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Transforming Nikkeijin Identity and Citizenship: Untold Life Histories of Japanese Migrants and Their Descendants in the Philippines, 1903–2013

SHUN OHNO

Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2015, xiv+284pp.

In January 2016, Japan's Emperor Akihito and Empress Michiko visited the Philippines as state guests. Mass media reported that the royal couple had wanted to visit the country as part of their pilgrimage for the victims of World War II. On January 28, the royal couple met with 86 second-generation (Nisei) Japanese descendants (Nikkeijin). The Nisei have lived extraordinarily difficult lives because of the war. Their Majesties politely listened to the stories the Nisei had kept for seven decades. Reading *Transforming Nikkeijin Identity and Citizenship: Untold Life Histories of Japanese Migrants and Their Descendants in the Philippines, 1903–2013* by Shun Ohno, we can imagine how precious this meeting was. It would probably not have been made possible without the persistent efforts of sincere journalists—as Ohno was—for decades to seek justice for the Nikkeijin in the Philippines (“Philippine Nikkei” in the book), particularly the Nisei. Journalists, together with concerned citizens and Nikkeijin associations, have demanded the Japanese government's recognition of its war responsibility for the Nisei. Nisei (often forcibly) collaborated with—or were even conscripted into—the Japanese military in the Philippines during World War II but were abandoned thereafter; no chance of repatriation was given. They were exposed to the threat of ambush. They lost practically everything—family, property, job, opportunities for education—but received no compensation at all.

The book is a culmination of Ohno's life work. It summarizes the history of Japanese male emigrants to the Philippines in the early twentieth century and that of their children and grandchildren until recent times. Their life has been tossed about by rapidly changing bilateral relations between Japan and the Philippines at each historical moment. At the same time, colonial and postcolonial Philippines throughout the twentieth century and beyond has been under the influence of the United States, and that has also affected the Philippine Nikkeijin in many ways.

As a journalist at that time, I wrote about the Philippine Nisei's impoverished and miserable post-war lives without Japanese fathers, and pointed out the inescapable responsibility of the Japanese government for having invaded the Philippines, conscripted many mestizo Nisei as Imperial Japan's soldiers and *gunzoku* [paramilitary personnel], and abandoned them without any assistance after the war. (pp. 129–130)

What Ohno began for the Nisei as a journalist in the 1980s was expanded to his broader research on their fathers (first generation, or Issei) and their children (third generation, or Sansei) and beyond. That was eventually compiled in his doctoral dissertation, which became the foundation of this book.

The Issei, who migrated to the Philippines from the 1900s to the 1930s, managed to establish themselves and settled in the Philippines, where landownership, immigration control, civil registry, and citizenship were regulated by American-made laws (Chapter 2). Many of them eventually married in the Philippines and produced the second generation, Nisei, who carry a double heritage. The community of Japanese migrants built Japanese schools for the Nisei's education in the 1920s and 1930s. Japanese schools received support from the Japanese government as institutions for "instilling the Japanese spirit in Nisei's minds" (Chapter 3). So raised, the Nisei suffered greatly as they were inevitably involved in World War II, in which their father's country—Japan—fought against the United States, the sovereign of their mother's country, the Philippines. The colony became the worst battleground during the war. Family members who had different nationalities—Japanese or Filipino, if not dual, ambiguous, or stateless—were divided as "enemies" in theory and separated physically by death or repatriation. Many Nisei were ambushed by Filipinos on suspicion of espionage (Chapter 4) or as objects of revenge. Many of the Nisei who survived the war remained in the Philippines, concealing their identity for fear of maltreatment by Filipinos in the post-World War II decades when anti-Japanese sentiment was severe.

Japanese journalists, including Ohno, uncovered the fierce lives and deaths of the children of Japanese migrants in the Philippines without compensation and began to demand justice for them. Some opposition representatives, human right lawyers, and concerned citizens of Japan joined the movement (Chapter 5). In 1990 Japan's Immigration Control and Refugees Recognition Act was revised to allow Japanese descendants up to the third generation, Sansei, to stay in Japan as long-term "special residents" without work restrictions. By then Japan had become a dream destination to many impoverished Filipinos for its economic and technological advancement, while Japanese industry needed 3D (dirty, demeaning, and dangerous) workers in the bubble economy. The Nisei began to unseal their identity and assist the Sansei to work in Japan (Chapter 6).

This is a moving story: a sincere journalist's grounded research bearing fruit after decades by moving both the Japanese and Philippine governments, which were indifferent to the issue and reluctant to render any positive actions. It proves the merit of diligent journalism, which in this case contributed to justice by turning what seemed impossible into reality. This sprawling drama does not need agitating writing. Compilations of citations of archival materials or interviews are enough to impress readers.

However, this book leaves room for improvement if it is to be more influential in the domain of social sciences. Research questions could have been more focused so that the theoretical framework and methodology were more tightly knitted. There is a list of six questions in the

first chapter. This implies that the project was not successful in narrowing down *the* research question. Also, the theoretical framework and methodology are not well harmonized. The thinness of both the introductory chapter (Chapter 1) and concluding chapter (Chapter 7) may be attributed to that.

The author claims to “analyze identities and citizenship of three generations of Nikkei” (p. 4). “Identity and citizenship” has become an important topic in understanding issues pertaining to ever-escalating human mobility, which is producing increasing numbers of transnational families and citizens in this globalizing world. Identity of migrants has been massively researched since the 1990s in migration studies and in various studies pertaining to globalization. The premise of these studies is that identity is not static but a process of othering. It is flexible, political, and relational, can be plural, and can be strategically articulated in negotiations; “It is only through the relation to the Other, the relation to what it is not” (Hall 1996, 4). The identity and citizenship of Philippine Nikkeijin as viewed by Ohno confirms such nature of identity making as manifested by different attitudes by each generation of Philippine Nikkeijin. The first generation who grew up in Japan mingled well with members of the destination community. But they were Japanese, after all. Their Japaneseness was further amplified by the growing militarism of Japan and the war (Chapters 2–4). Many mestizo Nisei, if not all, attended Japanese school and were made to collaborate with the Japanese forces during the war. They had to conceal their Japanese identity during the postwar decades for their own survival and began to reveal it only after Philippine–Japan relations improved. They played a central role in organizing Nikkeijin associations (Chapters 5 and 6). Sansei who migrated to Japan as “Japanese descendants” were treated as “foreigners” in the host country, at times discriminatorily. While they gained stable resident status in Japan, and even Japanese passports in some cases, they came to consider themselves more “Filipino” (Chapter 6). The whole story is informative.

Today, we are not unfamiliar with individuals who possess *de facto* plural citizenships or nationalities and use each of them strategically in different situations. For some global citizens today, their citizenship/nationality and sense of belongingness do not necessarily coincide. It could have been more interesting if the grand story of three generations of Philippine Nikkeijin were elevated to a theoretical discussion such as a question of nations and citizens, the transformation of nation states, or power and agency, among others.

The complex layers of power relations that the players of this history render are intellectually stimulating. References to the complex power relations among the minorities of both countries challenge the assumption of a simple majority-minority dichotomy. The book reveals not only mainland Japanese migrants’ discriminatory attitudes toward Okinawan migrants in the Philippines but also those of Filipinos toward the latter. The book also reveals the arrogant attitude of members of the Japanese military toward Japanese migrants in the Philippines—including their descendants, such as Nisei—during the war. It is shocking to learn about starving Japanese soldiers

murdering their fellow Japanese, particularly Nisei—and even massacring Okinawans—who were fighting along with them against the enemy, for food. The war made humans hungry, and extremely starving humans became beasts. Justice, particularly for Nisei, is indeed necessary.

On the Philippine side, details of the land problem in Davao City in the early decades of the twentieth century (Chapters 2 and 3) enlighten us on the intricacies of colonial American rule over the land occupied by the Bagobos, who had exercised what James Scott called “the art of not being governed” (Scott 2010). On the one hand, Americans blamed Japanese intermarriers as illegal (occupants); on the other hand, the Bagobos happily accommodated Japanese men as kin as they diligently developed their land. Members of the Filipino population who had already been assimilated into the colonial system, such as Manila-based journalists, supported the American view.

Methodologically speaking, the sources Ohno cites are skewed to Japanese ones, with few materials from the Philippines or the United States. Citations from unreliable sources, including double citations, are scattered throughout the text. Some uncritical treatments of archival materials and such citations of interviewees do not sit comfortably in the main text of the book. The publisher could have been more careful in editing for typos and biased or ambiguous expressions. While Ohno’s adoption of “citizenship/nationality” (pp. 4–5) is appreciated, these two terms are a source of confusion when discussing migration matters between Japan and the Philippines due to inconsistent usage of the terms. Nevertheless, a number of anecdotes expose untold sad stories effectively. For example it is important for us to learn about Takuma Higashiji, a Nisei, who was hanged as war criminals in 1946 (pp. 87, 102–103), while his commander from the Japanese Imperial Army and his colleagues were repatriated alive.

A huge number of newspaper and magazine articles, studies, and reports on Nikkeijin in the Philippines have been published in Japanese. This has hindered Filipinos, including Philippine Nikkei, from reading them. Although this book contains minor limitations, it is a welcome source of information for Philippine Nikkei persons, researchers, and students of the subject, particularly those who do not read Japanese, as well as supporters and government officials in both countries.

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