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A BOOK REVIEW OF THE JAPANESE COMMUNITY IN CEBU, 1900-1945

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Authors: Jose Eleazar R. Bersales and Taihei Okada

Title of Book: *The Japanese Community in Cebu, 1900-1945*

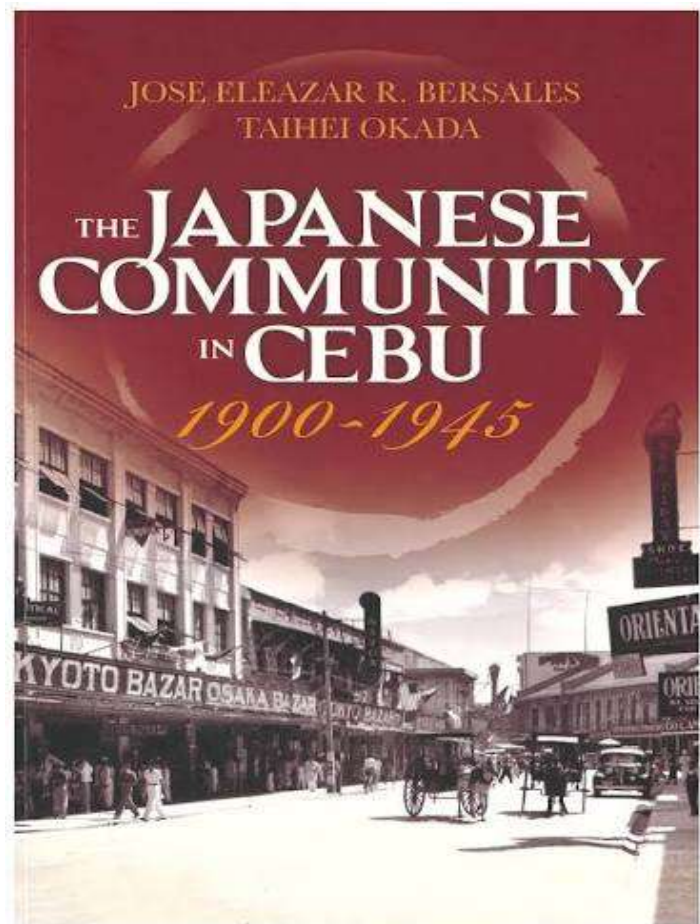
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ABSTRACT

This book review presents a thorough dissection and critical interrogation of Jose Eleazar Bersales and Taihei Okada's 2023 work, *The Japanese Community in Cebu, 1900-1945*, which is construed as a trailblazing historiographical account of the Japanese diaspora in the Philippines. Using archival research as its principal methodology, Bersales and Okada have upheld the fact that many Japanese settled in Cebu Province during the American colonial period for commercial purposes. From there, it opened up a veritable crucible, in the form of commercial-industrial establishments, which offered a new perspective as to how the Japanese settlers had acclimatized in their new environment that inevitably spurred or benefited the Cebuanos, in addition to narrating how the same societal setup was disturbed and eventually ruined by the eruption of the Second World War. Ultimately, it is expected for a trailblazing work to have built-in shortcomings, be it in the conceptual or technical side; however, Bersales and Okada's book is a prominent addition to the literature, tackling not just the local history of Cebu or the history of the Japanese diaspora in the country but also the Japanese settlers in pre-Second World War Southeast Asia, which will serve as the backbone for future research.

KEYWORDS: Cebu Province, Japanese, Philippines, Second World War

I. INTRODUCTION

The year 2025 marked the eightieth anniversary of the surrender of the Imperial Japanese forces to the Allied Forces, which brought the Second World War to its close. In the following decades, many former Japanese colonies have started to incorporate to their annals of national histories such event, in which they were written in such a manner to depict the Japanese as a brutal and uncompromising type of people, which consummated the shared feeling of despair, anger, and resentment of their once colonized nations. On one hand, these harrowing representations are true to numerous people living in the Southeast Asia region.

What is truly unfortunate, on the other hand, is how historians had deliberately passed over the lives of the Japanese already living in the areas long before the war broke out, as the disregard of which gives a sense of dimming certain historical lights to suit their own way of thinking or, worse, strangle the other reality that there were Japanese that were innocuous and different from the Imperial Japanese forces, as they had only ventured into such areas in search of greener pastures. It certainly feels that there is still a 'cold war' existing, as there are discreet conflicts that persisted long after the ink of the peace treaties had dried in the form of historical writing. In the case of the Philippines, in addition to the failure of providing the Japanese immigrants an appropriate socio-historical understanding and voice, another historiographical oversight that persisted for several decades was the dearth of local histories. These histories either serve as a strong and sufficient foundation for the data presented by scholars in the written national histories or give a differing point of view to what has been etched or often repeated in the hegemonic works of national history.

Hence, the book being reviewed, *The Japanese Community in Cebu, 1900-1945*, by scholars Jose Eleazar Bersales and Taihei Okada, addresses the surprising lack of the historians' engagement regarding the huge gaps of understanding of the historiographical vectors when it comes to two interrelated and bludgeoning fields of inquiry: the tracing of Japanese settlement in the Philippines and the influence of the Second World War on the attitude of the Filipinos towards the Japanese. Their study focused narrowly on the genesis and experience of the Japanese community within the province of Cebu during the period.

II. SUMMARY

In the first two chapters, Bersales and Okada opens up with a milieu of the Japanese settlement, first, in the national level, and subsequently, in Cebu Province. An inquiry into the statement made by the authors expressing that there is a stark difference in terms of the luring factor, which sufficiently justified the settlement of Japanese in prewar Cebu in comparison to the other Japanese immigrants that ultimately settled in other cities in the Philippines (Bersales and Okada 2023, 4), which really set the tone for the entire work. The authors' adoption of this claim openly challenged the 'agricultural'-dominant disposition of

historians and other scholars, as to the reason of settlement of Japanese in certain areas in the Philippines, as they championed for a more 'commercial'-centric opportunities that address the motive of the Japanese to come to Cebu, specifically in terms of retail trading, specialty trading, manufacturing, and service providers relevant to physical therapy and carpentry (Bersales and Okada 2023, 10, 28). The Japanese never intended that their introduction of the 'bazar' concept would make an undeniable and persistent impact on the lives of not only the Cebuanos but the entirety of the Filipinos, as the concept remains relevant today.

Having analyzed the milieu and participation of the Japanese community during the prewar period, the authors now turn to the events that unfolded in the province during the Second World War. Economically speaking, the pertinent viewpoint is that the economy was brought to a halt as wartime controls prioritized military needs over those of civilians. However, in the case of Cebu province, the authors drifted away from this stance and cogently argued that the province experienced an expansion of economic activities, in which ushered in numerous Japanese companies to come to the province and to have a share in the great profits being sustained in the area (Bersales and Okada 2023, 45). Socially speaking, they also touched on the formation of the Hoko system, which was eerily similar to the ones institutionalized in Formosa, as it was employed by the Imperial Japanese forces to entrench not only their authoritative control over the multiple facets of the society, but more importantly, it was designated as an institutionalized deterrent for the natives as well as their fellow Japanese to engage actively in anti-Japanese measures, categorically referring to guerrilla warfare. And as the tides turned against the Imperial Japanese forces with the impending advancement from American forces around 1944, Bersales and Okada argues that the Japanese Military Administration in the Philippines took a leap of faith as they pursued mandatory conscription of all male Japanese civilians to augment their forces, and in the case of Cebu province, the male civilians who are eligible to be conscripted had 'essentially welcomed' the idea of joining so as to fight for their motherland. Then, as the Americans landed on the shores of Cebu province, the Japanese civilians were caught in the crosshairs of the raging war, literally and figuratively, but had a strong resolve not to surrender to the American forces. Ultimately, their Bushido-inspired demeanor did not pay dividends as they either became the numbers in the official death tally or their families were torn apart.

In the last chapter, Bersales and Okada argue that, after surrendering to the Americans in September of 1945, all surviving Japanese citizens, whether military or civilian, had to be repatriated to Japan. It is no wonder if it was done for security and propriety reasons. Not only had the Japanese themselves made moves to expunge their existence, but the Filipinos themselves. With the passing of the Philippine Alien Property Administration in 1946, the Filipinos confiscated assets explicitly owned or possessed by the Japanese. Henceforth, the authors pithily concluded that the coming of the Imperial Japanese Forces and the Second World War not only destroyed the lives of millions of Filipinos but also the undisturbed lives of the Japanese settlers who arrived in the area long before them (Bersales and Okada 2023, 85).

III. ANALYSIS

A welcome feature of the work is seen in the detailed bibliographic listing and scrupulous engagement of both published and unpublished Japanese sources of information (specifically the *Bag-ong Kusog*—a newsweekly magazine in Cebu Province that ran from 1915 until 1945), which are still largely unknown and distant from other researchers. The systematic and painstaking listing of the entirety of the resources used in giving contextualization, in addition to the specific data that gives ‘flesh and blood’ to the events that were written in the book is of great beneficence to future researchers or scholars of the same theme, in terms of having an abridged source of information. But what is even more admirable and a welcoming feature of their work is their acknowledgment of the limitations encountered when it comes to the sources, and for the relevant facts contained herein. Instead of using words of possibility or uncertainty as a fire exit if the discussion being made has already hit a dead end, the authors have the impression to be honest to their readers, rather than being a conjecturer who would end up asking more questions rather than answering them, leaving the readers baffled and astray.

Another strength of the work, which might be minute or overlooked by the readers, is its inclusion of matrices, mostly confined to demographical data, which establishes quantitative data, in addition to relevant photographs of events, magazines, newspaper articles, and posters. These details opened new windows that deepened historical perspectives on the reality of that period and underpinned the foundations for the information presented.

As we assess, or reassess, the profoundness and critical treatment of Bersales and Okada on the settlement of Japanese in the province of Cebu from 1900 until 1945 as seen in the book, it can be stated that works which gives (or claims to have) a pioneering narrative or departs from the traditional viewpoints with regards to a certain theme or topic, often encounter numerous shortcomings or drawbacks, which is not uncommon. Some of the information and interpretation presented, which might seem trivial for some readers and scholars alike, presents symptoms of inconsistency. In view thereof, should someone dissect the text properly and thoroughly, these unraveled maladies manifested signs of extreme predilection of the authors as well as ignorance of certain historical facts, which deprived the book of a more thorough narrative.

First, as the title of the book implies, *The Japanese Community in Cebu, 1900-1945*, definitively establishes what the authors aspire to do. They have realized it in a neat manner in which their work was shaped by the existing sources before them. However, for a more meticulous and keen reader of the book, they cannot help but see a paradox. They would wonder and pose the question, “Where are the Cebuanos in the authors’ work?” “Why did the authors seemingly omit or sidestep the presence of the true natives or locals of the area in the study?” It is seemingly hard to remove the locals from their home, just to have a straight-line assessment of the foreign settlers there, hence creating a blind spot regarding historical experiences. Cebu is the home of the Cebuanos, not the Japanese settlers, in short.

To be fair to the authors, there are around four occasions that the Cebuanos popped up in the book, and it falls to the following circumstances: the Cebuanos were employees of Japanese manufacturing and stores (Bersales and Okada 2023, 26); consumers of the items sold and produced by the Japanese community; victims of the harsh control and eventual atrocities that came with the Second World War; and they even became the spouses of the Japanese settlers. Under such circumstances presented in the antecedent statement, I must perforce dissent from the line of thinking and treatment of the authors. The search for a more impartial and balanced understanding is hindered, not helped, by the seemingly one-dimensional treatment of the topic. It would have been better for Bersales and Okada to expound on how the local natives of Cebu perceived the Japanese settlers within their area, even if they were considerably fewer than their Chinese counterparts, who came to Cebu Province much earlier (Bersales and Okada 2023, 10). The converse of this statement is also true. How did the Japanese settlers view the natives of Cebu province? This specific question is more pertinent and articulate to the author's nuanced treatment of the topic; however, it did not materialize.

The second one lies within the contextualization of the 1932 Anti-Japanese boycott. The boycott that occurred between the local Chinese and Japanese communities in Cebu was an offshoot of the "aftermath of the Japanese invasion of China and the occupation of Manchuria," which commenced in September of 1931 (Bersales and Okada 2023, 30). The contextual statement provided by the authors was problematic.

Historical sources have established that the year 1931 is seen as the "commencement", not the "aftermath" of the attempt of Imperial Japan to incorporate the entire mainland China to its empire. The Imperial Japan's selection of Manchuria (along with other communities in the Northern China region) was guided by the economic boon provided by the region such as oil, iron, and other extractive minerals as they immensely lack the resources to be an autarkic economy, and to a lesser extent, to manifest the aggressive reprisal of the Japanese army in the region, when it comes to the staunch opposition of the Chinese to buy their goods, which in reality, led to the dismay of the cabinet members in Tokyo.

And more importantly, the undergirded meaning of the phrase "*aftermath of the Japanese invasion of China*" is inaccurate. However, when gleaned from other scholarly works, it can be discerned that the entire mainland China was not fully occupied by the Imperial Japanese forces, not during the Second World War and most definitely not during 1931, as the authors had tried to convey in the book in view of the implication of the statement written (Paine 2003, 3-6, 298). Moreover, such a statement constitutes the premise that the Chinese people, governed primarily by Chiang Kai-shek, had been effectively overmatched by the Japanese forces, which, should the readers adopt this certain viewpoint without due thorough historical research about the event, would lead to an erroneous historical interpretation and narrative of the Japanese invasion of Manchuria. It is rather perplexing and disappointing to see the authors had phrased such a pivotal occasion in such a manner, and it would have been more of a pleasure and delight to read if the authors had written simply in a straightforward manner—"The Japanese occupation of Manchuria."

Besides the shortcomings presented in terms of content, as a finishing touch to the list of shortcomings or drawbacks, it is also worth highlighting its technical blemish. On page 5, footnote 6 was written as “Milagros Gurrero, *A Survey of Japanese Trade and*, p. 21”. Such a shortening made was incongruent with the format prescribed for shortened footnotes within the Chicago Manual of Style (CMOS). Indeed, the CMOS permitted the shortening of titles longer than 4 words, but they must retain their most identifiable keywords so as to assist the readers for identification-cum-verification purposes. However, as shown in the example footnote in the book provided, at first glance, the footnote is, in point of fact, acceptable within the standard set, but it would have been much more proper and nicer to look at, if the authors or the editors of the book would add the next word of the title of the book being referred to, to the shortened footnote, “*A Survey of Japanese Trade and [Investments]*”. They could have also gone the other way, wherein they erased the conjunction “and” and still the keywords representing the book title remain intact. It is an eyesore for the readers to see the shortened footnote of a lengthy book title would end at a conjunction.

IV. CONCLUSION

Overall, these aforementioned criticisms do not detract from the book's innate strengths which made it an important work. Its historiographic contribution is not only limited to widening the field of discussion that highlights the experience and roles played by Japanese settlers who came to neighboring regions and areas, such as the Philippines, even before the outbreak of the Second World War, so as not to set boundaries in accord with the prevailing counterproductive mindset of scholars, which imprisons the minds of both readers and fellow scholars alike to the stereotypical labels and connotations associated with the theme at hand. Henceforth, a new middle ground is indeed what we need, but we cannot specify its contours without a deeper sense of appreciation for the work has to offer.

Despite barely scratching the surface of the facts and recount of the experiences of the community as presented in the book, Bersales and Okada underscore the importance of having a microscopic, panoptic, and, at the same time, unprejudiced view of the Japanese community, who had settled in a region before the outbreak of the Second World War. It is, therefore, a courageous attempt to provide a clear example of why we can and must confront and more importantly, learn not just from the darkest and most uncomfortable chapters in history but also swallow the bitter truth and reality implicit within their work of the sacrosanct duty in viewing a highly polemicized or prejudiced figure or occurrence impartially. Hence, as this book planted the seeds for future relevant research, it is, therefore, high time for interested scholars to give voice and proper platforms for the often-overlooked sectors of the community a fitting chance to be heard in both public and academic circles.

V. REFERENCES:

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