

Asian Studies for Filipinos: The Philippines in the Asian Century

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Introduction

Why should Filipinos study Asia? There is no more opportune, more urgent time for Filipinos to study the region than today, when ties between the Philippines and other Asian countries have deepened: calls for ASEAN integration, the popularity of Korean and Japanese culture among Filipinos, the Korean diaspora, ongoing Filipino migration, cheaper flights to ASEAN countries, and the territorial and maritime disputes with China.

Furthermore, many multinational companies have moved their production and operations to East Asia, including the Philippines, which received its own windfall of foreign direct investments. Remittances from Filipinos abroad prop up an otherwise ailing economy, and the booming service and real-estate sectors provide much-needed employment. Today, despite increasing poverty and growing inequality, the Philippines is touted as an ideal investment hub, and one of the region's fast growing economies.

At the same time, labor migration to other Asian countries has continued since the mid-1970s. Singapore, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Persian Gulf countries have long been top destinations for Filipino workers. And their migration has collectively wrought a “migration revolution” (Aguilar 2014). Through remittances and other transnational links, migrants have altered class structures, changed Filipinos' sense of nationhood, and contributed to the economic well-being of the Philippines. These and other developments have made an impact on Philippine society, and on the daily lives of all Filipinos.

Asia for the Philippines: Neighbors but Strangers

But despite Asia's importance for the Philippines, many Filipinos know relatively little about it. In contrast, they generally appreciate and (or think they) know more about the West. They can readily identify Barack Obama, but would probably have to Google up Xi Jin Ping. They hear about Columbus, Magellan, and Marco Polo, but not Gadjah Mada, Cheng Ho, and ibn Battuta. They admire the Romans, but neglect their contemporaries, the Parthians and Sassanids of Iran. Many read about Achilles and Odysseus from *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, but do not even know Arjuna and Rustam from the *Mahabharata* and the *Shahnameh*, respectively. Filipinos would probably recognize a silhouette of Eiffel Tower, but would not know a *torii* even if they were standing in front of one. They quote Shakespeare, but not Kalidasa; recite Romantic odes, not Arabic *qasidas*; and watch *Death of a Salesman* and *Oedipus Rex*, but not *Hagoromo* or the *Ramayana*.

Filipinos' Westernized worldview distorts their learning in other subjects. A typical curriculum of World History courses (and textbooks) charts a story that runs from Mesopotamia to Ancient Greece and Rome, to the Dark Ages and Renaissance, and then the Industrial Revolution up to the modern period (cf. Ansary 2009). And a local world history textbook for high school in the Philippines devotes only around ten pages to Islamic civilization.

The role of Asia is sadly left out of this world historical narrative; certainly, the history of Asia is taught in a separate subject, but this separation, while necessary to some extent, reinforces the notion that Asia played little or no part whatsoever in World History. On the contrary, as many scholars point out, the region played an integral role to the development of Western civilization. John Hobson's *The Eastern Origins of Western Civilization* (2010) for instance, illustrates, among others, China's role in Britain's Industrial Revolution.

Even the study of science ignores Asian contributions. For instance, some textbooks in the Philippines often cite pioneering developments in chemistry and physics. They identify certain Europeans as the Father or

Discoverer of a device or particle. But many supposedly Western inventions or discoveries were already predated in Asia or were made possible because Europeans developed them from Asians.

But it's not that Filipinos do not learn about the region. They take up at least two courses on Asian History, one in high school and another in college. Certainly, they learn about Confucius, Taoism, and Buddhism; about Gandhi, the Great Wall, and the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperty Sphere; about Mao Tse Tung and the Meiji Restoration. Filipinos also pick up information from occasional travels to ASEAN countries; stories from Overseas Filipino Workers (OFW); news about OFW life; Asian restaurants in the Philippines; and information culled from Japanese animé and Korean novels.¹

Thus, it's not so much that Filipinos are completely in the dark about Asia. Perhaps it may be more accurate to say that they have little appreciation for their Asian history classes. They may read textbooks, but do not think much of or remember what they read about.

There may be several reasons for this. First is a perceived lack of relevance of the field: why is it important to learn about, say, Hinduism, or would it change my life if I know the Taj Mahal was built as a monument to eternal love? This lack of utility may partly spring from an exoticization of Asia. Filipinos mostly see it in terms of its past: as an exotic, strange land of ancient traditions and premodern societies. There is little understanding of contemporary Asian history. India conjures up Hinduism and the Taj Mahal, but not Mumbai as India's financial center. China evokes the Great Wall, but not the towering skyscrapers of Shanghai.

But more significantly, this dearth of awareness also has much to do with and exacerbated by the Philippines' colonial history, which has helped stifle Filipinos' appreciation of other Asian societies. This relative ignorance, however, is not only a question of dates, personalities, and the like, but also, more importantly, a matter of orientation, which is primarily directed to and influenced by a Western, specifically American, *weltanschauung*.

Christian and Colonial Legacies

Filipinos love the United States more than the Americans themselves (Santos 2014). And partly because of their Westernized, Anglophone education, Filipinos have learned to see fellow Asians as Other. Their Southeast Asian neighbors return the favor; some of them do not see Filipinos as Southeast Asians because Filipinos have imbibed Western culture too deeply, and speak English too well for their liking.

Christian Filipinos inherited their anti-Muslim bias from, among other sources, their Spanish conquerors, who brought their counter-Reformation, anti-Islamic zeal to the Philippines. Today, especially in light of the Mamasapano incident, it is common to hear “Muslim kasi” (It’s because they’re Muslims) when a Muslim is being disagreeable or downright violent, as though his religion always had something to do with his behavior. Ignorance and insensitivity to Islam has undoubtedly hampered relations between Christian and Muslim Filipinos. Labeling the Qur’an as the “Muslim Bible” or seeing Muhammad as the Islamic Jesus are hardly accurate descriptions of Islam’s scripture and prophet.

This treatment of Islam springs in part from general religious differences between the Philippines and its Asian neighbors. Majority of Filipinos are Christian, while their fellow Asians are Buddhist, Hindu, Sikh, or Taoist. The Philippines takes pride as “the only Catholic country in Asia.” But why should it be a badge of honor, as though there was something dishonorable with being an Islamic or Buddhist country? As a Christianized nation, Filipinos have arguably picked up a biblical bias that does not see much truck with anyone who is not part of Yahweh’s Chosen People. Parts of the Hebrew Bible (the term, Old Testament, is Christocentric) tell the story of conquest and extermination of “heathens” and “pagans” like the Philistines and the Canaanites, in retrospect all Asians. With few exceptions (Ruth, Cyrus the Great, and the Persians in *The Book of Esther*, foreigners and non-Israelites are ignored or demonized in the Good Book. Today, trapped in a Christian worldview, Filipinos find it hard to appreciate Islamic, Buddhist, or Taoist culture

and society. This is ironic, given that Christianity is historically of Asian origin. Filipinos' ignorance of Asia is compounded by indifference at best and racism at worst. They cry foul when Filipinos are depicted negatively in the media, as when Dan Brown wrote of Manila as the "gates of hell" in his novel, *Inferno*. However, a recent study reveals that Filipinos themselves are a racist, discriminatory bunch (Newsgraph n.d.). The history of our relations with Chinese-Filipinos and Muslims testifies to this, as does our treatment of Japanese-Filipino children, who are sometimes labeled as *jafake* (fake Japanese, fake Filipino) [Ubalde 2013, 98]. In contrast, many Filipinos admire and aspire to be Fil-foreigners, many of whom are famous and beautiful actors, actresses, models, and basketball players in the country. A few also impugned the Iranians when the Philippine team lost to them in the 2013 FIBA championship game (Ramirez 2013). And a popular TV show had a Filipino actor portraying an Indian ("Michael V - DJ Bumbay") in funny but unflattering terms, blurring the lines between humor and discrimination. This racism sits uneasily with (supposed) Filipino hospitality and friendliness. And given the increasing ties between Filipinos and the rest of Asia and the world, Filipinos' ignorance and ridicule of the foreign is becoming embarrassingly untenable.

The Moral Dimension of Asian Studies: Linking Knowledge and Ethics

Asian Studies is less about memorizing facts and dates about Bangkok, Bali, or Buddhism or explaining the rise of the Mughal, Ottoman, and Safavid Empires. And it is certainly not about getting a degree in the field, although that would not be so bad an option. Knowing know who the first Abbasid caliph was, or where or when Prince Shotoku was born are hardly life-changing bits of information. Research on these matters is well and good, but what is vital here is the ethical dimension of Asian Studies, which should develop not just knowledge of but also an openness to, appreciation of, and sensitivity to the foreign, the alien, the Asian.

In this sense, Asian Studies is not just an intellectual, scholarly enterprise; it is also a moral, practical, day-to-day affair that pertains to how Filipinos treat and relate to the histories, cultures, and societies of other Asians. Ethics here involves not how one deals with “friends” (fellow Filipinos), but how one treats strangers. There is indeed a strand of moral philosophy that explores these and related issues (Eagleton 2009; Appiah 2005; Zizek, Santner, and Reinhard 2005).

The moral dimension of Asian Studies underlies the acceleration of what might be called “global and interactive turn” in the field. This development is, among other things, a response to an overtly Eurocentric scholarship, which had ignored the role of Asia in World History or treated it as a poor, derivative copy of European civilization. In contrast, more recent studies show how and to what extent Asian societies have always interacted with the West and contributed to its development. Studies like this have been around for some time (Hodgson 1993; Abu Lughod 1989), particularly World-Systems Analysis by Immanuel Wallerstein and André Gunder Frank. But the trend has only accelerated and received a new poignancy in light of 9/11 and the so-called Rise of Asia. This is nowhere more evident than in Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies.

Faced with a surge of anti-Muslim sentiments and the alleged Clash of Civilizations, scholars of Islam and Middle East have produced works that help counteract studies for which Islam is a violent and fanatical religion, and a backward civilization. Taking pains to show otherwise, these academics point out how an enlightened Islamic civilization promoted all sorts of learning, including medicine, astronomy, mathematics, philosophy, and chemistry (Gutas 1998; Khalili 2010; Starr 2013).

Something of the germ theory was already known in medieval Islamic civilization; medieval and early modern European medicine relied on ibn-Rushd’s *Canon of Medicine*, a standard textbook of the field then. The Heliocentric Theory owes itself to the work of the Maragha Revolution in astronomy, referring to scholars centered on and working on the Maragha observatory in northern Iran (Khalili 2010). And some of our constellations have Arabic origins, as do the words, alchemy and chemistry (*al-kimiya*).

In mathematics, Europeans borrowed Hindu-Arabic numerals to replace Roman numbers, which proved cumbersome in calculations, not least in business transactions (Try multiplying numbers in Roman numerals). Zero came from India, and algebra, which comes from the Arabic, *al-jabr*, was developed by mathematicians from the Islamic world. In addition, scholars highlight the different ways Islamic learning precipitated the development of modernity and other hallmarks of European civilization (Hobson 2010; Salibas 2007; Beckwith 2012; Lyons 2009). Indeed, the Scientific Revolution the West is proud of could not have happened without the contribution of Islamic civilization (Khalili 2010).

Complementing these works are studies that emphasize politico-economic interactions and crosscultural exchanges not just between Europe and Asia (Maclean and Matar 2011; McCabe 2008) but also within Asian societies, especially in precolonial times (McLaughlin 2010; Darwin 2007; Parker 2010; Hall 2011; Tagliacozzo 2009; Warren 1981). It is quite fashionable nowadays to see titles containing “World History,” as in the Oxford University Press series that includes *China in World History*, *Japan in World History*, *Migration in World History*, *the Silk Road in World History*, and *Southeast Asia in World History*.

The “global-interactive” turn in Asian Studies contains several moral impulses. In countering Orientalist scholarship,² stressing cultural interactions, and highlighting Asia’s role in world history and its many achievements, it teaches Asians and non-Asians alike to appreciate and respect the region’s history: Asia is not the backward civilization of Orientalist scholarship. The global-interactive turn also imparts the notion that no society is self-contained, that all civilizations in many ways cooperate and depend on each other. In practical, everyday terms, this means puncturing Western myths of civilizational superiority and overturning stereotypes and racist attitudes that arguably lead to discriminatory policies, if not drone strikes. This link between such perceptions and policies is best exemplified in the case of Muslims, Arabs, and Arab-Americans: in the wake of 9/11 and the War on Terror, many of them were suspected of being terrorists, or of harboring them, and were on the

receiving end of a backlash, in which many were unjustly detained, if not tortured. Secondly, the global-interactive turn in Asian Studies offers an intellectual basis on which to fashion an ideology of tolerance, respect, and understanding, one that suited for a world that trumpets integration, globalization, diasporas, mobilities, transnationalism, and crossborder flows. In this sense, Asian Studies is a huge part of liberal education, a cure for racism and ignorance, and a tool for understanding and harmony.

Morals and Migration

What does this have to do with the Philippines? For better or worse, many Filipinos will be interacting with fellow Asians through migration, tourism, or both. And they need a handle— Asian Studies, among others—to help them manage and make the most of these encounters. It was established earlier how Filipinos neglect, dismiss, or even poke fun of other people, including fellow Asians. Asian Studies then is a means to reverse these negative attitudes and develop a sense of respect and sympathy towards others. The idea is that if one truly respects other cultures and peoples, one would not readily insult them, let alone exploit them.

Even so, many Filipinos (in the Philippines and abroad) understandably could not care less about Asian Studies. Living the migrant life is hard enough without studying your host society, especially if you suffer injustices or work in deplorable working conditions. But fighting racism and discrimination with the same will only add fuel to the fire. At any rate, even a little knowledge of Asian societies is essential to survival (sometimes literally so); hence the Pre-Departure Orientation Seminar (PDOS). More importantly, a passing acquaintance with or even appreciation of, say, Japanese, Singaporean, and Arabic culture, language, and history can go a long way in building friendships, promoting intercultural solidarity, and, perhaps in some cases, improving the level of Filipino assimilation into host societies. Of course, if cultural understanding is to happen, fellow Asians who employ and work with Filipinos, must take time to know about Philippine society as well.

I spoke with several friends who work abroad. And they agree that a little knowledge of Asian history and culture can benefit Filipinos. One striking idea from our conversations was the connection between knowing about Asian societies and practicing Filipino notions of *pakikibagay* (adjusting and fitting in), *pakikisama* (camaraderie), and *pakikipagkapwa* (neighborliness; being a good neighbor, human being). These values can be seen even in simple gestures like not eating and drinking in public during Ramadan; taking care not to serve pork (-based) meals if and when Filipinos have Muslim visitors; and not ridiculing customs and dismissing traditions, no matter how odd they find them. Filipinos can also show their *pakikipagkapwa* by suspending their Christian biases and refraining from seeing non-Christian countries as godless places, as some Filipinos have been known to comment. Yahweh and Allah are one and the same deity.

The study of Asia signifies the respect and importance Filipinos give to their hosts, to people in general: that Filipinos take enough time to know them; that they are worth knowing. As one of my friends abroad put it, “From what I observe, if locals see that we try to blend in, they see that we respect our culture, and they appreciate it. And then they think that the respect should be mutual, so they get to know us better, instead of being prejudiced against foreigners.”

This is hardly the stuff of brilliant scholarship; but in a world of ignorance, hate, racism, and indifference, this knowledge and the attitude it engenders have something to be said for it. Of course, good behavior does not automatically flow from intelligence or awareness; plenty of people are smart but have atrocious morals and implement questionable policies. And it will take much more than tolerance, respect, and Asian Studies to eliminate the root causes of hatred, discrimination, and exploitation. After all, Filipino labor migration is first and foremost a response to an exploitative neoliberal global system that demands cheap, temporary overseas labor (Rodriguez 2010, 143). Indeed, many Filipinos are second-class citizens in their destination countries, looked down upon and discriminated in many cases (Rodriguez 2014). Asking OFWs to be understanding and culturally sensitive rings hollow if their rights are violated

and their dignities are trampled. Racial and intercultural harmony is well and good, but let us not forget that the relations between migrants and citizens of host countries are shot through with inequality. Even so, this exploitative nature of Filipino labor migration is no excuse for continuing ignorance and racism. The field is not a magic bullet for a happy, harmonious world, but it is nevertheless a vital part of achieving it.

Asian Studies and Nation-Building

And what of Asian Studies for those who remain in the Philippines? There are one hundred million Filipinos, but only a small but not insignificant fraction will and can migrate. And at any rate, the question of foreignness does not just apply to foreigners abroad. One could argue that as far as many (Christian) Filipinos are concerned, foreigners include the *lumads* of Mindanao, and our Muslim brothers and sisters.³ They are formally citizens of the Philippine Republic, but given the way they have been treated in history, they might as well not be a part of it. Christian Filipinos joined the Spaniards and Americans in “pacifying the Moros.” And it did not help that Christian settlement in Mindanao dispossessed many of its residents who had lived on the island for centuries, and implemented policies that simply disregarded their traditions, cultures, and aspirations. It is not surprising that many of them harbor (ed) separatist tendencies.

Many of Christian Filipinos sadly do not know much about Islam and Mindanao, again especially in light of the Mamasapano incident. Worse, what they do know is always tainted by insensitive stereotypes or misconceptions. Historically speaking, Christian-Muslim encounters in the Philippines have sharpened “hatred, false images, and negative attitudes” (Gowing 1988, iii) between the two. Mindanao is “underrepresented, misrepresented, or not represented at all,” says Albert Alejo (2013, 102), referring to Social Science textbooks in the Philippines. Many Filipinos would have a hard time picking out Lanao del Norte, Cotabato, Sultan Kudarat, and Maguindanao on a blank map of the island. And few of them understand *halal* regulations, and believe that having four wives is *de rigueur* among Muslims.

The recent peace agreement with the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) was a step forward in improving relations with Filipino Muslims, as is the establishment of several government agencies like the National Council for Muslim Filipinos. But the watered-down Bangsamoro Basic Law (BBL) still betrays an insensitivity to the inhabitants of Mindanao, especially the Muslims and lumads. No wonder the gutted draft of the BBL was rejected (Inquirer 2014). Moreover, the peace process will come undone if there is a lack of on-the-ground awareness among Christian Filipinos of Muslim and lumad history and culture. A peace agreement and a development plan may be in the offing, but it will only be undermined if fear, prejudice, and distrust continue to exist between Filipino Muslims and Christians.

It would do Muslim-Christian relations much good if many more Filipinos learned about the history and culture of the Muslims in Mindanao. But once again, this is less about knowing this or that isolated piece of information, but more about developing a sense of awareness and respect. If Christian Filipinos truly respected their Muslim brothers and sisters, they would, ideally at least, stop exploiting the latter, dispossessing them of their land, and implementing questionable political and economic policies.

Of course, the problems in Mindanao and Bangsamoro cannot be reduced to and resolved by getting acquainted with the island's varied history and culture alone. Plus, Mindanao also has internal problems: the phenomenon of *rido* (clan feuds), the concentration of power among local clans, tribal rivalries, poor governance, and other factors have all adversely affected Mindanao. Even so, knowing much about the history of the island can go a long way in managing the myriad of problems. It is, or should be an integral part of the Bangsamoro Development Plan. In this sense, Islamic Studies (as part of the study of Asia) can be pressed into the service of a just, more integrative and inclusive sense of interreligious and intercultural harmony, if not nation-building.

Asian Studies and Alternative Visions

Asia is a fount of venerable traditions, resources, and experiences that Filipinos can draw on. Cliché as it may sound, studying the region can conjure what Jose Rizal named in *Noli Me Tangere* “The Specter of Comparisons,” through which Filipinos compare themselves and their nation with another. In doing so, they get to see themselves from the outside, shake their identities, and get a glimpse of what they do as a people and how they conduct their personal, social, and political lives.

Many Filipinos travel to other Asian countries and cannot help comparing their homeland. The comparison often brings about episodes of nostalgia and sentiment. “Iba pa rin sa atin,” (There’s no place like home) many an OFW has said. But it also foregrounds the sad realities in the country. When one travels to, say, Japan, one is immediately struck by the extent and efficiency of their rail transport system. Filipinos who go through the everyday ordeal of riding the MRT conjures up thoughts like “Why can’t we have something like this in the Philippines?” Sure, some Filipinos make excuses for their incompetence and inefficiency, and defend the honor of the Philippines when criticized. But the fact remains that cross-country encounters like this remind Filipinos how bad things are at home, and how good they can be.

Filipinos have much to learn from other Asian societies, not least lessons on economic development. Corruption is said to be the root cause of poverty in the Philippines, but other ASEAN countries do have levels of corruption comparable to the Philippines, and still managed to clock in impressive growth figures (Raquiza 2012). The reasons for poor economic performance must lie elsewhere: the dominance of political elites, institutions, and the interaction of a whole range of factors. The economic development of South Korea, Taiwan, Japan, and Singapore has much to teach Filipinos, despite different conditions between these countries and the Philippines. These and other insights have implications for initiatives on social, economic, and political change. It would, for one, entail developing new strategies for radical social transformation.

Notes

¹ Filipinos have worked in Asian countries since the mid-1970s, and the scholarship on the topic has kept pace with the trend ever since. These studies focus on remittances, gender dynamics, identity, and nationalism and nationhood, but little has been written on how and to what extent Filipinos relate to, interact with, and learn about their fellow Asians. One reason arguably lies in the nature of Filipino migration. Many OFWs work abroad only to send money to relatives back home. They are by no means philistine, but they do not see the need nor do they have the time to think much about their fellow Asians. Some OFWs do learn new languages (Abinales 2014) and get acquainted with the culture. This may arise out of necessity, as in the case of Filipina nurses in Japan under the JPEPA. But on the whole, OFWs probably do not think much of these matters. And even if they do want to interact with the locals, some OFWs live in societies that have a generally low regard for foreigners, another disincentive for integration and intercultural interaction. Living in a strange land, Filipinos find safety in each other, sealing themselves off, understandably, from the dominant, and at times, discriminatory society. Perhaps this helps explain why some Filipino migrants redefine and strengthen their sense of nationhood, if not nationalism (Aguilar 2014). OFWs are known to say, “Iba pa rin sa atin.” (Literally, ‘ours is different.’ But it means, this place is never quite like home.)

Secondly, younger Filipinos have been led to Asian Studies (or the study of Asian languages at least) because of Japanese animé and Korean telenovelas. You could certainly learn a thing or two about Korea or Japan by watching *My Sassy Girl* or *Attack on Titan*. But this would be like studying Philippine society based only on *Mara Clara*, *Got to Believe*, or *The Legal Wife*. Besides, many Filipinos watch East Asian popular entertainment not to learn about Japan or Korea, but simply to be entertained. Few really pause to reflect on, say, the tensions between modernity and tradition in Japan when they watch animé or read *manga*. That, perhaps, may take the fun out of it.

² There is still a strain of Eurocentrism at work here, however. Studies like these show—unwittingly or not—that Asia(ns) are just like West(erners): rational, tolerant, progressive, and open to free trade. As centers of learning, Asian civilizations are just as enlightened as their European counterparts. But the problem is that Asians have to or are made to justify their rational, progressive credentials to the West. East-West interactions there may be, but they are framed solely perhaps on Western standards of reason, progress, values, and historical agendas. In this sense, we may simply be projecting contemporary visions of globalization onto the past. Southeast Asian traders certainly interacted with Indian, European, and West Asian merchants. But they probably did not think about “globalization” or “The Dialogue of Civilizations” as they engaged in this crosscultural exchange. Perhaps they did, but not in the way we do so today. For one thing, contact with other peoples was a matter of course; there were no visas, national borders, national citizens, and immigration quotas back then, so international trade was nothing to write (home) about. Asian civilizations may have benefited from the Indian-Middle-East-Southeast trading networks, but they were still primarily agrarian. China may have traded with Southeast Asian societies, but they were not exactly advocates of free trade agreements; the Confucian order looked down on traders and saw the outside world as barbarians.

³ It could be argued that Christian settlers are the foreigners in Mindanao.

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