

# philippine studies

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William Pomeroy

Bilanggo: Life as a Political Prisoner in the  
Philippines 1952–1962

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**Philippine Studies** vol. 60 no. 1 (2012): 139–143

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Rizal, who were two, three, or four times removed from their first paternal Chinese ancestor” (239). In other words, there were Chinese mestizos of an earlier period and Chinese mestizos of a later period (the book’s focus). But in both cases these social groups are referred to by the same term, “Chinese mestizo.” However, the distinction between the different groups and generations of “Chinese mestizos” is crucial for without it there is much confusion. In Chu’s study, for instance, the cultural practices of the Chinese mestizos of the earlier period (like food and attire discussed on pages 199–202) are imputed to the mestizos of the later period covered by this study, unintentionally homogenizing and reifying mestizos. Thus the following statement, which attributes what is Filipino to “Chinese mestizos,” is fuzzy to say the least:

In this chapter [5], I tried to show the situation in Chinese mestizo households during the latter part of the nineteenth century, at a time when intermarriages (at least until 1892) between Chinese men and local women were quite common. As one can see, many of what are considered today as “Filipino,” such as kinship terms used or food cooked in Filipino households, arose from such interactions between these men and women in personal and intimate settings. (236)

This statement is applicable to the earlier generations of Chinese mestizos discussed by Wickberg (1740–1850), but inapplicable to the mestizos discussed in the book, indeed especially if the latter held on to their Chineseness, as Chu asserts.

There is much that is useful and thought provoking in this book, which deserve attention and closer scrutiny, but they are clouded by the lack of clarity in the periodization of the history of Chinese mestizos in the Philippines and their changing historical contexts. The author is eminently capable of making this clear, and I hope he will do so in future work.

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WILLIAM POMEROY

## **Bilanggo: Life as a Political Prisoner in the Philippines 1952–1962**

Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press, 2009. 214 pages.

The true measure of freedom lies in one’s capacity to embrace the necessity to defend people’s rights to sovereignty, a life of good health, safety, and freedom. This is the great theme of William Pomeroy’s *Bilanggo: Life as a Political Prisoner in the Philippines 1952–1962*. A brave progressive and internationalist, Pomeroy embraced the goals of the old Partido Komunista ng Pilipinas (PKP), which during the 1940s led the “country’s most effective guerrilla organization, the Hukbalahap” (213). Of working class origins from upstate New York, Pomeroy was one of the US soldiers who took part in the landings of the US army in October 1944. When the war ended, coming back to the Philippines as frequent as he could became his singular goal.

Pomeroy fell in love with the country and its struggling people. He studied at the University of the Philippines and became one of its respected writers. The spirit of internationalism pushed the power of Pomeroy’s pen and ink to their logical conclusions: the armed rebellion and a passionate love for one of its most brilliant and brave daughters, Celia Mariano. Together they lived through the most violent attacks on freedom. Yet through it all, theirs was a partnership that was made strong and constant by the struggle for national liberation against US imperialism.

The book documents their capture in 1952 when they were sentenced to life imprisonment, “and served ten years before being pardoned by President Carlos P. Garcia” (213). For all its honesty and relevance to the current struggle to free political prisoners, one cannot but be astounded by how *Bilanggo* reveals the uncanny yet resilient anti-imperialist standpoint of a white man. Pomeroy came all the way from the belly of the beast right into the fray. The Philippine national liberation movement and its armed component were sincerely embraced by him in all their compelling urgencies, actual dangers, and genuine promises:

When we joined the guerrilla struggle, it was with the full awareness of the possible consequences, which for thousands of our fellow Huks was death. While we were in the mountain forest, we had repeatedly faced death in many forms. If Celia had died in the open struggle, I

would have mourned her, but it would have led to fiercer dedication; it would have been the same for her if I had been killed . . . But we were captured alive, and the alternatives were blurred . . . For us, there were two main concerns: our responsibilities to our movement and our devotion to each other. (2)

*Bilanggo* contains eight chapters in which Pomeroy captures the paradoxical dispositions that radicals embrace: their hopes, fears, joys, frustrations, and loves. The moving moralism and asceticism of organized collectivities—a strength for Pomeroy—is captured in all their human richness as he tells his readers about internal conflicts, unbeatable sorrows, and relished joys. *Bilanggo*'s chapters are well thought out in that they consistently conjure images of space and time. Chapters refer to places while their subtitles point to time. Indeed, to live a life in incarceration is to deal, at the very least, with the tediousness of consciously counting the hours while being present in a constricted space.

All throughout the book, Pomeroy is mindful that acts committed against him and his comrades by prison personnel and men in uniform are all but concretizations of the impact of US imperialism on the people's fight for freedom and sovereignty. In a sense, Pomeroy asserts a way of reading one's experience in prison as both a direct result and a parallel condition of what is happening outside prison walls. And this is none other than the struggle between the conflicting interests of a global superpower and the anticolonial movement, which with Pomeroy's participation had, by then, been clearly a global struggle of and through class waged by the exploited.

As if a constant reminder of the class component of the national liberation struggle, Pomeroy never fails to underscore the pride and joy of being on the side of the poor. But we often hear this of and from revolutionary accounts. It is therefore refreshingly moving to read Pomeroy's fascinating stories about what happens when the oppressed recognizes and, in fact, sides with radicals who embrace the cause. Their capture in 1952 was followed by a courtroom battle. In the Manila Court of First Instance, Pomeroy vividly recalls what ensued right after the judge gave his sentence:

[W]e turn and are led out of the courtroom, the troops closing around us as we pass through the corridor, and take the steps that carry us beyond freedom . . . Along the corridor, down the stairway, and

across the courtyard as we emerge, there are crowds of people who give little heed to the troops. They surge forward as we go by and the subdued murmur, "There they are," precedes us. Hands go up to wave. Then a young girl runs between the troops who have ready rifles and throws a garland of sampaguita flowers around each of our necks. She dodges the shouting troops. . . . (4)

*Bilanggo* is an edifying addition to the literature on political prisoners. Pomeroy very well enlightens his readers by historicizing the difficult situation of the same problem of convicting freedom fighters:

Political prisoners from the Huk movement, convicted of "rebellion complexed," began to flow into Muntinglupa from 1950 onward, and this has introduced the most restrictive feature of all into the prison's life and atmosphere. The policy is to segregate the Huks completely from the rest of the prison population out of fear that they will "indoctrinate" the other prisoners . . . To assure that the anti-Huk policy is carried out, to spy upon Huk prisoners and to subject them to harassment, the Military Intelligence Service has assumed control over "security" matters in the prison, with its agents assigned among both the guards and ordinary prisoners. (15)

As a sequel to *The Forest (TF)*, Pomeroy's personal account of his participation in the armed struggle, *Bilanggo* provides a more comprehensive account of the dialectical relationship between structure and the subjective force of personal struggle. *TF* was officially criticized by what is known today as the reaffirmist camp of the CPP, which severely condemned the Jose Lava-led old Communist Party and eventually broke away from it. The then newly formed CPP came out with an article entitled, "A Forest Nightmare," published in 1971 in which Pomeroy is labelled a "revisionist renegade" on account of supposed "bourgeois pessimism" and "purely military viewpoint" that constituted his personal narrative. According to the document, Pomeroy "[misrepresents] revolutionary struggle as a nightmare."

Today, the merits of such allegations must be weighed in a dialectical fashion against the fact that struggles everywhere are almost always held back and even grossly tainted by the limitations of one's personal history and the history of one's generation; and externally, as well, by the attacks of the

powerful imperialist enemy. Nobody, despite his or her good intentions, may be exempted and excused from the degrees of error that make revolutionary movements vulnerable. Should Pomeroy be exempted?

Pomeroy himself launches a critique of the Jose Lava-led CPP in this sequel in relation to the leadership's position toward political prisoners. He notes that their decision (with Celia) "to seek release from prison through courts has the strange effect of putting us at odds with Jose Lava and the 'Politburo group' that he heads" (204). He then continues to express his assessment of the situation in relation to the prospects of a movement that for Pomeroy "had lost the initiative and had been thrown on the defensive and was being crushed" (204). This part of the book is crucial in terms of its great insight into internal conflicts and campaign prospects for the struggle of political prisoners.

For Pomeroy, their pleading guilty, against the wishes of Lava and his "Politburo," was based on his analysis that "the movement would take at least five years to rebuild . . . and if we would be released after ten years . . . [we] could then once again play our part in the movement" (204). Jose Lava rejected this view, which for him was "MIS-inspired" (204). But, for Pomeroy, the situation "raises the question as to how revolutionaries should conduct themselves in prison so as to regain freedom and get out to resume the struggle" (205). He then sets up the "Friends of the Pomeroy's," a "committee of families of political prisoners . . . to conduct campaign for their release." His proposal was rejected by the Leading Organ headed by Lava, pronouncing "that being in prison is 'part of the game' and trying to get out would be a sign of weakness" (205).

This is far from the conduct of the current organized campaign for the 354 political detainees scattered in prisons nationwide. Samahan ng Ex-Detainees Laban sa Detensyon at Aresto (SELDA) has launched a vigorous campaign participated in by the families of political prisoners who fearlessly demand the release of their loved ones and expose the trumped up charges and various forms of torture that the latter undergo in the hands of the state. Political prisoners themselves coordinate nationwide activities, such as fasting and issuing of statements explaining the illegal and unjust circumstances surrounding their detention, among other consolidated political activities practiced behind freedom's steel doors.

The political struggle to free political prisoners is a just struggle against the capricious practices of state power in all its random suspension of rights.

It is also a struggle for protection against the current imperialist attack on peoples' freedom that has the effect of distorting and therefore limiting an international conception of human rights. *Bilanggo* demonstrates how the struggle of political prisoners is ours, too. Prison life for Pomeroy is "[e]ssentially a war of attrition" (37). But he also speaks of what sounds like a secret code among comrades in chains: "But there are other chains of which we are aware, the chains of human solidarity." His is a powerful elucidation of the saga of political prisoners in a neocolony:

[The political prisoner] has not merely breached a law but the very dikes of the social structure. In his case, the police and the armed agencies, the courts and the prison guards, are merely the tips of the whip that is swung by the landlord, the big businessman, the foreign imperialist, the political boss, the archbishop, the wielders of power in the society . . . The whip is aimed with great deliberation at him who dares to resist or try to change that power. (36)

*Bilanggo* is a rich cultural resource for the continued study and transformation of the political landscape in general and the particular and crucial struggle for freedom for all political prisoners worldwide.

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CURTIS WHITEFIELD TONG

## **Child of War: A Memoir of World War II Internment in the Philippines**

Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2011. 253 pages.

Born in Davao in 1934 to missionary parents (American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions or ABCFM), Curtis Whitefield Tong, his mother Margaret, and his two sisters moved to Baguio City in 1941 so that he and his two sisters could study at Brent School. On 8 December 1941 the Japanese bombed Baguio. American and British civilians, including the Tongs sans the father, were arrested and imprisoned in Camp John Hay.