

From Classroom to Variable Stage Theater

Paul Palmore

The thrust of the present Philippine government toward developing the arts through drama, dance, and song presents a problem for schools and community groups. Few existing stages are applicable to all these art forms. While theater and dance are traditionally performed on a proscenium stage, "modern" theater often reverts to Greek and early Roman arena stages. This article will give instructions for the construction of a stage and light design convertible into most stage forms.

This project began when an intriguing design problem was presented to the author: Convert a 12 meter by 12 meter classroom with a 4 meter ceiling into a small theater. The theater stage was to be designed in such a way that it could be used for theater in the round, environmental theater (that encompasses the audience), oral interpretation presentations, as well as for traditional proscenium presentations. This was all to be done at minimal cost.

Research into existing variable stage theaters showed a variety of styles: one type featured a stage floor divided into 4ft by 4ft sections, each held up by a single pole hydraulically manipulated so that various elevations could be achieved. The audience sections were supported by similar hydraulic systems so that they too could be raised and lowered. Other theaters used enormous and expensive trap and fly systems, immediately ruled out because of cost. Still other stages made use of movable platforms that could be rearranged manually. These theaters seemed the most economical and practical for doubling as a classroom. Materials for the construction of such a stage were all available in Dumaguete and might be purchased at a reasonable price.

A bigger problem immediately arose: In what shapes should these platforms be made? The stages investigated proved quite predictable in shape: long, rectangular proscenium types and boxey, square arena shapes. Surely there might be more variety in these stage forms without wasting either stage space or materials. A choice was made of these shapes: Two 4ft x 8ft platforms, two 4ft x 4ft platforms, two 4ft x 8ft platforms with beveled edges, two square platforms with triangular points, and two 4ft x 4ft platforms with beveled edges. These forms were arrived at after experimentation with numerous shapes and sizes of platforms, taking into consideration the following factors: (1) size of the classroom; (2) minimal waste of materials and space; (3) shapes that could produce the greatest number of stage types.

The 4ft x 8ft and 4ft x 4ft sizes were chosen because these were sizes of plywood available at local stores. These sizes were also convenient because they would fit the 36ft x 36ft shape of the classroom. Four 4ft x 8ft platforms laid down lengthwise and one 4ft x 4ft platform would extend the whole length of the room. The design of numerous other stage types immediately followed from these shapes. Figures 1, 2, and 3 show only a small sample of the stage floor patterns designed by the author and his students in technical theater.

Stage

The construction of the platforms was a simple affair. A height of 15in from the floor proved ideal for audience sightlines. All platforms required facing on all four sides, to cover support wood and improve strength. The following materials were purchased to construct the platforms:

Number of Pieces	Size	Purpose
6	2" x 2" x 8'	length support
4	2" x 2" x 6'	length support
36	2" x 2" x 4'	length and width support, inside brace support
6	2" x 2" x 3' (approx.)	beveled edges
8	2" x 2" x 2'	short edge support
56	2" x 3" x 12 1/2"	support legs
7	1/2" x 4' x 8' sheets	of plywood platform tops
9	1/4" x 4' x 8' sheets	of plywood platform facing

Figures 4 and 5 show the shapes cut from the various sheets of plywood and the construction of a 4ft x 8ft platform.

As 15in is quite high from the classroom floor, steps for the platforms were designed. They might also serve as seats or backdrops. Four beveled steps, six 1ft x 4ft steps, and two 1ft x 3ft steps were constructed with the following materials:

12	1" x 7" x 4'	sides of 4 long steps
12	1" x 7" x 3'	sides of 3 & beveled steps
8	1" x 7" x 2'	sides of beveled steps

24	1" x 7" x 1'	ends of all steps
2	1/2" x 4" x 8" sheets	of plywood tops of steps

See Figure 6 for details of construction.

Coconut lumber for low cost

As cost was a primary consideration, all lumber used (with the exception of the plywood) was coconut lumber. Care should be taken when nailing coconut lumber, as the wood is extremely hard and has a tendency to split. Splitting may be avoided by drilling holes slightly smaller than the nails, then driving in nails for sturdy joints.

When all steps and platforms were finished they were painted: black for all facing and sides, mahogany stain and varnish for the top. The platforms, if well constructed, are strong enough to stand many years of use. Since coconut lumber is used, they are heavier than most platforms, thus ideal for heavy stage action. Rubber padding may be put on the bottom of the support posts to help hold the platforms in place.

Lighting

Lighting was the next problem. As the stage was constructed to be variable, the lighting had to supply adequate acting area lighting as well as top lighting, and still be as inexpensive as possible. After some research, an ideal system was found. Basically, it consisted of a grid above the whole room with one electric outlet per 16 square feet, so that a light designer could plug his lights in almost anywhere. Existing light grids were of iron, thus expensive and difficult to make. An inexpensive wooden grid was designed using planed 1 in x 3 in and 2 in x 2 in wood. Figure 7 shows the layout of the grid system on the ceiling of the classroom.

Outlets are located every four feet on each lighting track. Thus lighting tracks 1 to 12 have three outlets each. By no means do all outlets need be used, as these tracks are placed to accommodate every conceivable design. (See Figure 8)

The following materials are needed for the construction of the lighting tracks:

Number of Pieces	Size
24	1" x 3" x 12' (planed)
12	2" x 2" x 12' (planed)
24	1" x 1" x 12' (1 x 3 cut into 3 strips)
Small pieces of 1/4 in plywood to provide gap for wing nuts.	

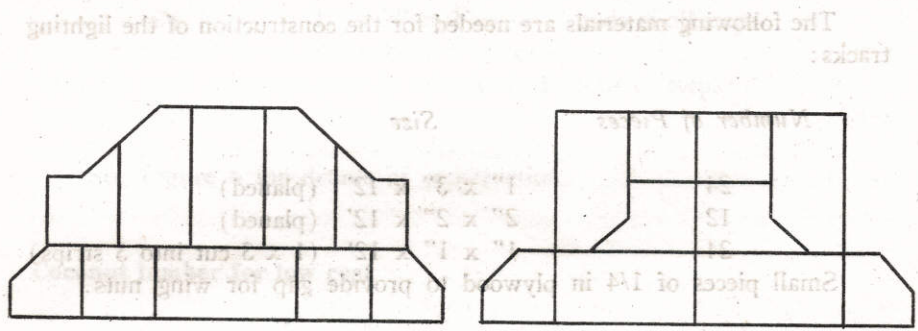
All wires coming from the outlets should be concealed in the ceiling on their way to a switchboard or a dimmer circuit in a corner of the classroom or in an adjacent room. The circuit should be able to handle 60 amperes.

These maneuverable lights make it easy for a light designer to adapt to the stage floor designed for a particular production.

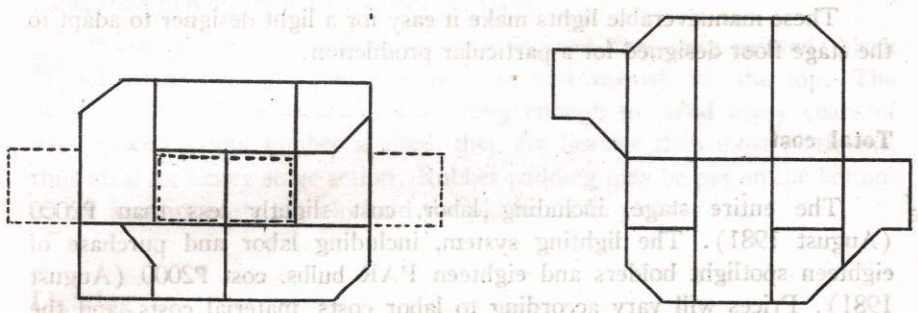
Total cost

The entire stage, including labor, cost slightly less than ₱2000 (August 1981). The lighting system, including labor and purchase of eighteen spotlight holders and eighteen PAR bulbs, cost ₱2000 (August 1981). Prices will vary according to labor costs, material costs, and the size of the room.

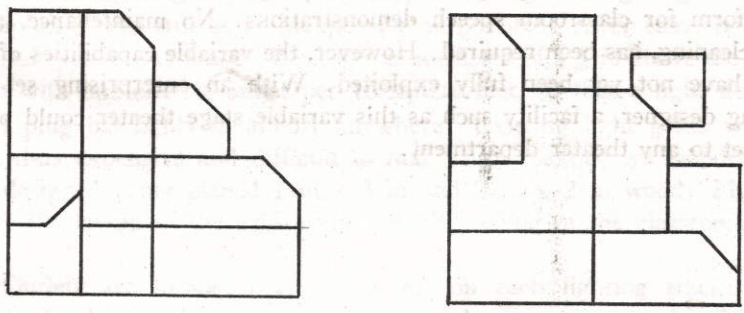
This stage and lighting system has already been used for several performances and serves its purpose well. The stage floor is also used daily as a platform for classroom speech demonstrations. No maintenance, aside from cleaning, has been required. However, the variable capabilities of this stage have not yet been fully exploited. With an enterprising set and lighting designer, a facility such as this variable stage theater could prove an asset to any theater department.



proscenium type

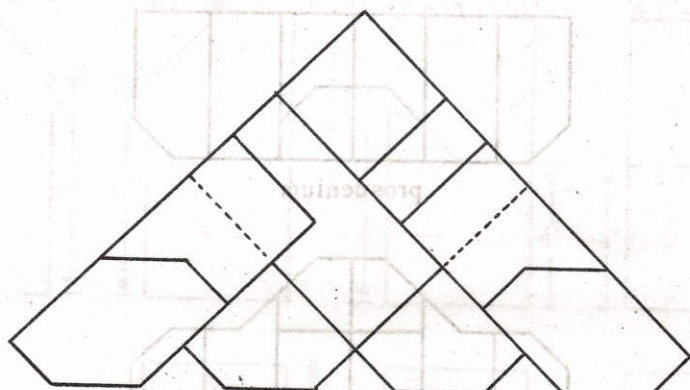


arena type

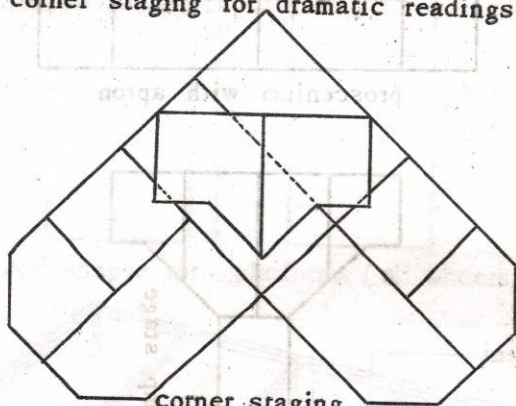


corner staging

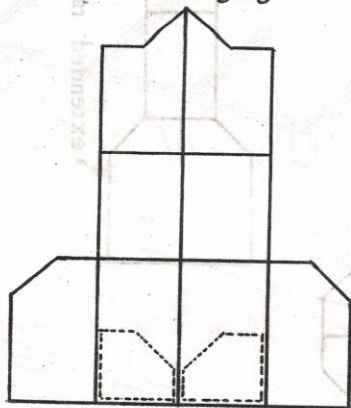
Figure 1. Stage designs using various platforms (not to scale).



corner staging for dramatic readings



corner staging



thrust type

Figure 2. Stage designs, continued.

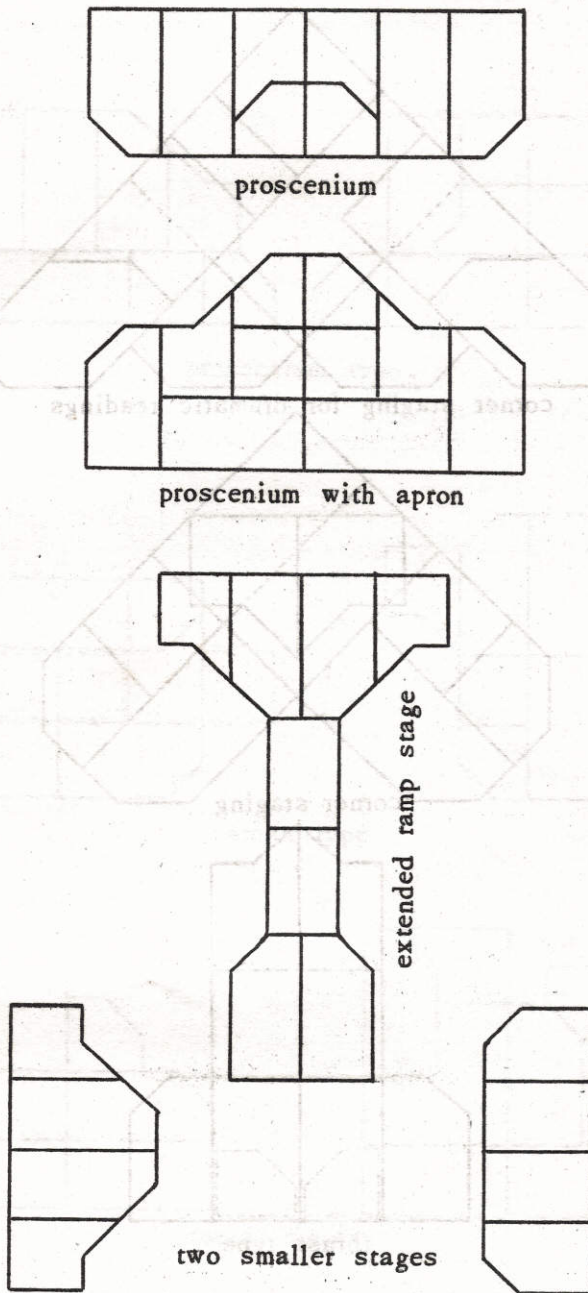


Figure 3. Stage designs, continued.

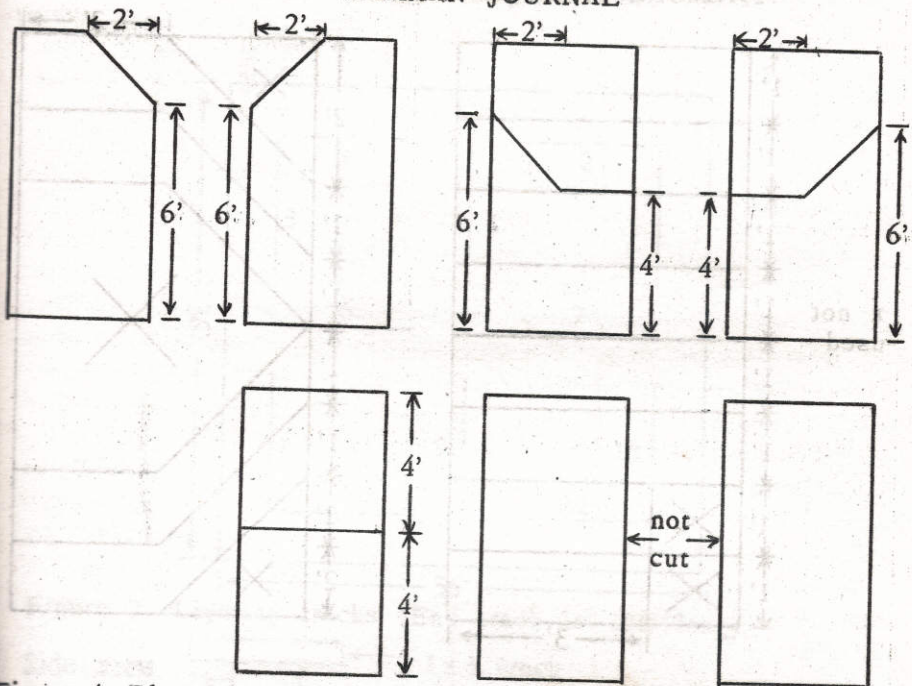


Figure 4. Plywood shapes for platforms (all sheets are $\frac{1}{2}' \times 4' \times 8'$).

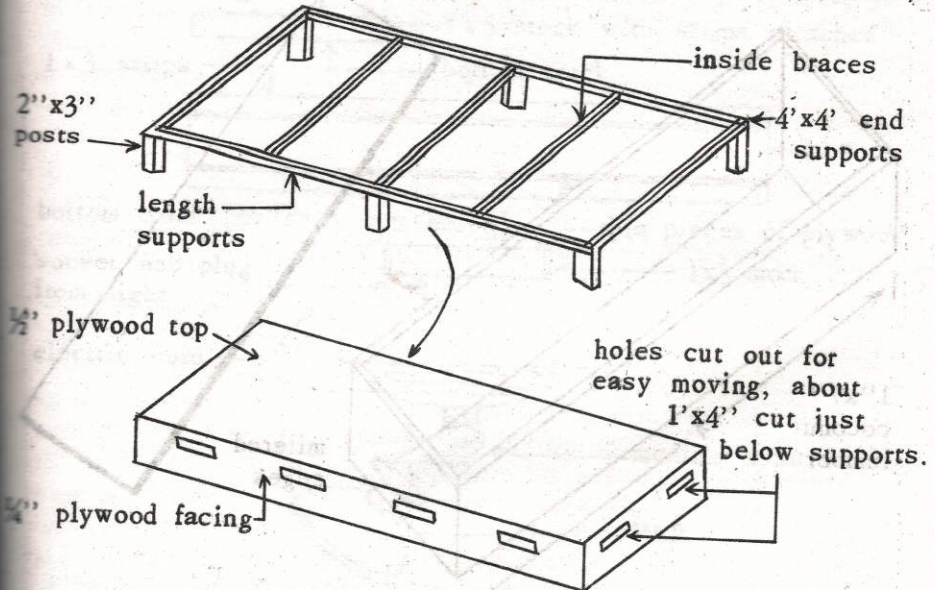


Figure 5. Construction of platforms.

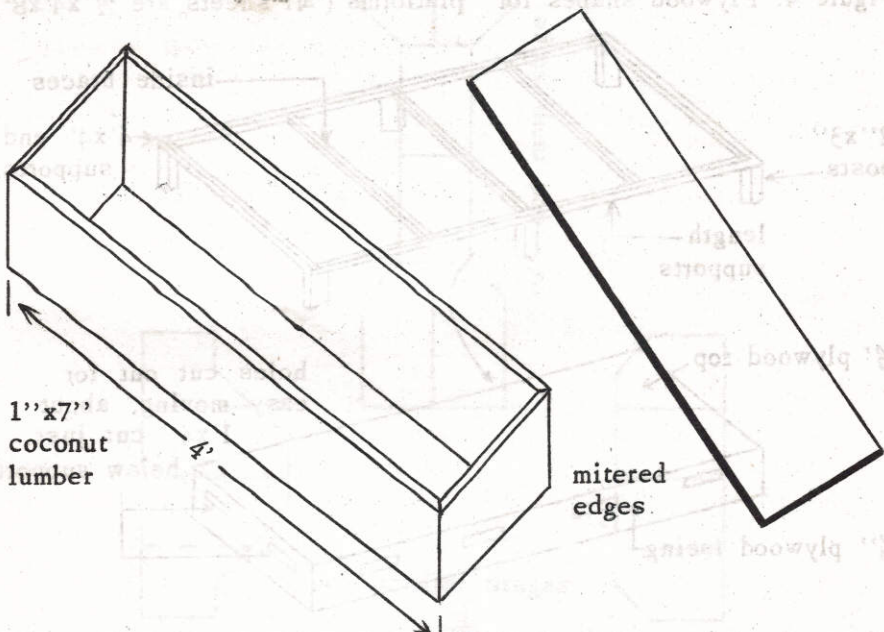
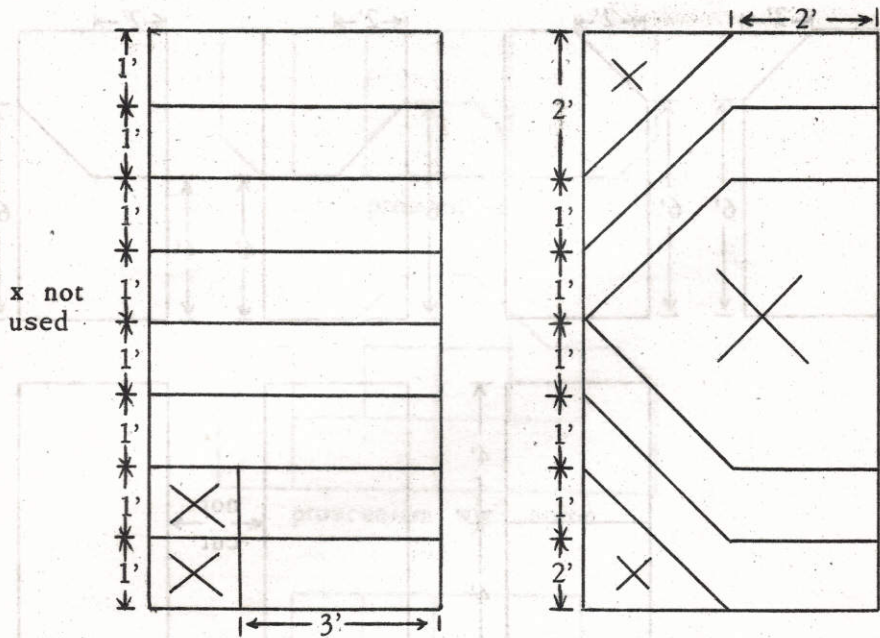


Figure 6. Construction of steps.

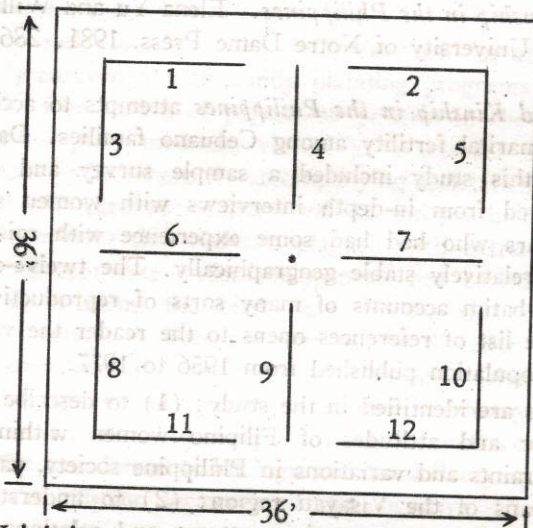


Figure 7. Lighting tracks (End track is 12ft long).

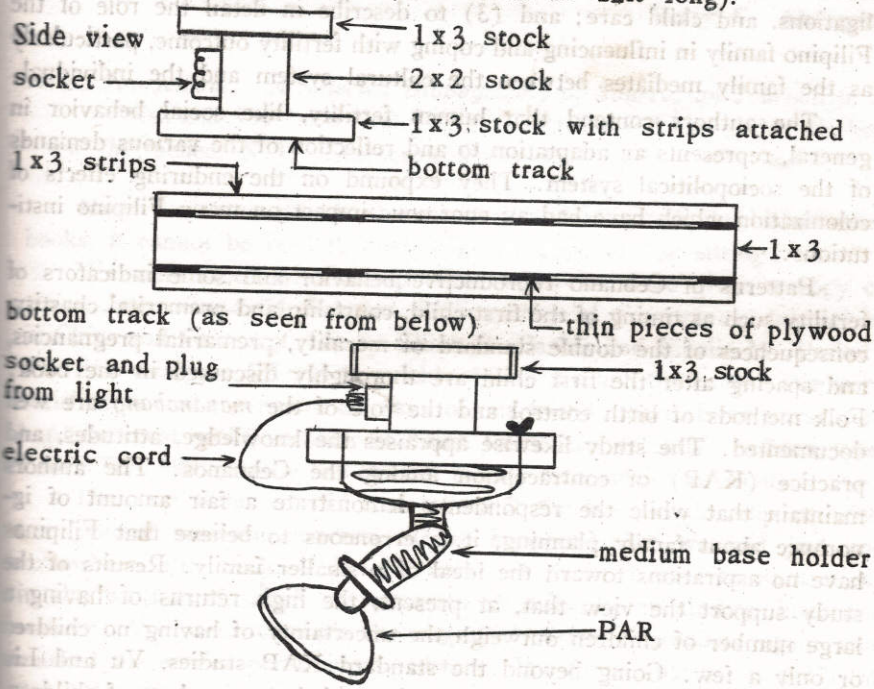


Figure 8. Details of lighting.

Book Reviews

Fertility and Kinship in the Philippines. Elena Yu and William T. Liu.
Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981. 286 pages.

Fertility and Kinship in the Philippines attempts to account for the high level of marital fertility among Cebuano families. Data collection techniques for this study included a sample survey and ethnographic materials collected from in-depth interviews with women still in their childbearing years who had had some experience with raising children and who were relatively stable geographically. The twelve-chapter book is rich with verbatim accounts of many sorts of reproductive behavior. The twelve-page list of references opens to the reader the vast literature on Philippine population published from 1956 to 1977.

Three goals are identified in the study: (1) to describe the fertility-related behavior and attitudes of Filipino women within the social-structural constraints and variations in Philippine society, particularly for lowland Christians of the Visayan region; (2) to understand the cultural elements that shape normative patterns and relations, kinship obligations, and child care; and (3) to describe in detail the role of the Filipino family in influencing and coping with fertility outcome, particularly as the family mediates between the cultural system and the individual.

The authors contend that human fertility, like social behavior in general, represents an adaptation to and reflection of the various demands of the sociopolitical system. They expound on the enduring effects of colonization which have had an enormous impact on many Filipino institutions.

Patterns of Cebuano reproductive behavior and some indicators of fertility such as timing of the first child, courtship and premarital chastity, consequences of the double standard of morality, premarital pregnancies, and spacing after the first child are thoroughly discussed in the book. Folk methods of birth control and the role of the *mananabang* are well documented. The study likewise appraises the knowledge, attitudes, and practice (KAP) of contraception among the Cebuanos. The authors maintain that while the respondents demonstrate a fair amount of ignorance about family planning, it is erroneous to believe that Filipinos have no aspirations toward the ideal of a smaller family. Results of the study support the view that, at present, the high returns of having a large number of children outweigh the uncertainty of having no children or only a few. Going beyond the standard KAP studies, Yu and Liu identify the coping mechanisms of couples with large numbers of children,

discuss the cost-benefit ration of children, and explain why couples do not opt for a drastic reduction in family size.

Fertility and Kinship in the Philippines will be of value to all who are seriously concerned with family planning programs and to those engaged in the formulation of population policies in the Philippines. The modern contraceptive methods, viewed as a transfer of technology, can only be effective when there are accompanying societal changes in economic conditions, health care, sociocultural values, and psychological perceptions. The study concludes that societies plagued with extreme poverty, traditionalism, and economic underdevelopment are bound to be less open to efforts at reducing the birth rate. While this conclusion implies the need for change, it does not present the direction for that change. The book stimulates the reader to ask himself: Given the personality and social components of a Filipino, should he change his sociocultural and cognitive structure to adopt a modern contraceptive technology? Or should the transferred technology and its delivery system be modified to adapt to the Filipino sociocultural and cognitive structure?

Betty C. Abregana

Asian Journalism: A Selected Bibliography of Sources on Journalism in China and Southeast Asia. Elliott S. Parker and Emelia M. Parker. Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press, 1979. xii + 472 pages.

How does one go about reviewing a bibliography? Unlike other books, it cannot be read through page by page in one sitting.

We were faced with this problem when we were given a copy of *Asian Journalism: A Selected Bibliography of Sources on Journalism in China and Southeast Asia* by Elliott S. Parker and Emelia M. Parker. The first thing we did was to quickly thumb through the pages. We were satisfied to find the names of many of our friends there. Even ours. Perhaps the most prolific scholar of Asian Journalism recently has been John Lent. This bibliography has at least twenty-nine entries on Lent.

The next thing we did was to see if the book could help us with our present research interests. It so happened that we had just co-authored a little book, *A Brief History of Asian Mass Communication*, in the writing of which we experienced difficulty in finding historical sources. We went through the pages of *Asian Journalism* again and marked the entries pertaining to history. We found that at least 177 of the 2345 entries in the book dealt with history. Many of the articles

we had not encountered before. We then realized that this bibliography would be a rich source for a future revision of our little history.

We also counted the entries on the Philippines, another area of research interest. We found at least seventy-three entries on this country, a few of which were unfamiliar. Many other entries we had heard of, but we did not know where to locate them. This book tells us where. We know now that this volume will be useful to us both in our research and teaching.

Our next impression of the book was that it was heavy on China and light on the rest of Asia. Perhaps this is to be expected because China is, after all, the biggest Asian country—and the oldest. It was China that gave birth to printing and the newspaper.

Asian Journalism will be particularly useful to the researcher who is struggling for a place to start looking for materials. As the authors themselves admit, and as the subtitle indicates, the bibliography is not comprehensive. No one bibliography, for that matter, can really be comprehensive. *Asian Journalism* is eclectic; the entries have been selected according to the following criteria: 1. pre-1960, 2. historical and descriptive, 3. newspapers, 4. China, 5. Southeast Asia, primarily Malaysia, Singapore, and Indonesia, 6. Chinese press in the United States, and 7. secondary materials.

Each entry contains the name of the author, title of article, source (whether newspaper, journal, or book), language in which written, chronology (the historical period with which it deals), methodology of research, geography (country covered), and subject (history, press control, etc.). Most of the entries are in English; a few are in Chinese. The bibliography does not include articles from such specialized journals as *Media Asia*, *Asian Messenger*, and *Media* because they are readily accessible. This is one of the volume's limitations.

The bibliography is oriented more to print media, although radio, television, and film are included. The question is, where did the authors draw the line? Their answer: "These non-print items were noted and entered, but remain secondary to the main work." The question is left unanswered.

The bibliography also has a bias for articles that are historical and descriptive. According to the authors, journalism in Asia has not been a particularly fertile field of historical endeavor, and general descriptive and historical works are lacking. How true! Mass communication research in Asia in recent decades, particularly that coming out of universities, has been a product of the new schools of sociological and statistical

research. Good old-fashioned historical and descriptive research has been neglected.

This bibliography should help put journalism researchers back on the main track. Much more historical and descriptive research remains to be done before we can jump into the sophisticated computer-assisted correlation-coefficient research now the fashion in the West.

A note on the printing of the book: As the authors say, the volume is essentially a "formatted print-out of the authors' data." They highly recommend this use of the computer for making a bibliography: "It is extremely efficient, it allows infinite and easy corrections, can be readily updated and permits extensive cross referencing."

We have three little criticisms of the volume. The Introduction is set in five-point agate type—too minute for the usually worn-out eyes of scholars and researchers! The Table of Contents lists Introduction, Appendix, and Index, but nowhere is the body of the book (pages 1 to 391), the Bibliography itself, indicated in the Table. A little confusing at first. Finally, we think the title of the book is too narrow to accurately reflect its contents. It does not take into account the fact that journalism in the last two or three decades has expanded into the broader field of mass communication.

Crispin C. Maslog