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‘Twice forgotten’; ‘twice suppressed’

‘Twice forgotten’ or even ‘Twice suppressed’ might have been an alternative title for this lavishly illustrated and beautifully designed book which tells the stories of some of the 1500 Japanese men – and their descendants – who came to work on the Benguet or Kennon Road which transformed Baguio in Northern Luzon, into the Philippines’ second ‘chartered city’.

Otto van den Muijzenberg

UNTIL RECENTLY, FILIPINOS OF JAPANESE descent preferred to pass for Chinese mestizos or disinterested their mixed ancestry. This was particularly true in Baguio, the site of the third-largest community of Japanese in the American Philippines before the Pacific War. The early American administration of the Japanese colony (from 1899 onwards) was bound to the increasingly strict immigration legislation at home which by the end of the 19th century had put an end to the flow of Chinese and Japanese labourers to America’s west coast.

Many American administrators ‘on the ground’ in Manila and the provinces considered Filipinos unfit for work on the infrastructure needed to fulfill the modernisation promises that accompanied their takeover of the colony from the Spaniards. Manual labour by Americans was minimal, however, so much so that the admission or even active recruitment of Japanese and Chinese was deemed necessary. It was politically unwise, however, to make these ‘foreign orientals’ visible in public documents accessible to anti-imperialists at home and anti-American immigrants. This was particularly true in Baguio, the site of the newly projected colonial ‘Hill Capital’ of Baguio, 1500 metres above sea level. Coming from peasant families in provinces or Kennon Road which trans-...