

BOOK REVIEW

## China and the Philippines: A Connected History, c. 1900–50

**Phillip B. Guingona. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023. 274 pp. £85.00 (hbk). ISBN 9781009359245**

Chien-Wen Kung

National University of Singapore, Singapore  
Email: [hiskcw@nus.edu.sg](mailto:hiskcw@nus.edu.sg)

Phillip B. Guingona's lively and well-researched book makes what the author admits is a "straight-forward" argument: that, in the first half of the 20th century, the Philippines and Filipinos on the one hand, and Chinese people and China on the other, played significant roles in each other's histories (p. 7). To substantiate this claim, Guingona draws from a wealth of primary materials in Chinese, English and, to a lesser extent, Spanish, as well as scholarship in Chinese, Philippine and global history, to explore myriad cultural, business, social and political ties between two "mobile societies" across "intermediate scales" (p. 14). Existing histories, he contends, have largely neglected such ties and have instead gravitated toward the Manila galleon trade in the early modern era and the Philippine Revolution's impact on Chinese and other Asian nationalisms at the turn of the 20th century (p. 7). Guingona attributes such neglect to the vast, unwieldy, and overtheorized field of world history, and, more specifically, to an "imperial Eurocentric historiography" (p. 12). Conversely, this book purports to adopt a decolonial approach that "foregrounds actors from the Global South" (p. 16).

The book advances its agenda in four parts, each focusing on entanglements between China / Chinese and the Philippines / Filipinos. Part one, "Mirrored Diasporas" (chapters one and two), engages in a novel comparison between the better-known and more institutionally organized Chinese community in Manila with the understudied and frequently effaced Filipino community in Shanghai. Both these "mobile societies" resided in cosmopolitan cities and consisted largely of unaligned, young to middle-aged sojourning men without strong state or imperial protection (p. 24). Both also grappled with racial discrimination in their respective metropolises, as Guingona shows by creatively juxtaposing the marginalization of Filipino classical musicians by white Euro-Americans in Shanghai and the Philippine legislature's targeting of wealthy Manila Chinese merchants with the 1921 Bookkeeping Act.

Part two, "The Philippine Model" (chapters three and four), employs the framework of "cultural tributarism" to explain how the Philippine education system under US rule was attractive to Chinese educators and students. This approach integrates cultural institutions and exchanges into the study of inter-Asian interactions, which Guingona views as characteristic of the historical tributary system (p. 74). Conventional scholarly wisdom holds that China looked chiefly to Japan as a model of educational modernity in this period. Guingona argues, to the contrary, that the Philippines represented in Chinese eyes a distinctive form of modernity which "offered many of the same advantages as Japan, and it surpassed Japan in several areas" (p. 90). Most of all, unlike Japan, the Philippines was not a militaristic power that had colonized China (pp. 90–93). One wonders here, given both multiple references to the "global South" and the ostensible Sinocentrism of the tributary system, if Bandung-era Third Worldism might have been a more appropriate conceptual grounds for analyzing these horizontal, non-hierarchical exchanges.

Part three, “Nationalisms of the Founders” (chapters five and six), traces the political and economic projects of a small, wealthy and ambitious group of overseas Chinese men, mostly from the Philippines, who founded the China Banking Corporation in 1920. Collectively, but not always successfully, the “Founders” leveraged their skills, capital and social networks to promote provincial causes such as railroads and self-government, and national ones, such as the May Thirtieth Movement and National Salvation. Guingona demonstrates the strength and durability of Hokkien nationalism as “a separate but concomitant form” of sub-national Chinese nationalism (pp. 122–123), even amidst the Second Sino-Japanese War. This section is also notable for detailing how overseas Chinese businessmen cultivated ties with Chinese politicians during China’s Republican era to enhance their political clout and further their commercial and philanthropic ventures – a topic about which much more can and should be written.

Finally, part four, “The Pivot” (chapters seven to nine), returns to the grounds of cultural history. Guingona takes up the Far Eastern Championship Games – involving China, Japan and the Philippines – using sport as a lens to explore Sino-Philippine interactions and questions of nationalism, race and gender. The Fifth Games in 1921, in his telling, represented a “moment of coalescence,” during which sport “transformed into a nexus for nationalism and a conduit for transnationalism, connecting people and their divergent social and political agendas” (p. 166). Chinese and Filipino veterans of the Games sustained these inter-Asian networks beyond the Games themselves at Springfield College in the US, where they studied physical education. In 1934, however, amidst growing tensions between China and Japan over Manchuria, the Games were staged for the tenth and final time. Sport, in Guingona’s narrative, renders visible “the intense world of contact that crossed over area studies boundaries” and “exposed the extensive entanglements between politics and society” (p. 213).

All in all, Guingona offers an eclectic array of thematic templates and methodological avenues, from music and sport to education and infrastructure, that can help scholars integrate a more diverse range of Asian peoples into a transnational reimagining of modern Chinese history. Yet the book’s kaleidoscopic arrangement of stories, personalities, events and institutions also affects its overall cohesiveness. *China and the Philippines* pivots swiftly from one set of concerns to another across its constituent parts, and from fascinating but fleeting mini-narrative to mini-narrative within these parts. The book is largely held together by the author’s central metaphor of the “web of Sino-Philippine connectivity” (p. 9). World history may indeed rely on metaphors (p. 8), but a metaphor does not necessarily make an overarching narrative. The author could have been more explicit in the introduction or conclusion about how this web was transformed over time within the temporal boundaries of US rule in the Philippines and the onset of communist rule in China. World history, after all, also entails contending with the intersecting temporalities of different regions.

Finally, making the case for connective history, Guingona invites us to consider the place of scholarship on Chinese society and culture in the early 20th-century Philippines in his argument. The author identifies the Manila galleons and the Philippine Revolution as episodes that have “garnered outsized attention in the history of Sino-Philippine entanglement” (p. 6). Yet he overlooks scholarship by the likes of Richard Chu, Andrew Wilson and Caroline Hau here, even though he cites these authors’ works elsewhere in the book. Was the Philippine-Chinese community that Chu, Wilson Hau and others have written about not constitutive of Sino-Philippine entanglement in this period? True, *China and the Philippines* is much more than a history of this community or a history of Chinese emigration to the Philippines, but this is nonetheless a curious omission.