

## Repensar los estudios ibéricos desde la periferia

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# The Location of the Philippines within Spanish Official Frameworks

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**Abstract** This article explores several notions of location in relation to the Philippines. Contrasting Filipino studies which problematise conceptions of the Philippines as Asian, this essay focuses on Spanish perceptions of the archipelago in official political and economic plans regarding Spain's presence in Asia in the 21st century. The Philippines plays an important role in these plans, as it is listed as a priority country for Spanish actions in this region, mostly due to the shared colonial links. Despite this shared history, there are several Spanish ambivalent perceptions that locate the Philippines as a country connected to Spain and, at the same time, in the periphery of countries with a Hispanic heritage, which is evident in the location of Fil-Hispanic studies within Hispanic scholarship. Furthermore, Spanish official perceptions are often politically motivated, in relation to the practical uses that the location of the Philippines can have for Spain as a gateway to Asia, in particular, the neoliberal focus of certain Spanish policies, which re-establish a centre-periphery dynamics in a neo-colonial global context.

**Summary** 1 Introduction. – 2 Location as a Symbolic Category. – 3 The Philippines as Categorised in Spanish Foreign Affair Policies. – 4 The *Vigan Master Plan*. – 5 Hispanic Enough?

**Keywords** Spain. Philippines. Cultural relationships. Fil-Hispanic Studies. Spanish Cultural Promotion in Asia. Instituto Cervantes.

## 1 Introduction

Until 2005, when I thought of location, it was always referring to a particular physical place. I always connected places in rigid categories: cities, countries, regions, and continents. It was always drifting from physical to political geography. This conception of location has a lot to do with my schooling in Spain, where the study of geography focused on physical cartographical representations. It was also a consequence of my own professional experiences, which meant that, for about ten years, I relocated to five different countries. In 2005, while living in New Zealand, I was offered an internship in the Embassy of Spain in the Philippines, and so I was to relocate once more. I, once again, thought of Asia, then Southeast Asia, then an archipelago, then the island of Luzon. It was in my first month working in Manila that I started to problematise the concept of location, realising

that it is not a neutral and transparent representation but a politically and culturally constructed category. I was in the Embassy at the time, reading a document regarding a new programme for scholarships that the Madrid office had sent to be distributed and promoted in the Philippines. After examining the document, I realised that there was no mention of the Philippines in the wording of the requirements; it was a cultural programme for which *hispanoamericanos* could apply. I thought it had been sent by mistake, so I went to ask my Filipino colleague, who had been working in the Embassy for the past twenty years, what she thought of this. She told me that there was no mistake; it was probably for Filipinos as well. She said that scholarship programmes in which it stated that they were for *hispanoamericanos*, usually included Filipinos, even if not specified. After this experience, my rigid thinking in terms of physical 'location' was shaken by a completely different reality. This scholarships programme was conceived, not in terms of physical location, but in terms of a historical colonial relationship. This anecdote serves to illustrate the shifting nature of the concept of location, which can be socially constructed according to the establishment of different categories of countries, regions, or places. What struck me the most in the (silent but tacit) Spanish categorisation of the Philippines as an ex-colony in 2005 was that it was also included as a priority in a new set of official administrative plans as part of Spain's projection in Asia. In 2000, the Spanish central government launched the *Plan Marco Asia-Pacífico*, a political strategy established to improve Spain's presence and visibility in Asia. This plan was extended for two more years, and it was followed by a more ambitious *Plan de Acción Asia-Pacífico 2005-2008* (MAEC 2005), and subsequently by the *Plan Asia 3, 2008-2012* (MAEC 2008). This article explores several notions of the location of the Philippines, particularly as perceived in Spanish official political plans and cultural activities in the twenty-first century, arguing that there is a range of ambivalent perceptions that locate the Philippines as a country with strong links to Spain and, at the same time, in the periphery of Hispanic countries. This is also apparent in the location of Fil-Hispanic scholarship in relation to Hispanism. As María Dolores Elizalde, one of the most influential researchers in Philippine colonial history, stated in 2003, the Philippines is "the most forgotten amongst the Spanish colonies", and has been linked in Spain to "old clichés which, due to a lack knowledge, described it as distant and lacking in interest" (Elizalde Pérez-Grueso 2003, 11; Author's trans.). Furthermore, this perception of a peripheral Philippines is, in many cases, symbolic and politically motivated.

## 2 Location as a Symbolic Category

One of the first notions that comes to mind when thinking of the location of a specific country is the mental image of a map. The process of ‘mapping’ can serve as an initial explanation for the connections between the concepts of geography and physical location. However, mapping is also a symbolic process which, in turn, makes location a symbolic category. Maps depict places, but due to their representative nature, they are also subject to politics. In his extensive study on nationalism, Benedict Anderson discusses one of the political consequences of mapping. He describes maps as “national logos” (1991, 175) that reinforce the idea of the boundaries of the nation-state, and play a role in the construction of nationality. In today’s Philippines, for instance, this ‘national logo’ is widely printed on a variety of everyday places, such as t-shirts, book covers, and jeepneys<sup>1</sup> as a symbol of the country’s national sentiment. Anderson discusses the process of mapping in connection to the birth of the official nationalisms in Southeast Asia. He explains that “the logo-map penetrated deep into the popular imagination, forming a powerful emblem for the anti-colonial nationalisms being born” (175). From an earlier date, since the fifteenth century, maps have also served to represent, naturalise and impose colonial empires. Examples of these cartographical representations, in which the Philippines is represented as part of the Spanish colonial enterprise, can be found in several exhibitions about the Philippines organised by Spanish official institutions since 2000. For instance, the *Filipiniana* exhibition (2006) was organised by the Spanish Institution Casa Asia in Barcelona and aimed to offer an overview of the history and culture of the Philippines. The very first section of this exhibition was significantly entitled “The Charting of a Territory”. This section displayed a selection of maps ranging from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century, as well as several paintings by Filipino artists from the twentieth century, related to mapping. The exhibition started by establishing a clear division in the history of the islands; before and after Spanish arrival there. Textually, the focus on this section was on the ‘unification’ of the inhabitants of the islands under Spanish rule. The text of the exhibition catalogue explained that it was the Spanish conquest and colonisation of the islands that enabled that “such a varied human, cultural and geographic construct began to be “artificially unified”” (Guardiola 2006, 24). Curator Juan Guardiola emphasises the important role of mapping in that process: “One of the tools used to shape this construction, physically and symbolically, was cartography” (24). The maps, in this section, should be interpreted in

1 The *jeepney* is one of the most widely used form of public transport, adapted from the North American Jeep.

relation to these accompanying discursive remarks. Reaching far beyond the primary denotation of maps as geographical markers, the textual materials made particular statements about how the exhibition visitor and the catalogue reader should interpret those maps on display: “The first exhibition space consists of a transitional area that draws a real and an imaginary map of the Philippines [...] [T]his introductory space made up of historical, military and artistic maps intends to establish a physical and mental territory that will guide us through *Filipiniana*” (24).

An interesting note in this statement is the distinction between ‘real’ and ‘imaginary’ maps. Since the map is, in most cases, a visual representation of geography, a ‘real’ representation does not exist, as the actual process of depiction already entails some kind of selection and interpretation, influenced by the author’s motivation. Therefore, even the most accurate maps are constructed following particular motivations and embedded in the historical situation. The early maps depicted in *Filipiniana*, as well as in other exhibitions, are an example of this. The simple act of drawing the Philippine islands is already constructing and conveying particular meanings, which, in the case of the early maps, relates to the representation of the Philippines as part of the Spanish Empire. Nevertheless, the *Filipiniana* exhibition does not explore the fluidity of the process of mapping in the Philippines. Filipino Historian Vicente Rafael explains that “through the [first] two centuries of Spanish rule, the limits of Filipinas kept shifting” (2000, 5). While Rafael focuses on aspects of geopolitics, Filipino scholar Nick Joaquin, referring to Magellan’s arrival in the islands in 1521, states:

It would take four more expeditions and half a century before Philippine geography as we know it today would begin to take shape; and even then it would still be “fluid” [...]; the form of our national geography was not “inevitable”. Like the identity we call a Filipino, it, too, was a development – and still is a work in progress, a map in the making. (1988, 147)

Apart from the idea of the flexibility of the map, Joaquin has made an interesting point by connecting “national geography” with “identity”, expressing how both are “in progress” and, therefore, not static. If a national “identity” is constantly being defined and contested (in the Philippines as much as in Spain), the same can be said about the perception of what constitutes a region, both in terms of its geography and the characteristics that are associated with it. In this context, some studies in the Philippines have challenged even some of the most common ways of categorising the country. In one of his articles about Filipino identity and its connections to the Philippine nation, Filipino scholar F. Sionil José expresses that “*We are not Asian*”, challenging a widely assumed basic

notion: "By accident of geography, we [Filipinos] are in this part of the world but we are not Asians in the sense that the Chinese, the Japanese, the Indians - even the Siamese - are" (Sionil José 2008, 3).

His argument is that, when comparing the history of the Philippines to that of the surrounding countries, more differences than similarities can be found, from religious to cultural influences. Sionil José argues that the tribal division of the islands, and later colonisation by the Spaniards first, and the Americans after that, left an indelible cultural mark on Filipinos. This mark made the country very different from its Asian neighbours; so much that, even today, Filipinos are still struggling to define themselves among Asian or Southeast Asian nations. The category that Sionil José proposes is simply that of 'Filipinos' who have been shaped by their geography, but are "still struggling towards nationhood" (2008, 3). Apart from this questioning of Filipino identity within Asia, other critical studies in the Philippines problematise essentialist perceptions of Asia. Filipino sociologist Fernando Nakpil Zialcita further argues from the very title of his essay about the questionable Asian categorisation of Filipinos: "As yet an Asian Flavour does not Exist" (2005, 239). In this essay Zialcita explores a particular discourse which portrays Filipinos as non-Asian, due to the perceived differences between their culture and that of other countries around them. By analysing several categories, such as "geography, race, language, and culture", he asserts that it can be argued that "there has been no Asia" (245). His conclusion is that considering every aspect in particular would lead to a different categorisation and, therefore, to include or exclude certain countries and/or the different cultures within them. Similarly, in a study entitled "Southeast Asia as a Collage", Zialcita (2005, 269-300) examines the origins of the term Southeast Asia, as a Western category. He argues that as many commonalities can be found as differences, among the countries that fall within the geographical category of Southeast Asia. However, he acknowledges that the existence of ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations), which invented a region, made relevant the question of what Southeast Asia encompasses. His conclusion is that, if a definition of a Southeast Asian identity is sought, it should be wide enough to include all of the communities that ASEAN incorporates. The categorisation of countries and cultures is, then, problematic, but also it is a common way to make sense of a particular reality. In the case of the Spanish plans for foreign affairs, the categorisation of the Philippines in Asia is a way to organise their policies. However, it can be argued that this issue is as problematic as Zialcita suggests.

### 3 The Philippines as Categorised in Spanish Foreign Affair Policies

When the Spanish Government published the first strategic plan to reach Asia and the Pacific, they placed countries into five discrete categories. The *Plan Marco* groups countries into “Las cinco Asias” (MAE 2000, 35), which are:

1. China.
2. Japan and both North and South Korea.
3. The Indian Subcontinent.
4. The various country members of ASEAN (in which the Philippines is included).
5. Australia, New Zealand, and other islands in the Pacific.

It is clear from this division that, as much as physical geography plays an important role, there is an economic view of the region, acknowledging, for example, the growing importance of China as an economic power by positioning the country in a single category by itself. The second major approach to delineate the region is described in the *Plan de Acción Asia-Pacífico 2005-2008* (MAEC 2005). The ‘five Asias’ disappear and there is another categorisation in three different sets of Asian countries (apart from the Pacific region, which is described separately). First, there is Northeast Asia, with specific references to China, Japan, South Korea, and Mongolia. Second is Southeast Asia, in which the Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, and East Timor are described. The last block includes Afghanistan and South Asia, in which India, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Pakistan are discussed (MAEC 2005, 45-77). Apart from this strategic division, the *Plan* establishes another categorisation: *Cooperation for Development* (121-34). This is a perception of the region that focuses on economics, and countries are divided in the following categories:

1. *Países Prioritarios*: The Philippines and Vietnam.
2. *Países de Atención Especial*: Afghanistan, Cambodia, East Timor and countries affected by the 2005 tsunami, in particular, Sri Lanka, Indonesia and Thailand.
3. *Países Preferentes*: China and Bangladesh.

These three categories express a political decision by the Spanish Government to spend funds on certain projects in these countries. Spain has established itself as a ‘giver’, confirming a kind of categorisation that positions some countries as ‘receivers’, and therefore needing the funds. This establishes specific dynamics in global movements of funds from Spain, reinstating old positions of the centre and the periphery, which becomes an expression of global neoliberalism. In this situation, there is a perception of the Philippines as a country in need of Spanish aid, a

discourse that has been clear since the 1990s. The concept of cooperation in the Spanish plans is connected to that of development and it is key to the understanding of the official perceptions of the Philippines by the Spanish Government.

The special consideration of the Philippines as a priority in Spanish foreign affairs policies is highly visible in the area of *Cooperation for Development*. This establishes a series of regional priorities within Asia, by deciding which countries will be the recipients of Spanish funds and resources, the amount of the funds, and the kind of aid that will be offered in development projects. The Spanish understanding of the Philippines as a priority country is not completely new, going back to the early 1990s, as the *Plan de Acción 2005-2008* acknowledges that “the Philippine case is already sufficiently established and has absorbed approximately 50% of AECI’s cooperation in the region” (MAEC 2005, 52).<sup>2</sup> An important aspect of the official Spanish-Philippine relationships has traditionally been an influx of Spanish economic resources in the country. As recently as 2008, the *Plan Asia 3* stresses developmental cooperation in the Philippines as a key factor in Spain’s foreign affairs policies:

Spain is the first country in the EU that supports the economic, social and political development in the Philippines, and the government’s will is to keep doing it, keeping its characteristic as a priority country for our cooperation, as well as one of the main components of our bilateral relationship. (MAEC 2008, 41)

The Spanish Government’s policies repeatedly describe the Philippines as a country in need of funds, which *de facto* establishes a power relationship between both countries.<sup>3</sup> In this equation, the Philippines is the receiver of Spanish cooperation and, therefore, has to abide by the rules and regulations, that is, the funding agenda set by Spain. At the same time, over the last decade, the Spanish Government has set its own political agenda to establish itself as influential in Asian politics and markets, utilising in part the historical connection with the Philippines. Much of this interest relates to business and trade with Asian markets, as a commercial strategy by the Spanish government to pursue their neoliberal economic plans, as described in their policies (MAE 2000; MAEC 2005; 2008). This is also apparent in the activity of the Spanish Chamber of Commerce in Manila,<sup>4</sup> which “aims to expand business opportunities to its members and

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2 AECI stands for Agencia Española de Cooperación Internacional. In 2007 it changed its name to AECID (Agencia Española de Cooperación Internacional y Desarrollo).

3 For a further study on this topic, see Díaz Rodríguez 2014.

4 This institution was established in 1899, and it is one of the oldest of its kind in the Philippines.

to perpetuate the centuries old commercial/economic bond between the Philippines and Spain”, while at the same time “to help and participate in the development of the Philippines”.<sup>5</sup> International cooperation, therefore, can follow an agenda of power and control over some countries, disguised as humanitarian assistance. Spanish cooperation is not entirely philanthropic, as it pursues particular objectives that are expected to be met by the Philippines. Once this power relationship has been established, the Philippine Government will have to reciprocate somehow the help given by Spain, following the dynamics of power relations. As Pierre Bourdieu points out: “The acknowledgment of debt becomes recognition, a durable *feeling* toward the author of the generous act” (1998, 102). If reciprocation is achieved, Spain would benefit obtaining some of the objectives set in the strategic plans to reach to Asia (MAE 2000; MAEC 2005; 2008), such as becoming more visible in the region by utilising the Philippine connection as a door into the continent, as well as an ally for specific actions within the region. In many ways, this Spanish categorisation of the Philippines in terms of cooperation evokes a historical past. In the old colonial relationship, Spain, as the imperial power, established developmental policies in the Philippines. In the twenty-first century, Spain is still investing in projects to help develop certain areas in the Philippines, albeit with different motivations. This relationship established by the Spanish government echoes a neo-colonial approach under the light of neoliberal globalisation.

#### 4 The *Vigan Master Plan*

Apart from humanitarian aid efforts, one of the examples of Spanish developmental projects in the Philippines is the *Vigan Master Plan*. Spain joined this interesting Filipino-based project due to the historical links dating to the old Spanish Empire. In December 1999 the city of Vigan, capital of the Philippine province of Ilocos Sur (Northern Luzon), won its status as a World Heritage Site from UNESCO. As explained by Norma Respicio, from the Management Heritage Conservation Agency, this distinction was achieved because “Vigan represents a unique fusion of Asian building design and construction with European colonial architecture and planning” (Respicio 2004, 177). In addition to the uniqueness of this cultural fusion, Vigan is also “the best-preserved historic city in the Philippines” (177), and even more so after the implementation of the *Vigan Master Plan*, which aimed to restore many of the buildings in the city centre since the early nineties. This project was largely a Philippine initiative, which saw in the rehabilitation of the historical city centre a major point of lo-

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5 <http://www.lacamaramanila.com/sample-page/> (2018-08-06).



cal development, through an increase in tourism in the city. Since many of the buildings in Vigan date from the Spanish colonial era, in 1996, the Philippine Government decided to request the following from the Spanish Government: “To provide technical assistance in identifying specific projects for the preservation / restoration and re-development of the historic center not only as tourist destination but most importantly as a national treasure of the Hispanic legacy to the Philippines” (185).

The Spanish Government accepted the proposal and joined the *Vigan Master Plan* in the mid-nineties. One of the arrangements was that: “The team leader of the project, a Spaniard, was to come to the Philippines every two months, and spend two weeks in Vigan, assisted by a co-team leader who is a Filipino architect, with the latter acting as the overall supervisor of the project during the former’s periodic absence” (187).

In spite of these agreements, the *Plan* did not achieve all of the proposed objectives, as support from the Spanish Government seemed to stop at a certain point, without fulfilling the hopes of the Vigan Heritage Management Agency. Respicio states that “some quarters were entertaining the hope that the Spanish Government would bankroll the greater part of the formulated Master Plan” (Respicio 2004, 188), but this never happened. In my interview with architect Javier Galván (former director of the Manila branch of the Instituto Cervantes<sup>6</sup>), he explains that, in terms of Spanish input, the project ended performing a couple of isolated tasks, such as the restoration of a building, and a project on bringing water to one of the suburbs. He believes that the problem of completion was twofold. On the one hand, the experts sent from Spain were somehow detached from the Philippine context and reality. On the other hand, the ever-changing strategies by the Spanish agencies towards heritage are perceived by Galván as a handicap:

A few projects related to improving infrastructure were undertaken in Vigan, but there wasn’t a general strategy. At first, the efforts by the AECI related to restoration; ‘Let’s restore this building because it dates to Spanish times’. Later on, it was linked to development; ‘If we restore this building, this is clearly linked to tourism, which will help in the country’s development, and this is part of our strategy of aid for development. However, this policy was also abandoned, and the final and current approach has been the implementation of individual training through the *Workshop Schools*. In conclusion, heritage is still perceived as an engine for development, but only through training’.<sup>7</sup>

6 <http://manila.cervantes.es/en/default.shtm> (2018-08-05).

7 Galván Guijo, Javier (2011). Interview with the Author; Author’s trans.

The 'Workshops Schools' (from the Spanish *escuela-taller*) mentioned by Galván is a heritage project initiated by the Spanish government in Spanish-speaking countries in Latin America. These projects entail Spanish experts training local staff in several aspects of heritage conservation. In this context, there is a connection between the Spanish strategies in the Philippines and in Hispanic America, which brings back the idea of location in terms of the old Spanish Empire. Furthermore, these strategies provide a direct link between the notion of Hispanic heritage and the concept of development, establishing, what can be explained as a neo-colonial baseline for international relationships. The baseline for this is the establishments of a set of power relationships in which those with funds and expertise can lead specific projects, which in turn influence the handling of heritage in those countries. The neo-colonial aspect of these global relationships also comes from the fact that these Spanish projects were established in countries that were once part of the Spanish Empire, and therefore with a Hispanic heritage. Considering that the Philippines is included in this strategy, the perception of the Spanish Government towards the Philippines is that of a country with a Hispanic heritage that is worth preserving.

## 5 Hispanic Enough?

Since the publication of the *Plan Marco* (MAE 2000), Spanish institutions have organised many exhibitions in and about the Philippines, focusing on narrating the historical connections between both countries, and stressing in many cases some 'Hispanic' aspects of the Philippines (Díaz Rodríguez 2018). However, despite this seeming inclusion of the Philippines in the Hispanic world, this is not as clear-cut, the main reason being the defective situation of the Spanish language in the archipelago.

Although Spanish was spoken during Spanish rule in the Philippines, it was never fully assimilated by the indigenous population, a situation that was very different from that of the Americas (Anderson 2004, 227). Despite becoming an official language of the Philippines (together with English and then Filipino) after its independence from Spain in 1898 until 1976, Spanish was then removed from being an official language, and had no legal standing (Rodríguez-Ponga 2009). When looking at the number of speakers of Spanish, the Instituto Cervantes estimated in 2016 that there were 461,689 people with some competency in Spanish, while only 3,325 had Spanish as their native language (Instituto Cervantes 2016).

Considering this situation, the 2005 *Plan Asia* already stressed the importance for the Spanish Government to keep promoting and disseminating Spanish language. Many of the proposed objectives had to do with the reinforcement of relationships with local universities as well as establishing scholarships for students of Spanish and training programmes for

Spanish teachers in Asia (MAEC 2005, 141, 288, 290). More recently, in 2012, an agreement was reached between the Spanish Ministry of Culture, the Instituto Cervantes, and the Philippine Department of Education to support the re-introduction of Spanish language in secondary schools, managing to include in the programme amounting to 76 schools in 2017 (Cabria García 2017, 89). Furthermore, the branch of the Instituto Cervantes in Manila is the official Spanish centre for the promotion of Spanish language and Hispanic culture in the Philippines. The official statement published on their web site explains its core mission: "Instituto Cervantes' mission is to promote the teaching, study and use of Spanish as a second language, and to contribute to the advancement of Spanish and Latin-American cultures throughout the world".<sup>8</sup>

Spanish language is, then, at the core of their activities. Language is also the link between Spain and other countries that were once part of the Spanish Empire. This institution disseminates the cultures of Spain and those of countries in Latin America. Even though Spain has been searching for cultural commonalities with the Philippines in recent years and emphasising Hispanic traces in the Philippines (Díaz Rodríguez 2018), it is not a part of the Instituto's mission to promote Philippine culture as such. This was made clear in my 2010 interview with José Rodríguez Rodríguez, former director of the Cervantes' branch in Manila. When asked about joint ventures with local Filipino artists, he stressed that it should always be on the grounds of their connection with Spain. The Manila branch would promote and organise cultural activities with a Filipino flavour as long as they have some kind of Spanish connection. He affirms that there are other institutions to promote Philippine culture and he believes that the success of cultural relationships should be on the grounds of unification: "We have to search for formulas in which we can see both cultures integrated".<sup>9</sup>

In the Instituto Cervantes' model, language is a crucial factor when deciding on cultural promotion. This is the reason why Spanish-speaking countries in the Americas (but not the Philippines) have been included in the mission statement. However, since the institution only has branches in non-Spanish speaking countries, and the Spanish language is not widely spoken in the Philippines, there is an Instituto branch in Manila. Furthermore, and considering that the focus of the Instituto Cervantes is to promote Spanish language, many cultural products in Spanish are disseminated through its branches. Many of these products are not actually from Spain, but come from other Spanish-speaking countries in Latin America. The institution is, therefore, promoting cultural products from other countries, which are considered related to Spain through a common

8 <http://manila.cervantes.es/en/default.shtm> (2018-08-05).

9 Rodríguez Rodríguez, José (2010). Interview with the Author.

language and close cultural ties, the common thread of 'Hispanic culture'. Even though the Spanish Government constantly emphasises the Hispanic traces in the Philippines and the common links between both countries (MAE 2000; MAEC 2005) this is not enough to consider the Philippines 'Hispanic' as to be promoted through its channels, unlike other countries which were once under Spanish colonial rule. This is a strong statement about Spanish official perception of the Philippines; the country is perceived as closely linked to Spain through its Hispanic traces and, at the same time, as a complete 'other' which is not worth including in the promotion of Hispanic culture.

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