

Introduction

The texts collected in this book were written on different occasions and represent some of the results of the search for clues announced in the book's subtitle.¹ The collection begins with the extended English translation of the first chapter of my biography, *José Rizal's Struggle for Life and Death*, which was first published in 2021.² This is followed by a short discursive piece that I designed as a loose script for a public discussion with the Italian philosopher Sergio Givone about outsiders and the paradox of freedom that took place in Florence in June 2024.

The essay "Hero of the Nation and Citizen of the World" is based on a lecture I gave in Wilhelmsfeld and at the World Museum in Vienna in 2023. It is an attempt to get as close as possible to Rizal's life and thought, and at the same time to question the identity-politics that feeds into the idolisation of this historical thinker. The following three chapters are largely based on the sections found in my Rizal biography, first published in 2021 and in a second edition in 2025. They thoroughly explore Rizal's complex attitude towards Europe, his vision of political and moral progress in the Philippines and the carnivalesque

1 All translations in this book are the property of the author unless otherwise noted. – My thanks go to Johann Stockinger for kindly pointing out literature and hidden letters from Rizal and Blumentritt.

2 D. Harth: José Rizals Kampf um Leben und Tod. Facetten einer kolonialismuskritischen Biografie. Heidelberg, 2nd edition 2025; ONLINE: <https://books.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/heibooks/catalog/book/1356>.

rhetoric of his novels. After this I offer a brief discussion of the critique of racism advocated by Blumentritt and Rizal, based on a previously unknown letter.

In October 2024, a delegation from the Philippines had the opportunity to visit Heidelberg and Wilhelmsfeld. I was honoured to be invited to share my thoughts on Rizal briefly, which proved to be a challenging task. As a starting point, I chose his statement that he still had the Malay “Wanderlust” in his blood. My short lecture eventually evolved into an essay in which I took Rizal’s wanderlust as a starting point to talk about wandering as a metaphor and as a topos in world literature. In doing so, I did not forget what Rizal’s friend Maximino Paterno had to say about Rizal as an indefatigable traveller: “He went to Europe in 1882 to expand his knowledge and compare the greatness and progress of developed countries with the slow, monotone and sometimes retrograde pace of this unfortunate colony.”³ Luckily, Rizal had a useful shadow with him on all his journeys, the “Demon of Comparisons”. Starting from the question of Rizal’s scientific paths, or those he wanted to pursue, I examined his relationship to physical anthropology, particularly anthropometry. I have dedicated a separate short study to this topic, as well as to his life in exile. The final statements in this book concern the long overdue recognition of Rizal as an author of the Spanish language by the *Instituto Cervantes* in Madrid, which took place in spring 2023.

Why search for traces at all? Isn’t José Rizal unmistakably present in the Philippines and in countless other countries and continents in images and inscriptions? Yes, that’s the case.⁴ But that doesn’t mean that the ‘hero’ depicted in all kinds of more or less idealized monuments is perceived as an individual. Maybe that would be too much to ask, as monuments and inscriptions idolise the person whose image they serve, but also run the risk of falsifying or obscuring the stories

3 “Marchó a Europa en 1882 para ampliar sus conocimientos y comparar las grandezas y progresos de los países cultos con la marcha lenta, monótona y a veces retrógrada de esta desgraciada colonia.” Homenaje al Dr. Rizal (1899). In: Rizal ante los Ojos de sus Contemporáneos. Manila: Comisión Nacional del Centenario de José Rizal, 1961, 37

4 Paz Policarpio Mendez: *Adventures in Rizaliana*. Manila 1978

written on his life and limb. Moreover, the data visibly reproduced on memorial plaques and monuments very rarely offer direct access to the figures' contexts, placed as they are in the public space as tangible memorabilia.

There is no doubt that it is one of the customs of the cult of a national hero everywhere to freeze the idol stereotypically in stone or bronze in order to guarantee the recognisability on which the beneficiaries of hero worship can rely: Political functionaries of virtually all ages and hues have done the same. "I was to discover that like the overcoat that wraps Rizal in all his statues and photographs, Rizal is obscured by countless myths and preconceived ideas", notes the Filipino scholar Ambeth R. Ocampo in his book *Rizal without the Overcoat*.⁵

One of the common 'labels' that distorts Rizal's life and work is his political classification as a "nationalist" and "revolutionary". The biographer Austin Coates celebrated him as a "nationalist"; for most presidents of the Philippine Republic he was or is the "revolutionary" who liberated the archipelago from the yoke of Spanish colonial rule.⁶ Both contradict not only Rizal's self-image, but also the historical facts. Philippine nationalism was alien to him. Instead, he advocated a semi-autonomous association with Spain (as an overseas province) on the basis of reforms that would be secured by treaty and would dis-

5 A. R. Ocampo: *Rizal without the Overcoat*. Pasig/Manila 1990, Preface

6 A. Coates: *Rizal, Philippine Nationalist and Martyr*. Oxford & Hongkong 1968. Präsident Fidel V. Ramos in: M. Rajaretnam (Hg.): *Jose Rizal and the Asian Renaissance*. Kuala Lumpur & Manila 1996, 33 ff. The numerous academic attempts to transform the reformer Rizal into a revolutionary hero are not convincing either; see e.g. Floro Quibuyen: *Rizal and the Revolution*. In: *Philippine Studies*, Vol. 45, No. 2 (Second Quarter 1997), 225–257. The homage by the *Instituto Cervantes* from 2023 also adopts this attribution and adds an ambiguous suspicion that casts doubt on Rizal's political honesty: "Tras volver a Filipinas, se le condenó al destierro en Mindanao. Pese a sus intentos por *congraciarse con el gobierno español* fue acusado de asociación ilícita con otros revolucionarios y acabó siendo encontrado culpable de traición siendo fusilado el 30 de diciembre de 1896. Rizal sentó las bases del independentismo filipino y es reconocido como un héroe." <https://cultura.cervantes.es/espanya/es/Caja-de-las-Letras:-José-Rizal-in-memoriám/157697> (22.1.2024)

empower the old colonial institutions. He never completely gave up hope of a love match between the Philippines and Spain, even in his greatest despair at the inertia of the Madrid government:

We have all come here to [...] unite our vows, to give shape to that mutual embrace of two races that love each other and want to be united, morally, socially and politically, in the space of four centuries, so that in the future they may form a single nation (*una sola nación*) in spirit, in their duties, in their scopes, in their privileges.⁷

Rizal's statements about what drove him throughout his life, i.e. to develop the ability of independent thinking in his countrymen through secular education, is not really taken seriously by his admirers – or so it sometimes seems. He rejected violence, especially revolutionary violence aimed at political independence and directed against the colonial power. On this point, as elsewhere, he was unequivocal. He feared the anarchy that would result from an irregular uprising from below, frustrating the patient negotiation of legitimate interests at the higher level. After all, as Rizal clairvoyantly recognised, it is rarely the ideal of liberation but rather the thirst for power of the agitators that violent insurrection is intended to satisfy.

Whether Rizal revised his critical stance towards the Catholic Church and the religious abuse of the friars was a bone of contention between the clergy and Freemasons for a long time. In 1896, the Jesuits boasted of their victory over the “heresies” of the alleged apostate and presented “evidence” years after his death.⁸ Other, more straightforward misrepresentations have claimed that Rizal was given a professorship in medicine in Germany as a reward for his conversion to

7 “Hemos venido aquí todos a este banquete para unir nuestros votos, para dar forma a ese abrazo mutuo de dos razas que se aman y se quieren unidas, moral, social y políticamente, en el espacio de cuatro siglos, para que for- men en lo futuro una sola nación en el espíritu, en sus deberes, en sus miras, en sus privilegios.” *Discurso en el banquete dado en honor de los pintores filipinos*. In: J. Rizal: Escritos políticos. Manila 1961, 21

8 It is in keeping with the unresolved contradictions in Rizal's life and work that his retraction has been neither clearly refuted nor definitely affirmed to

Protestantism. The notion that he had received a doctorate not only in Madrid but also in Heidelberg was a false conclusion even for qualified historians.⁹ Political denunciations also played a role during his lifetime and caused him considerable difficulties in his projects: he and Blumentritt were said to have worked together as agents for Bismarck's claims to Oceania. In truth the opposite was the case.

But what does truth mean in the face of the growing darkness under the "overcoat"? Even Rizal's novels have fallen victim to the creation of legends. An essay comparing him – for whatever reason – to Mark Twain relays Blumentritt's supposed statement that translations have made Rizal's novels accessible to "all" German readers.¹⁰ Well, for heaven's sake, how long did Ferdinand Blumentritt live and what spectres are supposed to have revealed to him his friend's alleged bestseller success? Nota bene: the only German translation of *Noli me tângere* was published in 1987, and that of *El Filibusterismo*, under the title *Die Rebellion* anno domini 2016.¹¹

False trails damage Rizal's life story and his written legacy. These trails drag his conviction of the moral right of non-violent resistance into the unknown and smudge the traces of his intellectual struggle against the lawless and arbitrary power of illegitimate rule in his Tagalog-Philippine homeland and beyond. It is not easy to free the

this day. Cf. Rene Escalante: Did Jose Rizal Die a Catholic? Revisiting Rizal's Last 24 Hours Using Spy Reports. In: Southeast Asian Studies, Vol. 8, No. 3, December 2019, 369–386. <https://englishkyoto-seas.org/2019/12/vol-8-no-3-rene-escalante> (16. 12. 2024)

9 Catherine Vance Yeh: The Chinese Political Novel. Migration of a World Genre. Cambridge (Mass.) & London 2015, 41. Among the erroneous statements contained in this study is the following: "Rizal's name became a regular reference for nonviolence in the writings of Gandhi." (44)

10 Dolores S. Feria: The Mysterious Strangers. Rizal and Mark Twain. In: Rizal. Contra Essays, ed. Petrolino Bn. Daroy & Dolores S. Feria. Quezon City 1968, 40

11 J. Rizal: Noli me tangere. Roman. Aus dem philippinischen Spanisch übersetzt von Annemarie del Cueto-Mörth. Frankfurt a.M.: Insel Verlag 1987. J. Rizal: Die Rebellion. Roman. Aus dem philippinischen Spanisch ins Deutsche übersetzt von Gerhard Walter Frey. Heidelberg: Morio Verlag 2016

autonomous Rizal from this suffocating 'cloak'. But if, to paraphrase Eufonio Alip, it is a matter of following confidently the hero's travels in search of "light and wisdom", then this attempt is worth every effort.¹²

12 E. M. Alip: *I Traced Rizal's Footsteps in Foreign Lands*. Manila 1961, 5