

# Introduction

Transnational, transregional, and even global approaches to the study of Southeast Asia—and the countries therein—has been a recent trend in the field. More scholars are now paying (greater) attention to the embeddedness of Southeast Asian nations in systems or networks that include yet transcend the region itself. While research on internal, i.e. national issues, remain vibrant as ever, the study of Southeast Asia no longer seems to be confined to the nation-state. Research now foregrounds the porosity and nebulousness of national boundaries, and highlights the different interactions that take/took place across and within societies in the region.

Of course, this is not wholly new. As early as the 1980s, a scholar like James Warren was already thinking about the Philippines in regional terms, with his notion of the Sulu Zone; research on the Galleon Trade, among others, had also highlighted Philippines-Mexico connections. But studies like these have multiplied in recent years; many have advanced our knowledge of the Philippines' transnational connections in immense ways. One thinks of, for instance, of Birgit Tremml-Werner's *Spain, China, and Japan in Manila, 1571–1644: Local Comparisons, Global Connections*; David Irving's *Colonial Counterpoint: Music in Early Modern Manila*; or Pedro Luengo's *The Convents of Manila: Globalized Architecture during the Iberian Union*.

This has been partly due to academic trends (the rise of global histories, for instance), increasing migration, the intensifying flows of ideas, globalization, anti-Orientalist and anti-Eurocentric approaches becoming *de rigeur*, and the emergence of mass media that help foster at least a superficial or working awareness of other cultures, regions, and nations. In many ways, our world today demands more than ever a global outlook.<sup>1</sup>

The present issue of *Asian Studies* represents a modest addition to, and illustration of, this transnational approach to the study of Southeast Asian societies, particularly the Philippines. The first of two-peer reviewed articles, Jely Galang's study of a German-owned tobacco plantation in

Jolo, Sulu, Southern Philippines in the late nineteenth century highlights not just the Philippines' embeddedness in a greater Southeast Asian region, but also its relatively unknown connection to Europe. If Jolo is part of the Sulu Zone, that zone in turn is connected to Germany. Although Jely does not elaborate on the European link, he illuminates an understudied aspect of the Chinese in the Philippines, and adds a new episode in the story of the Chinese in Southeast Asia.

The second peer-reviewed article—by John Jison of the University of the Philippines in Los Baños—compares the 8/8/88 democracy movement in Myanmar with the 1989 Tiananmen Student Movement in China. It represents a relatively rare comparative study among Filipino scholars. It is heartening to see a Filipino academic who does work on Myanmar, a country less studied in the Philippines. Also, by comparing a Southeast Asian case to one outside the region, John performs a border-crossing of sorts, and contributes to the scholarly literature of mobilization, which, he says, has focused more on liberal-democratic, and Western, contexts. Moreover, John's focus on discursive opportunities—the way a movement articulates its claims and how and to what extent they resonate—offers interesting insights and implications on why movements fail (or succeed), especially in light of the resurgence of populist and authoritarian politics in Southeast Asia.

This issue also features three “special articles” that the journal is privileged to publish. The first, by Caroline Hau, offers an illuminating overview of the state, problems, issues, and debates in Southeast Asian Studies, with particular emphasis on the question of its audience(s). It serves as companion reading to, and provides the larger intellectual context with which articles, essays and poems featured in this issue can be set against. The second article by Marilyn Canta brings into greater detail the life of an Indian-Armenian merchant, Rafael Daniel Baboom, who moved to, and engaged in trading, in early nineteenth-century Manila. He is known for commissioning, *tipos del país*, a set of illustrations by the Filipino artist, Damian Domingo. And while much is known about Domingo, Canta builds on existing literature and digs up the archives to shed more light on

his lesser-known contemporary. Canta's article offers yet another instance of Manila's global connections during the Spanish colonial period. Lastly, Shinzo Hayase's article—on how *The Manila Times* reported the events of 30 September 1965 and its aftermath in Indonesia—gives us a glimpse of Philippines-Indonesia linkages in the 1960s. Hayase situates this narrative amidst the geopolitical tensions of the Cold War, the issue of sovereignty over Sabah, the Vietnam War, and the pre-ASEAN efforts at region-building. A lone essay on India-US relations by Don McLain Gill represents new efforts by Filipinos to study India. It is pleasing to see how Don has written on a country that has generally been understudied, perhaps even ignored, by Filipinos. One can only hope that more scholars can join the enterprise, and add to the Philippines' pool of India experts, of which there are only a handful, including Dr. Joeje Santarita of the UP Asian Center.<sup>2</sup>

The two books reviewed here exemplify global and transnational approaches to the study of (Southeast) Asia. Michael Hawkins, whose two books<sup>3</sup> situate Muslims and the Southern Philippines amidst the larger American colonial project, offers a succinct assessment of Nicole Cuunjieng Aboitiz's *Asian Place, Filipino Nation: A Global Intellectual History of the Philippine Revolution, 1887–1912*. Dr. Hawkins looks at the book's contributions to new, regional approaches in Philippine historiography. Jorge Bayona in turn evaluates Tatiana Seijas's *Asian Slaves in Colonial Mexico: From Chinos to Indians*. The Philippines-Mexico connection has long been studied in Philippine historiography, but Seijas's book advances our knowledge of this connection, even as it also highlights Asia-Latin American linkages, for which there too have been recent studies.<sup>4</sup> One notes, among other things, the book, *Navigating the Spanish Lake: The Pacific in the Iberian World, 1521–1898*.

An intriguing correlate of transnational approaches to Southeast Asian Studies is that they entail a newfound openness to, and appreciation of, the Other, i.e. a different nation or region. Indeed, this moral dimension of Asian Studies is explored briefly in a travel narrative by Chadwick Co Sy Su; he highlights the capacity of travel to open minds and respect

differences. Another travel narrative by Adrian Alarilla exemplifies what Viet Thanh Nguyen calls “Southeast Asian American Studies,” a fusion of traditional area studies and Asian-American studies. As noted above, the transnationalization of Southeast Asian Studies has been partly due to, and is illustrated by, migration and the migrants’ experiences.<sup>5</sup> In his essay, Adrian juxtaposes his life experiences as a migrant with stories from Nguyen’s *The Refugees*, and shares interesting reflections on historiography, the haunting of memory, and the disruption of historical chronologies, among other things.

This issue of *Asian Studies* also features six poems, the most since the journal introduced a poetry section in 2012. While these are not scholarly works, they do point to the reality of Filipinos’ engagement with, if not actual travel to, Asian societies. Pauline Mari Hernando’s verse takes us to Shenzhen, China, and registers—and laments—the city’s (if not country’s) shift to capitalism and the impact of market-oriented production on artistic labor. Noel Moratilla speaks of his wanderings in Gwangju, South Korea, his poem distantly echoing Jose Rizal’s *A las flores de Heidelberg*, and joins a genre of Filipino poetry that longs for home. Lawdenmarc Decamora’s writes of the 2019 anti-extradition bill protests in Hong Kong, of transformations in rural Philippines, and of the territorial disputes in the South China Sea. Of course, what would a 2020 issue of the journal without a COVID-19 related poem, this one from Rosella Torrecampo?

If many of the foregoing writings represent recent trends in Southeast Asian Studies, they also signify shifts in Philippine Studies, which likewise has begun to situate the Philippine nation-state as part of, and interacting with, a larger regional or global network. This kind of scholarship straddles two fields: area studies in general or even European/American Studies and Philippine Studies in particular. As a meeting place of East and West, these recent studies belie Rudyard Kipling’s statement that both shall never meet; on the contrary, they encourage an expansion of one’s awareness beyond one’s nation or region (not that there’s anything wrong or parochial with studying ‘just’ the Philippines) and help generate new insights and findings.

In reading Jely Galang's account of the German-owned tobacco plantation in Sulu, one learns not just about the Southern Philippines but also about the Chinese in Southeast Asia, Southeast Asian trading networks, and German-European presence in the Philippines. While scholarship on Philippine art has taught us much about Damian Domingo, Marilyn Canta's article on Rafael Daniel Baboom informs us too about Domingo's—and the Philippines'—Indian-Armenian connection. It also discusses briefly Armenian Christianity, British colonialism, the Safavid Empire, and Indian trade, among others. Conversely, these kinds of studies also help European or American scholars studying their respective countries expand their knowledge beyond their own national horizons. Americans, Spaniards, and perhaps even other Europeans reading about the Philippines will inevitably confront the West's imperial project and its impact on this side of the world.

Transnational or transregional approaches do not erase national boundaries; they only highlight their porosity, if not their constructed nature, as well as the interactions between, within, and across regions. They also allow different scholars to confront the histories and societies of nation-states in other parts of the world, not least their former colonies. One hopes that we have gone beyond the days of Orientalism, where the West silenced or stereotyped the Other, and that scholars from Asia and Europe can encounter each other as equals, without recourse to exoticization, discrimination, and other forms of discursive violence. At the same time, this meeting also encourages Asian scholars themselves to look beyond a stance that dismisses—in nationalist, anticolonial vein—the West, which risks precluding a deeper engagement with its own history, culture, and formative influence on (post)colonial states.<sup>6</sup> Of course, a nationalist focus on one's country, and an appreciation of foreign, Western, or even other Asian societies are not mutually exclusive. Moreover, the latter certainly does not mean ignoring—or letting slide—the sins of imperialism and colonialism.

While works such as Galang's and Canta's shed invaluable light on Philippines-Asia ties, they also highlight unique material conditions that

facilitate the production of historical knowledge, especially of the Spanish colonial period, not least because it involves extensive archival work. Indeed, many of the global and regional approaches to Philippine colonial history are done by non-Filipinos,<sup>7</sup> or by Filipinos who pursued advanced studies from an institutional base outside the Philippines, or at least had some access to foreign funding or assistance. This is not to say that Philippines-based and -trained scholars do not or cannot engage in such transnational approaches, whose applicability or necessity depends on the topic; plus, many of the Spanish archives are accessible online, although many are available only on-site. Also, some studies can be done even without or with little foreign funding; for instance, (online) interviews of migrants can be conducted, or and Asian films and novels can be analyzed relatively easily.

Broadly speaking, though, it does appear that having access to international funding, milieu, and institutions—and all that entails—is more conducive to a global and regional approach to Philippine and Southeast Asian history, even if such access does not preclude a scholar from having a purely “local” focus. At any rate, a transnational framework does not supersede so-called “local” (i.e. not Manila) approach to Philippine history, one that focuses on a certain locale, province, or episode. Both the local and the transregional are legitimate and complementary scales of analysis. And at any rate, much local history still needs to be unearthed to help continue the shift away from a Manila-centric historiography, and enrich our understanding of Philippine society, as much as a transnational study does.<sup>8</sup>

It has been our pleasure to prepare these articles for publication. We hope you find them illuminating, and that they can help inspire other scholars to follow similar paths and expand the horizons of Philippine and Southeast Asian Studies.

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## End Notes

- <sup>1</sup> The global spread of Korean popular culture, for instance, has put South Korea on the radar, even if it has not necessarily and always lead to a better understanding of the country. And while Othering and anti-immigrant rhetoric persist, it is much more difficult to be parochial these days.
- <sup>2</sup> Dr. Santarita for instance has written on Indian foreign policy and India-Philippines premodern relations. See for instance, “Panyupayana: The Emergence of Hindu Polities in the Pre-Islamic Philippines.” In *Cultural and Civilisational Links Between India and Southeast Asia: Historical and Contemporary Dimensions*, edited by Shyam Saran, 93–106. Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018.
- <sup>3</sup> See Michael Hawkins’s *Making Moros: Imperial Historicism and American Military Rule in the Philippines’ Muslim South* (Northern Illinois University Press, 2013) and *Semi-Civilized: The Moro Village at the Louisiana Purchase Exposition* (Cornell University Press, 2019).
- <sup>4</sup> See Jorge Bayona’s essay, “Border-Crossing as a Latin American Scholar of Asia: A Year Back in an (Un)Likely City for Asian and Southeast Asian Studies,” *Asian Studies: Journal of Critical Perspectives on Asia* 56 (1): 139–42, 2020.
- <sup>5</sup> See also Caroline Hau’s essay in this issue, which discusses this subject briefly.
- <sup>6</sup> One of the benefits of, say, studying Western Asia is that it inevitably exposes one to the Biblical studies, the Roman Empire (in the East), medieval Europe, not least during the Crusades, and even medieval European philosophy and literature. One can just note the influence of philosophy in the Islamic world on Europe, or the West Asian background to Homer and early-ancient Greek literature.
- <sup>7</sup> One can see the extent of archival work involved in Birgitt Tremml-Werner’s *Spain, China, and Japan in Manila, 1571–1644: Local Comparisons, Global Connections* (2015) or David Irving’s *Colonial Counterpoint: Music in Early Modern Manila* (2011).
- <sup>8</sup> I thank all the contributors for their writings, and for exchanges and conversations about their works that have shaped the writing of this essay. In many ways, they are its co-authors.