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doi:10.1017/S1479591423000281

The Filipino migration experience: global agents of change

By Mina Roces. Cornell University Press, 2021. 264 pages. Hardback, \$49.95, ISBN: 9781501760402. Ebook, \$32.99, ISBN: 9781501760419.

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(Received 11 January 2023; accepted 11 January 2023)

Overseas migration by Filipinos in contemporary times is widely studied in social sciences owing to the phenomenon’s magnitude and impact on multiple aspects of Philippine society. In this context, historian Mina Roces brings our attention to how the public image of Filipino migrants has remained unchanged from that of suffering martyrs and marginal workers in a foreign land for their families, despite the half-century-long history of state-sponsored labor migration. She thus addresses the need to update the image by focusing on migrants’ personal stories. This book is an outcome of her endeavor to investigate the phenomenon by placing migrants at the center of the analysis and redefining who Filipino migrants are and what they experience, with a special emphasis on migrant agencies.

What distinguishes this book from other studies that focus on migrant agencies is its “very big picture approach,” which means it includes all types of Filipino migrants regardless of legal status (i.e., temporary migrants, permanent residents abroad, and undocumented migrants), geographical location, profession, and gender (p. 8). This stance became possible partly because of the wide range of materials utilized. Roces’ argument is based on her curation of “migrant archives” – materials that migrants collected, published, and disseminated, such as migrant newspapers, NGO journals, self-published books containing voices of migrants’ children, cultural performances of second- and third-generation migrants in colleges abroad, various objects collected and displayed in museums founded by Filipino migrants, and so forth (p. 8). These materials have been largely overlooked in the existing literature, yet they reveal “how migrants have enacted change in both the host countries and the homeland in making a plea for a reconsideration of migrants as revolutionary actors outside the sphere of labor” (p. 9).

Furthermore, Roces’ data included her own participant observations while attending migration-related seminars and events, and interviews in many major destination countries, such as the United States, Australia, Italy, Singapore, and Hong Kong. It must be noted that Roces is a 1.5 Filipino Australian and has been a “mobile person” herself, which made her empathize with “the way the migrant archives interpret the past” and “appreciate the difference between the migration experience of the diaspora and the viewpoint of the nation left behind” (pp. 13–14).

The book comprises three parts, each containing two or three chapters. Each chapter begins with a literature review and a brief summary of the main data sources, making it easier for readers to follow the subsequent argument. The first part underscores how Filipino migrants challenged the family, gender, and sexual norms of the homeland. In Chapter One, Roces critically re-examines the relationships between migrants and their families left behind in the Philippines. In conventional narratives, despite hardships and loneliness, it is assumed that migrants would migrate to preserve the sacred “family,” stipulated as “the foundation of the nation” by the Philippine Constitution (p. 24). While this is true in many cases, the collective autobiography of migrant domestic workers underlines that family can also be an exploitative institution, rendering its members to feel like “cash cows” or “ATMs” through a never-ending demand for more money (p. 34). This harsh reality has led some migrants to consider migrant NGOs as their “new imagined families” whose members they can count on emotional care and unconditional support (p. 25).

Chapter Two focuses on how some migrant domestic workers in Asia and the Middle East have broken taboos surrounding gender and sexuality. Infidelity by men is socially tolerated in the Philippines. Against such backdrop, this book argues that publicly confessing women’s extramarital affairs (albeit using pseudonyms) can be interpreted as their assertion of sexual agency. This phenomenon may have been engendered by their increased financial power, reduced peer pressure, and the demographic context of domestic workers’ life worlds.

The second part focuses on the dimension of migrants as consumers and investors and how they have altered class relations and the economic landscape of the Philippines. In Chapter Three, Roces argues that the role of migrants’ continuous remittances and large gift boxes from overseas are symbols of “love and affection” have altered social norms of reciprocal relations in the homeland (p. 60). Because migrants’ earnings are considered much higher when converted to local currency, those remaining in the Philippines no longer reciprocate what they receive. In addition, upon returning home, migrants tend to show off their new middle-class status by purchasing real estate and branded goods and becoming patrons in the home village. Failure to do so may result in social ostracism.

Chapter Four illustrates how migrants’ enormous power as consumers has influenced and transformed the country’s business scene. The major media enterprise ABS-CBN established a subsidiary company called “The Filipino Channel” to cater to various service needs of Filipino migrants in the main destination countries. Big real estate companies were quick to respond to migrants’ purchasing power and specific needs. They built condominiums and suburban estate houses rapidly, held financial seminars and advertised products with attractive phrases, such as “Filipino dreams”, to overseas Filipino workers. Additionally, they exported the “American dream to the Philippines” to *balikbayans* (Philippine citizens who return to the homeland on visits) (p. 84).

The third part of the book shifts the focus from transformations brought about by temporary workers of various classes to those driven by middle-class Filipino migrants with long-term residency rights or naturalized citizenship in Western immigrant countries. Chapter Five describes cases of “community historians” who devoted themselves to documenting and advocating the legacy of Filipino migrants’ paths in the social history of the United States. This chapter introduces detailed cases of the Filipino American National Historical Society archive, the Wing Luke Asian Museum, including its permanent exhibit of Filipinos who worked in Alaskan canneries in the 1920s and 1930s, and Filipino ethnotours in San Francisco. In these activities, community historians perform “social and cultural activism” (p. 93). Their “heroic narratives” that are presented in these exhibits express how Filipino migrants “had struggled and yet survived against the odds, but that their hard work has not been adequately acknowledged by the host society or the homeland” (p. 91).

The next two chapters address the aforementioned “heroic narratives”. They introduce cases of highly educated middle-class Filipinos or their descendants volunteering to help co-ethnics and others. Chapter Six takes up two cases: one group that provides educational support to newly arrived Filipino children who have difficulty adjusting to the American public school system and groups that aim to protect married Filipina migrants to Australia suffering from domestic violence. Unlike other studies that address migrants’ problems and highlight the inadequacies of the host government’s

policy, this chapter underscores the role of these Filipino volunteers. Middle-class Filipinos could easily comprehend the complexity of the problem faced by lower-class youth and women of Filipino ethnicities in need of assistance. Accordingly, this chapter emphasizes that they could transcend the class difference and work “*in partnership* with the governments of the host countries in the *joint* project of empowering the Filipino ethnic group” instead of confronting the government of the host country (p. 118, emphasis in original text).

Motives behind such heroic acts are elaborated in the final chapter, which discusses cases of “diasporic philanthropy” activities (one fund-raising and the other a medical mission) performed by Filipino migrants in transnational partnership with Philippine-based partners. It argues that the major driving force of such philanthropic activities is “the positive feelings migrants experience when they perform philanthropic work [which] is intimately connected with the celebratory ending of their heroic narrative of migration” (p. 171). These volunteers could feel that they had become “successful person[s] who could share [their] wealth with the less fortunate” (p. 172). Furthermore, they could be “alternative role models to the corrupt Philippine politicians who have neglected their duty of care toward the poor and disadvantaged groups” (p. 172). This perspective is reiterated in the conclusion, where Roces remarks that migration archives serve to present their own model of success as “heroes and heroines...who have been able to compete with the mainstream society and excel” (p. 179).

The book’s dedication to promote Filipino migrants’ image as agents of change, instead of the victims characterized by “*bagong bayani*” (new heroes) whose image is equated with the passion of Jesus Christ, makes it invaluable in the field of migration. The aim is eloquently stated in the introduction: “If there are any similarities to the passion of Christ, it departs from the popular discourses by ending with the resurrection rather than the crucifixion. These [migrants’ own] narratives also demand to be heard, entreating the readers to acknowledge and appreciate the hard work and contribution migrants make to the Philippine nation and to the host countries where they live and work” (p. 11). These migrants’ voices and their need to be heard are consistent themes throughout the volume. While numerous influential works on Filipino outmigration founded on migrants’ own narratives and everyday practices have existed since the early 1990s (e.g. Aguilar 1999; Constable 1997), this book stands out because it exposes aspects of Filipino outmigration, such as hidden sides of family relations and sexuality and migrants’ power as consumers, investors, community historians, benefactors, that have remained unwritten or been downplayed. This counterpoint to their long-held “martyr” image throws the reader off balance, which is necessary for the book to fulfill its objectives.

The book furthers scholarship on Filipino migration because it demonstrates the significance of migrant archives made by Filipino migrants. Because statistical data and direct interviews and questionnaire surveys with migrants are easier to access, most studies on Filipino migration (mostly in social sciences) have relied on such sources and methodologies. Against this backdrop, the book demonstrates the potential of materials that are written, compiled, performed, or displayed by migrants themselves to reveal their ambivalent, nuanced, equivocal, and uncertain experiences and sentiments. The results provide a depth which overshadows the simple frameworks too often found in dominant academic and popular discourse.

It is inevitable that any book which attempts to take a “very big picture approach” to a phenomenon involving a diverse range of people’s experiences and spanning half a century using migrant archives would generate questions of omission. To provide one such example, Chapter Four illuminates how the Philippines’ well-established media and real estate enterprises have expanded the scope of their business by offering new TV shows and building condominiums and houses, responding to the needs and dreams of Filipino migrant “investors.” It makes one wonder why the chapter did not mention cases of labor migrants who experienced ceaseless struggles, made achievements during their sojourn, and became self-made media tycoons or land developers upon returning to the Philippines. If there are no such examples, it may be interesting to investigate how migrants would account for their non-existence and the specific socio-political conditions which prevented them from becoming heroic role models in the field of business in their own country.

To conclude, this book marks the beginning of writing “a Filipino migrant 2.0” (p. 11). It offers a fresh outlook on Filipino migrants. Scholars, policy makers, and international and civic organizations concerning the Philippines and other migration streams should be encouraged to read the book because it promotes understanding of the multiple and profound effects migrants can introduce in both their destination and home countries.

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doi:10.1017/S1479591423000025

Indonesia at the Crossroads: Transformation and Challenges

Edited by Masaaki Okamoto and Jafar Suryomenggolo. Gadjah Mada University Press, Trans Pacific Press and Kyoto University Press, 2023, 420 pages. Paperback, \$49.95 USD, ISBN: 9781925608373

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(Received 31 May 2023; accepted 31 May 2023)

The volume *Indonesia at the Crossroads* is edited and written by Asian academics and practitioners based in Indonesia, Japan, and South Korea. The authors review Indonesian society, economy, governance, and security of the past 20 years since the 1998 democratization until 2019 just before the COVID-19 pandemic.

The volume is characterized by its attempt to de-westernize scholarly knowledge and perceptions of Indonesia. It examines contemporary Indonesia from Asian perspectives – more precisely Indonesian, Japanese, and Korean perspectives – derived from each country’s academic environment surrounding Indonesian studies. The academic environment in Asia is different from that of the West, which has faced “the crisis of Indonesian studies in universities” (p. 4). Western academia is, therefore, required to “show (and claim) their contributions to international audiences in order to maintain funding for Indonesian studies in their universities” (pp. 4–5). In contrast, Indonesia, Japan, and probably South Korea have domestic demand for knowledge of Indonesia and have a certain critical mass of academic and general readerships who have basic knowledge of the country. In Japan, for instance, Indonesia is one of the most important Southeast Asian countries in terms of economics and international relations (p. 5). Asian scholars are thus relatively free to publish books and articles on a variety of topics about Indonesia in their own national language for their domestic readers, and discuss topics in-depth, empirically, practically, and theoretically.

In this Asian context, the volume highlights “the need to advance discussions and various forms of collaboration among researchers of Indonesia” in Asia (p. 6) and seeks to contribute to the development of the study of Indonesia as multi-disciplinary, “not limited to theoretical discussions, and inclusive of practical and mundane issues” (p. 7). It is not an exaggeration to say that the authors’ standpoint in this volume is closer to people’s everyday lives in Indonesia rather than theory-oriented mainstream academia.