. But at that time, they were too young to

think about multiculturalism. Also, there were fewer foreign kids. Now friends know better about multiculturalism, so I'm fine now."

However, she would like people to have a fuller understanding of multiculturalism. Hina does not want to be treated differently because she comes from a multicultural family.

"I just want to live like Korean children do. I don't like to be treated in a special way because of my multicultural background. I'm doing well without such programs. When my teacher asked me to join them, I said "No." For example, the Korean language class: I already speak Korean well. I told my teacher, "You know I speak Korean well." My mom also told my teacher that I don't want to join special programs for multicultural children."

Her love for singing, which she discovered when she was in third grade, ranks high among her interests. In 2016, during her school festival, she sang a song with a male rapper and they bagged second prize based on student votes. According to her, the talent that she displayed in the festival showed that multicultural kids are capable.

All things considered, Hina's school life has been very positive. She has had no problems with her teachers; in fact, she said her teachers like her. And she has friends in school, and in particular, two close friends. Asked about what she and her friends do, she says, "Just chat. All my friends are talkative. We talk a lot about classes, teachers, skirt lengths, graduation trips, high school and so on. Time really flies while talking about these things."

Hina's happy moments are not confined to her life in Korea. Her visits to Pakistan are part and parcel of her cherished memories. She has visited her father's home country since she was three years old. The last visit was in September 2016. Before each visit, Hina would learn some key words in Urdu from her father, and while there, her relatives would teach her more words and expressions, and when words fail her, body language comes in handy. She remembers the words and expressions she learned from these visits. In return, she also teaches some Korean words to her cousins and introduced *ramyeon* [Korean instant noodle dish], which her cousins enjoyed.

She remembers the sweltering heat that reaches almost 40 C. in September. More importantly, she also remembers something beautiful about Pakistani culture.

"People treat each other well and have good relationships with their neighbors [in Pakistan]... Here [in Korea], we don't have good relationships with any neighbors," she

## Hina: Two Worlds

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said. “We don’t even greet our neighbors. But there, it’s like in the old days [in Korea], people are warm-hearted,” she added.

Her dad does not talk much about Pakistani culture. Her dad introduced Islam to her, which she has embraced. Hina says that she likes Islam and expresses an interest to know more about it. She sadly noted that people in Korea have uninformed and negative views about Islam. Whenever she sees negative generalizations about Islam online, she presses “Dislike.”

“People in Korea hate Islam. Comments on the news online about Muslim people are all bad words,” she said. “Whenever bad things happen, [Koreans] connect it to Islam.”

When she was little, Hina had entertained thoughts of wanting to be a singer, or an astronaut or a diplomat. She is still undecided on what dream to pursue. Lately, becoming a VJ or a model or working in a broadcasting station or a stewardess has piqued her interest. She has heard that working as a stewardess is not easy, but the attraction is the promise of traveling. Her travels to Pakistan, Malaysia, Thailand and Singapore with her parents have nurtured her appreciation for different cultures, she says.

“It’s good to see beautiful things, to meet foreigners, and have the chance to speak English,” Hina said. “It’s more fun in foreign countries. I think I’m more suited to foreign countries. Everything is so exciting,” she added.

Her future plans include going to Saudi Arabia after she completes her university studies. She is also determined to learn Arabic and Urdu to communicate with people of different backgrounds and enable herself to gain a deeper understanding of her own roots.

“I’d like to work by connecting Arabian countries and Pakistan to Korea, earn money, and then help my dad’s family, financially, in Pakistan.”

The details of her future plans will firm up as she discovers more about the things that matter most to her. Hina’s self-knowledge of who she is will see her through life. Hina sees herself as belonging to two worlds. And to her, it means a lot to be true to herself and be proud of who she is and her family. When asked about how she really identifies herself, she does not hesitate to give a definite answer.

“Half Korean and half Pakistani... I like both,” she said. “I just like both.”

To children with a multicultural background and the adults who develop policies and programs, Hina shares her hopes and thoughts:

“I hope little kids are not hurt because of their multicultural background and they are not sad because of their differences from other people. I hope they think they are more special. When we are little, it’s easy to be hurt. So I hope it doesn’t happen to little kids now.

I also hope their friends are more interested in different cultures. I think having more classes to experience different cultures in elementary schools would be helpful. Instead of explaining multiculturalism and different cultures only through presentations with PPT [PowerPoint] slides, it would be better to have more fun through a variety of events for kids to enjoy.”



## Hyoungh Wook\*

To Be an “Ordinary” Korean

**Interviewed, written and translated into English by:** Seonyoung Seo

“What are my happiest memories? I am always happy whenever I buy books online, and more so when they arrive at my home.” With eyes twinkling behind thick glasses, Hyoungh Wook, a nineteen-year-old bookworm, talks about his most recent books. “I love reading fantasy novels. I don’t enjoy serious literary works reflecting the real world, or history books. Reading fantastic fantasy stories helps me de-stress and relax. These days, I read about ten books every three days.” For him, books seem to be best friends, a shelter from the stressful real world, and the joys of daily life. What led him to fall in love with books? The story of his childhood may reveal the reasons, albeit partially.

Hyoungh Wook was born in 1998, to a Chinese mother and a Korean father. His parents met in China when his father was doing business there. They moved to Korea in 1996. He is an only child, but grew up in two countries. He describes his life trajectory in both places briefly, saying: “I was born in Korea, but raised by my mom’s family in China when I was a small kid. Because my parents wanted me to learn Chinese, they sent me alone to China one year before entering elementary school. I lived with my grandparents from my first year to the third year of elementary school. After that,

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\* Not his real name.

I came back to Korea and studied here from my fourth year of elementary school through to high school.”

He believes that his three years of elementary school in China immensely impacted his current and future pathways. The foundation of his language skills in Chinese was established during that period, helping him to later enter a prestigious university, majoring in Chinese language and literature.

Reflecting on his childhood in China, he says, “Learning Chinese was just like everyday life there. I didn’t really intend to study hard in the beginning, but later, I became really eager to learn more, to get higher marks in school.” Recalling his heyday, he repeats with a smile. “I made a lot of effort to compete with other kids, and came out on top in school. In Chinese schools, there is a particular ranking system. If you have a single ranking badge, that means you are the president of your class. Two badges means a representative of your year, and three badges are given to the committee members of the school. That shows you are the highest rank at school. I got three even when I was in my third year. I was very competitive and did whatever I could at that time.” With his grandmother’s help with his studies, and feeling close to his Chinese cousin at home, he improved his language skills, performing steadily at school. He remembers himself as being proactive and competitive, when in China.

But coming back to Korea in his fourth year of elementary school was a turning point. Korean kids were different from his Chinese classmates. He felt they were rude and less considerate. They behaved without thinking much about other people. Some kids teased him about his background, and having a Chinese mother. He dealt with such insulting behavior by ignoring them, but the sudden change of surroundings made him much less proactive in school life. “I lost all my competitive spirit and didn’t want to do anything in my fourth year. I didn’t interact with classmates for the whole year, and wanted to restart a new school life in my fifth year.”

Asked about differences between Chinese and Korean children in terms of relationships with kids from multicultural families, he responds clearly: “In Korea, if people know someone’s background is different, they tend to make fun of it. But in China, it becomes something to be proud of. Chinese kids speak proudly about having multi-racial friends. I feel Chinese kids are more mature in that sense.” Amid Korea’s culture of a strong collective identity and acceptance of casual racism on a daily basis, he came to realize that being different is not helpful to school life. In that environment, it was natural for him to reject invitations to join “special programs for multicultural

## Hyoung Wook: To Be an “Ordinary” Korean

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kids” at his school. He is critical of such programs: “Programs like cooking traditional Korean food are not necessary for me. They didn’t seem useful at all. Also, if I joined in, it would reveal my being different from others. That would bring more negative effects in the end.”

Luckily, Hyoung Wook’s homeroom teacher in his fourth year was very supportive, helping him to adjust in school. That’s not because she obviously cared more about him, but because she paid attention to every student, encouraging them all to get along well and enjoy each day in harmony with others. However, in spite of at least one good teacher’s support, Hyoung Wook, who used to be proactive and competitive in school in China, has become quiet and an introverted, in order not to be noticeably different in Korea.

In middle school, Hyoung Wook’s school life was not enjoyable, despite his maintaining high grades in his classes. “I was stressed out from the studies every day. Classes at study academies after school were also annoying. I was also annoyed with classmates at school. Their simply being around was itself just annoying.” His daily routine involved returning home immediately after classes at school and academies. He rarely went out with friends throughout middle school and high school. Instead, it was with books that he developed a deep attachment. “I read 30-40 books a month. Except during school hours and homework time, I was reading books all the time. Every day I borrowed a book from the library before class began in the morning, returned it, and borrowed one more book again after school hours.” It is not surprising that Hyoung Wook was selected as “The King of the Bookworms” every month until his second year of middle school. His relatively obsessive reading habit was put on hold when he had to study hard to enter an elite high school, and later to gain admission from universities. However, books still provided a shelter, or a refuge where he could relax in the middle of tough and stressful days.

Hyoung Wook wanted to be an “ordinary” student, but his noticeably good language skills in Chinese probably drew people’s attention in high school. His classmates only knew that he spoke Chinese very well because he had lived in China, but didn’t know his mother is Chinese. Hyoung Wook explains: “I didn’t tell them because I had already learned through my previous experiences that not telling is the best way. I’m sure, with 100 percent certainty, that I would have faced uncomfortable situations if I had told them. Kids would definitely have seen me differently. Middle school and high school kids are the same as smaller ones.” In fact, he has never revealed his Chinese background to his classmates since he was in middle school. His experiences from elementary to high school life in Korea demonstrate that Korea is “not a good country

for foreigners. People are strongly exclusive of foreigners at school, at least before university.” This view seems to represent a hidden scar in his heart, brought about by uninformed kids teasing him about his Chinese background, invitations to ridiculously irrelevant multicultural programs, and his reaction of social retreat from other classmates in order to protect himself.

He is not very optimistic about the possibility of change in Korean schools, in terms of unfair treatment of multicultural kids. “Unless the number of mixed race people dramatically increases, I don’t think Korean students will change their way of thinking. I know they should change. But if people reveal their multicultural backgrounds simply in order to help make it change, they will not avoid experiencing harsh reactions again and again. Rather, it would be better that minority groups just hide themselves, while living in Korea.” Identifying himself as Korean because he was born and grew up in Korea, Hyoung Wook said he has a sense of belonging to Korean society. However, as his life story shows, he often has to hide part of his background and identity to live as a “Korean,” and to avoid being bullied by other people. That is surely one reason why he found his own comfort zone in fantasy novels in his school days.

Recently, another turning point may be developing in his life. As a freshman in the department of Chinese language and literature at a university in Korea, he recently feels much more comfortable, because he is not seen as a special case anymore. Having lived in China, he is one of many students in his department who speaks Chinese fluently. A more independent and individual life style at university provides space for him to be himself. He joined a drama club, and works with other members on translation of Korean dialogue into Chinese. His volunteering as an interpreter for Chinese visitors in his church makes him feel proactive, and helps to improve his simultaneous translation skills.

Asked about the future, Hyoung Wook answers: “My ultimate goal is having a stable job in Korea. I will figure out the best way to find a job. I guess it will be something connected to China, like becoming an interpreter, or a travel guide or something. I think it would be good to make use of my strengths.” He knows what he wants and what he can do best with his multicultural background. And this talented bookworm’s hope is to be an “ordinary man” in Korea.





## Haneul\*

A Seed of Hope

**Facilitated by:** Sangji Lee

**Translated into English by:** Seoyeon Yoon Chu

I started my third year in middle school in March 2017. I like watching television, usually entertainment shows and drama series. I am also interested in music. I listen to it often while studying or while riding public transportation. I fiddle with my mobile phone a lot, frequently checking social networking sites. It is fun to communicate with my friends and others through Facebook or KakaoTalk. Like any other teenager, I have favorite actors and actresses. I, too, like looking for images or video clips about my idols. I am happiest when I hang out with friends; mostly we chat, joke and play.

### **A happy childhood**

My family lives in Seoul.

My parents got married in 1999. My older brother was born in Korea in 2001, but he was sent to China, our mother's home country, to be raised by our grandparents. He was sent back to Korea when he was four. I was born in China in 2003. Soon after I was born, my parents took me to Korea. I regard myself as a Korean. I think this idea sticks in my mind because I have lived in Korea since I was a baby. And I believe that I should belong to Korean society.

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\* Not her real name. Haneul wrote her life story in Korean.

My father has five siblings; hence, I have many relatives on my father's side. My mother has three sisters with the oldest living in Korea and the rest in China. It is sad that I cannot see them often. My brother is an athlete graduating from a middle school specializing in physical education. He started school in an elite athletic high school. He is doing modern pentathlon, a grueling event that covers running, swimming, shooting, horseback riding and sword fighting. I am always rooting for him and I hope that he will be able to make it to the national team someday.

My growing up years were filled with many fond memories of my family and friends. My mother actively participated in multicultural events. Many of those initiatives were meaningful and inspiring. My family had gone on camping trips for free, and through these, we built a lot of good and happy memories. Those programs also enabled me to make friends with children from other multicultural families. When I was younger, I was able to join activities offered by multicultural centers. I wish I could have more opportunities to take part in those programs and make more good memories.

Many of my friends are from my boarding school. Living together, studying together and sharing meals with other students make us close to each other. When I think about my school, many happy memories about my roommates immediately come to my mind.

### **Links to China**

I had been to China seven or eight times to visit my mother's family and relatives in Shenzhen and Yanji. I enjoy meeting them, though I sometimes feel that talking with them is not easy because we speak different languages. I have a great time whenever I visit, enjoying delicious foods and seeing new things and places in China.

My mother taught me a little bit of Chinese. Although I cannot speak my mother's tongue very well, my visits to China and getting immersed in the language have been helpful. I can understand basic conversational Chinese, my Chinese writing though needs much improvement. Because I am attending an international middle school, learning a second language is a requirement. The students can choose their second language among Spanish, Japanese and Chinese. I selected Chinese because I already know some Chinese and my mother can help me. She also said that knowing the language would be a great help for my future.

## Haneul: A Seed of Hope

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At first I was discouraged that my Chinese was not so good despite having a Chinese mother, so I decided to learn from her to get better. Chinese is a difficult language to master because you have to learn characters, their meanings and *pinyin*.<sup>3</sup> However, these are the very same reasons why I find it interesting and fun.

Most of my relatives on my mother's side live in China, including my grandmother, aunt and uncle, and cousins. I do not get to talk to them often. I only have short conversations with them when my mother calls them. My Chinese is not good enough, but I think it is important to stay in touch with them. I will improve my Chinese and so I can communicate better with my Chinese relatives.

### **School experiences**

I get along well with all types of friends starting from elementary school. I had a good time in the first year of middle school, usually hanging out with my close friends from elementary. I felt sorry when I did not pass the second round of admission to an international middle school. I did well in my transfer examination, and I was admitted to the second grade [8th grade] of middle school.

I am generally shy with strangers. It is hard to strike a conversation with new friends, but after I get to know them, I can be quite playful and chatty. When I was first introduced to the new school, I was timid, just nodding to the questions asked of me. I could not even say a word on the first day. But now, I have a good relationship with my classmates and enjoy my school life very much.

Like any other teenager, I study hard and play hard with my friends. Since my school is an international middle school, there are a number of admission tracks. The 'social integration track' is for multicultural children, so some of the students have a Chinese or Japanese mother. With these friends, I can find something in common and we are really close.

My school system is different from the ordinary schools. First, students have to live in a dormitory. I share my room with two students. Second, we have an after-school study program while the usual middle schoolers go home after school. I like that my school is different. I think students there are smart and their future is bright, so I am driven to study harder. There are some teachers I like and others that I don't like; most of them, including my homeroom teacher are kind. I think what really stands

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<sup>3</sup> *Pinyin* is the official Romanization system for teaching Standard Chinese.

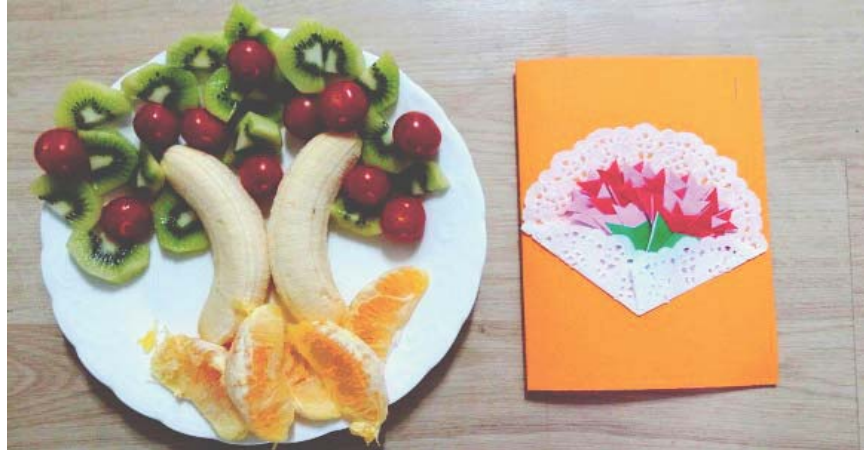


Photo and poetry by Haneul

가족나무

주황색 뿌리아빠  
늙었지만  
영양을 많이 흡수  
나를 위해 오래오래

노란색 줄기 엄마  
늙었지만  
사랑을 많이 받아  
나를 위해 튼튼튼튼

초록색 이파리오빠  
부모님 사랑을 빼앗지만  
훈련을 많이 해서  
나를 위해 승리아자

빨강색 열매의 나  
약하지만  
부모오빠사랑을 모아  
가족을 위해 희망씨앗 심다

Family Tree

The orange roots are my father  
the roots may be old  
they give nourishment  
for me to grow.

The yellow trunk is my mother  
the trunk may be old  
it gives love  
for me to be stronger.

The green leaves are my brother  
we share our parents' love  
he works very hard  
to win a victory for me.

And the red fruits are me  
though weak I may be  
the love from my parents and my brother  
plant a seed of hope for my family.

out in my school is its English class. Its teaching level is higher compared to other middle schools. We learn math and science in English, too. I receive high grades in most subjects, except for English. I honestly find it hard to follow English class. Many of the students in my school have learned English since they were young. I have never attended an English private institute, and I was not well-prepared when I applied for this school upon my mother's recommendation. Because my English is not good, I used to be nervous when I had an English presentation or an English-speaking performance evaluation. I would keep my voice down so that the other kids will not know the level of my English skills. I am now studying hard to improve my English and to catch up with my peers. I am all the more determined to work hard, since I know English is very important for high school entrance exams. My dream is to have good grades in English in the final year of middle school, get into a good high school, have great test scores enough to go to a good university and become successful. In Korea, education plays an important role in success. I guess my current experience in an international middle school would help me a lot to achieve success.

### **Hopes and dreams**

When I was younger, I had lots of dreams – to be a singer, a painter, or a chef, among others. When I was in second grade in elementary school, I started swimming as a hobby. My swimming skills improved and I got into a training program for young talents. Through the program, I participated in a number of competitions and further developed my interest in swimming. Afterwards, I started to receive systematic training at a swimming club. The training was tough. In my sixth grade, I quit swimming because I decided swimming was not fit for me. I thought my scores in the competitions were not that good. Also, I was skinny and weak.

My mother and father were so busy that they could not take good care of me and because of this, they wanted me to enter a boarding school. In my first attempt to gain admission to an international middle school, I did not pass the entrance exam and I went to an ordinary middle school instead. I began studying hard. My efforts paid off and I got to the upper ranks of my class. I took the test again for admission to an international middle school, and this time, I made it.

When I was interviewed, I said that I wanted to become a diplomat. Actually I have not yet decided on what course I will pursue. At various times, I have thought of wanting to be a CEO of a company or a neurosurgeon. I started thinking about being a CEO after I had watched a documentary about a female CEO. I also want to be a neuro-

surgeon because my father suffers from cerebral infarction and I want to become a doctor to remedy his condition. I don't know what I really want to be or what I want in my life. I think now is the time to explore my aspirations. I believe the time will come when I will find out what will be best for me. I will just look at the bright future ahead of me. Positive thinking always makes things turn for the better. I hope my future would be bright, and I will become a good and successful person.

Since my father is sick, my mother has been working at various jobs. She works as a Chinese teacher, a translator/interpreter, and a reporter. She is now running a massage shop. It is tough for her because the shop operates for 24 hours. For my mother, I want to study hard and to be a good student. I want to become successful and give back to my mother in the future.



**Sarang\***

Out of Troubled Waters

**Interviewed and written by:** Sangji Lee  
**Translated into English by:** Seoyeon Yoon Chu

Sarang was born in Korea in 1992 to a Filipina mother and a Korean father. She is currently enrolled in a training program to become a certified nursing assistant. At 26 (at the time of the first interview in December 2016), Sarang thinks that it is time to make her own living and work out her future plans. Here is her story.

#### **A strong mother-daughter bond**

Her parents met through a Korean friend of her mother. When they married, Sarang's mother did not think about having a baby because she knew that her husband was ill. But he wanted a family, thus, she came into this world. Sarang's father died when she was five months old. Since he passed away when she was still a baby, all that she knew about him came from her mother's stories and through photos. Her mother told her that he was a good man.

Several months after she was born, Sarang was sent to the Philippines to be raised by her maternal grandparents. Her mother had to work and could not take care of her. Sarang spent the first seven years of her life in the Philippines with her mother's relatives. She has a blur of memories of those years. She also has vague memories of meeting her father's relatives a few times. She has scarcely heard from them lately,

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\* Not her real name.

while she keeps in touch with her relatives in the Philippines by exchanging messages, usually through Facebook.

Sarang is part of a larger family on her mother's side. She has half-sisters and a half-brother, the children of her mother by her Filipino partner. Her half-siblings are older than her; they were all born in the Philippines before her mother came to Korea. While her half-sisters live in the Philippines, her half-brother is in Korea, working as an undocumented factory worker. She feels sorry for his tough life; she thinks of her brother, who is 13 years older than her, as a real grown-up. He is married to a Filipina in Korea and they have a son, who is just starting elementary school. Her nephew is Sarang's best friend and source of happiness. She jokingly says that now that he is older, he is not cute anymore. She is full of happiness and passion when she speaks about him, her face lights up and it is easy to tell that he brings her joy. She was worried at first about her nephew's schooling because his parents are both foreigners, and he has no Korean registration. Fortunately, through the help of the principal, who is the mother of Sarang's middle school friend, her nephew was able to attend school.

The person Sarang loves most is her mother. Her mother used to work at the US military base in Itaewon, near Seoul, but quit her job when she heard of the plan to transfer the base to another region. Sarang is worried about the health and economic condition of her now elderly mother. Without regular employment, her mother sells items from the Philippines at the Filipino market on Sundays, which provides her income. Sarang works at several part-time jobs, but her earnings are not enough to cover rent and living expenses. Every Sunday she helps her mother at the Filipino market. Christmas Day and New Year's Day are no exceptions; they have to sell things to make a living. She wants to earn money to relieve her mother's burden.

### **Overcoming challenges**

When Sarang returned to Korea at the age of seven and entered school, she did not know Korean at all: "I was, like, the only foreigner at the school. I had a hard time because I couldn't speak Korean." She could not understand what her friends talked about, so she did not want to go to school. Teachers tried to help her, but adapting to a new school as well as a new life were formidable challenges. Everything in Korea was new to her. When she reached third grade, her Korean had improved and she slowly adjusted to school life. "I was just so young at that time," she recalled. After a couple of years of initial adjustment, she said she did not have major difficulties in her schooling.



## Sarang: Out of Troubled Waters

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Sarang went through elementary and high school in Korea. Although she was born in Korea, she has Korean nationality and Korean registration number, and she has lived most her life in the country, Sarang feels the sting of discrimination and stigma. The challenges she and her family face in Korean society made her shy and afraid of interacting with people. But she seems determined not to be frustrated and to rise to the challenge.

### **“Please don’t ask where I am from”**

College education is an important criterion to be successful in Korea. When she was in the last year of high school, she decided not to pursue college education. Already financially stretched, her family could not take out a student loan, which would be additional burden. According to her, with college tuition fees averaging nearly USD8,000 a year, the cost was beyond what she and her family can afford. She thinks that most Koreans hold an unfavorable view of high school graduates and those with a college degree from non-prestigious universities.

At age 20, she started working at part-time jobs to help her mother. Presently, she is getting hospital training to obtain a nursing assistant certification. The training requires 780 hours of training (380 hours in private clinics and 400 hours in general hospitals). To meet this requirement, she has to work eight hours a day, seven days a week. She can take time off six times a month. Her supervising nurse allows her to choose her days off, but she does not have any preference and accept any days-off designated by the hospital. Right after finishing training sessions in the hospital, she goes to a private institute where she studies for certification and meets peers her age. She feels fortunate to work with good people at the clinic; the head, nurses and patients are willing to help her. The clinic receives subsidies, thus, most of the patients are poor people and migrant workers from the Philippines. The patients also include undocumented migrants, whose plight she understands very well.

Having been born and having lived in Korea most of her life, she gets upset when she is treated like a foreigner, and people ask her in English “where are you from?” or when she is told that her Korean is really good. The first thing that comes to her mind is “Oh no, not again. Why do people speak to me in English?” and she wishes she could disappear. At times she asks “why am I Korean” or imagines that “life would be different, if my father had lived.” She has decided to leave things that are beyond control as they are and focus on what she can do.

**“I am not a foreigner”**

While she tries to be calm and unaffected from getting the cold shoulder or being stared at, she gets furious at the injustice and unfairness towards her mother. When she quit her job at the US military base, Sarang’s mother wanted to find another job. After sending several applications, her mother got an interview for a cleaner position at a shopping mart. She was denied because she looks like a foreigner, not because of her clumsy Korean or her frail health. This angered Sarang. Cleaning and having a distinctive appearance are irrelevant, and actually, based on looks alone, her mother does not look any different from other Korean women. It upset Sarang that although she and her mother are Koreans, society continues to treat them as foreigners.

**Hoping for the best**

Although she has worries about the future, Sarang dreams of a new beginning as a nurse’s aide. Sometimes she is hurt by the way people view and treat her family, and it makes her wary of people. But she does not let this discourage her.

“Wherever you go, you meet people. I am sometimes defensive because of the way people look at me. But we are all humans, and humans are equal. Once I receive my certification as a nursing assistant, I can take care of my mother when she is ill. I am still hesitant to mingle with people, but I understand that I have to overcome my reservations because I continue to live in Korea. At times I feel lonely in Korea. Still, I think Korea is a better place to live in and the Philippines is a good place to visit.”

Like other young people in Korea, Sarang is concerned about her future career and employment prospects. She is aware of the challenges before her, but armed with determination and hope, she will move steps closer to achieving her dreams.



## Suga

A Proud Korean-Filipino Kid

**Interviewed and written by:** Emely D. Dicolen

I first met Kim Min-Seok or Suga in 2011 when I attended mass at Caritas, a Multicultural Family Support Center in Daegu City, headed by Fr. Myung Hyun Kim.

When I heard him speaking in Tagalog, I thought he was a “pure” Filipino because he was so fluent in the language. I learned later that his mother is a Filipina and his father is Korean. While waiting for the mass to start, he played with the other multicultural children. However, during the mass he was the only one who showed interest in what was taking place, participating actively in the singing and the community prayers.

I saw him a few more times. In one program, I saw him perform some magic tricks. One time, I asked him to read the prayers in the mass which he gladly accepted. He read very well and I thought that he has a lot of potentials. When I learned that there was going to be a Tagalog Speech Contest organized by the Philippine Embassy in Seoul in celebration of the *Buwan ng Wika* (Month of the National Language), I encouraged him, through his mother, to join.

He gladly and excitedly accepted the challenge. All the contestants were asked to write their own speeches. Suga wrote a beautiful speech entitled *Pinoy ‘Yan!* (That’s the Filipino!). On the day of the contest, September 9, 2013, he eloquently and confidently delivered his piece, accompanied by props which he designed. When the results were announced, Suga was adjudged the winner! He was given a round-trip

ticket to Manila, courtesy of Philippine Airlines, a medal and a certificate, which were handed by the former Philippine Ambassador to South Korea, Ambassador Luis T. Cruz.

Here's his contest piece:

**Pinoy 'Yan!**

*Katulad ninyo Pinoy rin ako. Hindi man puro ang dugong Pinoy na nanana-laytay sa aking katauhan, sa puso't diwa ako ay isang Pinoy. Pilipinas ang bansang pinagmulan ng aking ina kung saan maraming lugar ang kaaya-aya. Maraming lugar ang nakatagong paraiso kung kaya't mga dayuhan sa bansa ko ay nahahalina.*

*Mga tanawin ay nagbibigay sigla sa pusong nangungulila. Mga pagkaing kakaiba binubusog ang gutom ng sikmura. Sa gwapo't ganda ng mga Pinoy, ang mga dayuhan ay lubhang nabibighani nila. Kaya nga sa buong mundo mga Pinoy ay nagkalat na, hindi dahil sa kahirapan kundi dahil sa kanilang talino at likhang kakaiba.*

*Hindi lamang sa ganda ng Pilipinas kung bakit doon ay higit na mas masaya at kaaya-aya; dahil din ito sa mga taong doon ay nakatira. Sa buong mundo kilala ang mga Pinoy. Mga Pinoy na may kakaibang kakayahan sa pakikipagsabayan sa anumang larangan, mapa musika man, palakasan, at aktin-gan. Higit sa lahat, ang mga Pinoy ay kilala sa kanilang pagiging mapagma-hal sa kanilang pamilya at kapwa. Masayahin kahit maraming problema at hindi nakalilimot magdasal sa Poong Lumikha.*

*Sa pagkakataong ito, nais kong ipagmalaki, lahi ko ay Pinoy. Puso ko ay Pinoy. Ang wikang binibigkas ko ay wikang Pinoy. Ipagmamalaki ko ito dahil kaming mga Pinoy ay hindi natatakot humarap sa hamon ng buhay, gaano man ito kahirap. Dahil dito, ang bansang Pilipinas na aking sinilang-gan ay higit na kaaya-aya kahit sa anumang bansa sa sandaigdigan.*

Pinoy 'yan!

**That is the Filipino!**

I am also Filipino like you. The blood that runs through my veins may not be pure Filipino, but my heart and spirit is Filipino. The Philippines is where my mother hails from, a land of beauty. It has many hidden places of paradise which bring many foreigners to its shores.

The sights breathe life to a heart full of longing. The unique cuisine eases the hunger of an empty stomach. The beauty of the Filipino has enticed foreigners. The Filipinos are all over the world not because of poverty but because of their talents and unique creativity.

It is not just the beautiful sights of the Philippines that make it more inviting, but because of the people who inhabit it. Filipinos are known throughout the world.

Filipinos with their distinct talent can excel in any field, be it music, sports, or acting. Most of all, Filipinos are known for their love of family and fellow human beings. Joyful even in the midst of problems and with a deep faith in the Creator.

On this occasion, I want to say that I am proud to be Filipino. My heart is Filipino. The language that I speak is Filipino. I am proud that we Filipinos are not afraid to face any challenge in life, however difficult. Because of this, the Philippines, the country of my birth, stands tall above other countries in the whole world.

That is the Filipino!

### **From the Philippines to Korea**

Suga was born in Korea on May 19, 2002 and is now in third year of middle school. He goes to Daegu Seongji Middle School in Daegu City.

When he was two months old, he was brought to the Philippines, to Isabela, his mother's hometown. He lived with his aunt so his mother and father can continue working in Korea. He returned to Korea when he was two years old. He did not forget the Filipino language and Ilocano, his mother's language. At home, his mother also speaks to him in Ilocano. This is rare because usually, Filipino women married to Korean men do not teach their language to their children. However, whenever he and his mother have a fight, Suga uses Korean so that his mother will not understand him. In many Filipino-Korean families, the children are more fluent in Korean language than their Filipino parents. It is a situation which creates communication problems among multicultural families.

When he returned to Korea, he went through an adjustment process. Initially, he felt aloof towards his father. He was brought to the Philippines when he was still very young, so he did not have any memory of his father. But in time, their relationship became better. While he is close to his father, he is closer to his mom. He does not remember any significant memories with his father because he is always busy with work. "Our relationship is okay and he supports me in whatever I want to do like acting and baking," he said. Suga spends more time with his mother. They do many things together: traveling, shopping, baking, going to church and attending activities of the Filipino community. Wilma, Suga's mom, is active in participating in the activities of the Filipino community, especially those pertaining to Filipino-Korean families.

When he returned to Korea, he felt that he was different from his classmates. He felt that they did not want to play or talk with him. In fact, he had experiences of being bullied at school when he was younger. The details are now lost on him—he could not exactly remember what and how it happened or the child who bullied him. All he remembers was that it had something to do with his being a mixed blood and his mother being a Filipina. But now, his classmates accept him: "maybe because I can already speak Korean fluently. I also have a good sense of humor, that's why they like me." Similarly, he used to feel ill at ease with his teachers, but now he thinks they are kinder and nicer. He does not feel any discrimination from his teachers just because he belongs to a multicultural family. He learned Korean language from his friends and in school.

## Suga: A Proud Korean-Filipino Kid

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His circle of friends includes his classmates. He goes out with his classmates only after school. They go to the movies sometimes. Often, he spends time with other multicultural children, mostly the children of Filipino and Korean parentage. He meets them every week and during vacations. They play, study and participate in cultural activities, such as dancing and singing.

If he were to choose which country to live, he answered, "I prefer to live in Korea because of the quality of education, though I love the weather in the Philippines." He always looks forward to Christmas and New Year when he gets a chance to go to the Philippines for vacation. He keeps in touch with his friends and relatives in the Philippines through social media and phone calls.

### **Learning from Australia**

Aside from winning the Tagalog Speech Contest, another unforgettable experience for Suga was when he was chosen from among many applicants to join the Korean delegation in a cultural exchange program to Australia. Organized by Korea Foundation, Suga and the members of the delegation visited some schools and communities in Australia to share Korean culture. The visit took place on August 22-26, 2016.

His greatest learning from the cultural exchange is Australia's openness to multiculturalism:

...because in Korea, if you are a multicultural child, it seems they don't want to be with you, some children are like that. But there, even if your mother is a Filipina, or a Vietnamese, it's still okay. They are all together, they are all friends even if they come from different races. I feel that they like me...

Suga found the atmosphere and environment for multicultural children more favorable in Australia than in Korea. He hopes that someday, multiculturalism in Korea can be like Australia's.

When asked if he is a Korean or a Filipino, he said jokingly, "it's a question I cannot answer directly." He later elaborated with conviction, "I am a dual citizen. I am proud in saying that I have two citizenships. I am proud that my mother is a Filipina and I am proud that my father is a Korean." He further said that his classmates and friends envy him because he can live both in Korea and in the Philippines.

### **Many gifts**

Suga has many dreams. He wants to pursue a career in acting and baking. He wants to act in a drama or a movie. He goes to acting workshops on Saturdays to hone his acting skills. He recalled that even when he was young, he found it easy to cry, but given the choice, he would prefer comedy.

Suga also wants to pursue a career in baking. His interest in baking was stoked when he saw some bread being sold at the hospital where his mother was confined. It was his first time to see such bread; curious, he tried it and liked it. He wanted to bake the same bread, so he searched for it on YouTube. After several attempts, he perfected the making of the bread. Now he receives a lot of orders for the bread, and also cakes and pastries. He must be earning well because he jokingly said, “There’s money everywhere here. I don’t know where else to keep my earnings.”

He dreams of having a bakeshop someday. Suga is aware that to achieve his dreams, he needs to practice more, which is why he bakes every day. Though he doesn’t have any idea which university to go to, one thing is sure, he will definitely study in Korea because he believes in the quality education it offers.

One talent that he is putting to good use is translation. Although he does not have formal training, he is often asked by some government and non-government offices to translate materials from English to Korean, from Tagalog to Korean, and from Korean to Tagalog. He remembers earning KRW320,000 for four hours of work during a recent translation assignment.

He is active in the Daehan Catholic Church in Daegu City. He observed that many Korean children do not go to church. For him, going to church and praying are very important. He leads the rosary in church. He attributes his faith in God to his exposure in the Philippines. “My talents come from God. That’s why prayer is important.”

For Suga, belonging to a multicultural family does not hinder him from dreaming big. He is a proud Korean and a proud Filipino. With his determination and his parents’ support, there is no doubt that he will surely achieve his dreams.





## Soo Nam

Love for Mom Inspires Big Dreams

**Interviewed and written by:** Emely D. Dicolen

### **Raised in Korea, socialized into Filipino culture**

Seven years ago, at a birthday party of one of the members of the Filipino community in Daegu, two cute, smart, little boys were running around. Everyone in the group loved them. People talked to them in Tagalog, and they would answer the questions in Korean. The older of the two boys was Cho Soo Nam; the younger one was his brother, Cho Soo Min.

Soo Nam was born in Korea on July 3, 2002. He is now 15 years old and a third year middle school student at Wangseon Middle School, Daegu, Korea. His father, Cho Ho Jin, died when he was only one year old and so he and his younger brother grew up under the care of their mother, Alice. He cannot recall much of his experiences with his father. His mother told him that his father used to bring him to the park.

Life was not easy for him and his family without his father. He and his brother were too young and all the responsibilities of taking care of them, sending them to school, providing for all their needs, and making sure that they get the proper discipline fell on their mother's shoulders. He recalls his mom teaching in the English academy and doing part-time jobs like baking cakes and pastries. "I also help her sometimes," he said. "I often help in doing the house chores like washing the dishes and sometimes preparing food so mom can have time to do other things. I help her bake, too." He and his brother also help in selling the breads, cakes and pastries baked by their mom.

“I love it when mom prepares our favorite dishes. She is very kind, loving, thoughtful, sweet, hard-working, friendly, and of course pretty,” he proudly said. “That’s why I love her so much.” For Soo Nam, his mother is the best person in the world. He said, “I’m very proud of my mom because she is famous. She knows many well-known people like the Philippine Ambassador and she even met Philippine President Benigno Aquino III.” Alice is very active in the Filipino community; she once served as President of the Daegu Filipino Community Council. She was president of the organization when it received the Presidential Banaag Award in 2014, an award conferred by the Philippine government to individuals or organizations for their significant contributions to advance the interests of overseas Filipino communities. She is also active in linking with the Philippine Embassy in Seoul in organizing Independence Day celebrations, cultural programs and dialogues with various Filipino communities. Alice brings her two sons to these activities. His greatest dreams are reserved for his mom. “When I grow up, I’ll give my mom a lot of money, a big house, and a new car. I’ll give her a comfortable and a happy life. I love my mom.”



Soo Nam and his brother selling bread, cakes, and pastries baked by their mom in a Filipino community event. Photo courtesy of Soo Nam’s family.

## Soo Nam: Love for Mom Inspires Big Dreams

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Though they normally use Korean language at home, his mom never failed to teach them Filipino or Tagalog language, Filipino culture, values and practices such as saying *po* and *opo* [language that shows respect for older persons or those in authority], *pagmamano* [a gesture of showing respect for and receiving a blessing from older persons], and others. He can understand Tagalog because his mom talks to them in Tagalog. He shared, “I can understand but I cannot speak because the pronunciation is difficult. When my mom is angry, she uses English.” Soo Nam is quite multilingual: he speaks Korean but he also understands English and Tagalog.

Soo Nam’s mom teaches them about God, how to pray, and they go to church together. He said, “When I was younger, I hated going to church. But now, I enjoy it. I am now a *sacristan* [altar boy]. I serve during the English mass for foreigners, mostly Filipinos, in the church on Sundays.”

### **Strong family ties and friendships**

He treasures every moment he spends with his brother and his mom. They enjoy going to the park, visiting famous places, going to church, or just hanging around at home. One memorable time for him was the time when his mom brought him and his brother to Seoul to go Namsan Tower, visit museums and eat good food.



Soo Nam (first on right) and his brother serving as altar boys. Photo courtesy of Soo Nam’s family.

His closeness with his father's family in Korea and his mother's family in the Philippines seems to fill Soo Nam's longing for his father. He happily recalled his last visit to the Philippines two years ago. His family went to see her mother's relatives in San Mateo, Rizal. They visited some places like Baguio City, where he recalled going to the strawberry farm and visiting some museums. He vividly remembers how his favorite uncle, Tito Leo, brought him to Jollibee, a famous fast food chain, especially for children. He also loves his Tito Leo because he gives him presents.

His father's early passing did not hinder him from becoming close with his father's family. They spend special holidays with them, such as during *Chuseok* (Thanksgiving Day) or *Seollal* (New Year) and pay respect to their ancestors. He has a very good relationship with his cousins and other relatives in his father's family but he is closest to his uncle whom he described as kind and smart. "My uncle is kind and smart. He works for a famous company in Korea, and he has a high position in his company. This makes my uncle my idol," he explained.

He also hangs out with his cousins in Korea. They usually go to the *norebang* [karaoke or singing room]. They play computer games at least once a month. He loves singing. Although he does not consider himself a good singer, he enjoys singing in the church choir.



Soo Nam has received awards in various competitions that he has entered. Photo courtesy of Soo Nam's family.

## Soo Nam: Love for Mom Inspires Big Dreams

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Like other Korean children, Soo Nam likes sports, too. During his free time, he plays baseball and soccer with his friends. He admits that he is not good at these sports but he is not also a bad player. He also enjoys being with his friends. He feels very much accepted and he never feels different from them. He never experienced being bullied or discriminated. His friends know that his mom is a Filipina and this did not pose any problem. In fact, his friends said his mom is very kind. "I look very Korean that's why I think they don't think I am a mixed blood," he argued. His teachers are very kind, too. They help him a lot in his studies and other school activities. They treat him equally with his classmates.

He is a competitive young boy. He joins contests and has received several awards. He was given a trophy and a cash prize of KRW500,000 in a Korean speech competition in his academy. He got another trophy in a *taekwondo* competition. He said "I want my mom to be always proud of me, that's why I am trying to be the best."

### **Dreams for the future**

Soo Nam brings this spirit of determination to his future dreams. He dreams big. He wants to be a car engineer and go to Gyeongbuk University, one of the good universities in Gyeongbuk province in South Korea. He wants to be a CEO of a famous car company like BMW. He dreams of having his own family and when he has his own children, he will teach them about cars. He wants to make a lot of money in the future so he can help his mom.

"I don't mind if people call me a Korean or a Filipino. I am comfortable and proud of both," he remarked. When people ask him, he automatically says he is a Korean, but in his heart, he is also a proud Filipino.



## Aera

Living the Dream

**Written by:** Emely D. Dicolan

I first heard about Aera Yoon, from her mother, Eloisa. In our many conversations at the Philippine Center in Seoul, Eloisa mentioned that she has a baby girl by her former husband, a Korean. Eloisa came to work in Korea. She and Aera's father were introduced by her employers, a Korean-Filipino couple. The marriage did not last—the lack of communication was one of the factors that strained the couple's relationship. When Eloisa got pregnant with Aera, her husband and her husband's family did not want Eloisa to have the baby. That was the final straw that broke the marriage. Pregnant, out of work, and without a husband, Eloisa stayed at the Songbukdong Center until Aera was born on July 17, 2003.

After Aera was born, mother and daughter moved to the Bomun Migrant Labor Center. Eloisa transferred Aera to an *agabang* [babies' center], a shelter for multicultural children managed by the Salesian sisters, because she needed to work. Her heart would break every time she would leave for work because Aera would cry. Sometimes Eloisa would stay with Aera a while longer until she would stop crying.

Aera got sick when she was staying in the *agabang*. Eloisa could not take care of her daughter because she was working. With a heavy heart, Eloisa decided to bring her daughter to the Philippines to be cared by her family. Aera was three months old when she arrived in Bulacan, her mother's hometown. She lived with Eloisa's brother and sister-in-law. Her uncle and aunt became her *tatay* (father) and *nanay* (mother)

## Aera: Living the Dream

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in the Philippines while Eloisa continued working in Korea. “Someday, I will bring her back to Korea and we will live together again,” Eloisa often said.

### **Returning to Korea**

Aera spent most of the first 10 years of her life in the Philippines. Unlike other children of her age who enjoyed outdoor activities and hanging out with friends, Aera spent most of her time at home. Her *tatay* and *nanay* did not allow her to go out and play with friends or neighbors. Though Aera and her mother were miles away, they communicated with each other through phone calls. Like her mother, Aera dreamed of being together someday.

Dreams do come true! Eloisa’s and Aera’s dream was fulfilled when Aera joined her mother in Korea. Their constant communication made it easy for both of them to reconnect and ease the adjustment process. The mother-and-daughter bond became stronger when Aera returned to Korea.

On top of her priority was learning the language. “I wanted to learn the language so that I can talk to my father. I want to ask him a lot of questions,” Aera emphasized. This motivation inspired Aera to learn Korean. She recalled that after six months of studying Korean language at the multicultural center near their house, her teacher recommended that she can enroll in a Korean elementary school. Her teacher was impressed with how fast she learned and was confident that with her Korean language skills, Aera will not be bullied in school.

With the positive feedback from her language teacher, Aera took an exam in a public school and was accepted as a second grader. Her classmates were kind but she was shy to interact with them. She was quiet in class and she seldom played with her classmates. She was not spared, however, from becoming the target of jokes of a group of young boys. The boys would say some Korean words to her which she could not understand. Maybe she was singled out because they knew that she has mixed blood, and that her mother is a Filipina.

Dreams do come true! Aera’s wish to see her father had been granted. She was two years old when father and daughter met for the first time. Eloisa initiated the contact with her former husband so he can see his daughter. Aera was a little older when they met the second time. Because Aera could not speak Korean, they could not communicate with each other. As mentioned earlier, Aera’s ardent wish to know her father motivated her determination to learn Korean. The third meeting turned out to be a



happy one because by then, Aera could speak Korean, and they can talk with each other. Other meetings between father and daughter had transpired since.

Aera's father visits her during special occasions. They would go to the park and dine together and he would give her some money. "We are not close," she said. "We do not even talk much but I am happy to see him." Later, she also met her *halmoni* (grandmother) and her younger half-sister, her father's child from his current family. Aera felt very much accepted by her father's family. All the more she felt complete.

**Korea is where her heart is**

For Aera, Korea is a beautiful country. She enjoys going to school because her teachers and classmates are kind. Aera mentioned that she learns more in Korea. The lessons, the learning materials and technological facilities are more advanced in Korea



Aera with her paternal grandmother. Photo courtesy of Aera and her family.



## Aera: Living the Dream

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than in the Philippines. When she has some difficulties, her teachers and classmates help her. Now she feels more comfortable with her classmates and friends. She feels accepted by her peers. Knowing the language enables her to communicate with her classmates. When she is asked about her mother, she is proud to say that her mother is Filipina. “She is my one and only mother.”

She also enjoys her freedom and has learned to be independent in Korea. She can go to school by bus or train by herself. During her first time to travel to school by herself, she missed the station where she was supposed to get off. Fortunately, she managed to find her way. She has a lot of opportunities visiting beautiful places such as parks and museums with her classmates and friends. She would go to the waterpark with her friends; they go boating, and do a lot of activities. She also attended a skating class, so she said it makes her life in Korea more exciting.

Another dream come true for Aera was visiting Jeju Island during one of the field trips organized by the school. She shared that when she was in the Philippines, she dreamt of going to Jeju Island. She was fascinated by the beauty of the island as depicted in television and magazines.

Aera is a very talented young lady. She was able to hone her skill in knitting. She normally does it during her free time. She draws and plays the piano. She shares her piano skills in the church where she plays on Sundays during the Holy Mass. She loves reading and writing, too. She writes some scripts for plays, songs and poems—in Korean. Aera wants to be a writer in the future and she dreams of entering one of the prestigious universities in Seoul to be able to pursue her dream.

In the Philippines, she did not have the opportunity to join competitions. But in Korea, she joined several competitions already; the first was a singing contest. Although she did not win, Aera said this did not stop her from joining other competitions.

Aera misses her family in the Philippines: her *tatay*, *nanay* and cousin Maeann. She considers Maeann as her favorite cousin because they lived together for a long time. They used to spend time telling jokes and talking about anything interesting to both of them. However, now that Maeann has gotten married, they don't get to talk that often over the phone. She hopes to visit them during the summer or winter vacation. Although now fluent in Korean, Aera has not forgotten her first language, Tagalog.

Recently, Aera graduated from elementary school and she proved that a child from a multicultural family can excel in academics. She was awarded as the Best Student in

her class. Aera is proud to be both Korean and Filipino. Eloisa was very proud of Aera's achievement. All their sacrifices paid-off. This achievement inspired Aera to strive and study harder now that she is in middle school. Thus far, all her dreams have come true: she now lives with her mother; she has met her father, grandmother and sister; she has visited her dream island—Jeju; she is doing well in school; she is enjoying her life in Korea. Determined to work hard, Aera is looking forward to a bright future.



Aera and her mother during her graduation. She was awarded as an Outstanding Student. Photo courtesy of Aera and her family.



## Haeri\*

Undercover in Korea

**Interviewed and written by:** Maruja M.B. Asis

Haeri was born in Korea to Filipino parents on March 10, 2004. She eats Filipino food at home, the food that her mom prepares. Other than her Filipino parentage and growing up on Filipino cuisine, Haeri has lived all her young life in Korea, speaks Korean, has Korean friends, likes things Korean, and as her parents see her, she is more Korean than Filipino.

Haeri's story started when her parents went to Korea to work. Her father, Josue, arrived as a factory trainee in Korea in 1997. At the time, Korea only admitted trainees rather than workers. Trainees were workers but they did not earn or were not entitled to benefits as workers. These conditions contributed significantly to unauthorized migration. Before his two years ran out, Josue ran away and found work in another company which offered better wages and working conditions. He was supposed to return to the Philippines after two years, but lack of options at home and opportunities for employment in Korea inclined him to stay in Korea, albeit under irregular conditions. He has since remained in Korea. During his almost 20 years of stay in Korea, he met a town-mate who was also a trainee in Korea, got married, bore two children (Haeri's brother is 15 years old) and made a life in Korea. He decided to

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\* The names of persons have been changed to protect their identities. The story is based on interviews which were conducted mostly with the parents since the interviewer cannot speak Korean and Haeri cannot speak English or Filipino. The conversations between the interviewer and Haeri were mediated by the parents.

work in the agricultural sector, which he found more stable and safer since it is not subjected to inspection by the authorities. Josue has been working in the farm for ten years. He and his employer have a very good relationship. Josue knows the ins-and-outs of the livestock industry, basically managing the business and co-workers in the farm.

Life in Korea is fine for Haeri and the family, except that they do not have legal papers. Their lack of legal status is like a sword that hangs over their heads, although this uncertainty seems to cause more anxiety for Josue and his wife, Elsa, than for the children. As Josue described, they do not know when they will get caught. Although their farm has not been visited by the authorities, Josue still worries about their situation. His employer is willing to provide him and his family with legal papers. His employer had asked for help in their municipal office, but was told that this was not possible. For the sake of the children, Josue hopes that they will not be caught and deported. Although they are able to live and work in Korea, the children attend school, and they are able to move around, they are also careful not to draw attention to themselves, lest they will be asked to produce documents about their legal status.

### **Living in the shadows**

Without legal documents, Josue and Elsa could not access social services in Korea. Haeri and her brother were born in a hospital; Josue and Elsa had to pay a lot of money to cover the delivery expenses. When the children reached school age, this presented a challenge because the school required documents. Josue's request to have the children admitted was granted, thereby allowing the children to attend school. In 2016, when Haeri's brother reached high school, the family went through a very uncertain period. The high school was a lot stricter in requiring a legal document, but was eventually persuaded to accept Haeri's brother as a student. According to Josue, if his son were not accepted, he and his wife would have thought of returning to the Philippines so their son could continue his studies.

Otherwise, life for Haeri seems to proceed in a normal fashion. Her father drives to and picks her up from school. This is her daily routine. She enjoys going to school and has many friends at school. According to her parents, her teachers tell them that Haeri is doing well in school. Sometimes, Haeri comes home and happily reports that she topped her exams. Haeri loves to draw and dreams of becoming an artist, although when asked what she likes best in school, she said that she enjoys sports. Elsa helps Haeri with her school work. There are times when Haeri would be on her own because Elsa had problems with the language. Both Josue and Elsa said that the

children's Korean language is much better than theirs. When they could not understand some Korean terms or concepts, they would ask the children to write them down in Korean so they could use Google translate to have these terms translated into English.

Haeri and her brother have their circle of Korean friends, mostly classmates, while Josue and Elsa have Filipino friends, workmates, as well as people in church. When asked about how they raise their two children, Josue and Elsa acknowledged that they combined Filipino and Korean approaches. As they often stressed, the children's culture is more Korean than Filipino. The family used to attend a Catholic Church; now, they are attending and are among the leaders of a Christian Church. If the family lived in the Philippines, the children would be part of huge extended families, both on their mother's and father's side of the families. In Korea, the family is confined to the nuclear family. Haeri knows that she has family and relatives in the Philippines. She knows and sees her grandparents and cousins on Skype, but language keeps them from communicating with each other.

### **Living in suspense**

Josue and Elsa aspire for Haeri and her brother to finish college, the same hope and aspiration of Filipino parents for their children. They are not sure, however, whether the children can continue their education in Korea. So far, Haeri and her brother have been able to sail through school requirements. The experience of Haeri's brother when he entered high school was a wake-up call for the parents. Josue and Elsa said they will return to the Philippines if the children could not continue their studies in Korea. They realize, however, that the decision will be tough for the children. The family has discussed this possibility; Haeri and her brother do not like the idea. If they had a choice, they would like to continue their studies and work and live in Korea. For them, Korea is home, while the Philippines is the home country of their parents. Josue and Elsa know that the move to the Philippines will be tough for the children: they will have to start life afresh, learn another language, and get accustomed to life in the Philippines. Josue and Elsa have prepared for their eventual return to the Philippines—they have built a house and they have acquired some farmland. What they have not and could not fully prepare for is how Haeri and her brother will adjust to living in the Philippines. All their life, they had been living as Koreans. Josue and Elsa would like to legalize their children's status in Korea, but they do not see any possibility on how to go about this. As mentioned earlier, their employer had made inquiries on how he can legally hire Josue and Elsa, but there is no such pathway in Korea.

In the meantime, Haeri goes about her day-to-day activities, working towards realizing her many dreams, hoping that all will be well.



Samples of Haeri's drawings. Scanned copies provided by Haeri and her family.



## Jae Guk

From Davao to Jeju

**Written by:** Jae Guk Go  
**Facilitated by:** Yang Soon Kim

Hello. My name is Jae Guk Go. I am 15 years old and currently living in Jeju City. I was born in the Philippines and lived there for 12 years. My father is Korean and my mother is Filipina. I went to a Chinese elementary school in Davao City from Grade 1 to Grade 5. My father worked on a ship as a chief engineer so I did not really see him that often and I did not have the chance to be close to him. I did not have any problems in the Philippines when it came to my schooling.

My family decided to permanently reside in Korea. In March 2014, we arrived in Jeju City. I continued my studies—Grade 6—at Samyang Elementary School. On my first day at school, my dad and mom accompanied me to the faculty room to meet my homeroom teacher. Luckily, my homeroom teacher knew how to speak English. I was brought to the classroom where I was asked to introduce myself. After the class, all of the students approached me and tried to communicate with me, but at that time I didn't know a lot of Korean so I tried to speak English to them. They toured me around the school. In our Korean subject, I didn't understand the lesson, even if my seatmate tried to help me. For the first time, I had a problem understanding my lessons.

Luckily, there was a program wherein high school students would teach grade school students on any subject that they needed help with. The program helped me a lot in my Korean language. I had fun times with my classmates. We went to Halla Mountain together. But in October 2014, our family moved to another place. On my last day in school, my classmates gave me letters. It was a sad day, but we needed to part ways.

In our new home, my father went with me to Nohyeong Elementary School where I will continue my studies. My new homeroom teacher took me to our new class and I met my new classmates. They welcomed me and asked for my phone number, talking to me in English. One boy took me around my new school. My teacher gave me Korean lessons after classes. Thanks to her, I learned a little bit of Korean.

In December 2014, I graduated from elementary. We had a two-month break from January to February 2015. I was excited to see snow for the first time, but not that much snow fell in Jeju, so I was a bit disappointed. I didn't even realize that it was snowing. So, my mom, dad and I went to Oremok near Halla Mountain to see the snow and do some snow sleighing. It was very fun, but also rather dangerous. That was my first sight of snowfall.

In March 2015, I started my first year of middle school. I was really nervous because of the exams and I was afraid I would fail. When I went to our classroom, I didn't have any friend to talk to. A boy behind me started talking to me. I told him that I came from another country and couldn't understand Korean that well. He said that he would teach me Korean and in return I would teach him how to speak English. He was my very first friend in middle school.

My teachers realized that something was wrong with me because I couldn't answer their questions. I told them that I couldn't understand Korean well and that I came from another country. After that, they made the lessons easier for me to understand, but still I had difficulties. My father thought that I should go to a Chinese academy [or cram school] to continue my Chinese lessons since I already learned Chinese in my elementary school in the Philippines.

My father also enrolled me in a Korean academy to improve my Korean. In time, I made a lot of friends. They were kind, friendly and they would help me a lot in understanding and answering the difficult questions in our lessons.

The day of my first exams came. When I received the examination papers, I was shocked because there were only 30 questions. In the Philippines, the exam questions could reach up to 70 items, but they were all multiple choice questions. In our Korean school, the type of examination was different and included multiple choice, fill in the blanks, enumeration and problem solving. I couldn't understand a single thing. After three days of exams, I asked my classmate if there were more exams to come. He said that there was only one exam left, and in the second quarter, there won't be any exams. I was very happy about it because when I took the exams, I kept grabbing my hair out of stress.



Finally, the report cards were given to us. I headed to my Chinese academy before going home. My teacher at school said that my parents must sign the report card. I was afraid to show it to my dad because I thought that we would get angry. I gave him the report card and he was really mad. I felt sorry and told my father to just sign it. He signed the report card and added a note. I didn't know what he wrote in the report card but I think it was about me. That night I was really stressed and I kept grabbing my hair. I didn't know what to do until I just fell asleep. The next morning, I asked my classmates if I was the last in our class, they said I wasn't. I was relieved that at least I wasn't the last in our class.

After one month, final exams were scheduled. I studied hard without understanding what I was studying. I failed again in the exams. The same thing happened. My father got angry and just signed my report card. I was not feeling that much stress like the last one because there were no more exams. I was looking forward to one month of summer vacation.

Two weeks after school started again, my teacher introduced me to a new mentor. She was from Jeju National University. She would go to my house and sometimes we would meet in the library or café and teach me Korean language, mathematics, science and other subjects. I understood what she was teaching me, but it was kind of fast. In the second quarter, instead of having exams, we would have a lot of quizzes. I was still getting stressed and kept grabbing my hair again. I would feel relieved when it is physical education time, or when I am hanging out with my classmates during free time.

In September 2016, we had a sports day and I was really excited about it because I was going to play basketball. A week before, we were practicing really hard so we would win first place and our class can eat chicken or pizza together. Our efforts paid off: we won first prize. We were so happy and I had zero stress that time.

Compared to my first year of middle school, I was more stressed in second year. We had four exams, two in the first semester and two in the second semester. When I entered my class on the first day, I saw my classmates from first year, so I was glad that they were my classmates again. All of the teachers were nice, except the mathematics teacher who was somehow strict.

Our math teacher said that we needed to participate in class recitation and answer the questions written on the board. I was really nervous that if I couldn't answer the

question, I would be punished. I studied our lessons and I understood a little bit more, but still not enough to pass the exam. Luckily I have a classmate who really wants to help me. I am glad to have a friend like him.

During summer vacation, my father told me to join the church's Scout Program. I already experienced being a Boy Scout when I was in the Philippines. When school resumed, I was happy to see my classmates again but I was not so happy with the lessons. The lessons were getting harder and harder. Thanks to my classmate who was always there to help me, I didn't fail many subjects. I kept failing mostly in my Korean subjects, but not English and Chinese. I was really sad and stressed out.

In March 2017, I entered my last year of middle school. I must study hard to pass the entrance exam for high school. Hopefully I can understand the lessons now and get some good grades in my subjects. There is also a teacher that comes to our house and tutors me in Korean and mathematics.

Since I was a child, I dreamed of becoming a doctor in the future. I want to become a doctor because I want to help my parents, grandparents and sick people who need treatment. Recently, I realized that I like sports, especially basketball. In school, my classmates would tell me that I am very good in basketball. They encourage me to play better and hopefully become a professional basketball player in the future. However, being a player is not a good profession. That is why I think I will pursue my dream of taking up a medical course when I enter university someday.

I can now communicate to my father in Korean. I thank my parents who are always there for me, giving me their full support, love and guidance in order for me to achieve my goals and ambitions in the future.



## Jadd

Mom's "Little Prince"

**Interviewed and written by:** Bubbles Beverly Asor

"Although mommy is having a hard time letting go of her baby prince, she feels so blessed seeing you grow over the years. No matter what, you will always be her brilliant and precious treasure. Stay smart, independent, and goal-driven, my love! Mommy loves you so much, beyond all the planets! HAPPY 13th BIRTHDAY, Big Foot!" This is Judee's heartwarming birthday message for her son Jadd. At first glance, it appears to be another sweet Facebook post that would earn hundreds of likes and shares online. But there is an inspiring life story behind this birthday greetings, a story of family, a story of migration, and a story of "her little prince."

On a February day in 2010, Judee and her five-year-old son, Jadd, left their hometown in Davao City for the proverbial "greener pastures" in South Korea. Unlike many Filipino migrants who chose to leave their home country for work, permanent settlement or marriage, Judee moved to South Korea to pursue graduate studies as one of the first steps to make her professional dreams a reality. However, since South Korea is a recent migrant destination especially for student migrants, Judee encountered institutional problems regarding her master's scholarship which affected the mother-and-son's living arrangement and financial resources. It turned out that Judee's scholarship would only cover a monthly stipend of USD500 without accommodations. The scholarship arrangement was a huge blow for Judee and Jadd who, at that time, did not know anyone in South Korea. This scenario of having no family and

friends in a new place was quite similar to Jadd's apprehension about South Korea: "I was more afraid because I did not know anyone."

Fortunately, another Filipino student in the same university introduced Judee to Emely Dicolen who used to be a lay missionary at the Pastoral Center for Filipino Migrants in Seoul. "Doc Emely," as she is fondly known to Filipino migrants in South Korea, was instrumental in linking Judee and Jadd to Sister Michaela Santiago, FMA who is the Filipino migrant community's *Lola* (grandmother). She is known for her tireless work in helping many Filipinos since the early 1990s, when the first wave of migrants were faced with labor and human rights violations. *Lola* made it possible for Jadd to be placed in Bethlehem Childcare Center<sup>4</sup> run by Catholic nuns (Salesian Order of St. John Bosco) especially for children of 'multicultural' families. Judee, as a student migrant, did not fall into the marriage migrant category but the center made an exception for her.<sup>5</sup> The Salesian nuns provided Judee and Jadd with a monthly supply of rice and shouldered their house's *jeonse* (a one-time lump sum deposit which usually offsets the monthly rent). In the following account, Jadd fondly remembered Bethlehem Childcare Center:

The center provided kindergarten uniforms, food tray for school lunch, bags as well as breakfast, lunch, dinner and snack for free. When parents couldn't bring their kids to kindergarten or they couldn't take care of them, they can take the kids to the center. It is open from Monday to Friday. Teachers also took care of kids who were too young to go to kindergarten, dividing them according to their ages in Bethlehem Childcare Center. They also provided medical fees when kids were injured. When I was in first grade, I sprained my ankle and couldn't walk properly, one of the Sisters who just had a heart surgery operation carried me on her back and helped me to get in the car. I remember taking an X-ray and wearing a cast. She paid everything for my treatment. Looking back, they were very kind. No words can express my gratitude to them for helping me to do homework and join my kindergarten graduation. When I changed to another school and had to leave Bethlehem Child Care Center, I sent a letter saying how I and my mom could not live without the Sisters.

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<sup>4</sup> The Korean term for day care or childcare center is *eorini-jib*. Interestingly, migrants often call the day care center as *agabang* which literally means baby room.

<sup>5</sup> This is a reflection of the ambivalence of a student migrant status in South Korea where universities have yet to provide systematic institutional support and infrastructures for international students with children and dependents.

## Jadd: Mom's "Little Prince"

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For two years, Jadd stayed at the child care center when Judee had to attend classes in the university. On many occasions, mother and son spent their weekend bonding time at the laboratory when Judee had to do experiments because Bethlehem Child Care Center was only open on weekdays. As a result, the nuns would occasionally give Judee a piece of their minds. "While most mothers bring their children to parks, you bring yours to the laboratory." According to Judee, children were not allowed to stay in their laboratory, but her research supervisor was very considerate of Judee's situation and let Jadd hang around:

Jadd's presence in the lab made everyone's weekend special. While Jadd was often left with English and Math worksheets at my desk, researchers (from student researchers, post docs, professors and even the dean of the graduate school) would stop by to give him food, milk, books, and even money in envelope. I was often surprised with what Jadd received from my colleagues and professors. "God works in mysterious ways" came into my mind because oftentimes when Jadd got cash gifts, those were the times that we were actually out of budget.

While Judee juggled graduate studies and family life, Jadd started familiarizing himself with his new home. His initial apprehension of the unknown became a reservoir of wonderment and awe to adjust to the new environment. Jadd had a profound way of looking at adjusting to Korean life: "Unfamiliarity... it was great to set your eyes on things that you see for the first time in your life". For most migrants like Judee and Jadd, unfamiliarity can be an impetus to find ways to survive and adapt to a new life. What could be a better way of adapting to a new country than mastering the language? Jadd started to pick up the Korean language like a sponge. Bethlehem Child-care Center became his first school where he was first exposed to Korean language and the nuns were his first Korean language teachers. Jadd is now a 'native' Korean language speaker who, from time to time, acted as a translator for his mom when the need to speak or write in Korean emerged. At the same time, he demonstrated excellence in English class because of his prior schooling experience in an international school in the Philippines and Tagalog-English as his language at home. Jadd's English fluency even became an object of jealousy among his Korean classmates in first grade. According to Judee, Korean kids in Jadd's class would sometimes tell Jadd that he wasn't a Korean since he could speak English well. These Korean kids with well-off backgrounds may have regarded Jadd as a competitor within a highly results-based educational context. This patchy recollection of school experience shaped Jadd's notion of "racism." In Jadd's perception of South Korea, he mentioned "racism" as the only factor which tainted his overall favorable and good memories of the country he

called a home for seven years. “I really like Korea. It was good. Other than racism, it was really good.” Jadd also recalled Korean kindness and generosity.

Once I encountered a grandfather in a subway train. I offered him my seat but he declined. “No I am going down soon.” But he did not get off until my stop. When I got out of the subway, he even gave me money... Koreans are very kind and generous.

Time flew by swiftly for mother and son who fell into their daily routine and everyday rhythm in South Korea. Judee pursued a PhD degree. As the pressure of PhD life built up, Judee sometimes had to travel to other countries for scientific conferences and symposia, her Filipino co-scholars and co-members of *Pinoy Iskolars sa Korea, Inc.* or PIKO (an organization of Filipino international students) took turns in taking care of Jadd while she had to be away for few days. Meanwhile, Jadd’s daily schedule was packed with academic lessons and school activities. After school hours, Jadd went to Jungdongyeok Adong Center, a government-funded children center, where he obtained free music lessons, *taekwondo* instructions, art and music lessons and other tutorials. This children’s center is funded by the Korean government which is an alternative to the expensive *hagwon* or privately owned cram schools and academies found in almost every corner in South Korea. Jadd, being a foreigner, could not avail himself of the free classes in the children’s center without a Korean intermediary. Judee’s colleague in the university served as a foster mother who made it possible for Jadd to be enrolled in the children’s center. In exchange for this generous act, Judee had to work with the colleague in coming up with papers and researches. While a majority of Korean students seemed particularly unhappy and harassed by “overeducation” in South Korea, Jadd tried to reconcile enjoyment and hard work as a response to the demand and pressure that Korean education system entails:

It was really good in elementary school. I went to the field and played soccer. I joined the soccer club in the sixth grade, started as a goalkeeper, went to the competition, and so on... Studying in Korea seems to have been really important because the level of study is really high and difficult, so I think it would be really hard if I did not study.

This balanced attitude towards study and play at such a young age and a great sense of responsibility can be attributed to Jadd’s “early maturity” according to Judee. It is manifested in Jadd’s socialization with young people and adults alike. Although many of his friends in South Korea who acted as his *noonas* (older sisters) and *hyungs* (older brothers) were from his mother’s circle of friends from PIKO, Jadd enjoyed hanging

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out with kids who were also athletic and they liked playing football and basketball. He described himself as a "friend to everyone, regardless of gender." This combination of willingness to engage with people, hard work and self-reliance has reaped fruits. Jadd was conferred an Achievement Award during his elementary school graduation in February 2017. Judee was immensely proud of this accomplishment and she shared it with her family and friends on Facebook:

Another milestone that mommy is so proud of... I will always be your number fan, my Prince Jadd! Congratulations for being an Achievement Awardee! I will always do my best for you and your dreams. Love you so much!

From an apprehensive five-year-old boy who left his grandparents, aunts, cousins and father in Davao City, Jadd had already come a long way. He is now a tall, athletic (he runs every morning, plays basketball at night and plays soccer on weekends), good-looking and confident young man who once dreamed of becoming a veterinarian then a drummer. To this day, he dreams of becoming a football player. There is no doubt in Judee's mind and heart that Jadd could be whatever he wants to be and those dreams would someday be realized. At his age, Jadd is not just a dreamer but also a doer. He believes in one's will to make things happen. "I think it would be good to have our dreams come true. It is our choice, it should not be forced and imposed upon us but it must be our own course of action."

Despite the immense role that South Korea had played in shaping his childhood, Jadd claims that he is very proud to be a Filipino. For him, his sense of belonging is contingent upon his mother and father's ethnic identity. During his seven-year stay in South Korea, Jadd and Judee visited the Philippines two times, in July 2014 and October 2016. He remarked that he had a great time with his family during that visit and he actually did not want to leave. His connection to the Philippines was continuously maintained by frequent visits of his grandparents and aunts in South Korea. Jadd also maintained that his favorite season is summer because it is his hometown's weather and he likes to frolic in water. "Summer is the best time for swimming and I really like outdoor activities. I also like its perfect temperature and weather." Notwithstanding his maturity beyond his age, Jadd still revels in his childlikeness and youthfulness. His fondest memory of the Philippines is when he was wearing his Spiderman suit and was jumping up and down the sofa until he badly hurt his chin. He also recalled his fear of a big dog chasing him and his father rescued him. At the tender age of 13, he is very tentative to define his ethnic and religious identities. This is quite understand-

able. His Filipino identity is based on his family's ethnicity. When asked if spiritual life is important, Jadd believed that faith in God is important. As to why, he still does not know.

As of this writing, Jadd and Judee are in the United States awaiting their permanent residence visa and eventual citizenship. It would be their third home. Jadd's family in South Korea included him and his mother. This time, Jadd introduced me to a third member of their family—his new father. He also mentioned having three brothers through his new dad. He sorely misses his friends in South Korea but I am pretty sure that Jadd would be carving a new niche in his new home with his bigger family and would be writing a new chapter of his life. If there was a tinge of regret that Jadd felt, it would be the lack of time and opportunity to visit the nuns in Bethlehem Childcare Center before they left Korea. "It is a little unfortunate. I can not say anything except to say thank you very much."