

***Post-Colonial Statecraft in South East Asia: Sovereignty, State Building and the Chinese in the Philippines.* By Pak Nung Wong. London & New York: I.B. Taurus, 2013. Hardcover: 326pp.**

According to the author, Pak Nung Wong, this book is a historical ethnography, one that looks mainly at frontier “governmentality” (using a Foucauldian concept) as applied to the Philippines. He argues that “the gist of the Philippine post-colonial statecraft” hinges on how “frontier strongmen” are coopted into becoming the state’s ruling instruments, particularly in serving or subverting the centralizing state in “hegemonic processes of monopolizing physical force and symbolic violence” (p. 25). Looking at the cases of three strongmen in the Cagayan Valley in the northern Philippines, he concludes that — perhaps contrary to expectations — strongmen are not necessarily a threat to state rule, but may be “successfully contained” as well as “caught in the centralizing state’s governmental technologies and the ruled majority’s countergovernmental technologies” (p. xxvi).

Frontier governmentality, Wong argues, involves diverse tug-of-war processes and multiple areas of contestation where, across the Philippine archipelago, the sovereign state has decentralized to strongmen the authority to generate internal revenue, pacify unrest, and resolve disputes and conflicts. They do so — oftentimes successfully and to the benefit of the central government — through implementing state laws such as in counter-insurgency, land reform, elections, and education (p. 26). The process entails techniques described by Wong through his case studies as networking, identity-switching and brokering, among others (94).

In the case of the former military counterinsurgency expert-turned-governor-turned mutineer Rodolfo Aguinaldo, the strongman is co-opted and initially serves the objectives of the centralizing state, but he eventually does present a challenge to state-building when he declares secession of his province from the Republic. Revered as a legendary Robin Hood-like figure by the Cagayan populace when he served as governor from 1988–98, but loathed by others for his abuse of military power and then civilian authority, Aguinaldo exemplified both the local strongman’s critical role in capacitating the state to conduct discipline and surveillance, but also its need to maintain a careful balance between central and local power. Wong further explores the theme of discipline and surveillance

in his discussion of the Mamba clan in the border town of Tuau, who belonged to the ethnic group Itawes. Fighting a communist insurgency, Cordilleran self-determination movement and vigilantes, the Mambas (with three generations involved in politics) employed governance techniques that further illustrate how frontier governmentality works.

A second theme of the book is the important role of ethnic Chinese individuals and clans in the local economy and politics in some parts of the Philippines. As in much of Southeast Asia, capital-rich ethnic Chinese are, to the author, “most wanted frontiers” of the state, who, as transnational actors, are also expected to present a potential challenge to state sovereignty. In the Philippines, the launching of a land reform programme in the 1950s broke landlord dominance over the peasantry and gave way to new patron-client ties between tenants and Chinese capitalists (p. 35). Many of these Chinese had, however, intermarried with locals, and, in Cagayan, they counted among their kinsmen Ilocanos or even indigenous Itawes and Ibanags. When President Ferdinand Marcos allowed the ethnic Chinese to become naturalized citizens, they gained more access to political office.

Here, Wong presents his readers with the interesting case of Delfin Ting, a former mayor of Tuguegarao City, who drew his influence in part from ethnic Chinese networks, business patrons in Manila and his family’s own participation in key economic activities such as rice milling and grain trading. Delfin launched his campaign against the other strongman Aguinaldo by moving to eliminate *jueteng*, a now-widespread illegal numbers game that had itself been brought by southern Chinese migrants into the Philippines but which later produced large slush funds for local officials, including Aguinaldo, who used it to fund counterinsurgency operations. Delfin Ting, the book tells us, used his “Chinese” credentials — being industrious, hardworking and a self-made businessman — in his campaign to be elected mayor of Tuguegarao. Those who opposed him tried but failed to have his election nullified on the grounds of his being a Chinese national, as Ting was declared to be a Filipino citizen after all.

In the process of presenting his narratives on these three politicians — Aguinaldo, Mamba and Ting — Wong gives us various ways of theoretically framing the study of state-frontier relations. Chapters 3 and 4 particularly reveal his comparativist skills. Here, he first turns to a reflexive historical sociology approach and applies

an analytic trilogy of discourse-practice-creative strategy to state-frontier relations, comparing the Philippines and Myanmar. He then launches a short comparison of the dynamics and management of coup d'états in Africa and the Philippines.

Evidently, this book was a painstaking reconstruction of over a decade of fieldwork in the northern Philippines, for which the author deserves much admiration. It contributes to a growing but still sparse body of knowledge on state-building and local politics in the Philippines. Some of the familiar concepts in analysing the Philippine polity — patronage, clientelism, debt of gratitude (*utang ng loob*), ritual kinship, guns-goons-gold — emerge, but the author avoids essentialist arguments and manages to bring new perspectives to the subject.

The book is something of a challenge to read: it is over 300 pages long, and the author switches from theoretical exposition, to narratives of the state, to informants' personal vignettes and musings comparing Filipino and Chinese values (e.g. *padrino* and *guanxi*). He fills up the pages with names of persons and places that can confound the reader who is uninitiated in Philippine politics, let alone the politics of the Cagayan Valley. Ultimately, however, it is this richness of detail and Geertz-style thick description that give readers the local flavour of the frontier, and of the individuals, their motivations, their socio-economic interests, patterns of personal and business networks, their social relationships, and attitudes towards governance and the governed.

Given the complexity of the subject, deciding on the structure of the book must have been difficult. The comparative sections on Africa and Myanmar may seem too thin to justify inclusion in the book, and could have been placed as appendices so as not to digress from the main subject. The brief discussions on the role of China and the importance to local politics of transnational links seem a bit overstated or undercontextualized. Moreover, the book contains much more information than was perhaps necessary to deliver its main argument, including what to me were irrelevant figures (e.g. statistics on rice and corn production) and rather amorphous concepts (e.g. rhizomes).

Overall, however, for the depth and breadth of the data and analysis, this is a contribution that any student (or practitioner, for that matter) of Philippine politics should welcome. Students and scholars of political theory, political sociology, anthropology,

comparative politics of post-colonial states, economic and political history and ethnic studies will also find many things of interest and value in this book.

AILEEN S.P. BAVIERA is Professor of Chinese studies and International Relations at the Asian Center, University of the Philippines.