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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 disavowed 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 onwards) was bound to find it difficult to assimilate 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, many Japanese men, with their last penny to find a place on a ship which would bring them to the Philippines.

Japanese Pioneers in the Northern Philippine Highlands.

Many American administrators ‘on the ground’ in Manila and the provinces considered Filipinos unﬁt for work on the infrastructure needed to fulﬁl the modernisation promises that accompanied their takeover of the colony from the Spaniards. 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 fulﬁl the modernisation promises that accompanied their takeover of the colony from the Spaniards. Many American administrators ‘on the ground’ in Manila and the provinces considered Filipinos unﬁt for work on the infrastructure needed to fulﬁl the modernisation promises that accompanied their takeover of the colony from the Spaniards.

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During World War II, Japanese forces occupied the national capital for three years. As the Japanese occupation ended, many returning Japanese families were forced to leave the Philippines. The women belonged to what were termed ‘mountain tribes’ by early American anthropologists, particularly those speaking Bubuy, Kankaray, Bontoc and related languages. These wives played important brokering roles for the Japanese men towards the local economy and society. Continuing to work their own gardens and ﬁelds and often trading too, they worked as intensively as the husbands outside the house to sustain their families. Although communication between partners in many cases remained difﬁcult, with neither of the partners having had much education, to be able to make a living in acquiring a foreign language, the impression conveyed by their descendants is one of great marriage stability.

As time went by, however, a certain level of ‘Japanness’ was sustained and later on even reinforced in the group, with the recruitment of Japanese brides by those who could afford it. Successful and rich merchants, contractors, transport entrepreneurs and, later on, wealthy vegetable farmers in the La Trinidad valley founded (in 1924) and sustained the Japanese School of Baguio, which became a focal institution for the migrant group, including some of their ‘mixed’ offspring. In the late 20th century the school became the trigger for a revival of a sense of Japanese-Filipino identity, as well as linking institution with relatives in Japan.

In the late 20th century the school became the trigger for a revival of a sense of Japanese-Filipino identity, as well as linking institution with relatives in Japan.

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, 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. Overlaps 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 ‘bitter’ history of the Philippines, 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. Hopefully, it will inspire others to retrieve from oblivion, or will neglect, the past of similar hyphenated Japanese descendants elsewhere in Southeast Asia.

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