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## **History and Non-History: World History in an Oriental Setting**

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## HISTORY AND NON-HISTORY

**WORLD HISTORY IN AN ORIENTAL SETTING.** Philippine Edition. By Gregorio F. Zaide. Manila: Rex Book Store, 1962. ix, 939 pp.

This is a book whose very title is matter for prolonged discussion. What exactly would the scope of a world history be? What is meant by the phrase: *world history in an oriental setting*? Why an oriental setting? Is it possible to have a world history in an oriental setting?

These are the questions which immediately confront the reader. Fortunately, Professor Zaide has anticipated most of these questions and has given us the answers to them in his brief preface.

The scope of a world history is, in general, "the story of all peoples on earth, their achievements, their contributions to world civilization." In this, one can readily see that Professor Zaide has undertaken what is undoubtedly a monumental task and what is possibly the most ambitious project a Filipino historian ever brought upon himself.

More specifically, Professor Zaide's work takes into account

... the role played in the epic of human progress by the Chinese, the Japanese, the Koreans, the Filipinos, the Indonesians, the Thais, the Burmese, the Vietnamese, the Maoris, the Mexicans, the Peruvians, the Argentines, and other hitherto little-known peoples....

... In fairness, however, credit is given to the remarkable achievements of the Egyptians, Mesopotamians, Greeks, Romans, British, Germans, French, Scandinavians, Russians, Americans, and other Western nations to world progress and welfare.

What can one say to all these? One can either be overwhelmed by such a grandiose display of erudition and plunge eagerly into the book full of great expectations or else one can assume the posture of a sceptic which, in this case, is more advisable since it protects one from feeling afterwards like a deflated balloon.

Honesty demands that one say at the very start that this is too much of a task to be handled competently by one man alone. And for one man to try and squeeze such a veritable mountain of materials within the narrow confines of a single volume of less than a thousand pages is—one must be very kind about this—a tragic miscalculation. One simply cannot write a decent single-volume history involving the story of all peoples on earth since the days of creation to the present without, at the same time, sacrificing just about everything. It will not be a history at all, not even a *history in a nutshell*. It will merely be an outline.

Bogged down by obvious limitations, it could only at best give a telescopic view of man. Whatever achievements man has accomplished are tagged on him in short, convenient labels. And so, instead of

encountering historical figures of flesh and blood, we see, from a long way off, a great number of unrecognizable people parading in single file and bearing placards of such inscriptions: Father of Impressionism, Father of Modern Anatomy, Father of Renaissance Architecture, Father of Pathology, Father of Italian Poetry, Father of Renaissance Sculpture, Father of the Science of Climatology, etc.

One wonders whether this parade of placards is what Professor Zaide calls "the epic of human progress". It is a most frightening thought.

Realizing only too well that Professor Zaide would have his hands full trying to cut down a mountain into a mole-hill, one cannot help but be annoyed at his various digressions into fields other than history.

For instance, the entire Part I is nothing else but an excursion into geology, astronomy, and anthropology. A major portion of the book is wasted in statements highly irrelevant to a historical survey of this type.

Below are revealed some of the various aspects of this book. As an economist:

China produces one third of the world's supply of peanuts and one sixth of the soya beans. She produces one half of the world's output of antimony and one third of tungsten. Antimony is used in the manufacture of steel, and tungsten in electric lamps.

As a literary connoisseur:

Lord Alfred Tennyson is best known for *The Charge of the Light Brigade*.

Until now the Arabian stories of *Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves* and *Sinbad the Sailor* have never been surpassed by Western story-tellers.

As a travel guide:

In the Philippines are the Pagsanjan Falls, Los Baños Hot Springs of Laguna, the Hundred Islands of Pangasinan, the Salinas Salt Springs of Nueva Vizcaya, the Crystal Caves of Baguio, and the Underground River of Palawan.

The world's smallest fish, smallest deer, smallest water buffalo, rarest shell, and beautiful orchid are found in the Philippines.

Besides the natural wonders, one can also find in the Philippines outdoor sports, jam sessions, Christmas cards, Halloween parties, and Peace Corps.

As a social columnist:

During the Roaring Twenties, Mary Pickford, Rudolph Valentino, Babe Ruth, Jack Dempsey, and Bobby Jones became the idols of the American People.

As a sports bulletin:

Soviet Russia tops all countries of the world in chess. Other popular games are skating, skiing, rowing, horseback riding, ice-hockey, swimming, basketball, cycling, shooting cross-country running, wrestling, soccer football and mountain climbing. Boxing, baseball, and tennis are not so popular.

As a historian of science:

Organic chemists created many synthetic products in their laboratories such as synthetic rubber, silk, glass, perfumes, textile—dacron, orlon, and nylon.

It also has moments of pure fantasy to delight the young at heart:

...a sun-kissed archipelago of 7,100 islands called the Philippines, floating like a broken rosary of emeralds on the heaving bosom of the Pacific....

There is another irritating feature of this book and that is its great penchant for dishing out superlatives by the dozens. St. Peter's Church is the largest church in the world. It is also the most magnificent example of Renaissance architecture. Raphael was the greatest painter of the Renaissance. His *Sistine Madonna* is the greatest painting in the world. Robert Browning is the foremost philosophical poet in English Literature. *Madame Bovary* is the greatest realistic novel. Guy de Maupassant is the greatest short-story writer in the world, etc.

The next point to consider is the meaning of the phrase: *world history in an oriental setting*. In his Preface, Professor Zaide gives us the explanation:

This book presents the history of the world in an oriental setting. It is a sincere attempt to portray man's development and progress from prehistoric times to the present atomic age, not with the usual Eurocentric perspective which tends to overglorify Western achievements but from the Asian point of view.

It is high time that the place of the Oriental peoples in world history be accorded due recognition, which has been overlooked in most history books written by Western authors.

This, to my mind, is the most significant statement Professor Zaide has made in his entire volume. It is indeed true that most Western authors have been guilty of an injustice: overglorifying their achievements and politely ignoring the contributions of the East. It is indeed high time that the place of the Oriental peoples in world history be accorded due recognition. There is, therefore, a just cause for complaint. After all, the sum of human wisdom is not contained in any one culture alone.

However, we must proceed with caution lest, while trying to right a wrong, we end up by committing the same error: overglorifying oriental achievements and ignoring those of the West. It has not been given to us to dominate world history (at least, not yet anyway), and we must face this fact.

This brings us to the last problem. Is it possible to have a world history in an oriental setting? In fact, is it possible to have a world history in any setting at all? A world history worthy of the name must of necessity render a faithful account of the various achievements of both East and West and the exact extent of their contributions, neither favoring one nor disparaging the other.

If the purpose of the oriental setting is merely to serve as a reminder that the East must also be given due recognition, then it is superfluous. If its purpose is to enhance the contributions of the East, to glamorize them, even to overglorify them, then it is a distortion of history. And a distorted history is not history at all.