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Flexible Citizenship and Diasporic Consciousness: A Critical Inquiry of Chinese Filipino Identity in Charlson Ong's *An Embarrassment of Riches*❖

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ABSTRACT

Employing Stuart Hall's theory on cultural identity and Aihwa Ong's notion of flexible citizenship, I examine how three key characters in Charlson Ong's award-winning novel, *An Embarrassment of Riches*, position their identities in complex contexts, and how economic factors function in shaping their flexible identity. This paper argues that although the flexible identity of diasporic Chinese in the Philippines serves as a useful strategy to acquire economic power, transnational subjects and nation-states need to be cautious about the effects and limitations of flexible citizenship. I also conceive of language as a form of cultural capital and probe the agency of language in constructing flexible identity of the key characters. Further, I explore the effects of flexible citizenship on transnational subjects and nation-states. I aim to shed light on elucidating the specific type of hybridity of Chinese Filipinos, in addition to offering a nuanced understanding of the effects of flexible identity and its social implications.

KEYWORDS: diaspora; flexible citizenship; Chinese Filipino; Charlson Ong; *An Embarrassment of Riches*

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I. Introduction

Decolonization and globalization have significantly facilitated the flow of goods, capital, ideas, and people (Castles 1146). Such unprecedented flows destabilize the traditional understanding of identity, which defines it as stable and unchanging (Hall, "Cultural Identity" 236). In the Filipino context, the Chinese immigration to the Philippines started several centuries ago (Blaker 31; Go 386; Hau, *Chinese Question* 36), yet Chinese Filipinos have long been considered a foreign presence who pose problems for the Philippines (Hau, *Chinese Question* 6). The Chinese Filipinos stand in a problematic position vis-à-vis the "Philippine colonial society and national community" (Hau, *Chinese Question* 56). The Chinese have long been viewed as economically dominant, politically disloyal to the nation, and culturally different from the Christian majority (Hau, *Chinese Question* 58; Wickberg, *The Chinese* 9). As argued by Fanon, a problem that arises after dismantling colonialism is that the national bourgeoisie replaces the colonizer while the social hierarchy remains the same (11). Consequently, the so-called "Chinese problem" persists even after formal decolonization (Hau, *Chinese Questions* 5-6; Suryadinata 8).

The predicament of diasporic Chinese Filipinos is manifested in literary works, mainly written in Chinese and Filipino, which are addressed to a limited readership (Hau, "Notes" 107). As an emerging minority literature, Chinese Filipino Anglophone literature has gained recognition in recent years. The fact that Charlson Ong's *An Embarrassment of Riches* was granted the second prize in the Centennial Literary Contest serves as proof of this growing recognition. Set in the Victorianas, a fictional country monikered as a "small Philippines," *An Embarrassment of Riches* exposes the social, economic, and political realities in the Philippines, such as social inequality and instability, political violence, the predatory nature of global capitalism, and the problematics of Chinese Filipino identity (Gonzales 455; Patke and Holden 152). The novel tells the story of Jeffrey Tantivo, who returns to the Victorianas from his exile in the Philippines to investigate the mysterious death of his foster father and to help his friend, Jennifer Sy, to run for presidency after the demise of General Azurin, a dictator who has ruled the country for a long time. With the help of Jeffrey, Jennifer wins the presidential election. Yet her rule is brief and unstable since there are many interest groups that seek to benefit from and undermine her regime, including Alfonso Ong, a wealthy and conniving person. During

Jeffrey's stay in the Victorianas, he uncovers the mysterious death of his foster father and surprisingly finds that Alfonso is his biological father, who pretends to reconcile with him for selfish reasons. The novel ends with Jeffrey's second exile to the Philippines, with a renewed sense of self-identity and "awaiting a certain daybreak" (Groyon 1).

Although the national contest offered authors "an honor of national significance" (Jurilla 14), Charlson Ong's *An Embarrassment of Riches* was unable to generate much critical dialogue. Critical work on the novel has focused on the Chinese Filipino characters. Velasco analyzes the hybridity and complexity of identity formation of the diasporic Chinese and argues that their identity is contingent on the diasporic experience (359). However, Hau argues that family ties are the determining factor of the protagonist's legal status and fate (*Chinese Question* 267). She contends that the novel offers a deconstructive understanding of family and a different framework to understand the experience of Chinese Filipinos. Unlike Velasco and Hau, who focus on the protagonist Jeffrey, Gonzales focuses on the villainous character Alfonso Ong, and argues that he is a self-declared alien who infringes on the sovereignty of the fragile state (455). With Chinese businessmen and capital engaging in regional and global development, as well as China's rising influence in the Southeast Asia, this novel serves as a good vehicle for exploring the flexible identity of diasporic Chinese and its effects. Therefore, I propose that Stuart Hall's theory of cultural identity and Aihwa Ong's theory of flexible citizenship can be employed as useful and appropriate theoretical frameworks for examining the experiences of the key characters. In this paper, I focus especially on moments, motivations and effects of the shifts of three major characters from one subject formation to another. I examine how Jeffrey Tantivo, Jennifer Sy, and Alfonso Ong position their identity in different contexts, and the underlying forces that shape their flexible identities, including its double-edged effects. I argue that although the flexible identity of the diasporic Chinese serves as a useful strategy in pursuit of capital when subject to various regimes of truth and power, transnational subjects and nation-states need to be cautious about the effects and limitations of flexible citizenship. I hope this paper can offer a nuanced understanding of the effects of flexible identity and its social implications from the perspective of the Chinese Filipino.

II. Cultural Identity and Flexible Citizenship

In his analytical essay, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," Stuart Hall argues that there are two different types: the first type is an essentialist view, which perceives identity as a unity among people affiliated by race or ethnicity; it is stable and fixed, offering a sense of "oneness" (234). While appreciating the positive effects of this essentialist view in postcolonial struggles, Hall proposes a second view that recognizes both similarities and diversities within the shared perception of identity. It is a matter of "being" as well as "becoming," and is more about "positioning" than "being" (236-37). Identity is "never completed, never finished" (Hall, "Old and New Identities" 47) and is always in process. Identity is "subject to its specific conditions, limits and modalities," like events, relations, and structures (Hall, "New Ethnicities" 444). Hall emphasizes that identity is contingent, undergoing "constant transformation" ("Cultural Identity" 236). For Hall, diasporic identity is often a mixture of different presences, and it is defined by "heterogeneity and diversity" as well as "hybridity" ("Cultural Identity" 244).

In this paper, it is the second view of identity that is emphasized and deployed. This view acknowledges the fact that identity is subject to "the continuous play of history, culture and power" (Hall, "Cultural Identity" 236). While acknowledging the fluidity of the identity of the diasporic Chinese, I also propose that people are not influenced by external factors in a passive way, for they can also respond actively to different contexts by deploying specific strategies. Hence, the fluidity of their identity positioning is the outcome of the interplay between external factors and human agency. Therefore, I connect Stuart Hall's theory with Aihwa Ong's theory of flexible citizenship, which stresses the intentionality of identity positioning. By linking the two theories, I hope to offer a comprehensive analysis of the issue of identity in this paper.

Flexible citizenship is a notion proposed by Aihwa Ong when she explores the experiences of some diasporic Chinese in Western countries. As suggested by Ong, flexible citizenship refers to the "cultural logics of capitalist accumulation, travel, and displacement that induce subjects to respond fluidly and opportunistically to changing political-economic conditions" (6). The notion delineates the new norm of the diasporic Chinese as they deploy strategies to "circumvent and benefit from different nation-state regimes by selecting different sites for investments, work, and family relocation" (A. Ong

112), an experience that is quite different from the older generation of diasporic Chinese, who usually have strong emotional attachments towards China. In essence, flexible citizenship means "strategies to accumulate capital and power" (A. Ong 6) in different circumstances, including education, nation-states, and global market. By employing flexible citizenship, the diasporic Chinese are able to seek better educational, financial, and social opportunities with their knowledge, skills, transnational networks, and intercultural literacy. Based on such logic, I intend to analyze the specific strategies the three key characters employ. While taking Chinese transnationality as the primary subject, Ong advocates that the term is mainly employed by male elite and professional transnational subjects (112, 127). Hence, flexible citizenship also has class and gender dimensions, which will be covered in the analysis. Although flexible citizenship seems to focus on the agency of individuals, nation-states also participate in cultivating flexible citizenship. Nation-states may also employ it to attract skilled workers and professionals to "compete more effectively in global economy" (A. Ong 30). Besides, individuals may submit themselves to "the governmentality of capital, plotting all the while to escape state discipline" (A. Ong 135). However, it should be noted that despite the benefits and convenience brought by flexible citizenship, traditional regimes of truth and power, such as nation-states and family, still exert huge influence on individuals (A. Ong 108). Also, nation-states may constantly change their policies to adjust to the influx of different kinds of migrants so that they can benefit with little cost (A. Ong 112). Hence the nature of flexible citizenship is complicated and even inherently contradictory. In this light, I intend to explore both the positive and negative effects of flexible citizenship through the analysis of the three key characters from the dimensions of economy, family, kinship, language, and nation-states.

To sum up, flexible citizenship is related to strategic capital accumulation. Capital is an important factor in shaping flexible citizenship. In his essay "The Forms of Capital," Bourdieu elaborates on three types of capital: economic capital, social capital, and cultural capital. Economic capital, the major factor in the construction of flexible citizenship, enjoys considerable currency in the discussion of flexible citizenship. Yet, in exploring the experiences of wealthy and powerful Chinese migrants, Aihwa Ong has proposed that the strategies flexible citizenship denotes include not only economic capital but also cultural capital. Besides economic capital, I also probe cultural capital and the

conversion of different forms of capital, which are sometimes undervalued in the discussion of flexible citizenship. Bourdieu defines cultural capital as "instruments for the appropriation of symbolic wealth socially designated as worthy of being sought and possessed" ("Cultural Reproduction" 488). Cultural capital includes language competency, cultural background, knowledge, and skills (DeMarrais and LeCompte 15). According to Bourdieu, cultural capital exists in three states: 1) embodied state, which is the long-lasting disposition of mind and body, such as proficiency of dominant language; 2) objectified state, which is represented in media and cultural products, such as writing, painting, etc.; and 3) institutionalized state, which is reflected in academic qualifications, such as diploma, certification, etc. ("Forms of Capital" 244-48). Besides, under certain circumstances cultural capital can be converted into other forms of capital (Bourdieu, "Forms of Capital" 243). In my inquiry, I mainly focus on language as a type of cultural capital, which can function as symbolic power "in the sense of accumulated prestige, celebrity, consecration, honor, recognition or legitimacy" (Xu and Xu 77). Understanding and employing a certain language opens up a new world of possibilities, including social status, global citizenship, and personal development. In analyzing ethnicity, Stuart Hall also acknowledges the power of language as he argues that "identities are about the questions of using resource of history, language and culture" ("Who" 4). Since it is common for diasporic people to acquire proficiency in two or more languages, I explore both English and Chinese as cultural capital in shaping flexible identity of diasporic Chinese in the novel.

Ong's theory of flexible citizenship has raised numerous discussions ever since it was put forward. Some praise the positive effects of flexible citizenship, with which individuals can travel freely and easily between countries, seek advantages, and avoid disadvantages in various locations (Fong 15, 75). By employing flexible citizenship, individuals can enjoy more benefits and convenience, such as better educational resources, personal development, more employment options (Fong 187; Matthews and Sidhu 60), easier border crossing (Abu El-Haj 298), bigger influence in communities (Lepofsky and Fraser 127), and expanded geopolitical spaces to "accumulate and convert various forms of capital" (Stasiulis and Ross 333). Despite these positive effects, the negative effects of flexible citizenship have also been discussed. Some scholars have suggested that flexible citizenship can entail "insecurity, internal conflicts, and unfulfilled desires" (Fong 139), as individuals are not

sure whether such strategies can lead to a brighter future. By focusing on the gender dimension, some (Waters 119-30; Kanna, *Dubai* 162-64) have argued that flexible citizenship can be experienced differently by females. Waters proposes that the effect of flexible citizenship can be limiting since it even reinforces traditional roles of women and offsets the independence women have in the homeland (119). Also, women may experience boredom, loneliness, fear, and estrangement (Waters 130). Furthermore, flexible citizenship seems to be suitable mainly for the male elites and the professionals. Social upward mobility can be quite difficult for non-elite individuals (Fong 218). Sometimes the disadvantages of flexible citizenship can outweigh its advantages, such as the students in Fong's study (139, 204) and the women in Waters's study (130). Besides, the effects of flexible citizenship can only function to a certain extent (R. Lee 224; Choi 14). It is suggested that nation-states still influence identity formation (Mountz et al. 336) and can strategically deal with flexible citizenship as long as it does not threaten nation-states (Kanna, *Dubai* 160). Turner even argues that flexible citizenship is a political fiction, as citizenship can only function within nation-states ("Classical Sociology" 146; "We" 9). Flexible citizenship is also complicated by familial considerations, life course needs, citizenship restrictions, and other factors (Choi 14; Kanna, "Flexible Citizenship" 124; Kobayashi and Preston 165; Ley and Waters 120; Lynn-Ee Ho 145). By drawing attention to these contentions, I intend to offer a postcolonial reading of the novel to complicate the notion of flexible citizenship.

III. The Otherness of the Chinese

In the Philippines, the identity of Chinese Filipinos has long been a bone of contention. Due to a long history of colonial rule and interracial integration, the majority of Filipinos are of mixed ancestry. In a press release by the Senate of the Philippines in 2013, Sen. Edgardo Angara stated that Filipinos with Chinese descent comprised 22.8 million of the whole population, accounting for around 20%; despite the considerable population with Chinese ancestry, Chinese Filipinos remain in a problematic position (Hau, *Chinese Question* 27).

As diaspora is marked by hybridity and heterogeneity, diasporic people may experience and live a double (and even plural) life (Braziel and Mannur 5). In the new land, whether they are Chinese or Filipino, insider or outsider,

lies in the crux of Chinese Filipino identity. To clarify this confusion, it is necessary to elucidate what "Chinese" means. The word nation affirms a common life and often alludes to people with common racial, cultural, and historical ties. Like the concepts of a nation or nations, which could be described as "products of history" (Radhakrishnan 125), "social constructions" (Ashcroft et al. 150), or an "imagined political community" (Anderson 6), what a nation means to people depend on inventions and interpretations. Similarly, the connotation of the meaning of "Chinese" depends on the context and interpretations. Because of these reasons, people with Chinese ancestry may identify themselves and be identified by others as Chinese, Filipino, or Chinese Filipino under various circumstances. From the perspectives of non-Chinese, perception of Chineseness also evolves through time. As claimed by many theorists (qtd. in Hall, "Who" 4-5), it is only through the relation with the Other that identity can be constructed. Historically, the imagination and construction of Filipino identity is related to the construction of the Chinese as the Other. Under both Spanish colonial rule and American colonial rule, the Chinese in the Philippines were considered aliens by law (Gonzales 429). During the Spanish colonial period, the Spanish colonial rulers passed laws to limit the number of Chinese who could live in the Philippines and to restrict their area of settlement (Wickberg, "Chinese Mestizo" 68). In addition, mass killings of ethnic Chinese occurred in Manila in 1603, 1639, 1662, 1686, and 1762 (K. C. Lee 61-64; Weightman 24). When the United States replaced Spain as the new colonial master of the Philippines, the Chinese Exclusion Act was implemented in the Philippines in 1898 (E. Lee 41; Martínez and Lowrie 524). The persecution of Chinese continued to exist after the independence of the Philippines. Several presidents enacted laws to filipinize Chinese enterprises. Other diasporic Chinese all over the world also faced outright hostility and were discriminated against, just as the political cartoonist Thomas Nast critically depicted in the cartoon, *The Chinese Question*, published in *Harper's Weekly* in 1871. The "Chinese Question" also existed in the Philippines, as Caroline Hau explored in her pathbreaking book, *The Chinese Question: Ethnicity, Nation, and Region in and Beyond the Philippines*. In the Philippine context, the traditional race-based paradigm played a crucial role in identification. People were classified according to race, yet there were differences in these categorizations. Regardless of equality and diversity, the imagination of the Filipino identity was "conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship" (Anderson

7), from which the Chinese were excluded. While there were many references to Chinese Filipino, it was not common to use hyphenated identities to describe other groups of "foreign" ancestry, such as Spanish Filipino and American Filipino. Since national identity is usually perceived as a collective cultural identity (Hobsbawm 46; Smith 3), which presupposes a self/other, and us/them distinction, being Chinese connotes an otherness against the homogeneity of Filipino national identity. Before the Chinese Filipinos were finally naturalized and acquired status as Philippines citizens in the 1980s, being Chinese meant a foreignness, which was "inscrutable" to the native (See 163-65).

The issue of the "Chinese Question" is taken up in the fictional world that Charlson Ong creates. Although Victorianas is a country whose people do not have a strong sense of national identity, the Chinese Victorianos face discrimination and are perceived as the Other. In the Victorianas, the Chinese are also made aliens by law. The Victoriano Constitution "allowed for nearly any creature or any race to obtain citizenship except the Chinese" (C. Ong 11). Even when President Azurin realizes the importance of the ethnic Chinese, Chinese Victorianos are still not granted "full-fledged citizenship" (C. Ong 21).

While the Chinese Filipinos were once considered as aliens, now they are included in the umbrella term "Filipino," as a special kind of Filipino (Hedman and Sidel 84). However, as proposed by Stuart Hall, the boundaries of difference are always positioned in relation to points of reference ("Cultural Identity" 238). Vis-à-vis other racial groups inside the Philippines and the Victorianas, the stereotyped perception of the diasporic Chinese as "pariah capitalists" (Safran 89) still exists, since the Chinese are mainly engaged in the economic sector and function as middlemen. However, this is due to the fact that they are excluded from other sectors by the government. With the rise of Chinese capitalism and acculturation over generations, the connotation of Chinese now gradually shifts to "a signifier of both global and regional specific capitalist development" (Hau, *Chinese Question* 259). Despite the shift to a more positive image of ethnic Chinese, borders and boundaries continue to shape how we view ethnic Chinese. With an ambivalent attitude towards the ethnic Chinese, being Chinese still implies otherness to some extent.

IV. Flexible Identity of the Diasporic Chinese

Derived from Greek, the word "diaspora" originally meant to sow or scatter seeds before it was used to refer to people who are dislocated from their homeland because of "migration, immigration and exile" (Braziel and Mannur 1), especially the Jewish people. Designated by Thai King Vajiravudh as "Jews of the East" (Reid 55), the diasporic Chinese in Southeast Asia suffered a similar plight. In the literary world, the experiences of the diasporic Chinese are often associated with exile, displacement, alienation, cultural conflict, and so on. Yet, in a world where borders and boundaries are constantly contested and reconfigured, demographic and ethnographic landscapes have gone through unprecedented changes. Subject to "the continuous play of history, culture and power" (Hall, "Cultural Identity" 236), diasporic identity can be fluid and flexible.

Though it is common that diasporic people experience an oscillation between homeland and hostland (Mishra 16; Tölölyan 7), what the protagonist Jeffrey goes through dramatizes that it is not always necessarily the case. Jeffrey, in his inquiry into the mysterious death of his foster father, does not experience the strong confrontation between those two cultures. Rather, his experiences suggest that diasporic identity can be malleable, which means identities coming not from "fixed categories like race, class, gender, or nation, but from common positions in networks" (Polletta and Jasper 288). Jeffrey's experience departs from traditional understanding of diaspora, which deems "ancestral homeland as their true, ideal home" (Safran 83). Jeffrey never assumes China to be his true and ideal home where he would "eventually return" (Safran 83), but neither does Jeffrey consider the Philippines as his home. Instead, Jeffrey positions himself as a Victoriano. His identification attests Hall's insight that cultural identity is more about positioning than essence ("Cultural Identity" 236). The Victorianas is not an ideal place because it is filled with "poverty, power shortages, religious fanaticism, political charlatans" (C. Ong 9). Besides, the Victorianas invalidates Jeffrey's passport and terminates his citizenship during Jeffrey's exile in the Philippines, making him an alien. However, it is constantly acknowledged by Jeffrey as "my country" (C. Ong 2, 10, 24). Years of exile in the Philippines does not diminish Jeffrey's patriotism. Instead, Jeffrey yearns for a return to Victorianas.

In Jeffrey's life, the signifiers of Chineseness only appear sporadically. Most of the time, Jeffrey does not consider China as his eventual home where he "could in any final or literal sense return" (Hall, "Cultural Identity" 241). Yet, identity is not static, it is always a changing process (Hall, "Old and New Identities" 47). In certain circumstances, Jeffrey thinks of connecting himself with China. One moment is when his passport and citizenship are invalidated by the Victorianas. He has to "find some ground, some place, some position on which to stand" (Hall, "Old and New Identities" 52). Considering his ethnicity, he wishes that he could get a passport from China. Another moment is when he feels that people surrounding him in the Victorianas might not be trustworthy. Since "friends had turned into enemies," Jeffrey feels alienated amongst the Victorianos and is left with "a thousand fears" (C. Ong 100). Then he decides to go to the Tan Family Association to seek help. Since clan association is an important network in binding overseas Chinese (Cushman and Wang 178; Hau, *Chinese Question* 249-53), Jeffrey's seeking help from the clan association indicates that he acknowledges his identity as an ethnic Chinese. In addition, the visit also induces Jeffrey to respond fluidly and opportunistically to the changing context (A. Ong 6). When Jeffrey reaches the Tan Family Association, he switches his language to Chinese so as to create intimacy. He introduces himself as Tan Kok-ying, the son of Tan Tiak-ti. He then points to a photo of his foster father and pronounces both the Chinese and English name of his foster father so that people finally begin to talk to him. The code-switching again denotes Jeffrey's flexible identity.

There are moments when Jeffrey seems to perceive himself as a world citizen (Velasco 344), not belonging anywhere. When his foster father died, Jeffrey feels alienated and "no longer owed allegiance to any clan or country" (C. Ong 12). However, his attachment with both the Victorianas and China is not completely broken off. He is still allegiant to the Victorianas, but he strategically signals his attachment to China when conditioned by specific contexts.

Since diasporic identity is always defined by "heterogeneity and diversity" (Hall, "Cultural Identity" 244), the identity of diasporic Chinese cannot be fully represented by one male character. Like Jeffrey, Jennifer is also ethnically Chinese. The fluidity of her identity is manifested through her clothes, office decorations, and beliefs. As the heiress of one of the economic tycoons, she inherits Megalomalla, a 150-hectre skyscraper which is filled with high-tech

facilities. Everything inside the office bespeaks western modernity; yet, its backdrop forms a huge contrast. There are pictures of Maoist Red Guards and a Chinese character *ren* (patience; novelist's translation) on the wall. Jennifer wears the cheongsam, a traditional embodiment of the identity of ethnic Chinese. Besides clothing and decorations, there are also other contrasts of western modernity versus Chinese tradition. On the one hand, Jennifer advocates New Ageism and neo-socialism. On the other hand, she believes in Feng Shui, which is part of the traditional worldview of the Chinese. Each time Jennifer holds a meeting, she asks her advisor, Aldoux Chang, to perform a ritual. Jennifer's flexible identity well exemplifies the hybrid nature of diasporic identity (Hall, "Cultural Identity" 244).

Diasporic identity, Hall argues, is not "defined by essence or purity, but by the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity" ("Cultural Identity" 244). The image of Alfonso Ong forms a sharp contrast to Jeffrey and Jennifer. Alfonso is a wealthy and conniving person who builds his "kingdom" on a small island off the coast of Victorianas (C. Ong 171). Departing from his hometown in China, Alfonso sojourns and establishes business in Indonesia. Before the anti-Chinese sentiment reaches its peak in Indonesia, Alfonso migrates to the Victorianas. Taking the Victorianas as a base, Alfonso actively engages in regional and global business. He sends his two sons to America and conducts business with Chinese, Victorianos, and Americans. By "selecting different sites for investments, work, and family relocation" (A. Ong 112), Alfonso responds quite "fluidly and opportunistically to changing political-economic conditions" (A. Ong 6).

V. Underlying Forces in Shaping Flexible Identity and Its Effect

But what are the forces and elements that condition the flexible identity of the diasporic Chinese? And what are the effects? Several factors contribute to the shifts of the three key characters in positioning their identities. Economic factors play an important role in those shifts. As suggested by Aihwa Ong, flexible citizenship is mainly applicable to professionals, elites and technocrats (112). A common feature of the three key characters in the novel is their elite status and economic condition. Both Jeffrey and Jennifer are heir/heiress to business tycoons. Alfonso himself is a business and political tycoon. With economic capital, they are able to mobilize upward, to enter the elite strata, to

engage in regional and global capitalism, and to enjoy more conveniences and privileges. As national elites, they possess more discursive power over their co-nationals, engage and intervene in national politics, and even are able to establish a state-within-state, as Alfonso does. Without economic power, becoming elite and crossing boundaries would be impossible, as not everyone has the "equal advantage of mobility" (A. Ong 11). I posit that, to some extent, both the class mobility and flexible citizenship of the three main characters are framed by their economic condition. The invalidation of Jeffrey's passport and citizenship by the Victorianas serves as a good example. Jeffrey's foster father has lost much of his fortune before his death. Besides, the Victoriano law stipulates that the blue resident passport of resident Chinese can be invalidated "by any number of reasons including the death of the principal resident" (C. Ong 11). Therefore, Jeffrey's passport is immediately expired upon the death of his foster father. In contrast, Jennifer's citizenship remains valid after her father's death.

Possessing economic capital can enable diasporic subjects to go beyond the sphere of economy and venture into acquiring other forms of symbolic capital that can "facilitate their positioning, economic negotiation, and cultural acceptance" (A. Ong 18). For Jennifer, her entry into politics is facilitated by her economic condition. While traditional Chinese culture and patriarchal ideology often marginalize diasporic Chinese women, confining them to traditional roles of mothers, daughters and wives (Hom 42; A. Ong 152; Tang 21), Jennifer, as the heiress to one of the conglomerates, possesses more economic capital, which empowers her to participate in national politics. Besides, economic factors also prompt Jennifer to reclaim her Chineseness. As proposed by Aihwa Ong, the rising Chinese capitalism stimulates the acknowledgement of Chinese roots by some naturalized Southeast Asian subjects (7), including the Filipinos (Hau, *Chinese Question* 247-48). Jennifer's embrace of Chinese culture can be seen as her strategy in attracting votes and capital. But what is contradictory is the co-existence of elements of Communist China and traditional China in Jennifer's life, represented by the portrait of Red Guards and reliance on Feng Shui respectively. Her flexible identity seems more like a strategy than double identification. For the diasporic Chinese in the novel, their identity as ethnic Chinese becomes salient only when it brings them benefits. Therefore, I perceive their embrace of Chineseness as a useful strategy

to "respond fluidly and opportunistically to changing political-economic conditions" (A. Ong 6).

The role of economic factors is also prominent in Alfonso's experience. His experience best exemplifies the opportunism denoted by flexible citizenship. The desire to accumulate capital drives Alfonso to "privilege business-driven travel, family relocation, and the manipulation of state controls" (A. Ong 20). His moves to Indonesia and Victorianas may be interpreted as "strategies to accumulate capital and power" (A. Ong 6), which bring him enormous wealth. With the capital brought by flexible citizenship, Alfonso becomes a king of a state-within-state and is out of the governance of the Victorianas. To maximize his profit and interest, Alfonso can collaborate with anyone, make use of all resources, engage in illegal activities (such as drug trafficking and human trafficking), and even abandon his family. To please an uncle who has lent him money, Alfonso marries the daughter of that uncle, while abandoning Jeffrey's mother who is pregnant at that time. Jeffrey's mother is later saved by Carlos Tantivo, Jeffrey's foster father, through marriage. Alfonso collaborates with Comrade Lu, a corrupt officer who transports prisoners from China as slave labor for Alfonso. To secure his power and interest, Alfonso intends to build a modern harbor so that the American fleet could harbor and he could thereby rely on American superpower to manoeuvre the country. In the name of promoting the development of the Tagbulan tribe and preventing their extinction, Alfonso "relocates" these indigenous people and "cultivates" them (C. Ong 170-71). However, Alfonso's real aim is that to take away their kidneys for his kidney transplant.

Fanon has argued that a problem that arises after the dismantlement of colonialism is that the national bourgeoisie replaces the colonizer, while problems such as inequality and exploitation continue to exist (11). The case of Alfonso well attests to such a phenomenon. By taking advantage of the benefits and conveniences brought up by flexible citizenship, Alfonso transforms himself into a national bourgeois of the Victorianas, effectively joins global capitalism, and becomes an active participant in the neo-colonialist exploitation and violence against both his compatriots and citizens from other countries. With economic capital in hands, Alfonso also manipulates national politics and intervenes in the presidential elections to maximize his profit. No Victoriano president after the war is able to "come to power without *lao* Ong's blessing" (C. Ong 163). When Jeffrey meets Alfonso, he is advised to persuade Jennifer

to quit the presidential election so that her family can continue to proposer. After Jennifer establishes the new government, Alfonso secretly collaborates with other interest groups to undermine the stability of the new government, facilitates a coup, and finally makes Jeffrey a puppet president after Jeffrey provisionally agrees to be an organ donor. When Jeffrey runs away, Alfonso plans to kidnap his sons in America to operate the kidney transplant. Although Jennifer's experience seems to demonstrate that diaspora is a "liberating force against oppressive nationalism" (A. Ong 15), Alfonso's experience shows that it can also be a damaging force. The flexibility Alfonso possesses induces an attenuated sense of citizenship (A. Ong 119) as it significantly weakens state power and sovereignty. While the experiences of the main characters all demonstrate that flexible identity can provide individuals with opportunities and conveniences, its power is limited because people are still subject to "the continuous play of history, culture and power" (Hall, "Cultural Identity" 236). But Alfonso's pursuit of capital and interest is accompanied by some sacrifice, such as the loss of his lover and son.

Cultural forces also exert huge influences on diasporic subjects. Among these elements, family and kinship are important factors in shaping the identity of diasporic Chinese (A. Ong 113). For Jennifer, although her status as an heiress grants her capital and flexibility, she is still bound by filial piety. Since her family business meets financial crisis and a substantial share of the company is purchased by Alfonso, as the heiress she has to bear the burden to prevent her family enterprise from going bankrupt and attempt to revitalize it. Therefore, she participates in the presidential election, through which she might gain power and capital to facilitate the revitalization of her family business. While Jennifer is confined to the family regime, Jeffrey benefits from his confinement. One moment that Jeffrey shifts his position toward (cultural) China is during his visit to the family association. As hybridity is a prominent feature of diasporic subjects, it opens "a third space" (Bhabha 218) and affords them multiple options. Therefore, when Jeffrey becomes doubtful of the Victoriano people around him, he turns to his Chinese connections for help. But it is also noteworthy that the power of kinship is limited. When Jeffrey first introduces himself, no one responds. Long-time exile and an abrupt visit make Jeffrey look like a stranger in the family association.

What helps Jeffrey finally reconnect with the diasporic Chinese clan is language. When Jeffrey switches to Chinese, a localizing strategy denoted by

flexible citizenship (A. Ong 113), people begin to talk to him. Language, as a symbol of cultural identity and a form of cultural capital, closes the gap between Jeffrey and other diasporic Chinese. Jeffrey's proficiency in spoken Chinese, as cultural capital in the "embodied state" (Bourdieu, "Forms of Capital" 244), helps him establish connections with the ethnic Chinese and get useful information regarding the secret behind his foster father's death. Language also plays a significant role in Jeffrey's reacquisition of the Victoriano citizenship. The Victorianas, like the Philippines, institutionalized English as an official language alongside its indigenous language due to its colonial history. In the Filipino context, under the American colonial rule, English became the official language, which has far-reaching influence on the Philippines, granting "the Filipino education system an elitist character" (Hau, "Notes" 319). English is widely used as a formal language for communication and is generally regarded as a language for educated elites (Gonzalez 496). English proficiency, on both individual and national level, opens up opportunity for improvement of life, such as working overseas (Bolton 5) and access to higher education (Bernardo 17). Therefore, the mastery and deployment of English connotes power and privilege. As proposed by Bourdieu, one speaks language not only for communication but also "to be believed, obeyed, respected, distinguished" ("Economics" 648). In order to sustain citizenship and social status, they learn the language of the colonizer. As suggested by Bourdieu, different forms of capital are convertible into other forms of capital ("Forms of Capital" 253). With economic capital, Jeffrey is able to receive a good education, speak and write fluently in English, and thus transform economic capital into cultural capital. The elitist education then enables Jeffrey to write eloquent political essays for journals. As suggested by Bourdieu, cultural capital can "yield distinction for its owner" ("Forms of Capital" 245). With expertise in political essays, Jeffrey attracts the attention of Jennifer so that the latter invites him to return to the Victorianas to assist her presidential campaign. Since potential profitability of cultural capital depends on its scarcity (Bourdieu, "Forms of Capital" 248), Jeffrey's linguistic proficiency later prompts Jennifer to assign him the responsibility of publicity for her presidential campaign. Hence, it can be seen that through Jeffrey's life, different forms of capital are employed and converted in order to enable Jeffrey to better position himself and negotiate different forces.

In addition, it is also worth noting how Jeffrey and Aldoux Chang address Alfonso Ong. When Aldoux talks to Alfonso and when Jeffrey visits Alfonso for the first time, instead of using Mr. Ong or Alfonso, they call him *lao* Ong (old Ong; C. Ong 115, 163, 351), a special kind of Chinese honorific. As the combination of *lao* with surname is used exclusively by the Chinese to address a friend (Chao 238; Wu 61), such an address indicates that Jeffrey not only aims to "to be understood but also to be believed, obeyed, respected, distinguished" (Bourdieu, "Economics" 648) by Alfonso Ong. By employing such cultural capital, Jeffrey creates a sense of intimacy and forms a sort of alliance with other diasporic subjects. In addition to economic and cultural forces, national identity or allegiance may also influence subject formation. Although Jeffrey's identification with China is a purposeful act in pursuing personal interest, he is not a typical opportunist as denoted by flexible citizenship, since he has a strong attachment to the Victorianas. His main identification with the Victorianas is closely related to his status as a *mestizo de sangley* and a second-generation diasporic Chinese, because many overseas Chinese disengage themselves from Chinese cultural interests and national belonging in their hostland (A. Ong 116). In the Philippines, many second and third generation Chinese Filipinos identify the Philippines as their homeland (Hau, *Chinese Question* 93-96). Before 1946, the Chinese in the Philippines, whether immigrants or local-born, identified themselves as Chinese (Cushman and Wang 177). With the issuing of the Letter of Instruction No. 270 on the naturalization of Chinese, many ethnic Chinese acquired Filipino citizenship in order to get rid of various restrictions and to pursue personal interest (Tan 179). Although many ethnic Chinese have acquired Filipino citizenship, some assume dual identities, identifying with the Philippines and still "remaining conscious of being Chinese" (Cushman and Wang 1). Living in an "in-between space" (Bhabha 1), Jeffrey is able to sustain connections with the two sides and make use of disparate networks when needed.

While the above discussion has illustrated different forces in shaping flexible identity and its effects, Jeffrey's experience also demonstrates the conflict of flexible identity and personal pursuit. Exiled in the Philippines and deprived of Victoriano citizenship, Jeffrey has thought of acquiring a Chinese passport, which would only serve as a point of "temporary attachment" (Hall, "Who" 6) in positioning identity. In a globalized era, the function of passports as attestation of citizenship has been significantly undermined (A. Ong 2) as

holding a passport does not necessarily mean loyalty to a nation-state. For Jeffrey, seeking a Chinese passport is only a strategy and a response to the changing political-economic conditions (A. Ong 6), which indicates the limitation of flexible citizenship, just as some researchers (Fong 191-93, 218; Kim 953; R. Lee 224) have argued.

VI. Conclusion

Diasporic identity is a continuing process of positioning and becoming. It is about "Where you are at" instead of "Where you are from" (Gilroy 3). Identity is subject to the specificity of context, temporality, power relations, and so on. In mediating with the mainstream culture, the markers of Chineseness are no longer "the unspoken and unspeakable presence" (Hall, "Cultural Identity" 240) in the life of the diasporic Chinese. The ongoing negotiation between Filipino Chinese and mainstream Filipino culture prompts the recognition of the particularity of the diasporic Chinese.

As the title of the novel indicates, the Chinese Filipinos are an economically privileged group in the Philippines, yet they are also a marginalized group, hence causing a kind of embarrassment for them. Narrating from the perspective of such a special group, *An Embarrassment of Riches* contests and redefines mainstream notions of identity, citizenship, and national belonging. Although Chinese Filipinos are often perceived as the Other within the nation-state, Charlson Ong does not follow the "strategy of reversal and inversion" (Hall, "New Ethnicities" 446). Instead, he presents us with a "non-coercive and a more diverse conception of ethnicity" (Hall, "New Ethnicities" 448). Charlson Ong's depiction of the major characters suggests that pigeonholed images of Chinese-Filipinos are insufficient. By recognizing the "diversity of subjective positions, social experiences and cultural identities" (Hall, "New Ethnicities" 444) which comprise the category "Chinese Filipino," Charlson Ong captures the distinctiveness of the Chinese Filipino experience. As argued by Hall, identity can be framed by two vectors: "the vector of similarity and continuity; and the vector of difference and rupture" ("Cultural Identity" 237). The identities of the diasporic Chinese in the novel share some similarities, like attachment with Chinese culture, family, and kinship. But there are also differences as they respond differently to the contexts, which leads to disparate life experiences. Their flexible identity serves as a useful strategy in

the "war of positions" (Hall, "Old and New Identities" 57), in their pursuit of capital and interest, not only in economic form but also in political and cultural form, such as pursuit of equal civil rights, political security, and social acceptance. Flexible identity also functions as a practicable strategy in negotiating political and cultural rules of the hostland as well as in preserving distinctions and ethnic heritage.

As globalization has drastically changed how we perceive the world and ourselves, it stimulates people to seek flexible citizenship to acquire more capital. Meanwhile, triggered by global capitalism, many countries, including both developed countries and developing countries, are eager to attract foreign investment and talents to become more capable of facing global competition (Lynn-Ee Ho 151; Mitchell 229; A. Ong 132). Such a desire may prompt countries to adopt policies which allow easier access to citizenship. The commodification of citizenship, and the flexible citizenship it encourages, can help nation-states attract investment and capital. Yet, the concomitant economic advances may include the continuation and intensification of economic and social inequality since the social hierarchy remains the same. Flexible citizenship holders may participate in global capitalism's exploitation and violence against vulnerable groups. A blind attraction to capital can make flexible citizens place themselves above nation-states and other citizens, which may lead to chaos and turmoil, weaken the competitiveness of nation-states, or even infringe upon the rights and interests of individuals and nation-states (Studemeyer 567-68).

For transnational and diasporic subjects, flexible citizenship sounds enchanting as it brings additional benefits and convenience, but its disadvantages should not be overlooked. Although flexible citizenship seems to liberate individuals from constraints of borders and boundaries, nations are imagined as *limited* because they still have "finite, if elastic, boundaries" (Anderson 7), Hence, people remain embedded in specific geopolitical communities to a certain extent. The popular view that globalization has weakened nation-states has been problematized by Aihwa Ong (6) since nations still exert influence towards transnational subjects by determining "different shades of (il)legality of particular flexible citizenship practices" (Kim 940). While enjoying the benefits brought by flexible citizenship, transnational subjects may still be viewed as aliens who cannot be trusted, which has been elaborated by some researchers (Choi 14; Fong 191-93, 218; Kim 953). Their

flexible identity and the capital they possess can prompt an unusual upgrade of their status, contesting the "expectation of an orderly ethnic succession" (A. Ong 100). Therefore, flexible citizenship may lead to anxiety and resentment towards diasporic subjects. Furthermore, as citizenship is infused with duties, obligations, freedom, and rights, there might be tension between the pursuit of citizenship and those elements. It may also lead to additional burden (Fong 67,152; Popadiuk 241; Zhou 702) and feelings of estrangement (Waters 130).

As argued by Ong and others (Maira 714; Studemeyer 568), flexible citizenship is inherently contradictory. Through a critical discussion of Charlson Ong's *An Embarrassment of Riches*, it is the modest goal of this essay to clarify when and to what extent flexible identity may prove advantageous or disastrous. In a world reconfigured by transnationality on the one hand and witnessing the revival of populism on the other hand—a condition that engenders exclusionary nationalist sentiments and arouses xenophobia—flexible citizenship brings both opportunities and threats in the evolving interplay of regimes of truth and power.

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