

Manila: Heritage, Memory, Nationhood

Ian Morley

The Philippines has a distinctive historical status in that the character of local society before 1946 – when national independence was granted – was influenced by Western imperialism (i.e., Spain and the United States) and also by Asian imperialism (i.e., Japan). In helping to (re)shape the urban environments in which Filipinos lived, and the culture by which the native population undertook daily activities, colonisation by foreign powers led to the establishment of public spaces and the construction of monuments which are still, significantly, critical to the present-day grasp of what it means to be Filipino. Colonial era public spaces and monuments thus still inform, in the postcolonial setting, Filipinos' understanding of collective memory.

In recent decades, the issue of memory has become a preoccupation of historical scholarship. Within, for instance, the evolving frames of social history and oral history, new methodologies have been established so as to explore/explain representations of the past. The move by historians to better grasp what memory is has, in consequence, led to new knowledge of memory's association with how we think about, and approach, the past (as members of society and as scholars). In consequence, a new historiography has broken down different kinds, and complexities, of history-memory relationships.

Given the history of the Philippines, and its colonisation by different countries from 1565 to 1946, historians – alongside anthropologists, sociologists, archaeologists, architects, etc. – have done much in recent times to show how

Filipinos' comprehend their country's past, and how this comprehension is utilised to inform collective memory and the sense of belonging to 'an imagined community,' to paraphrase Benedict Anderson.

Whilst, evidently, the notion of memory entails something personal and individual, it is also, in the view of many intellectuals, connected to cultural forms. As such, it is argued that memory is a survival of past

experiences and it is a reconstruction of those experiences from a present-day standpoint. If this is true, then, with regard to monuments, how do they today notify as to who persons such as Filipinos *really are*? Moreover, how do postcolonial ideologies and politics affect the process as to how persons know the past? Are, as the Stanford University historian Sam Wineburg contests, memory and history colliding worlds? How, in short, do they connect and overlap with each other in an Asian society with a history such as that in the Philippines? More specifically, why in the Philippines are colonial-era monuments uncontested elements within built fabrics, yet ones built after national independence are often contentious? In superficial terms, this is the impression given of countless monuments in Manila; ones dedicated to colonial era persons – native and foreign – stand respected, yet ones dedicated to postcolonial figures can be poorly maintained and/or damaged. As Figure 1 shows, along Roxas Boulevard – the principal roadway into the centre of Manila from the southern districts and the outlying port town of Cavite – numerous poorly maintained postcolonial monuments are visible. In contrast, in proximity to and inside the Spanish walled city known as Intramuros, monuments stand proud. Why so?

In this Focus section, we provide an overview of colonial-era spaces and monuments. Case studies are given to expose how they helped shape past identity and, indeed, how they have been used to further reinforce what it is to be 'Filipino' in the postcolonial setting. But there is still much to learn, and against this backdrop urban historical studies have been undertaken at the Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK). Within CUHK's Department of History, in

The Politics of Remembrance

The Case of the Filipina Comfort Women Statue and the Kamikaze Pilot Memorial

Mar Lorence G. Ticao

Monuments serve as tangible representation of collective memory, commemorating events, people, or groups through physical structures. Commemoration involves "calling to remembrance" through ceremonies or markers, which significantly influence memory.¹ French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs introduced the modern study of collective memory, emphasizing that all memory, even personal, is socially constructed by the groups to which individuals belong. He distinguished between history, seeking objective truth, and collective memory, rooted in social groups and their contexts.²

The notion that collective memory is "constructed" aligns with American historian Michael Kammen's assertion that societies reconstruct their pasts to serve contemporary needs.³ The French scholar Pierre Nora observed that in the past, societies had a unified, continuous way of remembering history. This kind of memory was integrated into their daily lives and traditions. However, in a contemporary society, due to rapid changes and a belief in progress, our memory has become fragmented. We no longer have this natural, continuous memory, so we create *lieux de mémoire*, like monuments and museums, to hold onto our history.⁴

Monuments dedicated to comfort women aim to place their suffering and resilience within public consciousness, evoking a profound sense of loss and victimhood. More than 50 memorials worldwide honor their memory, highlighting the trauma they endured and their agency in overcoming it. These monuments are essential in maintaining awareness of historical injustices and preventing the erasure of these painful memories.⁵

Similarly, Japanese kamikaze pilots are often memorialized as symbols of

Monuments and shrines are powerful representations of historical memory, capturing collective experiences and shaping national narratives. In the Philippines, the contrasting treatment of comfort women memorials and Japanese kamikaze shrines reveals the complex interplay between political alliances and historical memory. The removal of the comfort woman statue in 2018 amidst strengthening ties between Philippine-Japanese relations highlights the influence of political agendas upon collective memory. This selective memorialization, where diplomatic and economic interests overshadow calls for justice for affected groups, challenges us to rethink the role of monuments in the Philippines in fostering an inclusive and truthful understanding of history.



Fig. 1 (left): Filipina Comfort Women statue (since removed) in 2017 along Roxas Boulevard in Manila, Philippines. (Photo courtesy of Wikicommons user Ryomaandres and reprinted under Creative Commons license, 2021)

Fig. 2 (right): In 2004, a life-sized kamikaze pilot statue was erected in the town of Mabalacat in Pampanga. (Photo by the author, July 2023)

sacrifice. They can also be seen as victims of war, driven by military coercion.⁶ In the Philippines, the proliferation of Japanese shrines reflects a complex historical narrative where these soldiers are remembered both as heroes and as tragic figures.

The presence of both comfort women and kamikaze memorials in the Philippines adds layers of complexity to the nation's memory and identity. This dual commemoration of wartime abuse and exploitation, alongside sacrifice and tragedy, underscores the constructed nature of collective memory,

influenced by political, social, and historical contexts. Furthermore, the contrasting treatment of these memorials reveals the selective nature of public memory, shaped by contemporary political alliances and national narratives.

Filipina Comfort Women statue: Erasure of painful memories

The history of comfort women is a dark chapter that many Asian nations, including the Philippines, grapple with. During World War II, the Japanese Imperial Army coerced

addition to my own work, students of the MPhil and PhD programs have been exploring facets of the Philippines' urban and cultural past; critical to our collective endeavours have been inquiries to fathom the form and meaning of the colonial built environment.

Broadly speaking, with particular reference to the capital city of Manila, monuments and public spaces of both national and local significance are discussed. With regard to the provincial context, an overview of American colonial-era monuments is also supplied: monuments were a tool among many employed by the Americans from 1898-1946 to help promote national unity, national resistance, and the heralding of the modern age. Claudia Montero's paper looks at the American colonial monument to the national hero Jose Rizal in Manila, whilst Mar Ticao's paper opens up an intellectual avenue to rethink the politics of remembrance regarding monuments in the Philippines associated with World War II and Japan's occupation of the country.

Whilst in many Western nations, monuments allied to the theme of imperialism have been pulled down, vandalised, or intensely debated, in the Philippines no such discourse or civil unrest exists. Why? The series of case studies that follows, funded with RGC (Hong Kong) grant support, helps explain this situation and, in addition, why colonial historical monuments still matter today in the Philippines. As my own papers explain, much of the American colonial built environment was actually designed by Filipinos employed by the colonial government pre-1946, and the legacies of their work still remain. One Filipino architect, Antonio Toledo, in particular, has been much overlooked in written history, yet it was he who during the Commonwealth

Era – i.e., the final phase of American colonial rule (1935-41, 1945-6) – did much to forge the appearance and layout of the Philippines' largest city, Manila. It was he and his cohorts who introduced a proto-modern form of design which still imprints upon the city's urban environment today.

All in all, albeit with reference to Philippine history, there is still much to learn of the colonial past, its influence still upon the development of the built environment, and its legacies as to how people understand themselves today as members of a nation. The role monuments and the built environment have played in enlightening Filipinos as to who they are remains unclear. The four papers in this Focus section grant a window to re-evaluate what the Philippine urban past has been, and how it informs the present. Of course, the present has not been exclusively shaped by the past; but, the past Filipinos have a sense of has been affected by a complex mixture of recollection, reflection, culture, and politics. Much of that knowledge has been selected/given particular meaning. Therefore, are monuments, ultimately, to be regarded not just as a continuation of the Philippine past that has been, but a past that makes sense for the present?

Ian Morley is Vice Chair (External) of the Department of History at the Chinese University of Hong Kong. He is also Vice President of the International Planning History Society. His publications include the monographs *Cities and Nationhood: American Imperialism and Urban Design in the Philippines, 1898-1916*, *American Colonisation and the City Beautiful: Filipinos and Planning in the Philippines, 1916-35*, and *Remodelling to Prepare for Independence: The Philippine Commonwealth, Decolonisation, Cities and Public Works, c. 1935-36*.



Fig. 1 (left): The plinth of a monument, now removed, sited at Roxas Boulevard, Manila. The plaza surrounding the architectural feature has become a parking space for motorcycles. (Photo by the author, 2023).

approximately 200,000 women from various occupied territories, including around 1000 Filipino women, into sexual slavery, euphemistically referred to as 'comfort women.'⁷ These women endured severe physical and emotional trauma. However, efforts to memorialize their suffering often encounter significant political resistance.

In December 2017, the Filipina Comfort Women statue was installed on Roxas Boulevard in Manila to honor the victims [Fig. 1]. The bronze figure of a blindfolded woman in traditional Filipina attire symbolized the comfort woman's strength and dignity. However, just four months later, the Department of Public Works and Highways removed it, citing a 'flood control project.'⁸ This removal triggered outrage among activists and survivors, who viewed it as an attempt to erase painful wartime memories.

The removal of the comfort woman statue in Manila reflects clear political motivations, primarily driven by the government's desire to strengthen ties with Japan, a significant economic and political ally.⁹ While President Duterte initially defended historical justice as a constitutional right, subsequent actions by his administration suggested a prioritization of diplomatic relations, widely perceived as a gesture to appease the Japanese government and suppress inconvenient historical truths.

Lila Shahani discusses the implications of removing comfort women monuments in the Philippines. She argues that erasing these monuments undermines collective memory, silencing the victims' voices and their struggle for justice. Monuments like the comfort woman statue in Manila are vital reminders of historical injustices, ensuring the remembrance of victims' suffering. Thus, removing them risks erasing painful memories from public consciousness, thereby undermining the comfort women's fight for recognition and justice.¹⁰

Kamikaze Pilot statue: Selective memory and reconciliation

The Philippines hosts several Japanese shrines and monuments, found in areas like Laguna and Pampanga, including the

Kamikaze Pilot statue in Mabalacat [Fig. 2].¹¹ These sites commemorate Japanese soldiers who sacrificed their lives during World War II. These shrines serve to honor the valor and dedication of these soldiers and have become symbols of Philippine-Japanese reconciliation and friendship.

The establishment of these monuments coincides with strong diplomatic and economic relations, with Japan providing significant Official Development Assistance (ODA) to the Philippines. This support, funding major projects like Duterte's "Build, Build, Build" program, highlights Japan's strategic interest in fostering bilateral ties, often at the expense of addressing Filipinos' historical grievances.¹²

Yet, by honoring Japanese soldiers, these monuments create a narrative of mutual respect and economic partnership while downplaying the suffering of Filipinos during the occupation. This portrayal of Japanese valor facilitates diplomatic and economic cooperation but risks erasing the historical grievances that many Filipinos still feel. Thus, while these monuments promote reconciliation, they also raise questions about whose histories are honored and whose sufferings are obscured.

The politics of memory: Balancing diplomatic relations and historical truth

The actions of the Philippine government regarding these monuments reflect broader diplomatic and economic strategies aimed at strengthening ties with Japan. The removal of the Filipina Comfort Women statue along Roxas Boulevard in Manila, and the proliferation of Japanese memorials in Luzon, can be seen as part of the calculated approach to maintain and enhance bilateral relations, which are economically beneficial.¹³ Japan's significant contribution to the Philippine economy through ODA and investments plays a crucial role in shaping the country's infrastructure and economic landscape.

However, this approach creates a tension between maintaining friendly relations with Japan and addressing the historical injustices suffered by Filipinos during the Japanese occupation (1942-1945). The

government's prioritization of diplomatic and economic interests often comes at the expense of historical truth and justice for marginalized groups. The removal of the 'comfort woman' statue, for instance, not only erased the physical reminder of wartime atrocities but also the voices of survivors who continue to seek recognition and justice.

Conclusion

Monuments play a crucial role in educating the public about history, offering tangible reminders of past events as well as providing sites for historical reflection. For instance, the Filipina Comfort Women statue in Manila, although short-lived, symbolized the resilience of Filipino women during the Japanese occupation. However, its removal represents a lost opportunity to remind the public of this painful chapter in Philippine history. Furthermore, monuments can serve as sites of dialogue and reconciliation, balancing the need to honor all aspects of history. While the Kamikaze Pilot memorial recognizes the valor of Japanese soldiers, true reconciliation requires recognizing and memorializing all victims of wartime atrocities.

The selective memorialization observed in the Philippines highlights the challenges of balancing historical truth with diplomatic and economic interests. It risks creating an imbalanced narrative that prioritizes diplomatic relations over justice for all affected groups.

In considering the role of monuments in shaping public memory and national identity, it is essential to ask: How can we ensure that monuments serve as inclusive and truthful representation of history? This question challenges us to reflect on the purpose of monuments and the importance of a balanced historical narrative. It invites us to explore avenues for establishing environments that acknowledge every dimension of history, while fostering learning, dialogue, and ultimately, reconciliation.

Mar Lorence G. Ticao is a research student in the Department of History at the Chinese University of Hong Kong. Email: mar.ticao@link.cuhk.edu.hk.

Notes

- 1 Kirk Savage, *History, Memory, and Monuments: An Overview of the Scholarly Literature on Commemoration*. University of Pittsburgh (2007), p. 1.
- 2 Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*. University of Chicago press (1992), p. 22.
- 3 Michael G. Kammen, *Mystic Chords of Memory: The Transformation of Tradition in American Culture*. New York: Knopf, (1991), p. 3.
- 4 Pierre Nora, 'Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire,' *Representations*, No. 26 (Spring 1989), pp. 7-24.
- 5 Orhon Myadar & R. A. Davidson, 'Remembering the 'Comfort Women': Geographies of Displacement, Violence and Memory in the Asia-Pacific and Beyond,' *Gender, Place & Culture*, 28:3, 347-369 (2021).
- 6 Yukie O, *Cultural Origins of the Kamikaze Special Attack Corps and the 442nd Regimental Combat Team During World War II: A Comparison Between the Japanese Soldiers Raised in Japan and the Nisei Soldiers Raised in America*. Oklahoma University, (2011).
- 7 Nicola Henry, 'Memory of an Injustice: The 'Comfort Women' and the Legacy of the Tokyo Trial,' *Asian Studies Review*, 37:3, 362-380 (2013).
- 8 Hideki Yoshimura and Sankei Shimibun, 'Place It 'Somewhere Else,' Duterte Says of Uprooted 'Comfort Woman' Statue in Manila.' *Japan Forward* (May 2 2018). <https://japan-forward.com/place-it-somewhere-else-duterte-says-of-uprooted-comfort-woman-stature-in-manila/>
- 9 Lila Ramos Shahani, 'The Politics of Erasure: De-Commemorating 'Comfort Women' in the Philippines.' In *Fallen Monuments and Contested Memorials*, edited by Juilee Decker. United Kingdom: Taylor & Francis Group, (2023).
- 10 Lila Ramos Shahani, *ibid.*, p. 82.
- 11 The Kamikaze Peace Memorial Shrine in Mabalacat, Pampanga, Philippines houses a monument with the Japanese and Philippine flags engraved on a wall (constructed in 2000), and a kamikaze pilot statue (erected in 2004). There used to be a marker describing the Kamikaze Corps, but it is no longer found on the site today. 'Kamikaze Pilot Statute (Mabalacat),' Kamikaze Images. <https://www.kamikazeimages.net/monuments/mabalacat-stature/index.htm>
- 12 Lila Ramos Shahani, *op. cit.* p. 86.
- 13 Lila Ramos Shahani, *op. cit.* p. 86.