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‘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 dissembled 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 Philippine colony (from 1899 onward) 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 nationalists in the colony alike.

It is therefore exceptional to find documentary evidence for the presence and work of some 1500 Japanese men who came to work on the mountain highway that had to be hacked out of the mountains to connect the Central Luzon lowlands to the newly projected colonial ‘Hill Capital’ of Baguio, 1500 metres above sea level. Coming from peasant families in provinces where the new Meiji land taxation caused extreme poverty, the young Japanese men described in this book often spent their last penny to find a place on a ship which would bring them to the Philippines.

After much delay, the 45 kilometres of this Benguet or Kennon Road linking Baguio to the mountain highway that had to be hacked out of the mountains to connect the Central Luzon lowlands to the newly projected colonial ‘Hill Capital’ of Baguio, 1500 metres above sea level. Coming from peasant families in provinces where the new Meiji land taxation caused extreme poverty, the young Japanese men described in this book often spent their last penny to find a place on a ship which would bring them to the Philippines.

As time went by, however, a certain level of ‘Japaneseness’ had not in any way ‘collaborated’ with the Japanese occupation authorities and was the most fiercely resistant to the Japanese occupation from December 1941 to April 1945. Having been the most fiercely resistant to the Japanese ‘co-prosperity sphere’ of all Southeast Asian nations, the Filipinos and returning Americans deported all Japanese nationals in 1945. Left behind were hundreds of Philippine wives and children of mixed ancestry who had not been registered as Japanese nationals. Even though most of them had not in any way ‘collaborated’ with the Japanese occupation forces – often the opposite it became wise behaviour for them to dissemble Japanese ancestry, and take on Filipino names. Even then many of them had difficulty in obtaining access to education and jobs, tagged as relatives of a bitterly hated enemy.

The character of the book as a centenary memorial shows in the many names and photographs of groups and families, which are important to the descendants, their friends and former neighbours, but less so to the general reader. Several biographies of carpenters, builders, contractors, farmers, and prominent businessmen and contractors give the reader a feel both of the family life and the occupational activities. They attest to basic values which these successful migrants impressed on their children and employees, like hard work, honesty and precision. Overlays in information between the chapters might have been reduced, and the scholarly reader may have liked to read a more explicit analysis of the wealth of data provided in terms of migration or ethnicity theory.

The rich content of the book, however, both in terms of the more than 300 beautifully reproduced photos and of the carefully researched information makes it an indispensable source for a better, more ‘balanced’ understanding of the history, not only of the Japanese pioneers and their offspring, but also of the urbanisation process of Baguio and surroundings in the first half of the 20th century, which will inspire others to retrieve from oblivion, or will seek new life from past of similar hyphenated Japanese descendants elsewhere in Southeast Asia.

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