

## The truth about the Manton de Manila

Author: Bea Zobel Jr.

Date: 2003-02-01

IT doesn't fail. Every time someone in Madrid would hear that I was going home, I would get: "Bea, bring me back a Manton de Manila, por favor!" Back in the Philippines I would search in vain. No one seemed to know where to find the precious shawls.

Eventually, I learned what every school girl knows--that the Manton de Manila did not come from our country. It was not made by Filipinos. It actually came from China.

Of course, the manton is not the only thing in this world that is geographically misnamed. I suppose it is to be expected that in the encounter between cultures from different parts of the globe, some confusion will arise.

The most obvious example would be the American Indians. They take their name from Columbus' presumption that he had made it to India instead of America. Perhaps all those days at sea had made him delirious! Hey, after just two hours in an Edsa traffic jam I already feel that I am on a different planet!

At any rate, because of Columbus' mistake we now have a pesky problem. I'm sure many of you have had to spend time clarifying when talking about Indian art whether you mean the Taj Mahal or Pocahontas. This muddle is the reason for that clumsy term "Amerindian." Imagine referring to our childhood game as "Cowboys and Amerindians?"

Ino Manalo points out that "papel de Hapon" probably doesn't come from Japan anymore. You also might say the same of Brussel sprouts not being the exclusive province of the Belgian capital.

One more example closer to home are Tingguian blankets. There are the blankets which antique dealers like to say come from Abra. Ino's friend Dave Baradas has a theory that these blankets were really woven in the towns of Ilocos. The association between the Tingguian people and the blankets arises from the fact that the Tingguian have managed to preserve so many pieces perhaps because of the traditional isolation of their mountain communities.

### History of misnaming

To return then to our mantones, their misnaming is a story in itself. It is the story of the Galleon Trade which ran between 1571 and 1811. The trade was the only authorized shipping connection between Asia and Spanish America. Through the galleons, the various products of the Asian countries reached Mexico. On the return trip came Mexican silver. For the longest time, Mexican silver coins were the accepted currency of China. Ino tells me of buying the silver dollars in the little town of Lijiang in the middle of Yunnan province. He thought he had stumbled upon a rare bit of history. The coins would later turn out to be clever fakes!

Among the goods carried by the galleons were the mantones. They were brought from the ports of China by Chinese traders. Arriving in Manila, they were loaded on to the galleons for the voyage across the Pacific. The galleons docked at Acapulco. From here goods were carried across wide plains and mountains to Mexico City, then Puebla before ending up in the port of Vera Cruz. Here commenced another ocean journey. This time what needed to be traversed was the Atlantic.

Of course, mantones also made their way to other parts of Latin America. In fact, the shawls became an important feature embroidered into women's costume all over the Latin world. Similarly it is significant to note that in Spain, as Pitoy Moreno points out, mantones came to form part of many rituals and dances.

### Integration

"LADY with Manton de Manila," by Juan Luna.

It is actually not uncommon for articles from another land to become integrated in the culture of a distant place. This is the case, for example, of Venetian glass beads that are very much part of the attire of the people of Africa. I think you find them among the peoples of the Cordillera as well.

Recently, I came across a Cuban magazine that had an article on the mantones. Unlike many of his compatriots in the Latin world, the author was aware of the mantones' true origins.

On second thought, I actually prefer it the old way. Better to leave people secure in the bliss of their confusion. Besides, wouldn't you want our country to be credited with the creation of such beautiful things?

Actually, the real reason is that I just can't see myself being so excruciatingly correct that I would start calling the shawls, "Mantones de China via Manila!"

