Report on the 9th International Conference on the Philippines (ICOPHIL)
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The International Conference on the Philippines (ICOPHIL) convened for the 9th time on 28-30 October 2012 at the Kellogg Center, Michigan State University. It is of curious interest that the 9th ICOPHIL came back to Michigan where the first International Philippine Studies Conference was held in 1980 at the Western Michigan University, Kalamazoo. Further, several Michigan universities have always been centers of various scholarly undertakings that had great impact on the Philippines.

The 9th ICOPHIL was spearheaded by Philippine Studies Association President, Bernardita R. Churchill and convened by Roger Bresnahan of Michigan State University. The conference drew from more than two decades of Philippine studies scholars from a wide breadth of disciplines and professions. Since 1980, ICOPHIL convened every 4 years, bringing together multidisciplinary conversations and debates among academics, policymakers, advocates and students from all over the world. The 9th ICOPHIL again brought better appreciation of issues on the Philippines and Filipinos.

The program was impressive as it constituted a wide variety of significant subjects. In particular, more than 60 panels were grouped into 11 simultaneous sessions that spanned two and half days. It was very difficult for participants to choose what panel to attend within a session since the panels were several and ran parallel with each other. In various lenses of analysis and exploration, themes ranged from Filipino diaspora studies; law, democracy and society; education; popular culture; indigenous communities; Mindanao issues; colonialism; environment, climate change and disaster risk reduction; economic and political history; economics and poverty; social agenda and development; identities; Chinese in the Philippines; health; sexual labor; values and tradition; preservation of natural patrimony; and the writing of Philippine history.

The discussions in the panels and informal instances were very enriching and lively, especially since participants were from different stages in scholarship. Some were established scholars with long research experience while others were students and beginning scholars whose questions provided fresh perspectives. Further, what made discussions fruitful were interests that traversed disciplines, exemplifying that an issue is not the domain of a single discipline. The following are some insights from the selected panels.
The paper entitled, “Demistifying Philippine Statutory Law,” delivered by Lance Collins, was not only insightful in regard to analyzing the intricacies of Philippine law and demonstrating how important codification is; it also spawned insights among the participants such as the role of culture and norms in the process of institutionalizing legal practices and the irony of overdependence on litigation. Eugene Matibag’s paper entitled, “Nick Joaquin’s Diagnostics of Colonial Society and Its Long-term Effects,” raised many questions from participants including whether Nick Joaquin’s critique of Philippine society is a mirror that is meant to catalyze a social epiphany or is it merely a reflection of a colonial education. The panel, entitled “Mindanao: Incorporating the Southern Frontier to the Philippine State,” provided presentations using both historical and contemporary frames. The panel discussion demonstrated how relevant the subject is, more so in recent weeks where Mindanao development, peace and identity have again come to the forefront of international attention. In the panel entitled, “Chinese in the Philippines: Current Research Agenda and Future Directions” Teresity Ang See acquainted researchers with valuable knowledge on source materials while Richard Chu shared the finer details of carrying out Tsinoy family historical research.

The two plenary sessions were compelling. The first plenary featured the documentary film project entitled, “U.S. v. Narciso, Perez & the Press,” which is spearheaded by Geri Alumit Zeldes, moderator and film director based at the Michigan State University. The film narrates the story of two Filipino nurses on trial in the US. Not only is it excellent journalistic work, but, among others, the work also presents various layers in the study of the Filipino diaspora and their narratives and how these affect identity formation among Filipino-Americans. The multi-media performance that followed complemented the film project in a non-conventional way by reconstructing the larger narrative through the perspective of Jason Magabo Perez, son of one of the accused nurses, who grew up through those tumultuous events.

The second plenary featured the keynote address entitled, “The Philippines: A Country at Risk from Climate Change” was given by Rodel Lasco, Senior Scientist of the World Agroforestry Centre (ICRAF). Rodel Lasco is also a Professor at the University of the Philippines Los Baños and lead author of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). It is worthy of note that the IPCC won the 2007 Nobel Peace Prize. The keynote address is significant not only for the Philippines but for the world because the Philippine environment plays a crucial role in the global ecosystem. The immediate, physical and material implications of climate change risk, exemplify that there is so much room for a deeper multidisciplinary discourse on climate change that needs to be seriously considered by Philippine studies scholars.

The conference featured the US launch of two books published by Anvil in 2011. One is entitled, Subversive Lives: A Family Memoir of the Marcos Years by Susan Quimpo and Nathan Gilbert Quimpo while the other is entitled, Film:
American Influences on Philippine Cinema," by Nick Deocampo. Conference participants also had the pleasure of watching the pre-screening of Deocampo’s work, entitled, “Film: American Beginnings of Philippine Cinema.”

The conference ended with a banquet and a closing roundtable discussion, which was moderated by Belinda Aquino, one of the pillars of Philippine Studies. The discussion weaved together the threads of Philippine Studies – its history, where it is now and how far it can go. While the 9th ICOPHIL was to face the closing curtain, it was also a signal for a dynamic beginning as new perspectives were shared, research collaborations hatched, friendships forged, and future directions sketched. Excitement over a growing community of Philippine Studies enthusiasts has continued. See you all in the 10th ICOPHIL in the Philippines in 2016!