The Philippines and Japan in America's Shadow

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Abstract
This book grew out of three intensive workshops and a great deal of collective brainstorming. The hard work has been worthwhile. As edited compilations go, this is a valuable collection that provides a number of insights into the occupation by the US of the Philippines from the beginning of the twentieth century and of Japan after the Pacific War. The project as a whole bears out the value of a collective enterprise that is planned and executed carefully and with a commonality of purpose. Many of the ideas that emerge from the shared focus are illuminating.

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This book grew out of three intensive workshops and a great deal of collective brainstorming. The hard work has been worthwhile. As edited compilations go, this is a valuable collection that provides a number of insights into the occupation by the US of the Philippines from the beginning of the twentieth century and of Japan after the Pacific War. The project as a whole bears out the value of a collective enterprise that is planned and executed carefully and with a commonality of purpose. Many of the ideas that emerge from the shared focus are illuminating.

This selection provides some general insights across the various contributions, something that can be difficult with such collections. In the event, The Philippines and Japan in America’s Shadow is clearly intended to provoke scholars working in similar fields. A strong collegial aspect to the book is acknowledged in the Preface, along with the hope of generating further work. And anything that presently adds to a vigorous academic publication program is commendable.

Co-editor Kiichi Fujiwara begins with a piece that might annoy scholars of the US itself. Measured against Japan, he claims, the US “has shown far less interest in its territorial expansion” (p. 1). For different reasons, both Teddy Roosevelt and Mark Twain would be spinning in their graves. The American experience is defined by its growth, so much so that it was labelled Manifest Destiny. Whatever else, this process needs to be woven into the story of American involvement in the East. So Fujiwara’s assertion, if this reviewer has read him correctly, is surely a straw dog. Nonetheless, Fujiwara’s discussion of latecomer colonialism is revelatory and sets the tone nicely for the entire book.

The structure of the book is interesting. Part I considers empires and nation-building, provoking comparisons with more recent developments elsewhere in the US imperium. Part II deals with nascent nationalism as revealed by Japan and the Philippines. Yoshiko Nagano’s comparison of the mystification of Jose Rizal and the symbolisation of the Japanese emperor is informative. The section ends with Satoshi Nakano’s moving account of memory and mourning. Part III considers some examples of so-called triangular encounters involving all three of the nations under review.

Julian Go and two prominent Philippine scholars make the running at the outset with Part I – a three-chapter section of provocative theorising. Go himself argues persuasively that America’s imperial identity emerges from its Philippine experience. This theme deserves further perusal. Rey Ileto reminds us that the prevailing view about the US and Japanese occupations of the Philippines is incomplete; that a radical or alternative interpretation that challenges a dominant pro-American narrative deserves attention. After the turmoil of the sixties, Ileto concludes, “the wars against the US and Japan would have the character of sameness more than difference” (p. 55). Next, Temmy Rivera reinforces the fact that postwar US intervention in the archipelago prevented the sort of structural reforms achieved in Japan. Land reform and democratic rights were achieved in Japan; they were stifled in the Philippines.

The sites chosen for discussion here are diverse and wide-ranging, both a strength and a weakness in dealing with the central theme. As the editors make clear in their Preface, the US casts a long shadow across the Pacific. Both Japan and the Philippines experienced direct rule by the great republic and it has loomed large in the development of both nations. The editors note en passant that the US has been a potent force “in such fields as political institutions, structure of economy, mass culture and consumption patterns”. This sweeping reality needs to be remembered when accessing this book because its varied chapters certainly range widely.

Perhaps the greatest strength of this volume is the commitment of the individual authors to the main theme of the project no matter what area is under review. Michiyo Yoneno-Reyes takes some of the relevant themes into the arena of ethnomusicology in a fascinating chapter that deals with the “singing of modernity” and the American presence.

In a deeply personal account, Hiromu Shimizu ends the book with a chapter that challenges the assumption that “Japan has an authentic cultural heritage, while the Philippines does not have that kind of cultural tradition”. Instead, according to Shimizu, both countries contest in similar ways within the shadow of the hegemon and as a consequence share much in this context. It is an appropriate and worthwhile conclusion to the collection.

There are infelicities of style as well as some problems of awkward usage, especially regarding syntax, but these never endanger comprehension. The book is well presented and, unlike most compendiums, actually provides a small index. This commendable study provides an indication of what can still be achieved with comparative studies of a tantalising theme when the central focus is maintained through diligent collaboration. It will have relevance for a range of scholars interested in the US and East Asian affairs.

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