

Teaching Asian History in Two Countries: The United States and the Philippines

By Joselito Fornier

After spending nine years in the United States studying for the M.A. (University of Hawaii) and Ph.D. (Northern Illinois University in DeKalb) in History, I returned to the Philippines in September of 1995. In November of that year, I joined the History Department of the Jesuit-run Ateneo de Manila University (Loyola Heights, Quezon City).

I taught Asian history in the United States and the Philippines. Interestingly enough, despite the fact that English is also the medium of instruction in the Philippines (a situation brought about by American colonial rule), I still had to make some adjustments in pedagogical techniques. This article shows differences in the educational and cultural systems of both countries, as well as the teaching strategies that I found useful for my students of Asian history.

I handled History 141 (Asia Since 1500) for one regular semester (Fall 1992) and three summer sessions (1993, 1994 and 1995) at Northern Illinois University. I have been teaching History 10 (Asian Civilization) at Ateneo de Manila University since the second semester of the 1995–96 academic year. (For most schools in the Philippines, the first semester of an academic year begins in June and ends in October. The second semester opens in November and closes around the third week of March.)

Before I proceed further, let me clarify a few things about the educational system in both countries. In the United States, students get twelve years of a combined grade school and high school education, while their counterparts in the Philippines usually have ten (six years of grade school and four years of high school. A few Philippine schools, however, add an extra year to grade school.) As

a consequence, Filipinos typically enter college at the age of sixteen—two years ahead of Americans, who finish high school when they are eighteen years old. This system reflects economic realities in a third world country. Because of tradition and the limited resources allocated to educational loans and scholarships, most Filipino parents shoulder the costs of their children's schooling through college. Thus, an extra two years would make education in the Philippines more expensive (something that the average Filipino family can ill afford). In terms of practicality, it is important to get Filipino students finished with their college degrees as soon as possible so they can get jobs, help the family, and become more independent. Lastly, a college degree is a mark of status, and even the poorest homes will have a diploma proudly displayed on the wall.

In order to make up for the missing two years of basic educational skills from high school, a college curriculum in the Philippines is loaded with extra credit hours. A Filipino college student takes an average of eighteen to twenty-one credits per semester, in contrast to the American student, who only carries twelve to eighteen. The student's program consists of a set of general education or "core" classes (e.g., philosophy, theology, mathematics, natural science) aside from the major subjects. The classes have been determined beforehand, and the student cannot deviate from them. While some extra credits beyond the core and major are allowed, these cannot replace the required subjects. In American colleges and universities, the general education curriculum prescribes a set number of credits for each area or discipline (e.g., humanities, foreign languages) which in turn provides a choice of courses for the students.

My students at Northern Illinois University took Asia Since 1500 as a humanities option or to fulfill a State of Illinois requirement for teacher certification, i.e., any three credit class on the third world. A few registered for the class because they were interested in the history of Asia.

The general education curriculum of Ateneo de Manila University requires undergraduate students to take twelve credits of history, namely: Asian Civilization or European Medieval Civilization

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The Filipino students—influenced by a built-in cultural concept about the elasticity of time and the “*bahala na*” (roughly equivalent to the Spanish “*qué será será*” or “what happens, happens”) attitude—would mostly wait until the very last minute (even up to two weeks before the end of class) to ask for extra credit work (I really had to be firm).

(first year), The Modern World (second year), Rizal and the Emergence of the Philippine Nation (third year), and Recent Philippine History (fourth year). Asian Civilization is also one of the courses for the minor in Chinese or Japanese Studies. Despite the Medieval Civilization alternative, the presence of Asian history in the general education curriculum is a recognition of: (1) the Asian heritage of the Philippines; (2) the need to know more about a region that is rapidly developing; and (3) the growing importance of Asia in international affairs.

I had to take a lot of things into consideration in the development of my teaching methods and class syllabus. First, I looked at what was possible to do in a regular semester of about sixteen weeks (or eight weeks in the summer session). I initially used as the main text *The World of Asia*, which covers China, Japan, India, Southeast Asia and Korea. However, since the book was never updated after its publication in 1979, I eventually switched to Rhoads Murphey's *A History of Asia* (published in 1991 with a second edition in 1996). The Murphey textbook helped me to narrow the geographical focus of my courses to Monsoon Asia (concentrating on East Asia, South Asia, and Southeast Asia). *A History of Asia* arranges materials on a topical and comparative basis; is well-organized, full of information, and easily understood by my students. A recommended supplement to *A History of Asia* is the recently published *Instructor's Manual to Accompany A History of Asia Second Edition* by Michael J. Harvey and Michael G. Murdock. This teaching aid provides the Asian history instructor with summary outlines, as well as discussion, essay, and multiple choice questions.

It is important—as part of the learning process—to give students a “feel” for the time periods that are being discussed in class. Thus, I had required my Ameri-

can students to read with the main textbook supplementary materials like John Hersey's *Hiroshima*, Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan*, Prakash Tandon's *Punjabi Century*, Philip Caputo's *A Rumor of War*, or Lao She's *Rickshaw*. Unfortunately, the time constraint was always a problem for my Filipino students because of their extra credit hours, so I considered shorter readings such as Mao Zedong's “Report on an Investigation of the Hunan Peasant Movement,” Mahatma Gandhi's “Hind Swaraj” (“Indian Home Rule”) Tokugawa Ieyasu's “Laws Governing the Military Household,” and excerpts from the *Analects* of Confucius. In this case, the documents in *Sources of Chinese Tradition*, *Sources of Japanese Tradition* and *Sources of Indian Tradition* proved to be invaluable. Unfortunately, I did not come across a similar collection for Southeast Asian history.

Second, regardless of the country or course title (Asia Since 1500 or Asian Civilization) I had to proceed from the assumption that my students knew little or nothing about Asia. In the United States, the educational system and media do not give much attention to Asia. On the other hand, Philippine high schools are required to have a one-year Asian Civilization class in the curriculum, and the country's media is more focused on Asian affairs. Nevertheless, the information coming from Philippine high schools is basic and easily forgotten, while Asian news items are limited to current events. It became necessary to introduce (or reintroduce) foundation topics like China's Hundred Schools of Thought, Japan's Shintō religion, or the caste system of India in order to link up the past with the present and show how history can develop along certain cultural or belief systems.

Third, I experimented with the topical approach and the country-by-country approach. In the topical approach, I would do overviews within East Asia, South Asia, and Southeast Asia of traditional

topics, such as: Ancient Civilizations, Religion, Philosophy, Political Developments and the Rise of Empires, the Western Expansion into Asia, Imperialism and the Asian Response, Colonialism, Society and Economy, World Wars I and II, Independence from Colonial Rule, and Contemporary History. Conversely, the country-by-country approach (usually China, Japan, India, and one or two countries in Southeast Asia) subsumed these categories within political boundaries. In both the United States and the Philippines, my students expressed preference for the country-by-country approach. The topical approach confused the students, since I tended to “bounce” around Asia too much, while the country-by-country method allowed the students to focus on one area at a time. Nevertheless, I believe the topical approach is much better since it allows for cross-cultural comparisons and brings in other relevant topics like the Korean War. I will just have to develop better teaching techniques for this system. However, when I utilized the country-by-country approach in the United States, I decided—after one semester—to leave out most of Southeast Asia in order to focus one segment of the course on the Philippines. The United States has a large Filipino community and was a major player in the history of the Philippines. As such, it was important to provide my American students with an awareness of the relationship between the two countries.

Fourth, I used slides, films, and videos to help students connect images and sounds with text. In the United States, films on Asia were readily available from the library of Northern Illinois University, and along with programs from outfits like Discovery Channel and *Nova*. Sadly, this is not always the case in the Philippines, and it can be difficult at times to acquire the necessary audio-visual aids for class. Fortunately, I was able to borrow some slides and films

from the Chinese and Japanese Studies Programs and the various embassies in Metro Manila. In addition, most Philippine classrooms (unlike their counterparts in the United States) are not designed for audio-visual teaching (e.g., no white screen that can be pulled down from the ceiling). Slide and film projectors, television sets, and videocassette recorders can only be used in audio-visual rooms which must be reserved ahead of time. I compensated for the limitation by bringing more pictures and illustrations to class. At one point, I even hooked up my computer to the viewing screen of the audio-visual room for a lengthy multimedia presentation using the *Encarta* and *Grolier* CD-ROM encyclopedias.

The teacher is still the main person in the classroom even if the students are required to be more interactive. It is the teacher who can make the history class come alive and give meaning to an endless array of facts. Thus, it is possible—through a well-projected and expressive voice—to hold the attention of students with vivid descriptions of China’s very difficult civil service exam or the intricate layouts of Angkor’s temple system. Furthermore, I am never afraid to let my hair down to get a point across. I have done things like swinging a wooden sword in class (I practice Aikido) in imitation of the samurais in ancient Japan. Every semester, I tell myself that I have to try something new, and this includes acting out the part of some historical figure.

A teacher should let the students’ talents come out in different ways, e.g., extra credit work (done individually or in groups). Significantly, my American students chose to do individual work, while most of my Filipino students opted for group projects. Despite the fact that individualism is becoming a part of Philippine society, the Asian concept of working together in groups still prevails in the country.

The Americans respected my deadlines and gave me plenty of time to assess the quality of their work. One student produced a paper on Asian linguistics, while another student wrote on his great-uncle who had served in the Philippines during the Philippine Insurrection

(1899–1901). The Filipino students— influenced by a built-in cultural concept about the elasticity of time and the “*bahala na*” (roughly equivalent to the Spanish “*qué será será*” or “what happens, happens”) attitude—would mostly wait until the very last minute (even up to two weeks before the end of class) to ask for extra credit work (I really had to be firm). Nevertheless, they really excelled in group work. While students turned out interesting projects like a mock Japanese tea ceremony, a report comparing Corazon Aquino and Indira Gandhi, or an eye-opening exposé of the drug trade in Southeast Asia, the best work came from the groups. These included: (1) a video production about India; (2) a CD-ROM (with sounds, texts, and pictures) on the history of Japan and India; and (3) a report on the Killing Fields of Cambodia, with students projecting vivid pictures on transparencies while narrating stories of people who survived the conflict. Recently, I required group reports as part of the course grade, and the students came up with more elaborate PowerPoint and multimedia presentations, slide shows, and drama productions on some aspect of Asian history or culture. They even went so far as to actually model costumes or cook food from a particular Asian country.

Discussion sessions in both countries also allowed students to be more expressive. However, I had to ask thought-provoking questions and, if possible, relate them to situations that the students understood. In many instances, they resulted in lively exchanges.

For instance, I would ask questions like: (1) On China’s Civil Service Examination: How can an examiner avoid bias, especially when he comes across a favorite student’s paper? Why is it necessary to have morals as the foundation of the Chinese civil service examination? What can you say about government officials today? (2) India’s Caste System: Was the caste system necessary in India’s historical development? Is it necessary now? What do you think about India’s affirmative action program? (3) Southeast Asia’s Immigrant Community: What role did immigrant labor play in the economic transformation of Southeast Asia? Why was the assimilation of the immigrant Chinese more successful in Thailand and

the Philippines than in Malaysia and Indonesia? Why did the indigenous Southeast Asians resent the immigrants (Chinese and Indians) who helped in the development of the region? Still, I had to be sensitive to the feelings of my students.

Issues can cross over from one country to another, and I had to make sure I created a positive instead of a negative atmosphere for discussion. For example, affirmative action in India is a topic that can easily provoke heated debate in an American classroom. In the Philippines, some Chinese Filipinos—because of past discrimination and the need to preserve cultural traditions—still resist intermarriage outside their community. Assimilation notwithstanding, the seeming exclusivity and economic success of this group have been resented by the non-Chinese Filipinos. Thus, I had to be careful when discussing the coming of immigrants to Southeast Asia.

Freedom of expression is something that American society is used to, and this was reflected in the classroom. As a result, the students at Northern were more inclined to ask questions, give comments, and disagree with me on certain issues. Some of them also had a deep level of inquisitiveness that provided me with more energy for teaching. By comparison, I discovered that most Filipino students are still overly respectful of hierarchy and will accept everything given by an authority figure. Moreover, the cultural trait known as *hiya* (shame) discourages some students from being too inquisitive. While *hiya* prevents a person from doing acts that are socially unacceptable, it also makes a student who is fearful of saying the wrong things in class tight-lipped. I got over some of the difficulty by encouraging people to speak up and linking class participation with the course grade. With time and patience, some of these students became just as inquisitive as their American counterparts.

In general, the older American students possessed a much longer attention span and were not easily distracted. My younger and just-out-of-high-school students at the Ateneo tended to have wandering minds and were a bit more restless, especially in the sessions that lasted for one hour and a half.

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The Filipino students had an easier time learning Asian names. First, the Philippine media gives more coverage to Asian affairs because the country is in Asia. Second, the numerous Filipinos working in Japan, Taiwan, Hong Kong, South Korea, Southeast Asia, and the Middle East make the country generally aware of Asia. Third, the existence of structures for integration, coupled with the country's centuries-long experience of immigrants, allows for the easy assimilation of Chinese and Indians into Philippine society. Chinese names are especially prominent in the country and Tan, Uy, Sy, or Ang are as common as Ramos, Santos, Cruz, or Reyes. But unlike the United States, the Chinese and their descendants in the Philippines—despite assimilation—have managed to maintain a very distinct identity through strong family traditions and the presence of schools (e.g., St. Jude or Xavier School) that teach Chinese language and culture. Nevertheless, this distinctiveness can be a good multicultural experience, and I always ask my Chinese-speaking students to demonstrate how the language works. Fourth, despite the fact that English is the medium of instruction for most Philippine schools (with fluency varying from place to place), Filipinos know at least one Philippine language. Thus, Filipinos find that many Asian words approximate more closely the phonetic sounds of Philippine languages.

On the other hand, most of my students at Northern Illinois University were from the midwest and did not come from a background that required exposure to Asia. Moreover, English is pronounced differently from Asian languages. Thus, it was difficult for my American students to remember Asian names. How did I get over the difficulty? First, I encouraged the midwestern students to use their memory. Second, I tried to use association by linking the spelling of names to phonetic sounds and—whenever possible—images. An enthusiastic teacher can make all the difference.

In the end, students are the same regardless of country. My students in the United States and the Philippines have complained about my “excessive” readings and difficult exams (especially the modified True or False items), asked

exasperating questions (“is this going to be on the test?”), and sometimes talked too much in class. I also had to give pointers on the rules of essay writing. Nevertheless, I was able to encounter a number of students who wrote well on the exams, participated regularly in class discussions, and even read materials that were not included in the class syllabus. After each semester, some of them would express gratitude for learning more about another world, another time, and another place. They make teaching the subject worthwhile. ■

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