Conclusions: The Ghosts of the Present

> *Chinese and Filipinos, China and the Philippines, though racially and geographically close to one another, can really have no vital relations, no worthwhile cooperation between them unless there is vital exchange.* [1]
>
> Dean Francisco Benitez, 1940

> *Why did he choose to plunge into nothingness, into the void of faceless faces, of soundless voices, lying outside history? I tried to step away and look at it from a distance of words read in books, half-remembered. For history records the patterns of men's lives . . . . All things, it is said, are duly recorded – all things of importance, that is. But not quite, for actually it is only the known, the seen, the heard and only those events that the recorder regards as important that are put down, those lies his keepers keep their power by.* [2]
>
> Ralph Ellison, 1952

American novelist Ralph Ellison, in the epigraph that appears above, articulates how historians play critical roles in sustaining systems of power and privilege. In his novel, *Invisible Man*, he pulls down the magician's curtains, exposing how the "keepers" of records shape and mold memory. Although many historians have attempted to recover and restore voices lost to time and archives, many others have intentionally or unknowingly sped past the graves of those who didn't fit into their narratives. After all, selection is a key task of historians and other channelers of the past, and the act of selection by its very nature necessitates omission. Selecting one testimony or story means leaving out many others. This act of censure is one that we all take part in, but it takes different forms, channels different agendas, and holds different consequences.

Ignoring is perhaps the most stinging form of omission. Overlooking or ignoring comes not from an active effort to undermine, deplatform, or distort some disputed reality, but from a lazy privilege and carefree obliviousness. Contrast ignoring with a more active form of erasure,

[1] Dean Francisco Benitez, "Our Oriental Relations – With China," *Sino-Philippine Research Journal [Zhongfei yanjiu jikan* 中菲研究季刊*]* 1, no. 1 (1940): 15–19.
[2] Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 439.

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such as efforts by some in Japan to obfuscate or downplay the scale of the Nanjing Massacre of 1937 in school curricula.[3] As Tomoko Hamada notes, "a written national history is a powerful ideological tool that can be used for the mobilization of citizens for the service of the collective (imagined) community."[4] Some textbook authors in Japan, like textbook authors everywhere, molded history to fulfill a specific and practicable purpose: creating a palatable imagined community from a shared, albeit distorted, past. Even though many outsiders would denounce the result of the narratives the authors conjured, those detractors can at least derive some righteous frustration knowing that the authors acted with intent and purpose.

The nefariousness of ignoring lies in its indifference, brazenness, and complete dissociation from costs. Geoff Eley describes how the past can become "both therapy and distraction, a source of familiarity and predictability, even as the actual ground of the present ceases to be reliable."[5] Yet the history of the ignored doesn't even have the chance to distract from or invoke nostalgias of real or imagined pasts. It is obscured with little thought but serious consequence. The history of the Sino–Philippine link, although enjoying thoughtful treatment in some scholarly circles, largely fits into this category.

China and the Philippines have had a rocky relationship over the past decade despite growing more and more economically integrated. Aside from brief honeymoon periods when President Rodrigo Duterte temporarily pivoted toward China early in his administration, and when President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. briefly offered an olive branch, the Philippines and China have appeared to be "sleepwalking into old-new nightmares," as Dan Steinbock recently observed.[6] The strange thing about these nightmares, however, and Steinbock captures it well with his "old-new" phrasing, are their confused chronology. Normally ghosts of the past haunt the present, as seen in the case of the Nanjing Massacre and textbooks mentioned previously, but with China and the Philippines, it would perhaps be more accurate to say that the ghosts of the present

[3] For more on this topic, see Wakabayashi, *The Nanking Atrocity*.

[4] Tomoko Hamada, "Contested Memories of the Imperial Sun: History Textbook Controversy in Japan," *American Asian Review* 20, no. 4 (2002): 36. See also Zheng Wang, "Old Wounds, New Narratives: Joint History Textbook Writing and Peacebuilding in Asia," *History & Memory* 21, no. 1 (2009): 101–126.

[5] Geoff Eley, "The Past Under Erasure? History, Memory, and the Contemporary," *Journal of Contemporary History* 46, no. 3 (2011): 556.

[6] Dan Steinbock, "PH 2022 Getting Ugly: Deep Divides, Xenophobia, US–China Tensions," *The Manila Times*, December 6, 2021, www.manilatimes.net/2021/12/06/opinion/columns/ph-2022-getting-ugly-deep-divides-xenophobia-us-china-tensions/1824860.

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haunt the past, which in turn unsettles and confuses the anxieties of the present and future.

Rocky relations between China and the Philippines over the past decade and during the height of the Cold War, coupled with the many ingrained research blinders highlighted in the introduction, have led people to overlook a complex and integrated past in the early twentieth century. The rich history of Sino–Philippine interaction that we have explored in this book, as well as the many colorful characters who spearheaded those interactions, have, for the most part, disappeared from popular knowledge. Present anxieties haunt past memories. Turning back to Eley's quote, for China and the Philippines, the present is indeed distorted, not by the therapy and distraction of the past, but by its absence. When former senator Panfilo "Ping" Lacson recently traveled to Pag-asa (Thitu) Island in the West Philippine/South China Sea to condemn Chinese incursions in the area and boldly plant the Philippine flag, he did not invoke a warlord trope, communist trope, or any historical episode for that matter. He talked about fishing and national security.[7]

While anti-Chinese discrimination and anti-China sentiments have persisted and realigned for many decades in the Philippines, they also don't feel very rooted in any past – at least not the pasts that appear in the pages of this monograph.[8] They appear more like an old reflex than anything connected to history. In fact, the Sino–Philippine relationship today feels very fleeting and superficial despite geographical proximity and deep historical ties. Politicians on both sides of the strait seem to enjoy the emptiness because it allows them to conjure their own convenient demons and xenophobias.

In 1930, Filipino Senator Jose A. Clarin wrote, "it is hoped that, when China attains the height of her power, she will use it for the benefit of weak peoples and for the abolishment of those barriers established through racial prejudice."[9] Like Dean Francisco Benitez, whose epigraph begins this chapter, the senator saw promise in China and reason for the Philippines to pursue a policy of engagement with that country. If elected

[7] Richa Noriega, "Lacson Raises Philippine Flags on Pag-asa Island Amid West Philippine Sea Tensions," *GMA News*, November 20, 2021, www.gmanetwork.com/news/topstories/nation/811650/lacson-raises-philippine-flags-on-pag-asa-island-amid-west-philippine-sea-tensions/story/.

[8] Patricia Lourdes Viray, "Filipinos See US as Top Ally, China as Greatest Threat – Poll," *Philstar.com*, December 6, 2019, www.philstar.com/headlines/2019/12/06/1974842/filipinos-see-us-top-ally-china-greatest-threat-poll.

[9] Jose A. Clarin (Ren Luqu 仁魯瞿), "My Message to the Chinese People [Wei Huayou zhu 為華友祝]," in *The Fookien Times Special Edition Commemorating Its Fourth Anniversary, 1926–30 [Xinmin ribao sizhou jinian Yuandan tekan* 新閩日報四週紀念元旦特刊*]* (Manila: Fookien Times Publishing Company, 1930), unnumbered.

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leaders in the Philippines today had as much curiosity about China and the Philippines in the past as Senator Jose A. Clarin did about China and the Philippines in the future, and if Chinese leaders and global scholars shared a similar curiosity, perhaps we all could have a more productive and peaceful present.

This book set out to get lost in an interdisciplinary, decolonial, connected history of the Philippines and China in the early twentieth century. It engaged with, challenged, and redesigned inspiring transnational, world, and global history approaches, and it followed equally inspiring and innovative historical agents. It navigated the dual oceans of history and historiography to uncover a world of intimate contact and mutual influence. It is my hope that the characters who appeared in these pages, who carried so much optimism and dedication, and who demonstrated the ability to survive and thrive despite the odds stacked against them, can inspire you as much as they inspired me. Thank you for reading my book.

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