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# Gift-Commodity Entanglements: Repositioning (In)Formality in a Transnational Philippine Market Trade

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**Abstract:** Filipinos working abroad, known as Overseas Filipino Workers, regularly send cash remittances and in-kind gifts (for example, cosmetics, vitamins, clothing) to family in the Philippines. These gifts are not subject to customs duties because, like cash, they contribute to the Philippine economy and provide family members with needed goods. However, because state economic policies have failed to adequately meet citizens' subsistence requirements, Philippine gift recipients and entrepreneurs in Baguio, northern Philippines, for example, operationalise this transnational flow of goods by diverting selected gifted products into grey spaces of public market trade – transactions that straddle informal/formal and gift/commodity practice and that are sometimes extralegal in nature. Baguio residents who cannot use the gifted goods they receive, for example, may sell or exchange them in commodity transactions at public market stores. Entrepreneurs, in turn, nurture good customer relations by gifting income from these sales, as well as goods, to community welfare initiatives. Simultaneously, depending upon the government's agenda, officials variably permit or restrict the tax-free import and sale of gifted goods. Given that overseas cash remittances and in-kind gifts continue to support the Philippine economy, I argue that government and entrepreneurs are complicit in using informality as an urban organizing logic when this practice is to their respective advantage.

**Keywords:** Philippines, informality, legality/illegality, entrepreneurship, gift-commodity exchange, transnational trade

**Résumé :** Les Philippines travaillant à l'étranger (Overseas Filipino Workers) envoient régulièrement de l'argent ou des dons en nature (cosmétiques, vitamines, vêtements . . .) à leur famille aux Philippines. Ces dons ne sont pas soumis à des droits de douane parce que, comme l'argent liquide, ils contribuent à l'économie philippine et subviennent aux besoins des familles. Or, dans la mesure où les politiques économiques de l'État n'ont pas su répondre adéquatement aux besoins de subsistance des citoyens, les bénéficiaires de dons et les entrepreneurs philippins, tels ceux de Baguio dans le nord du pays, opérationnalisent ce flux transnational de marchandises en détournant certains de ces dons vers les zones grises du marché public – des transactions qui chevauchent les pratiques informelles/formelles d'échange de dons/marchandises et qui sont parfois de nature extra-légale. Ainsi, les résidents de Baguio vendent ou échangent sur les marchés publics les dons

qu'ils sont incapables d'utiliser. À leur tour, les entrepreneurs offrent certains de ces dons, ou les revenus de leur vente, à des programmes communautaires afin d'entretenir de bonnes relations avec leur clientèle. Au même moment, les fonctionnaires de l'État autorisent ou restreignent, en fonction de l'agenda gouvernemental, l'importation et la vente de dons en franchise d'impôts. Au vu du fait que les transferts d'argent et de dons en nature soutiennent toujours l'économie philippine, j'affirme que le gouvernement et les entrepreneurs utilisent eux aussi l'informel comme logique d'organisation urbaine dès lors que cette pratique est à leur avantage.

**Mots clés :** Philippines, informel, légal/illégal, esprit d'entreprise, échange de cadeaux/marchandises, commerce transnational

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## Introduction

After working for six years in Hong Kong, in 2005 Beverly Tayad,<sup>1</sup> 54 years old, assumed the lease for her aunt's store in the Baguio City Public Market, northern Philippines (Figures 1 and 2). Beverly registered her business with the Securities Employment Commission (SEC), initially selling baked goods that she obtained on consignment. Within a year, however, Beverly changed her business to sell small-scale imported manufactured goods such as personal grooming products, health supplements, and confectioneries such as chocolate – goods that consumers demand but that are not always available at local department or neighbourhood stores. Beverly changed her business focus after being prompted by requests from Baguio residents who wished to purchase these products from a trusted dealer, by the ease of accessing such popular imported goods from her personal networks in Hong Kong, and by customers who had such items given to them as gifts but that they could not use and wanted to sell. Accessing her stock through a variety of channels – purchasing online or at duty-free shops, activating social networks – and by offering personalised assistance to customers, Beverly's business strategies materialise entrepreneurial “gray spaces” (Yiftachel 2012) in which so-called formal and



Figure 1: Baguio City Public Market Store. A marketer sells a variety of small-scale manufactured goods (cosmetics, vitamins, grooming products).



Figure 2: Baguio City Public Market Aisle. This section of the Baguio City Public Market sells small-scale manufactured goods (for example, cosmetics, confectioneries)

informal or commodity and gifting transactions emerge as interdependent spheres of practice.

As studies have documented, the millions of Filipinos, men and women, who have left the Philippines to find work across the globe regularly send cash remittances and gifts to family and friends in the Philippines (Basch et al. 1994; Kelly 2006; McKay 2016, 101–107). While such financial aid and in-kind gifts assist families in the Philippines to meet their subsistence needs, both initiatives also tangibly express migrants' care and concern for distant loved ones and physically keep migrants engaged in their families' everyday lives (see also Camposano 2017). Filipinos working abroad are known as Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) or *balikbayans* (returning Filipinos) – Filipinos visiting or returning to the Philippines after a period living in another country (Basch et al. 1994, 247; Szanton-Blanc 1996).<sup>2</sup> The cash remittances OFWs send are renowned for the direct contribution these funds make to the country's gross national product (Datta et al. 2007). The in-kind material gifts, however, can experience more circuitous life histories depending upon whether recipients keep the gifted items, sell, or exchange them for goods that better meet their needs. The gifted goods, such as those Beverly Tayad trades (for example, personal grooming and health products, clothing, canned goods), are packaged in standard-size cardboard containers (60 × 30 × 30 cm or 60 × 60 × 90 cm) known as *balikbayan* boxes. Overseas Filipino Workers send these boxes via small freight-forwarding companies directly from pick-up at their residences; they are shipped via cargo container to the Philippine recipient's home. Although the shipping time

between North America and the Philippines can be six to eight weeks, the cost – CAD \$95 or USD \$80<sup>3</sup> – is affordable given that the charge is based on the volume of the box rather than on its weight. *Balikbayan* box goods imported into the Philippines are tax exempt because in theory, such shipments contain the personal belongings of, or gifts from, *balikbayans*. As the Philippine Bureau of Customs' Information Sheet outlines, such goods are not imported in large-scale commercial quantities and are intended for Filipinos' personal use (Republic of the Philippines 2016).

Given that the Philippine state has failed to construct the basic political and economic foundations that can provide the majority of people with viable livelihoods (Hutchcroft and Rocamora 2012, 97–98), both gift recipients and entrepreneurs such as Beverly Tayad, as noted, operationalise this transnational flow of *balikbayan* box goods by diverting selected products into public market commodity trade. Indeed, the ongoing demand in the Philippines for goods not readily available at local venues means that some Filipinos living or travelling abroad may use the tax-exempt status of *balikbayan* boxes to “illegally” import products for commercial sale rather than for personal use (Rappler.com 2015). To curtail such potentially illegal initiatives, the Bureau of Customs periodically increases *balikbayan* box inspections and issues by-laws that restrict the duty-free entry status and distribution of these goods for limited time periods (De Vera 2015; Fabunan 2016; Paez 2016; Tupaz 2015).<sup>4</sup> The Philippine government, however, cognizant that such transnational gift-to-commodity transactions provide employment and a source of income for residents across

classes, often overlooks occasional import infractions and continues to encourage general gift-giving initiatives, heralding the heroism and self-sacrifice of Overseas Filipino Workers (Espiritu 2003, 80–81).

Studies analysing the role *balikbayan* box goods play in facilitating Overseas Filipino Workers' ongoing connections to the Philippines have primarily argued that OFWs send these shipments as a form of "kin-work" to realise their obligation to help those still in the Philippines, assuage their guilt at having attained a better quality of life abroad, and fulfill the expectations of their Christian-based education, which values self-sacrifice to enhance one's family's well-being (for example, Camposano 2017; Hof 2017; McKay 2016). I focus here instead on the mainstream strategies and the edgy side roads through which gift recipients and Baguio's public marketers selling the aforementioned *balikbayan* box goods have refashioned this trade into viable cross-sector businesses. Baguio residents generally, for example, rather than emerging as passive gift recipients, may maximise the potential of the goods they receive by selling or exchanging products that better meet their livelihood needs. In turn, the Baguio entrepreneurs trading *balikbayan* goods have established alternative enterprises integral to public market operation, service the everyday needs of residents across classes, and profitably contribute to the city's economy through the business taxes and rents they pay. By obtaining goods from local and global sources through both commodity and gifting transactions, these merchants emerge as self-styled (Imas et al. 2012; Kariv et al. 2009) transnational entrepreneurs who connect different sectors of society in new and innovative ways while remaining firmly seated in their Baguio market stores. Traders like Beverly Tayad create new socio-economic interstitial spaces within old ones by responding to consumers' changing consumption needs, fostering personal ties with suppliers in global locations, transforming part of their business profits into community outreach or gifting gestures, and consigning goods on flexible repayment terms to part-time sellers. That entrepreneurs create such in-between or "gray spaces" of practice (Yiftachel 2012) and that the city collects their rental payments, therefore permitting their activities, highlight how the government "formalizes informality" (Smart and Smart 2017, 239) and that both government and entrepreneurs are complicit in using informality as an urban organizing logic when this practice is to their mutual advantage (AlSayyad and Roy 2004, 5). These circumstances clearly demonstrate the "now widespread realisation that the informal economy [or informality] is no longer restricted to small scale and survivalist activities of the poor, but is also a sphere of accumulation in which the non-poor

operate" (Lindell 2010, 6). In this Baguio market trade, I consider the "gifting" aspect as existing within a realm of "informality," while entrepreneurs' mainstream purchasing sits more applicably within what has been considered more "formal" practice. I argue, however, that while informality and formality – here gift and the commodity transactions – maintain their own distinct dynamics, these spheres are best understood as "always in flux" (Harris 2017, 2) as their practices remain integrally bound up with one another in complex, shifting and sometimes conflicting ways.

To contextualise Baguio marketers' businesses, I review some of the literature addressing gift and commodity exchange, entrepreneurship, and grey spaces of alternative trade. The Baguio City Public Market case studies I subsequently analyse illustrate the multiple channels through which entrepreneurs mix and match sourcing and selling tactics to sustain their businesses more on their own terms.

### Gift-Commodity-Gift Flows

Scholarship analysing channels of exchange has de-essentialised dichotomies of the economic and the non-economic by recognising the calculative dimension in all forms of exchange and the neglected cultural dimension of market exchange (Schrauwers 2011; Smart 1993). In this light, in the new preface for the rerelease of his 1982 publication *Gifts and Commodities*, Chris Gregory (2015, xxiii) acknowledges the misunderstanding raised by his initial "conceptual opposition of gifts to commodities . . . [his earlier] analytical method of successive approximations . . . which proceeds from the simple to the complex." To clarify his current position, Gregory emphasises the "coeval relation between gifts and commodities," stressing the "interaction between sets of relationships as they impinge upon one another" (xxix) in what he terms a "complex muddle" (xx). In their research of entrepreneurial practices among fishmongers and market traders in rural Philippine communities, Nelson Turgo (2016) and Bryan Rich (2017) similarly argue that relations of reciprocity, empathy, trust and shame underpin the "pursuit of profit" (Turgo 2016, 83) – the very logic of how fish trading and public market enterprises are managed is such that these social relationships, in effect, make business happen. As William Davis (1973, 211) noted early on about Philippine public market traders, it is only by forming personal networks of mutual respect and reciprocal relationships that those in business can overcome the barriers posed by weak institutional state credit facilities and the lack of access to social services. Revisiting his earlier conceptualisation of formal/informal economies, Keith Hart (2010, 148) reiterates this point

when he argues that informality exists in all institutions, including government; some practices may be labelled “informal because their forms are largely invisible to the bureaucratic gaze.” Thus, as Hart (2010, 148) continues, “the formal sphere of society is not abstract [forms and procedures], but consists also of the people who staff bureaucracies and their informal practices.”

When Overseas Filipino Workers send gifts to family members in the Philippines, for example, the spirit is to offer these items such that receivers use them to best benefit their needs. Thus Filipinos receiving goods from relatives living abroad may sell some of their unwanted gifts to Baguio market entrepreneurs in return for preferred items or for cash. Entrepreneurs, in turn, often devote a portion of their profits from these commodity sales to altruistic initiatives such as offering employment to relatives or making charitable donations to community causes. As noted, part of being a successful Philippine entrepreneur means enabling such commodity-to-gift conversions in order to fulfil one’s customary responsibility for community well-being.

Thus, the fundamental feature of these exchanges is not found solely in the motivation of the giver, nor in any gift-debt obligation between the giver and receiver, nor yet in any distinct relation between the two parties (Smart 1993, 389). Rather the individuality of the gift, its potential to assume commodity value, and the spirit in which it is proffered are constituted by understanding it as an unconditional prestation whose capacity to realise a successful exchange is premised on the specific context or contingent “performance” of the interchange rather than on any predetermined goals of either the giver or receiver (Smart 1993, 405). In this light, as Smart and Smart (2017, 439) suggest, there has been an informalisation of the formal economy. This understanding enables us to see each sphere within the Baguio market trade of the aforementioned imported goods as distinctive, while the connections and potentiality of conversions between them remains a principal feature. It avoids assuming that gift and market or commodity exchanges are completely different types of relationships while precluding dissolving the distinctions between these interactions into a singular unifying practice that explains the outcome of entrepreneurs’ actions solely in terms of the dominance of one sphere (capital accumulation) over another (altruistic community initiatives) (Schrauwers 2011, 315–317).

## Transnational Entrepreneurship and Grey Spaces of Trade

Analyses of entrepreneurship argue that no one set of traits distinguishes entrepreneurial behaviour. Rather, entrepreneurs make a wide range of decisions within

the complex socio-economic and political matrixes within which they function. By mobilising whatever resources are at their disposal across informal/formal spheres, entrepreneurs leverage opportunities to best utilise production and marketing options (DeHart 2010, 59; Greenfield and Strickon 1986, 11; Leshkowich 2014). Mainstream economists seeking alternative understandings of current entrepreneurial practice have drawn on Max-Neef’s (1992) concept of “barefoot economics” to coin the term “barefoot entrepreneurs” (Imas et al. 2012, 563). Such “barefoot entrepreneurs” conduct business from the margins or so-called periphery of societal trade with minimal or variable social and capital resources. Indeed, Baguio’s outer-market-aisle merchants trading the aforementioned imported goods emerge as transnational entrepreneurs who do not have to leave the Philippines or their store location in order to enable cross-border connections (Kariv et al. 2009, 243; Landolt et al. 1999, 297–300). They function as the accessible or visible agents – the linchpin – for transnational networks by offering services such as purchasing unwanted gifts sent from global locations and using profits from these sales for local community and family outreach.

Through the “everydayness” of their “entrepreneurship” (Imas et al. 2012, 563) – working across social and economic sectors – Beverly Tayad and her fellow marketers, for example, evidence that what it means to be a successful entrepreneur does not depend on measurable notions of efficiency or targeted production or on a unidirectional maximisation of growth. Rather, these Baguio entrepreneurs have secured their enterprises by adeptly navigating alternative side roads of exchange – operationalising organisational skills, economic resources, social networks and calculative risk-taking for profit.

Indeed, in order to sustain their transnational businesses from within Baguio’s public market, entrepreneurs selling imported goods have created grey spaces of trade by, for example, consigning goods to periodic sellers who vend in unauthorised public spaces and exchanging goods in non-monetary transactions. “Gray spaces,” Yiftachel (2012, 153) argues, “have become a dominant feature of contemporary urbanism” created “from above” by those in powerful positions but more often from below by urbanites whose rights may have been marginalised in some way. The latter, such as Baguio’s market entrepreneurs, thus “generate new mobilizations and insurgent identities” by using grey spacing to create “bases for self-organization, negotiation, and empowerment” (153). Grey spaces emerge then as “developments, enclaves . . . and transactions positioned between . . . legality” and “approval” and illegality and disapproval (153). In this light, recent scholarship suggests that the term

“extra-legal” (Nordstrom 2007, 211) or “extralegality” (Smart and Zerilli 2014, 222–223) can aid understanding such nuanced or grey-zone actions that are not driven by any organisational intent to break federal laws but rather to leverage in-between opportunities that can achieve a better livelihood. Grey spaces of trade such as those activated by Baguio market entrepreneurs are rarely fully integrated into or eliminated from contemporary commodity transactions. Instead, they persist ambiguously partially outside of, or tolerated by, state authorities who realise that enabling urbanites to earn additional income through their actions-on-the-edge compensates for government welfare shortfalls while fulfilling residents’ subsistence needs (Cross 1998, 35; Yiftachel 2012, 154). Seeing grey spacing as a quiet ongoing process of refashioning socio-economic spatial relations (Yiftachel 2012, 153) dissolves any dichotomy between formal/informal and legal/illegal and thus more perceptively captures the unique “model mix” (Harris 2017, 2) characterising the spheres within which Baguio entrepreneurs conduct their cross-sector businesses.

This theoretical context provides a springboard from which to explore the multiplatform channels through which Baguio’s PX aisle market entrepreneurs operationalise their businesses. I have been conducting research on different sections of the Baguio City Public Market since 2009, with my data collection for this specific study occurring from 2015 to 2018. With my research assistant, I conducted 32 interviews with women entrepreneurs ranging in age from 28 to 66. I also conducted interviews with market and city administrators. Since the public market operates seven days a week, my assistant and I had ample opportunities to casually talk with and observe PX-aisle entrepreneurs to augment our formal interviews.

## Baguio and the Baguio City Public Market

Baguio, an urban centre of 300,000, is the government, education and administration hub for northern Luzon’s five mountain provinces and as such provides the customer base new businesses seek. Despite the recent opening of small- to medium-size department stores, the public market, formally established in 1913 shortly after the city’s founding, remains a primary provisioning site for fresh produce and souvenirs, and especially for imported household goods that are not regularly stocked by local stores. Urban residents across classes shop in the public market and in the PX section specifically to sleuth out well-known products that may be offered at discounted prices and to purchase more unique items, for which they may pay premium prices. The large majority of merchants working throughout the market are

women – it is a sector of the economy in which women predominate throughout Southeast Asia (Leshkovich 2014; Lloyd-Evans 2008; Milgram 2011, 2013, 2015; Mills 2016). In the Philippines, women have built on their history as the country’s primary household financial managers and as public market and street traders to activate a variety of alternative work opportunities (for example, selling fresh produce, cooked food and small manufactured goods) when applicable consumption demands arise. Baguio market entrepreneurs selling imported goods such as confectioneries, cosmetics, vitamins and general grooming products occupy both sides of an outer market aisle that extends almost the full length of the market building, with one side fronting onto Magsaysay Street, a major pedestrian and traffic artery (see Figures 1 and 2). Stores located on the outer side of this market aisle enjoy more public visibility because customers can access the stores from both interior market and exterior street entrances. Although entrepreneurs selling imported goods are in competition with one another, most agree that having their stores clustered together in one aisle means their location has become a specific go-to destination for the goods they offer. Indeed, the market sector selling these imported products is locally known as the “PX aisle.” “PX” is the term used to identify the PX commissary on a United States Army military post, where American military personnel can obtain US-manufactured goods, most often food items (for example, canned goods, various grocery products). During the American colonial period in the Philippines (1898–1946), a number of such army bases were established throughout the country and until the mid-to-late 1990s a selective military presence remained. Since the 1990s, however, most of these bases have been converted into leisure and tourist facilities hosting hotels, restaurants and general shopping venues where imported goods are still selectively available.

As noted earlier, a proportion of the imported goods that PX-aisle marketers sell originate in the tax-exempt gifts Overseas Filipino Workers send, via *balikbayan* boxes, to family and friends in the Philippines. To “curb [the potential] smuggling” of such goods that may be shipped to the Philippines in larger quantities for commercial sale, the government periodically inspects *balikbayan* boxes to tax the contents according to the type of items the shipment contains (Paez 2016; Parazo 2016). In mid-2015, in response to the Bureau of Customs’ unexpected decision to implement a decades-old law taxing *balikbayan* boxes, residents across classes submitted petitions online and wrote letters to municipal councillors protesting this government restriction (Tupaz 2015). Following a Senate investigation of this issue,

President Benigno Aquino III, in office at that time, promptly withdrew this unpopular policy to announce that the Bureau of Customs would instead inspect only “suspected” boxes (De Vera 2015). Shortly afterwards, to rescue his government’s declining ratings prompted by this controversial tax implementation, President Aquino obtained Senate approval to, in effect, raise the tax-exempt status of *balikbayan* box goods from 10,000 to 150,000 Philippine pesos (CDN \$250–\$3,750) (Ager 2016; Fabunan 2016). One senator clearly identified that politicians understood the ramifications of this issue when he stated, “[One] thing should be non-negotiable: don’t subject balikbayan boxes which are products of OFWs’ blood, sweat and tears to unwarranted inspection and draconian procedures” (Hof 2017, 111). Indeed, President Aquino’s general inferences in public speeches that a gift to your family is a gift to the nation (DeVera 2015; Parazo 2015) aptly capture that *balikbayan* box goods hold both gift and commodity value, simultaneously ensuring the social and financial well-being of Filipino residents and the national economy. The Philippine government’s flip-flopping on the implementation of such policies again highlights how the state is complicit in enabling channels of informality (Cross 1998, 35; Harris 2017, 4) when such positions are to their advantage, as the following case studies demonstrate.

## Baguio City Public Market’s Alternative Trade

### *Commodity- and Gift-to-Commodity Flows*

Beverly Tayad, the Baguio public market entrepreneur introduced earlier, conducts her business in a manner similar to that of the other women selling in the market’s PX, or imported-goods, aisle. Beverly ensures she has a regular supply of popular products as well as singular items that can differentiate her offerings from those of her fellow entrepreneurs and appeal to the broad economic range of her customers. To this end, Beverly sources her goods through mainstream commercial retail and wholesale venues as well as through her personal networks. To purchase the items most in demand, Beverly travels to Subic Bay (Olongapo, Zambales) and Clark (Angeles, Pampanga), former US army bases that, as noted, have been converted into commercial facilities that include retail and duty-free stores selling a range of imported products. Given the expense and time required to travel to these centres (a three- to five-hour drive), it is not always financially feasible for some merchants to personally make this trip. Smaller-scale Baguio market sellers may thus obtain the imported goods they need by paying a small

transaction fee to another level of itinerant vendors, or middlepeople, who travel to stores in Manila, Clark or Subic Bay purchasing imported products on speculation or for specific orders and subsequently offer these products to Baguio market PX-aisle sellers.

Beverly also checks online for notices of sales in Manila’s large department stores that periodically sell the imported goods she seeks. She then either travels to Manila personally to make her purchases or asks friends or relatives in the city to buy these goods for her. Other entrepreneurs explain that their strategy for locating sales of popular products entails consulting the websites of well-known department and discount stores in the United States, Canada or Australia, for example. These entrepreneurs purchase their goods online and have the items shipped to relatives or friends living in the applicable country overseas. Once recipients have accumulated the volume of goods needed to fill a *balikbayan* box, they ship the box to the entrepreneur in Baguio via a door-to-door shipping service.

Pursuing another marketing channel, some entrepreneurs ask, or receive offers from, their overseas relatives to send material goods instead of cash remittances. In 2012, Patricia de Guzman, for example, 36 years old, rented a small store in the PX aisle of the market to start a business when her husband’s workplace injury precluded him from returning to his job. Patricia’s relatives living in Alberta, Canada, support her business by sending her popular goods she cannot purchase in the Philippines and by paying the shipping costs from Canada. As Patricia explained,

In 2017, my sister sent me a *balikbayan* box containing assorted baseball caps that she found on sale at an outlet store. I gave some hats as gifts to my relatives, sold some to other PX merchants for 150 pesos [CAD \$3.75], and I sold the others to customers for 250 pesos [CAD \$6.25]. Although the hats were slightly used, they are always in style here.

To distinguish her business in a competitive market, Patricia may ask her relatives to send higher-end goods such as leather handbags and watches in response to specific client requests. Patricia explains that although she repays her relatives for the costlier goods, the latter do not set a specific time limit for repayment, often resulting in the ultimate gifting of some of these items. In yet a further business tactic common to that practised by her fellow entrepreneurs, Patricia divides products purchased or received in bulk into single units for sale. For example, in a large bag of mini chocolate bars containing 170 pieces at a cost per piece of seven to eight pesos, Patricia sells each unit for eight to ten pesos. Patricia

follows the same pattern for selling products such as name-brand (for example, Kirkland) vitamins that are usually packaged in large 500-unit bottles. Consumers customarily purchase vitamins in smaller more affordable ten- or twenty-piece volume amounts. Being able to source goods through such personalised gifting channels initiated by her relatives enables the commodity transactions that sustain Patricia's enterprise.

An increasingly common gift-to-commodity flow emerges when Baguio residents may not be able to use or wish to keep selected goods they receive in *balikbayan* boxes. In such cases, recipients may regift some items to friends or relatives or take the unwanted goods to sell to PX entrepreneurs in the Baguio City Public Market. As Aida Talango, 42 years old and an entrepreneur who has operated her market business for ten years, explained,

I regularly purchase popular imported products from customers who receive gifts they cannot use. One customer offered me packages of chocolates – Nestlé's "Butterfingers with Peanuts." My customer's son could not eat these sweets due to his peanut allergy, so she exchanged these packages for another type of chocolate.

Aida outlined a similar situation in which many OFWs living abroad, especially in the United States, Canada, New Zealand and Australia, send their Filipino relatives expensive cans of fish and luncheon meat such as American-produced SPAM. As Aida continued,

Although SPAM canned meat is a desirable product, some of my customers receiving these goods sell them to me, using the funds they receive to purchase other household items. In the Philippines a can of SPAM costs about 135 pesos (CDN \$3.35), while a can of local canned luncheon meat or fish costs only 60–65 pesos (CDN \$1.60). My customers who receive SPAM as a gift sell it to me for 120–125 pesos (CDN \$3) a can, a price that enables me to earn a small profit when I resell it. My customers then buy more tins of less expensive locally canned meat.

Beverly Tayad related a similar situation when she outlined,

I am always looking for products such as cosmetics, soaps and creams manufactured by well-known brand names like Aveeno, Clinique and L'Oréal. My *suki* (favoured) clients always come to me first to sell these gifted products. Based on our long-standing relationships they know I will offer them a competitive price. Our exchanges are based on understanding one another's needs.

Overseas Filipino Workers returning from abroad activate an additional arm of the market's PX-aisle trade. It is customary that returning OFWs bring gifts, or *pasalubong*, for family and friends in the Philippines. If OFWs were not able to send a *balikbayan* box to the Philippines in advance of their arrival, however, they face the challenge of transporting the volume of gifts they require given that airlines restrict the number of bags passengers can bring with them for no or little charge, both check-in and carry-on luggage. In what has now evolved into a common practice in Baguio, upon their arrival or the day following, OFWs visit the PX aisle of the Baguio market to purchase – in a commodity transaction – the imported goods they need for their socially and culturally sanctioned gifts. Newly arrived OFWs explained that when they shop at the Baguio market, they have to ensure that the items they purchase, in order to be considered appropriate gifts, are manufactured outside the Philippines. Indeed, however mundane the product may seem – Nescafe or Maxwell House coffee and US- and European-manufactured chocolates – the consumers with whom I spoke confirmed that they routinely examine package details to determine a product's provenance and thus its suitability as a gift. They emphasised that an item's place of production rather than its brand identity ensures a better-quality product (see also [Vann 2003](#)).

Scholars analysing the meaning of *balikbayan* box goods note that it is a common practice in the Philippines for consumers to "downgrade" products that are locally made ([Camposano 2017](#), 82). Baguio residents confirmed that they "have canned goods, shampoo, cosmetics and chocolate available here, but when these products are from abroad, they are of better quality than the goods produced in the Philippines." Studies continue to document the "allure of the foreign" ([Orlove 1997](#)) – how the consumption of goods produced in the Global North by those in the Global South materialises modernity and higher socio-economic status for the end user. In this light, [Nguyen-Hau Le and colleagues' \(2013, 765\)](#) research on wine consumption in Vietnam demonstrates "consumers' valuing of foreign" over "locally made" products (see also [Curtis et al. 2007](#)). Indeed, [Ty Matejowsky \(2007, 30\)](#) highlights how the consumption of US-produced SPAM – a luncheon meat introduced to the Philippines by the US military during WWII – symbolically represents America, high achievement, and indeed, the ultimate destination of many Philippine migrants. The ongoing appeal of such imported, often gifted goods thus keeps such products moving through gift-to-commodity transactions, as these Baguio market exchange patterns illustrate.

## Commodity-to-Gift Flows

Given that Baguio market PX-aisle entrepreneurs sell similar goods in side-by-side stalls, merchants explain that to sustain their businesses they need to foster good social relationships with their customers and with the broader community. Entrepreneurs like Beverly and Patricia thus offer discounts to their *suki* customers as well as layaway plans to enable clients to purchase the products they want on terms they can afford. Susan Batton, 29 years old with a new business, outlined, “When I receive a new *balikbayan* box, I first contact my *suki* customers so they can have first pick of the just-arrived goods. I even offer a discount to early shoppers if they purchase a number of items.” Offering this advance-shopping initiative aids Susan’s business in the long term even as the discounts she offers constrain her immediate capital gain. Indeed, while I was interviewing Susan, a customer walked behind the counter of her booth to more closely examine and ask about her products, while Susan noted, “Personal attention is key. I know what my customers like.” As one of Susan’s customers confirmed, “I always come back to Susan as she is easy to talk to and I trust her. You can even ask for a discount and not feel ashamed. Although I may not be shopping, I visit Susan to catch up on the market news and she always asks about my family.” In this light, Susan continued, “Looking to the future, I hope my give-and-take approach means I can develop longer-term relationships with my customers.” Another market shopper stated that she prefers to shop for her cosmetics and grooming supplies at Beverly’s store because, she said, “I enjoy the intimate setting there more than at expensive department stores where the staff just know how to stock shelves. Beverly knows my taste and can suggest which products are best suited to me.”

Much like nurturing good relationships with their consumers, PX-aisle market entrepreneurs also contribute to community well-being by using a proportion of their business profits, whether cash or in-kind goods, to engage in social welfare initiatives. As is customary throughout the Philippines where a high school and college education are highly valued, those earning anything above their subsistence income will regularly contribute to the education costs of a relative, and each of the market entrepreneurs with whom I spoke were engaged in gifting funds from their commodity income for education expenses. In this regard, Natalie Dacay, 62 years old, and an entrepreneur in business since the late 1990s, related,

I always try to buy imported goods that students offer me whether I need these items or not. This enables me to contribute to the costs for school tuition and

books. For example, I recently purchased a new pair of pink Nike running shoes from a student who had received the shoes from relatives living abroad, but the shoes were not his correct size.

Next door to Natalie, Leonora Ina-an, 53 years old, explained that her daughter who lives in New Jersey, United States, regularly sends *balikbayan* boxes of books that Leonora can sell in her store. When the books arrive, Leonora selects the titles she thinks are marketable and donates the remaining volumes to the [Reading Association of the Philippines \(2017\)](#), an NGO that provides books to schools and uses the book sale funds to provide tuition fees and uniforms for students in low-income families. Leonora continued,

Some people leave unwanted products with me on consignment such as canned goods, coffee, and popular health supplements. I tell them to come back in two or three days to collect their payment, but when they return I pay them even if their items have not yet sold as I know I will sell these goods eventually.

A similar commodity-to-gift situation arose while I was interviewing Leonora in her store in May 2016. One of her *suki* customers asked Leonora to assist the former’s relatives who had just lost their house in a fire that had destroyed a residential section of central Baguio. In response, Leonora donated several good-quality backpacks and a selection of canned goods, vitamins and confectioneries.

Beverly Tayad outlined other commodity-gifting channels through which she activates community outreach such as regularly sending orders of imported products to merchants working in smaller provincial markets. As Beverly explained, “Sometimes buyers from the provinces personally pick up the goods they want, but most often they text their orders to me and I just send the goods by bus after receiving a small deposit. My provincial buyers pay me the balance they owe, interest-free, once they have sold most of these items.” Beverly also offers employment opportunities rather than cash to facilitate relatives’ subsistence needs. As she explained,

When relatives ask me for money, instead I give them goods to sell so they can earn their own income. They can sell these products door to door, at their workplace, or they can organise an event to gather friends together. I advance these goods on a consignment basis and at a price barely above my cost so my relatives can add their own markup and still have competitive pricing.

In a similar initiative, Patricia de Guzman, the entrepreneur noted earlier who can access more expensive items via requests to her Canadian relatives, advances



handbags and watches to city hall administrative staff on flexible repayment terms. These municipal employees sell their consigned items to their co-workers in office-to-office transactions. As Patricia outlined, “Office managers and supervisors often like to have such products personally presented to them rather than having to make the rounds of all the market stores to find the item they want.” While such “illegal” or unauthorised vendors conduct business in public spaces not zoned for commercial sales, the Baguio government, cognizant of city employees’ need to augment their low wages with alternative work options, and of the provisioning service these sales provide to urbanites, often overlooks the extralegal aspect of these activities. Official tolerance of such edgy trade thus evidences how government has enveloped informal activities into its mainstream economic practice (see [Harris 2017](#), 1–2; [Smart and Smart 2017](#), 239). Through such alternative and flexible channels, Baguio PX-aisle entrepreneurs create grey spaces of practice that simultaneously increase their business income while providing goodwill and an additional income for community members.

At the same time, some gifting outreach initiatives may fail to produce the desired outcomes when periodic sellers do not pay entrepreneurs for the consignment goods they received because of poor sales or diverting earnings to other purposes such as family education or health care. In such circumstances periodic sellers are then precluded from accessing consignment goods on favourable terms from other merchants given the close communication among market entrepreneurs. To recoup these debts, PX-aisle entrepreneurs can rely for repayment only on broad-based social pressure and on the latter sellers’ exclusion from future business opportunities.

### ***Balikbayan* Box Goods: To Keep, Exchange or Sell?**

The circular flow of *balikbayan* box goods among Philippine gift-to-commodity-to-gift spheres additionally raises the question of whether all goods can potentially move with equal facility through these realms. [Annette Weiner’s \(1992\)](#) analysis of men’s and women’s exchange networks in the Trobriand Islands and of the specific goods that can be exchanged assists understanding the degree of mobility gifted products have in this transnational Philippine trade. As [Weiner \(1992, 33\)](#) argues, while “alienable” goods are easily “exchanged against each other;” the “absolute value of some goods,” namely “inalienable” items, “places them above exchangeability of one thing for another.” [Weiner](#) cautions us to remember, however, that throughout history even giving up inalienable possessions still granted the giver concessions

in return, such as spiritual or social capital from religious, community, or even government institutions (33–34).

In this regard, Philippine gift recipients with whom I spoke explained that when they receive a *balikbayan* box, it is generally understood that all of the goods in the box can be used, exchanged or sold as needed by any family member, and thus these items emerge as alienable. The exception occurs if the sender gives an item to a specific person by writing the latter’s name on it, thus rendering the item inalienable. By designating particular items for specific recipients, OFWs, as noted, prove their love for family and friends but also may claim or obligate the latter’s continued affection and respect in return, given the physical distances that separate them ([Camposano 2017](#), 82). One Baguio resident explained,

We most often receive such personalised items at Christmas but less often for birthdays. We keep the Christmas gifts that are sent to particular family members as our relatives living overseas may ask us if we received their package, if we liked the specific gifts, and if we were able to use the special items they sent.

Another urban resident explained, “Some of my relatives living in Canada send their gifts wrapped in second-hand clothing. We understand that the wrapped goods are meant for us to use, while we can sell the used clothing, especially if the garments do not fit us.”

Other consumers outlined that their decision to keep, exchange or sell the gifted goods they receive is also based on the items’ specific brand or place of production, as long as these goods have been sent for general family use. As one resident noted,

We prefer to use the personal grooming products with which we are familiar rather than trying a new brand just because that item has been gifted to us. If we receive soaps and lotions we cannot use, unless they are well-known and foreign-made designer brands like Victoria’s Secret, Oil of Olay or Dove, we will sell or exchange them.

She continued,

Sometimes our relatives send us goods they cannot use, but we may not be able to use these items either. For example, last month, our box contained many baby bottles, but we have no babies here; do our relatives expect us to sell these goods? And why do other relatives send us kitchen staples (for example, oil, salt) that we can purchase here in Baguio?

Another Baguio resident answered this question when he outlined, “We welcome receiving *balikbayan* box

goods, whatever our relatives send us, as we will realise the value of these items in some way.” Indeed, one family I visited maintains a common storeroom, or *bodega*, where the family keeps items they have received but cannot immediately use. This storeroom is an ever-changing resource, as family members can visit the *bodega* at any time to take, return or add items. “That is where I got my high brown boots,” one Baguio resident stated. “These boots were in my aunt’s box, but no one wanted them.” Another urbanite proudly modelled her Guess-brand denim jacket, explaining that when people ask her where she obtained her jacket, she exclaims, “The box, the box.” Such imported, gifted items maintain their prestige for the wearer as long as the latter keeps these items. But as the aforementioned resident continued to explain, “Once goods such as clothing are out of fashion or no one can use them, rather than leaving them to sit in the *bodega*, we take them to the Baguio market to sell.”

Baguio gift-recipients’ accounts thus evidence that the value of such *balikbayan* box goods is rooted in their fluid movement between “alienable” and “inalienable” spheres, which, in turn, is largely dependent upon the varying contexts – the contingent parameters or performance – of the exchange. Indeed, personalised gifts that were originally “inalienable” (for example, designated Christmas presents) may later become “alienated” commodities when their exchange value better satisfies a person’s need. Thus, whether keeping, exchanging or selling *balikbayan* box goods, Filipinos retain the value of OFWs’ gestures of assistance and care in a sphere of meaning Weiner (1992, 7) terms “keeping-while-giving.”

## Conclusion

Within the context of shifting government policies, Baguio entrepreneurs trading *balikbayan* box goods emerge as “savvy agents” (Kariv et al. 2009, 243) who have refashioned circuits of exchange to more firmly secure their trade. What enables the coexistence of, and conversations between, their divergent types of exchange relations is the acknowledgement of the legitimacy both of seeking business success and of building relationships through mutual support and exchange so long as the business practice does not overwhelm the cultivation of relationships (Schrauwers 2011, 316).

From their place-based locations in the PX aisle of the Baguio City Public Market, these transnational entrepreneurs thus activate spheres where, “in face-to-face” and “street-level” encounters, “laws” and customary practices are “renegotiated according to ever changing power relations” to yield spaces of “informal governance” (Polese et al. 2016, 16). Entrepreneurs convert gifted items that may have once been inalienable possessions

into alienated economic resources while diverting part of their business profits into altruistic community gestures that yield goodwill as well as potential capital gain in the future, but are always aware of the opportunities and constraints these forms present to, or impose on, transactors (Smart 1993, 405). Marketers such as Beverly, Leonora, Natalie and Patricia know their economic bottom line and the mix of tactics they need to implement to ensure their enterprises survive. As their businesses in imported goods demonstrate, commodity transactions can be pushed only so far before entrepreneurs need to activate some kind of self-sacrificing outreach that, in turn, may eventually inform their commodity performance. Philippine transnational entrepreneurs thus draw on and expand the precedent of local-to-global *suki* (favoured) relations in order to be somewhat certain of purchasing and receiving marketable products at appropriate prices, making the sales they require to maintain their businesses, and materialising the social welfare gestures they are customarily expected to make to community well-being. Through their everyday circular gift-to-commodity-to-gift transactions, these entrepreneurs innovatively connect people and sectors of society across global locations, shaping an alternative market trade in both visible and not-so-evident ways.

Understanding the multiplatform dynamics of these businesses means recognising the distinctiveness of the varied resources entrepreneurs garner, but guarding against dissolving their actions into a reductionist initiative that prioritises resource accumulation simply for self-interest or for profit maximisation (Schrauwers 2011, 316). Baguio’s PX-aisle sellers have “folded their economic transactions into social relations through practical activities” such that their spaces of trade undergo continual reconstruction as the practices they choose continually encounter each other (Polese et al. 2016, 16).

Since the mid-1970s, the sustained supply of and demand for *balikbayan* box goods clearly evidence the Philippine government’s “dependency on migration [and on remittances and in-kind gifts] as a development strategy” (Hof 2017, 111). That the state continues to praise the work of OFWs and continues to encourage their cash remittances and gifts masks the fact that government has not done enough to reduce poverty, inequality and corruption (Hutchcroft and Rocamora 2012). The ongoing sustainability of this transnational trade is thus contingent upon an overseas moral or informal economy in which those abroad continue to feel obligated to support those still at home through gift giving. It also depends upon Filipino residents having access to channels that best enable them to realise the value of the goods they receive – that provide the option to keep, exchange or

sell gifted goods. Beverly Tayad aptly captured the pivotal position her fellow PX-aisle marketers occupy when she described her entrepreneurial practice as *kapit sa patalim* – “holding on to the edge of the knife.” Beverly explained that the often unpredictable and potentially vulnerable nature of her public market work means that “one just needs to forge one’s own way with it.”

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## Notes

- 1 All personal names are pseudonyms.
- 2 The word *balikbayan* was coined in the 1970s by former Philippine president Ferdinand Marcos, who encouraged Filipinos living abroad to maintain contact with their Philippine families (Basch et al. 1994; Szanton-Blanc 1996). In 1973, the Marcos government formalised this initiative into a state policy, “Operation Homecoming,” in which OFWs, or *balikbayans*, were given incentives to travel home (for example, personal goods imported duty-free) (Espiritu 2003, 80–81). *Balikbayan* currently refers to OFWs temporarily living abroad and to those and their descendants who have permanently resettled in another country (Espiritu 2003, 232, n. 21).
- 3 The exchange rate I use here is CDN \$1 = 40 Philippine pesos.
- 4 The federal government’s vacillating *balikbayan* box by-laws surfaced again in the Bureau of Customs’ revised 2017 Memorandum Order (CMO) 04-2017, which outlined that “valuable new items” such as “gadgets, jewellery, appliances, and watches etc.” need to be declared with a receipt, while “new [items such as] everyday clothing, toiletries, chocolates etc.” do not require a receipt but need to be itemized (Republic of the Philippines 2017). In October 2017, “Senator Recto welcomed the decision of Customs chief Isidro Lapeña to suspend the BOC tedious guidelines and requirements in sending ‘balikbayan’ boxes

into the country” (Ballaran 2017). While some Overseas Filipino Workers may use the irregularity of *balikbayan* box inspections to import larger quantities of goods tax-exempt for commercial sale, I do not investigate the specific details of this trade in this article.

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