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## **Ongpin Stories** **by R. Kwan Laurel**

Review Author: Jonathan Chua

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immediacy foreign to memoirs or recollections: “Right now, I’m here at the front lines in Gen. Vicente Lim’s command post” (9). After recounting a funny story on a certain Lieutenant Palo, Buencamino scribbled in a line below the typewritten entry: “Palo is now in bed” (55). He could not have written this after Bataan.

Knowing its significance for posterity, somebody among those assigned to do the burning must have smuggled out the diary. What Victor must have heard was Felipe typing his daily observations—the contents of the third diary—not his recollections as the annotator alleges. There are erasures in this third diary as in the first, and there are also handwritten entries such as those for 15–16 December 1944 (182–84).

It is the second diary that contains entries that, no doubt, are recollections. Unlike the first diary there are no scribbles and erasures on its six entries. (Buencamino might have copied the text from the original manuscript he discarded.) Further, in the entries for 8 April and 10 April 1942, one finds the phrase “that night” (124), which implies that the events recounted were being recalled days after they had occurred. (The entry for 10 April is about Buencamino’s ordeals during the Death March. He could not have possibly written it on that day but only when he had arrived in the Capas concentration camp on 14 April.) The next entries, however, are diary entries, as evidenced by the same time markers used in the first diary (e.g., “Right now, somebody just died” [136]).

It seems appropriate, then, to entitle the work “diary” or “diaries” rather than “memoirs.”

The diaries are reproduced with all the erasures, doodles, handwritten notes, and drawings. Having the diaries in a form as close as possible to their originals makes one appreciate the narrative and know the author intimately. The downside is that it makes the book expensive and therefore inaccessible to the majority of readers. Another is the difficulty of deciphering some of the words in the diarist’s penmanship (34, 61). And because the text is unedited errors are to be expected: misspelled words such as “bivouaced” (12), “reconnaissance” (12), and “dysentery” (26); inconsistencies in the spelling of proper names such as Valdez/Valdes (16, 46) and Leoni/Leonie/Leonio (51); typos such “were” to “where” (8) and “me” to “be” (27); and the like.

Included are the useful glossary of places and glossary of names and expressions, but there is no index. Select photographs of the author either alone or with his family and friends provide visual accompaniment.

The book is ultimately not only about Felipe Buencamino III’s war experiences. It reveals to us a life productive and promising but cut short by a dastardly Huk ambush that also murdered Mrs. Aurora Quezon and her daughter, Baby Quezon. Moreover, the diaries give us a firsthand account of the early days of the war and life under Japanese occupation, particularly the relatively unknown activities of the MIS in which Buencamino served as aide-de-camp to Gen. Simeon de Jesus, head of the unit.

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R. KWAN LAUREL

## **Ongpin Stories**

Manila: Kaisa Para sa Kaunlaran, 2008. 122 pages.

Story cycles typically revolve around a locality. The best of them, like James Joyce’s *Dubliners* (1914), show how place shapes person, how it both molds and maims characters whose stories become memorable in the very process. To romanticize or idealize is not the usual object of these works—to the storyteller, the locality is both “dear and dirty”—but rather to show the specific turns that the human drama takes as it is played out in a specific milieu.

For his first collection of short stories, R. Kwan Laurel has chosen as his subject the Chinese Filipino community of which he is a member. He calls the collection, fittingly, *Ongpin Stories*, Ongpin being the street most associated with the Chinese in the Philippines. The eight loosely interconnected stories chronicle the lives of residents of the street as they are seen by an adolescent boy narrator.

We meet, among others, his classmate Tommy, a “math wizard,” who stakes his dream of making it in Hong Kong and escaping from a future of wet floors and rundown automobiles at his uncle’s garage on a quiz show; Grandfather, a dabbler in traditional Chinese medicine, family shaman, who suddenly acts “like a teenager” (99) when the neighbor (and business rival’s) grandmother comes to town; Mang Tony, the family driver, the “most honest man in the world,” whose compulsion to tell the truth almost ruins the hardware store and makes him the husband of Jenny, daughter

of “the richest man on our street” (81); Giat Co, the richest man himself, owner of four grocery stores and three buildings (“the Tall one, the Fat one and the Short one” [87]), who locks horns with the parish priest to salvage the family honor; Father, whose life revolves around the hardware store, steadfastly holding on to an ethic (“hard work always paid off” [110]), whose efficacy is threatened by the big businesses of the “white ghosts”; and the narrator himself, participant and keen observer, increasingly conscious of the tension between Ongpin and the world beyond it and of the contradictions within himself.

The eight stories may be enjoyed individually, but taken together they constitute a Bildungsroman. Although the narrator is the main protagonist in only the introductory story (“Ongpin”), we see him growing as he witnesses or takes part in various experiences: the alienation from his traditional Chinese heritage in “Ongpin,” the difficulty of intercultural communication in the face of prejudice in “Sir Jim,” corruption in both high and low places in “Streets of Gold” and “Giat Co,” the fragility of human efforts at happiness in “The Math Wizard” and “Amah.” Like Sherwood Anderson’s George Willard in *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919), he decides in the last story (“My Father’s Store”) that “I must run away from the store” (120).

Stories like Kwan Laurel’s lend themselves to “local color.” Readers expecting the stories to depict the supposed cultural traits of the Chinese will find these, and those who find such things amusing will be amused. The hardware store of the narrator’s family is called The Good Luck Hardware Store (and its rival is called The Good Fortune Hardware Store); the characters are named after American presidents or other celebrities (Thomas Jefferson Go and Paul Newman Chan); and then there are such accidental (though some may be wholly intentional) linguistic felicities as are possible only in bicultural communities—a name like Washington Dee Sy, for example.

But if Kwan Laurel presents stereotypes, he puts them in context, especially the negative ones. So while the narrator’s father and grandfather make no bones about bribing policemen, readers are made to see the historical circumstances that engendered it—as a necessary recourse against racism, poverty, and an ineffectual government. It is not condoned, but neither is it passed off simply as a natural trait of the Chinese.

Neither is Kwan Laurel one-sided in his depiction of Filipino-Chinese relations: “People . . . tend to let their prejudices get in the way” (27). In “Sir

Jim” the Great Director goes to Ongpin “to capture the authentic and real Chinatown” (18), but as the narrator and his classmates watch the movie “it became clear there would be no other Chinese character except an old man in shorts whom the leading man nicknamed ‘*si bugaw*,’ who kept slapping the star Mother had said was lovely” (26). But those maligned are themselves prejudiced. In “Ongpin” the narrator is shamed for failing grade five Mandarin. When he tells his mother that “the teacher said I was good in social studies,” she retorts, “What, you want to be a Filipino?” (4). He resolves to study harder in English, “hoping it would make my parents feel better that their son was at least learning a superior language compared to Filipino” (9). When a building near Ongpin collapses during an earthquake, a casual news broadcast reminds him of his otherness (“We received reports that a building around Ongpin collapsed. We have yet to confirm this. No, yes, no, no, it’s already in. A building on T. Alonzo and Doroteo Jose . . . where the Chinese also reside” [14]); his father, in turn, curses the Filipinos running to the disaster site— “[h]e assumed they were going there to loot and take advantage of the tragedy” (15).

Some of the critique is rendered with humor, and Kwan Laurel thus avoids sloganeering. In “The Most Honest Man in the World” the narrator’s father asks Grandfather why he chose to call the drink he invented “Mr. Tong’s beer” when Tong is not his name. Grandfather replies, “Here in Chinatown any big government official who comes always ask [sic] for tong, so I thought Filipinos are used to asking us for tong, so it should be easy to order our beer” (72–73). The posters for the beer declare, “When in a bar, just ask for Tong!” (72).

However, one need not read the stories from the point of view of cultural relations or identity politics. They are primarily literary documents, not ethnography or sociology. As such they transcend their putative ethnicity. In the end these are stories about human beings—plucky, prudential, almost heroic in their self-determination, but also flawed—struggling, though not always succeeding, to fulfill their dreams of a better life—an Asian Great Gatsby. Kwan Laurel’s choice of epigraph is telling. It is not a passage from Lao Tzu, whom one of the characters quotes, but from a poem by Filipino poet Amador Daguio: “I might have been the bamboo, / But I will be a man. / Bend me then, O Lord, / Bend me if you can” (ix).

Compared with Charlson Ong, another writer who has made the life of the Filipino Chinese his literary métier, Kwan Laurel paints a smaller

canvas. But he holds his own, his stories a complement to Ong's more panoramic prospect. This collection proves him an able fictionist; his use of symbolism not heavy handed, the "punch" of his endings always on target. Certainly, this first collection begs another one, and the author bids fair, in Confucius-like "rectification of names," to wear the laurel.

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