

# philippine studies

Ateneo de Manila University • Loyola Heights, Quezon City • 1108 Philippines

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## **Into the Country of Standing Men** by Rey Ventura

### **Book Notes**

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and possible remedies through institutional reforms and civic education. The various chapters raise the following points: Not a simple economic exchange, vote buying carries a range of meanings in different cultural contexts. Vote buying emerges when it is a cost-effective strategy and politicians can ensure voter compliance. It is comparatively advantageous only when certain conditions prevail, such as poverty, traditions of gift giving, and access to government largesse. Buying votes requires a complex multilayered organization that relies on classic strategies of surveillance, regulation, and incentive schemes, as well as the mobilization of networks of trust, judicial protection, and managers with in-depth local knowledge. Vote buying distorts democratic policy making as well as the economy, with the value of those whose votes are bought being discounted, even as the affluent (whose votes are not bought) are offered public goods. “Supply-side” remedies seek to alter the institutional incentives to engage in vote buying, e.g., electoral rules that strengthen political parties and programmatic campaigning, and effective enforcement of prohibitions. However, voter education as a “demand-side” remedy is ineffective as campaigns are often based on misguided assumptions about the meaning of vote buying to poor voters. A final chapter presents the main lessons learned.

VENTURA, REY

## **Into the Country of Standing Men**

Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2007. 324 pages.

*Into the Country of Standing Men* delves closer into the lives of the men Ventura wrote about in his first book *Underground in Japan*, first published in 1992 and reprinted in 2006 by the Ateneo de Manila University Press. In Japan the “unauthorized” migrant laborers are known as *tachinbo*, literally standing men, because they have to stand in line while a company foreman sizes them up and chooses the most able ones for the job for the day. According to Our Own Voice, a U.S.-based literary group that has given recognition to this work, “this term originally referred to prostitutes soliciting favors in the street. But post-war Japan’s rapid reconstruction and industrialization created a new breed of workers: the day laborers. These workers were mostly rural migrants. They stood on the corners and waited for labor recruiters to offer them jobs. They stood and waited like prostitutes.” In *Underground in*

*Japan* (47), Ventura says, “it is important to be seen standing. If you were sitting, that would mean you are just loafing around.” Fifteen years after *Underground* was first published, the standing men have somehow grown roots in their second “home” with one or two having married Japanese, or with offspring “made in Japan.” They are not as intimidated by their status as they were when they first came, and some have become very fluent in the language and comfortable in the lifestyle. As the book poignantly shows, however, the tachinbo ironically embodies homelessness as never before: he will never be considered a citizen by the Japanese state, nor can he now go back to his own home that somehow seems to have forgotten him after all these years. *Country of Standing Men* also features women, in all their strengths and frailties. Straightforward language, vivid imagery, and a unique sense of humor all contribute to making this book a gripping chronicle of an evolving social reality. The book was finalist for Essay at the 2007 National Book Awards given by the Manila Critics Circle and the National Book Development Board, and won the Global Filipino Literary Award for Non-Fiction, given by Our Own Voice, in 2008.