

Book Review

Aboitiz, Nicole Cuunjieng. *Asian Place, Filipino Nation: A Global Intellectual History of the Philippine Revolution, 1887-1912*. New York: Columbia University Press; Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2020.

Reinventing the Philippine Revolution

Luis Zuriel P. DOMINGO

University of Santo Tomas – Graduate School
luiszuriel.domingo.gs@ust.edu.ph
<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7864-7099>

ABSTRACT

This book review explores the work of Nicole Cuunjieng Aboitiz' *Asian Place, Filipino Nation: A Global Intellectual History of the Philippine Revolution, 1887-1912*. As opposed to previous works on the period, the said author challenges traditional narratives of the Philippine revolution, by leveraging her study on a transnational, global approach. The book claims direction on three core focuses that this review hopes to hypothesize: (a) the early days of Propaganda Movement and their effort to transnationalize Pan-Asianism, (b) the Philippine revolution and its actors' regional (and global) links, and (c) the continuing effect of the Philippine cause beyond place and time.

Keywords: Philippine Revolution, Pan-Asianism, Mariano Ponce, intellectual history, and transnationalism.

The most important stage of Philippine history is considerably the last decade of the nineteenth century. It was a period of significant transformation, both locally and globally. The Philippines, at the turn of the century, was in a period of constructive unrest, national self-consciousness, and infinite imagination. Similarly, this period, the Philippine revolution, was dubbed as the first anti-colonial upheaval, with a united front that gave birth to the very first republic in Asia.

For decades, the historiography concerning the Philippine revolution has been dominated by renowned historians—academics who expended on both

extensive empirical methods and phenomenological underpinnings. Likewise, the scholarly debate has produced many different rationalizations for why and how the Philippine revolution came to existence: in the Philippines alone, Teodoro A. Agoncillo's tandem work *Revolts of the Masses* and *Malolos: The Crisis of the Republic*, Fr. John N. Schumacher, S.J.'s *The Propaganda Movement*, and Reynaldo C. Ileto's *Pasyon and Revolution*, to only name a few.¹ Consequently, these works have become so canonical; they turn to become sacred scripts. Contextually, later literature about the period flourished but remained adamant, not until publication of ground-breaking intellectual history works like Resil B. Mojares' *Brains of the Nation* and Megan C. Thomas' *Orientalists, Propagandists, and Ilustrados*.² Both authors argued that early Filipino revolutionaries, like the Propaganda Movement, were heavily influenced by European orientalism models in their intellectual formation of national identity. Models that proved to be useful, not only in development of the revolutionaries' liberal nationalist thought, but also in knowledge production of the Philippines' anti-colonial projects, vis-à-vis racial discourses: laying the intellectual foundation for the Philippine revolution.

The rich history of the Philippine revolution, however, remains fertile to new interpretations and reinventions, given the availability of new data and ingenuity in approach. For instance, new historicism, the popularity of area studies, and at one's disposal of pristine frameworks, attracted budding historians to revisit the Philippine revolution. Accordingly, in historian Nicole Cuunjieng Aboitiz' illuminating *Asian Place, Filipino Nation: A Global Intellectual History of the Philippine Revolution, 1887-1912*, she "brings into focus, the cosmopolitan moorings of nation-state and the conceptual groundings of place, shows the ways in which Filipino nation-making could and often did take place transnationally".³ Hence, in the book, the Philippine revolution is regionally contextualized in Braudelian fashion as part of an imperial and anti-imperialist

1 See Teodoro Agoncillo, *The Revolt of the Masses: The Story of Bonifacio and The Katipunan* (Quezon City: University of the Philippines, 1956); Teodoro Agoncillo, *Malolos: The Crisis of the Republic* (Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press, 1960); John Schumacher SJ, *The Propaganda Movement, 1880-1895: The Creators of a Filipino Consciousness, the Makers of Revolution* (Manila: Solidaridad Publishing House, 1973); and Reynaldo Ileto, *Pasyon and Revolution: Popular Movements in the Philippines, 1840-1910* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 1979).

2 See Resil Mojares, *Brains of the Nation: Pedro Paterno, T.H. Pardo de Tavera, Isabelo de los Reyes and the Production of Modern Knowledge* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2006) and Megan Thomas, *Orientalists, Propagandists, and Ilustrados: Filipino Scholarship and the End of Spanish Colonialism* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2012).

3 Nicole Cuunjieng Aboitiz, *Asian Place, Filipino Nation: A Global Intellectual History of the Philippine Revolution, 1887-1912* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press; Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2020), 30.

climate in Asia, at the turn of the twentieth century. As opposed to previous works on the period, Cuunjieng Aboitiz challenges traditional narrative of the Philippine revolution by leveraging her study on a transnational, global approach. “Deeper international and transnational examinations,” as Cuunjieng Aboitiz hints, “of the Philippine revolution’s intellectual negotiations with “Asia” are still needed”.⁴ In that sense, she confronts the idea that the Philippine revolution, in spite of European influence, is intellectually heterogenous and important, in the formation and expansion of Pan-Asianist thought. Pan-Asianism, as context and idea, is an essential element in the book. The Philippines, according to Cuunjieng Aboitiz, “represents the first case of successful transnationalization of Pan-Asianism, involving cross-border political practice and revolutionary networking toward the goal of overthrowing two Western imperial powers”.⁵

Asian Place, Filipino Nation then credits the Philippine revolution’s global intellectual history in Southeast Asia and beyond, “as the history in question has global implications, global considerations, and global roots but often operates within an immediately regional, than global, setting”.⁶ Thus, her use of a global intellectual history framework of the Philippine revolution, reveals and offers new dimensions of gazing at overlooked centerpieces of the said period, for example, José Ramos, Doroteo Cortés, and Mariano Ponce.⁷

Cuunjieng Aboitiz then talks about concepts of “periphery” and “place”. On the one hand, Peripheries, in *Asian Place, Filipino Nation*, disembark from the traditional idea of East-West relations. Drawing on Pan-Asianism, Cuunjieng Aboitiz draws from the framework of Elleke Boehmer’s *Empire, the National, and the Postcolonial, 1890-1920* that, “anti-imperial and nationalist movements developed not only interaction between European colonial centers [...] but also, importantly, through interaction between peripheries”.⁸ This decentering has been useful in postcolonial studies, [post] empire studies, and global history. The book’s attempt, therefore, is relatively pioneering, since it is feasibly, the first to do so. On the other hand, Cuunjieng Aboitiz drew her concept of “Place,” from Edmund Burke’s criticism of empires, which argues the non-universality of it, in relation to the right rule and establish political

4 Cuunjieng Aboitiz, *Asian Place, Filipino Nation*, 9.

5 Cuunjieng Aboitiz, *Asian Place, Filipino Nation*, 26.

6 Cuunjieng Aboitiz, *Asian Place, Filipino Nation*, 27.

7 Cuunjieng Aboitiz, *Asian Place, Filipino Nation*, 62-63, 112.

8 Cuunjieng Aboitiz, *Asian Place, Filipino Nation*, 3; See Elleke Boehmer, *Empire, the National, and the Postcolonial, 1890-1920* (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 2005).

legitimacy. “Place,” for Burke, “was the basis of political society, formed the ground upon which other political notions, such as duty, freedom, and order, gained meaning”.⁹ Therefore, in *Asian Place, Filipino Nation*, “place” evolves in substance, as Filipino revolutionaries (both the Propaganda Movement and Katipunan) sentimentally and ideologically constructed identity, and imagined the nation. But Cuunjieng Aboitiz posits “the emplotment of place in the proto-national and revolutionary thought of turn-of-the-century Filipino thinkers,” in the revolutionaries’ imagination and creation of that “place” was concurrent in motion to other regional thinkers.¹⁰ This discussion is not only vital, as it improves conversation on nationalism and nation-states, but also significant in the discourse of transnationalism.

From these narratives, the book claims direction on three core focuses: (a) the early days of Propaganda Movement and their effort to transnationalize Pan-Asianism, (b) the Philippine revolution and its actors’ regional (and global) links, and (c) the continuing effect of the Philippine cause beyond place and time. As to transnationalize Pan-Asianism, Cuunjieng Aboitiz traces the historical backdrop of the rise of the Propaganda Movement and their adventure in Europe. How the Propaganda Movement’s newspaper *La Solidaridad*, became the catalyst and petri-dish in the development of national consciousness, racial affinity, and conceptualization of “place.” Filipino Malayness or a sense of belonging to Malay civilization, for example, were used by the movement to boost their confidence and arguments with regard to reclamation and enunciation of a Philippine civilization, an echo of Mojares’ scholarly work. But Cuunjieng Aboitiz further extrapolates the Propaganda Movement’s recognition of Japan, as a rising empire in Asia, and how the Japanese were overstated to be part of a greater Filipino racial and cultural grasp. Cuunjieng Aboitiz explains, “...this tentative expansion of Filipino affinities of place and belonging to include Japan was a progressive move that stands out”.¹¹ This overstatement, however, seems to be a problematic claim of the Propaganda Movement, as Japanese were of Sinic origin, rather than of Malay/Southeast Asian. Another example was José Rizal’s annotation of Antonio de Morga’s *Sucesos de las Islas Filipinas*; his goal to clarify historical misconceptions and resurrect the Philippine civilization, were rather ambiguous and overtly objective. Though Rizal annotated Morga’s *Sucesos* with the latest scholarship available at that time, his racial short-sightedness “failed to include the indigenous animists, non-Christian Chinese, and Muslims,” as Cuunjieng

9 Cuunjieng Aboitiz, *Asian Place, Filipino Nation*, 35.

10 Cuunjieng Aboitiz, *Asian Place, Filipino Nation*, 7.

11 Cuunjieng Aboitiz, *Asian Place, Filipino Nation*, 42.

Aboitiz points out.¹² Nevertheless, these broad prerogatives were advantageous, though questionable, for the movement in their larger awakening of [national and historical] consciousness to locate the Filipino nation or “place” within Asia, as discussed in the chapter.

The Propaganda Movement, however, was put on a knife edge. It started to crumble and later on abandoned, when José Rizal decided to return to the Philippines. Call for reforms in the form of the La Solidaridad turned to the creation of secret societies like the La Liga Filipina and the Katipunan. Cuunjieng Aboitiz also notes the change in approach and tact, “this new phase of Filipino nationalism and anti-colonial agitation would indeed traffic more heavily and explicitly in race”.¹³ The chapter on the Philippine revolution 1892-1898 narrates and examines the Katipunan and its relationship with the revolution, but more importantly, “the Philippine Revolution’s intellectual history was importantly international in its framework and global in that framework’s implications and considerations”.¹⁴ The ‘violence’ phase of the revolution was not only liberal in foundation, but interlinked on an “Asianist political thinking and organizing” framework as Cuunjieng Aboitiz argues.

Filipino revolutionaries, Cuunjieng Aboitiz claims, imagined radical alterations in the existing system rather than reforms’ uncertain consequences. In fulfillment of the revolutionary goal, Andres Bonifacio and the Katipunan looked at “Asia” the same way the Propaganda Movement saw “Japan as a symbol of current power to heighten by association the Filipinos’ sense of their Asian civilization and Asian history as well as to awaken racial pride”.¹⁵ While the issue of race was considered to be a prime mover and irrevocable from the Katipunan’s revolutionary goal and national vision against Spain, Cuunjieng Aboitiz notes that Emilio Aguinaldo, later on, dropped the issue on racial and ethnic distinctions, and pursued a more cosmopolitan approach. Aguinaldo, now leader of the revolution, advanced the struggle for independence, in a more honorable than intolerant trajectory.¹⁶

In her fourth chapter, Cuunjieng Aboitiz advances new historical narratives that have been half-finished by historians for decades. In this chapter, she brings into light the adventure of Mariano Ponce, as the first Pan-Asian emissary of the Philippine republic, and provides a better understanding of Pan-Asianism in

12 Cuunjieng Aboitiz, *Asian Place, Filipino Nation*, 52-54.

13 Cuunjieng Aboitiz, *Asian Place, Filipino Nation*, 76.

14 Cuunjieng Aboitiz, *Asian Place, Filipino Nation*, 79.

15 Cuunjieng Aboitiz, *Asian Place, Filipino Nation*, 83.

16 Cuunjieng Aboitiz, *Asian Place, Filipino Nation*, 86-88.

context. While most history written on Ponce focused on his sojourn in Yokohama and the mishap of the rifle shipment, Cuunjieng Aboitiz gets deep into Ponce's intellectualizing of Asianist thought, his admiration of Japanese expansionism, and his involvement within a network of Pan-Asianist intellectuals.¹⁷ Cuunjieng Aboitiz begins by mapping out the development of Ponce's intellectual thought, "his admiration for the rise of Japan and frustration with Spain were main factors in Ponce's move from reform to revolution [...] Japan's rise as an imperial and global power following the Sino-Japanese war [...] helped him remap the Philippines's geography of political affinity".¹⁸ This admiration justified Ponce's belief that Japan was the only country (from the peripheries) the Philippines could ask for assistance. From a network of Asian intellectuals, he gained companionship in Japan, sharing the same sentiments about the Philippine revolutionary cause; a threat of a new tide of Western imperialism made these revolutionaries and exiles believe in such "shared destiny" and "shared burden" in Asia.

This shared empathy, however, may only function temporarily in service of one's self-interest. After gaining one's ultimate objective, the fundamental tenacity of Pan-Asianist cause would become secondary or worse—impractical. This is how Cuunjieng Aboitiz observed it from the case of Vietnamese nationalist Phan Bội Châu.¹⁹ Châu was wary of Japanese expansionism. Shrewd as it can be, Cuunjieng Aboitiz summarizes Pan-Asianism within the Southeast Asian context as, "a romantic fantasy and trafficked in emotionality and bonds of friendship, but it was grounded in power calculations and instrumentalized by those in colonized Southeast Asia for nationalist purposes first and foremost".²⁰

Mariano Ponce, on the other hand, could be an exception. Ponce's Asianist thought, as Cuunjieng Aboitiz argues, was deeply rooted in geography and race, rather than nationalist or attached to the principle of exceptionalism. As the person to hold the international desk of *La Solidaridad*, in combination with his romantic ideals that were validated by fellow Asianist, he never regarded Japanese expansionism or those oppressed within the peripheries, as threat to the Philippine cause. He adored this Pan-Asian solidarity. Influenced by Chinese nationalist Sun Yat-sen, Ponce deemed the problems of Asia at the beginning of twentieth century, as common or universal. Ponce, according to Cuunjieng Aboitiz, viewed, "such different societies in Asia were bound together through

17 Cuunjieng Aboitiz, *Asian Place, Filipino Nation*, 112.

18 Cuunjieng Aboitiz, *Asian Place, Filipino Nation*, 113.

19 Cuunjieng Aboitiz, *Asian Place, Filipino Nation*, 115-116.

20 Cuunjieng Aboitiz, *Asian Place, Filipino Nation*, 117.

parallel historical experience and current geopolitical realities, and were to come to know and recognize one another thought appreciation of their common cultures, norms, and symbols”.²¹ But as Cuunjieng Aboitiz concludes, “Ponce’s stay in Japan was a success mostly in terms of delivering intelligence to the Hong Kong Junta, and in shaping foreign Asian opinion on the rightness of the Philippine Revolution”.²² Previously, historians viewed his stay in Japan as slightly insignificant and a grave disappointment to Aguinaldo’s revolutionary struggle yet *Asian Place, Filipino Nation* went beyond the narrative and provides a great contribution in understanding the global intellectual history of the Philippine revolution through Mariano Ponce’s adventure and enthusiasm. The promise of Pan-Asianism resonated after the days of the Philippine revolution; fragments of it flourished and became significant as the Philippines embraced globalization and modernization in the twentieth century under the Americans.

In the final chapter, Cuunjieng Aboitiz provides history of the transnational impact of the Philippine revolution. The anti-colonial rigor of the revolutionary struggle in the Philippines, at some point, was perceived by the Chinese as convenient. Although modern Chinese nationalism varied in framework and context, Chinese reformists saw the Philippine revolution’s anti-colonial spirit, as an effective remedy to China’s national problems. During the age of decolonization, Indonesian intellectuals, on the other hand, used Filipino revolutionary actors in their imaginings as justification of their struggle for independence during the Indonesian National Revolution.²³ Indonesians’ over-exaggeration of racial affinity with Filipinos was used to warrant such shared history and destiny. Cuunjieng Aboitiz settles the final chapter through narration of how Japan-centered Pan-Asianism was easily accepted by various Southeast Asian nations, including the Philippines during the Second World War, and how these nations choose to operate on diplomatic concepts like Third Worldism and Pan-Malayism after the war. Atrocities committed by the Japanese during the war, perhaps, made Pan-Asianism lose its popularity and because postwar Filipino personalities opt to debate over nationalism and liberalism.

The study of Cuunjieng Aboitiz is ambitious and ingenious but its historical substance is conclusively valuable. *Asian Place, Filipino Nation*, then, creates this progressive concept of the Philippine revolution’s significant transnational role albeit distancing itself from the very meaning of Filipino anti-colonial

21 Cuunjieng Aboitiz, *Asian Place, Filipino Nation*, 135.

22 Cuunjieng Aboitiz, *Asian Place, Filipino Nation*, 126.

23 Cuunjieng Aboitiz, *Asian Place, Filipino Nation*, 152-153.

nationalism of being self-manufactured and endemic. From the existing body of literature and scholarly debate of the period, Cuunjieng Aboitiz's central thesis, thus, is new and original. Cuunjieng Aboitiz writes well, making powerful arguments difficult to resist. More specifically, challenging historians to think about important questions about the long and rich history of the Philippine revolution. Her reinvention of the Philippine revolution did not only provide new perspectives and narratives on nationalism but the accounts behind and descriptions of Pan-Asianism presented meaning and structure on modern cosmopolitanism in Southeast Asia.

In conclusion, Cuunjieng Aboitiz' *Asian Place, Filipino Nation* nevertheless offers a newly minted take on Philippine history, transgressing from traditional narratives and methodology. A methodical reinvention of the Philippine revolution, the book, rather, is a recovery attempt of an eclectic 'structure of thought,' within the frame of "Filipino conceptualizations of a universal human history of civilization, and how Filipinos carved and grounded their constructed national places within it".²⁴ The book will interest not only history pundits and panjandrums, but anyone who believes the shared idea that revolutions are inevitable, spontaneous, and universal.

²⁴ Cuunjieng Aboitiz, *Asian Place, Filipino Nation*, 182.

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