



# ASIA MAIOR

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## **Asia in 2022: The impact of the Russia-Ukraine war on local crises**

**Edited by**  
**Michelguglielmo Torri**  
**Filippo Boni**  
**Diego Maiorano**

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A large, intricate mandala pattern in a light orange color, located in the bottom right corner of the page. It features complex, symmetrical geometric and organic shapes, resembling a stylized flower or a traditional Indian mandala.

CENTRO STUDI PER I POPOLI EXTRA-EUROPEI “CESARE BONACOSSA” - UNIVERSITÀ DI PAVIA

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The Journal of the Italian think tank on Asia founded by Giorgio Borsa in 1989  
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RECOVERING THE ASIAN ROOTS OF THE PHILIPPINE REVOLUTION

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Nicole CuUnjieng Aboitiz, *Asian Place, Filipino Nation. A Global Intellectual History of the Philippine Revolution, 1887-1912*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2020, 272 pp. (ISBN: 9780231192156).

For long, Filipino, Spanish, and US historiographies that dealt with the long Philippine Revolution (1896-1906) did so following national boundaries.<sup>1</sup>

They generally placed their respective institutions and agents at the center of their narratives and, in the cases of Spain and the US, often ignored, respectively, the successor or predecessor colonial rules. As postcolonial, imperial, and global history flourished, researchers have turned to studying the role of all the actors involved in this key event and have begun to shed light on the complex inter- and trans-imperial dynamics that marked its development. Among others, academics have tracked the western influences on Filipino nationalism, the disruptions and continuities the transition from Spanish to US imperialism caused in the archipelago, and the impact of these events in the metropolises.

As these examples reflect, however, the globalization of the history of the Philippine Revolution has majorly put this in dialogue with the evolution of the Spanish and American empires and their possessions. This tendency is both a consequence and one of the causes of the consolidated perception that the Philippines' historical experience is more similar to that of other territories Spain and the US colonized than of Asia. As a result, besides a few exceptions, most literature on the revolution does not examine the influences of its Asian context. Such alienation is especially striking given that, as Nicole CuUnjieng Aboitiz points out, the Philippine Revolution took place «against a backdrop of imperial consolidation and local resistance that was truly region-wide» (2). It is this gap that this historian fruitfully addresses in the book under review.

*Asian Place, Filipino Nation. A Global Intellectual History of the Philippine Revolution, 1887-1912* analyzes the role Asian geographies played in Filipino nationalist political thinking and the transnational networks that influenced this ideology and contributed to its translation into political action. In doing so, however, its author not only adds a critical omission in the history of the Philippines. Rethinking the revolution by examining its

1. Although the convention is to mark 1902 as the end of the Philippine Revolution, I use here the chronology that the author herself uses. See footnote 7, p. 184.

Asian connections leads CuUnjieng Aboitiz to nuance our understanding of the broader phenomenon of Pan-Asianism, as she identifies the one that emerged from the «peripheries», with its particularities. Therefore, *Asian Place, Filipino Nation* also builds upon the growing literature on «the global connections and transmission of ideas» involved in the evolution of anticolonial nationalism (3). In particular, with this novel approach to the Philippine Revolution and, through it, Pan-Asianism, this work enriches those bodies of historiography by developing two interrelated ideas.

First, the book demonstrates that guiding intellectuals and political leaders of the Filipino nationalist movement that culminated in the revolution embedded the Filipino identity within Asia and, specifically, linked it with «the Malay race and its historical environment» (36). Given the ethnolinguistic diversity of the islands, they «carved out a national space not through shared cultural practice or ideology, but through a grounding in place» (35, *italics added*). Understood as «both territorial (the significance of a particular physical space, with its history, land, rivers, and monuments) and social (involving origins, distinctions, social position)», place provides «the basis of political society [...] upon which other political notions, such as duty, freedom, and order, gained meaning» (35). Departing from this definition that Edmund Burke formulated, CuUnjieng Aboitiz takes this concept further by sustaining that Filipino *ilustrados* used this notion of place to forge a distinct nationalism, which was «constructed in universalist Western grammar» and inspired by Enlightenment ideals but specified and particularized by its Asian roots (36).

Along this line of defining the Filipino identity, intellectuals and revolutionaries also «reclaimed Filipino Malayness» (40). Using western scholarship's theories and methods, they argued that Filipinos «were of 'Malay civilization' in their languages, customs, religious beliefs, social institutions, psychology, and cultural practices» (40). As a consequence, they countered «the argument of Europeans who described the archipelago as overrun by an anarchy of tribes and races» (41). Opposite to that idea, they based the Filipino nation upon «an older, richer, documented civilizational realm» (41). Also, they recognized the intra-Asian connections and affinities that preceded the arrival of Spain in the archipelago and lived on under its rule to connect the Filipino nation, among others, to a Chinese ancient and glorious past and with Japan's contemporary rise as a global power. By doing so, they tried to place themselves in the racial hierarchies that Social Darwinism of the era sustained, with well-known political implications.

These «legitimate, affective ties of place and group» (6) served *ilustrados* and revolutionaries, on the one hand, «to speak to one another as two Filipinos» and «carry the local toward the national» (7); that is, to forge a distinct and coherent national identity. On the other hand, it helped them battle western imperial rationalizations of their domination of foreign lands and sustain the Filipino claims to self-government before the international



community. Finally, and more importantly for the book, it linked Filipino nationalism with the destiny of fellow Asian and Malay societies. How this sense of belonging translated into transnational networks is the second idea CuUnjieng Aboitiz develops throughout her book.

The author convincingly argues that Filipino nationalists envisaged and harnessed a web of Pan-Asian intellectual and material connections. Enlarging the East Asian solidarities that «central» Pan-Asianism originating in Japan and China had conceived, this Filipino «peripheral» Pan-Asianism considered that a wider array of Asian and Malay societies, including those from Southeast Asia, were «bound together through parallel historical experience and current geopolitical realities» and recognized «one another through appreciation of their common cultures, norms, and symbols» (135). As CuUnjieng Aboitiz demonstrates through the Filipino case and their relations with, mostly, Japanese and Vietnamese activists, anti-colonialists and nationalists across these territories supported each other's struggles through discourse and material aid in order to face Western Imperialism and build an Asian «federation of equals» (24).

The book explains how these Pan-Asian ideas and networks that nourished Filipino nationalism evolved throughout different phases of the revolution, from its direct precedents until its aftermath, studying the Asian dimensions of the political thought and relationships of a selection of Filipino intellectuals and political elites. After an introductory chapter that localizes this research in the historiography, Chapter 2 situates the origins of these Asian identitarian roots and solidarities at the emergence of the Filipino national consciousness itself, developed by ilustrados like José Rizal and Isabelo de los Reyes while unsuccessfully campaigning to improve the Philippines' situation within the Spanish Empire. Chapter 3 shows how, once the Filipino nationalist movement's disillusionment with «Mother Spain» reached its highest point and changed reformism for revolution, its leaders also looked to the Philippines' future by recuperating its precolonial past. While doing so, they displayed, with nuances in the different contexts of the conflict, the consciousness of fighting a struggle with global significance. Chapter 4 focuses on Mariano Ponce, one of the most outstanding foreign emissaries of the Philippine Republic. Here is where, through his writings, travels, and relationships, CuUnjieng Aboitiz better illuminates the nature of peripheral Pan-Asianism. Finally, Chapter 5 concludes the book by examining the far-reaching legacy of the Philippine Revolution and the peripheral Pan-Asian solidarities it propelled, both inside and outside the Philippine Islands. It argues that this impact lasted much beyond the turn of the century, revealing itself even in the context of global decolonization and national revolutions that followed the Second World War, as the Maphilindo experiment and Third Worldist solidarity prove.

In order to trace those Asian dimensions of the Philippine Revolution, CuUnjieng Aboitiz has realized a commendable study of the rich

Filipino national historiography and vast primary sources: mainly private archives, speeches, and publications—such as *La Solidaridad*—from notable Filipino ilustrados and revolutionaries, including archives from Spanish and US authorities that had also identified these Asian transnational subversive networks and tried to monitor them. No matter how well-known those sources were, CuUnjieng Aboitiz managed to read into them an original and convincing interpretation by framing them against the backdrop of growing transnational and global histories and in relation to the literature on other Asian anticolonial movements.

From this exhaustive investigation, future lines of research emerge. As CuUnjieng Aboitiz explains, this analysis focuses on «elite anti-colonial, proto-national, and national discourse» (154). The results of this already complex task make us wonder, however, whether and how other sectors of the archipelago's society shared this sense of belonging to Asia and the Malay race. For example, members of this same Filipino elite under study, over the revolution, moved from defending the Philippines' independence to advocating many different political arrangements after 1898, such as Filipino autonomy under American protection. It could be interesting to see their relation to this Asian dimension of the revolution and how they later abandoned it or reconciled it (if they did so) with their new positions.

To summarize, *Asian Place, Filipino Nation* is a thought-provoking book that contributes to a more sophisticated understanding of the Philippine Revolution by highlighting its Asian roots. In doing so, CuUnjieng Aboitiz shows how this key event constituted a «laboratory of ideas» that coined far-reaching «visions of world order alternative to those offered by the West» (6), shedding light on the broader phenomena of Asian anti-colonialism and nationalism. Hers is, therefore, a much-welcome addition to Philippine, Imperial, and Global Histories.