

Tracing José Rizal

On the global information network, there is an interactive online offer showcasing the university city of Heidelberg on the Neckar River through its literary reflections.¹ The ‘Literature Map’ (*Literaturkarte*) is a constantly updated service that marks the places on a city map where literature was created or literary scenes took place. An index leads to the Heidelberg addresses of the persons or places to be searched for, with reliable bio-bibliographical information and the locations of publicly visible memorials.

The literary map also commemorates two renowned critics of colonialism, Muhammad Iqbal and José Rizal, who were closely linked to Heidelberg. Those keen to explore the city’s literary heritage will find a number of memorials scattered throughout the city on the literature map: inscriptions on houses and university buildings, quotations fixed on stone, and street signs with their names. If a university city incorporates well-known names of exotic origin into its public memorial spaces, there may be reasons to be found in the attractiveness of the university as a magnet for academic tourism.

In the case of Iqbal and Rizal, however, it is also a matter of politically relevant myth-making, as both are revered as founding figures

1 <https://www.literaturland-bw.de/literaturkarte/> (21. 2. 2024)

and national monuments in their countries of origin.² An attribution that the Hindustani Muslim and the Filipino free-thinker would probably have resented, because they did not believe in hero worship and, as transcultural wanderers between Asia and Europe, could find little charm in national narrow-mindedness. Anyhow, it makes sense that Heidelberg's city council has named its riverside streets after Iqbal and Rizal. I say "it makes sense" because Iqbal and Rizal arrived in Heidelberg like travellers on a boat from a foreign land and left after a relatively short stay; but also because both brought an astonishing "flow" to their worlds of origin, with more or less revolutionary effects. And something else is also true: the mythical river of oblivion known as "Lethe" eats away at their memory, in spite of the local traces, something that a city like Heidelberg – a proud UNESCO City of Literature – should not accept. Perhaps a local saint like Goethe can help; after all, Rizal and Iqbal, once accompanied by benevolent local spirits, had their first experience of Goethe's *Faust* in Heidelberg.

Rizal and Iqbal are unforgotten idols in their countries of origin. The Pakistani is revered as the "Spiritual Father of the Nation" and was also praised – whether rightly or wrongly – by Ayatollah Khamenei as the chief ideologist of the Iranian revolution.³ As the "Father of the Philippine Republic" and a larger-than-life monument, the Filipino stands at the centre of a national, if not global, remembrance policy pursued with spectacular effort by all governments in the Philippines, regardless of their ideological pretensions.

Although the dates of Iqbal (1877–1938) and Rizal (1861–1896) are relatively far apart, they have much in common. For their idolic images – not their works – serve as vehicles for political self-congratula-

2 In the Philippines there is an official government address for this: *Selection and Proclamation of National Heroes and Laws Honouring Filipino Historical Figures* (<https://ncca.gov.ph/about-culture-and-arts/culture-profile/selection-and-proclamation-of-national-heroes-and-laws-honoring-filipino-historical-figures>)

3 Iqbal Singh Sevea: *The Political Philosophy of Muhammad Iqbal. Islam and Nationalism in Late Colonial India*. Cambridge 2012, 201

tions.⁴ Their roles as writers, critical intellectuals and cultural mediators – in short, their pre-eminent importance as transcultural *hommes des lettres* – appear insignificant under the rigid gaze of cult-worship, or fall by the wayside altogether. In reality, they wanted to change the world through the printed word, which broke down the genre boundaries between prose and poetry. Both have set in motion processes of change that have been beneficial and detrimental, even if sometimes contrary to their well-minded intentions. To study their transcultural role in mediating between Asia and Europe from a comparative perspective, and to study them as representatives of a specifically Asian-European modernity, would therefore be a worthwhile task, one that a transcontinental research cluster, yet to be invented, might one day profitably undertake.

One of the most active institutions behind the glorifying Rizal cult is an “Orden de Caballeros de Rizal”, founded in 1911, which also has a branch in Heidelberg’s immediate neighbourhood, in the Odenwald town of Wilhelmsfeld. Founding an Orden de Caballeros in the name of Rizal? Isn’t it a little strange that it was founded in the 20th century and doesn’t fit at all with the person whose name serves as the order’s figurehead? The truth is: Rizal preferred the pen to the sword as a weapon. The model of the “Orden” goes all the way back to the medieval institutions of courtly knighthood, while the members of such orders were once there to justify the existence of aristocratic society and secure it with the sword. Their special duties included strict

4 On December 29, 2017, historian Ambeth R. Ocampo wrote in the *Philippine Daily Inquirer*: “Rizal Day is upon us once again, and the commemorative speeches will be rolled out tomorrow, mostly from politicians beating the dead horse with the same tired quotations they learned in school. Jose Rizal then and now should inspire, and there is no better way to know him than to read him. After all, he left us with 25 volumes of writing that are hardly read outside of what is required in school. His six-volume correspondence, for example, is not just an outline of a short but meaningful life; his letters to family, friends, acquaintances, and colleagues in the Propaganda Movement remind those who have forgotten that he was made up of flesh and blood before he was petrified into monuments of marble and bronze.” <http://opinion.inquirer.net/109849/destiny-woman-rizalisms> [10.1.2018]

member discipline; the rules of behaviour were laid down in an obligatory code of knighthood, while the membership identified itself to the outside world in an appropriate order costume. All kinds of symbolic elements contribute to the pathos and organisational unity of such institutions. There are consecrations and other beautiful rituals, memorial ceremonies in honour of the order's patron, the awarding of orders of merit and medals, a more or less military hierarchy in which one can rise through the ranks, and much more besides. And the annual recharging ceremony of the signs and places involved adheres to the key dates of Rizal's biography, following the patterns of ritual remembrance.

However, what distinguishes the 'Orden de Caballeros de Rizal' from its medieval counterparts are the extraordinary activities that spread Rizal's name and fame worldwide. These include international networking, the punctual observance of the commemorative calendar, the dissemination of Rizal literature and, last but not least, the global distribution of commemorative symbols such as plaques, statues, monuments, etc.

The oldest large monument dedicated to the memory of Rizal is located in Manila in a spacious area called Luneta Park, approximately where the national hero was executed on 30 December 1896. It would seem that as early as 1901, as the Philippine guerrilla war against the Americans was still in full swing, the tender for the property was approved by the then President of the USA, Theodore Roosevelt, who was known to hold racist views. It was decided that an American-Filipino commission should be formed to serve as the jury. A fundraising campaign attracted a large number of European artists to submit designs that were, for the most part, feasible. Eventually, the monument was created by the Swiss sculptor Richard Kissling (1848–1919) and unveiled in 1913. The material of the Rizal monument, bronze and Gott-hard granite, speaks for itself and for eternity.

Richard Kissling created a model that was often varied, depicting the writer in the habitus of a man of letters, towering with broad breast over the peaceful reading people at his feet. Kissling is also known for his work on the William Tell monument in Altdorf in the Swiss canton of Uri, completed a year before Rizal's arbitrary killing. Rizal's Tagalog translation of Schiller's freedom drama *Wilhelm Tell* is, so to say,

the common denominator of both monuments. While both statues are meant to embody national heroes, their individual stories remain significant in their own right. Wilhelm Tell was a fabulous figure from the beginning, while Rizal, who had a real life, was mythologised post mortem.⁵

To extend the search for traces of Rizal to other countries would require a trip around the world. Replicas of the large Manilean monument are in Madrid and Jinjiang (Fujian Province), parks dedicated to the hero in Litoměřice (Leitmeritz), Wilhelmsfeld, Seattle and Tokyo, memorials in Heidelberg, Berlin, London, Paris, Port Moresby (Papua New Guinea), and myriad other locations, including his bust, statues, commemorative plaques, museums or street names in Czechia (former Bohemia), Germany, Austria, Italy and numerous other European cities, in Buenos Aires, and La Molina (Peru), etc. etc.⁶ As an impressive example, on the south-east coast of our Antipodes, in New South Wales and Victoria, the Tracker can discover six landmarks that commemorate the Philippine national hero. One of these landmarks is a bronze statue erected near Sydney in 2012, depicting the heroic gaze of a five metre tall Rizal giant towering over its verdant surroundings. Rizal was never there, but the Filipino communities in Australia are impressively large.⁷

All this pales into insignificance when compared to the idol's spread throughout the more or less blessed islands of his homeland. "Whether the foreigner wishes to learn Philippine history or not [according to a *Vademecum* for travellers], he cannot escape the Rizal presence. There is a monument to him in practically every town and plaza in the coun-

5 A fate he shares with numerous other national heroes; see for example D. Harth: Bolívar – Fabrication of a modern myth, in: D. H.: *Rituale im Zwielicht/Ambiguous Rituals*. Heidelberg 2014, 153–164. Online: www.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/archiv/16751

6 See also the List of historical markers of the Philippines overseas: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_historical_markers_of_the_Philippines_overseas

7 According to the 2021 census: 408,836 persons by ancestry (1.6 % of the Australian population). https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Filipino_Australians (1. 1. 2025)

try.”⁸ Indeed, Rizal’s portraits hang in all public buildings; it appears on the two peso note, the one peso coin and on postage stamps. Every main street in the country is named Rizal, as are an entire province (created in 1901), Manila’s main park, theatres, schools, universities, but also such banal products as cement, beer, matches and cigars. In short, the critic of colonialism posthumously colonises – in effigy or as a product brand – an imaginary world that is barely conceivable, in order to promote a myth that few see through or even understand. This is despite the abundance of information that Filipino Rizalists have disseminated to make Rizal impervious to future hardships.⁹

It seems there is no longer any reason to search for traces of Rizal. Rather, the reverse is true, the search for what the widespread idolisation conceals or displaces.

8 A. & G. Roces: *CultureShock! Philippines: A Survival Guide to Customs and Etiquette*. Singapore 2009, 68

9 As to Rizal’s public image see also Renato Constantino: *Dissent and Counter-Consciousness*. Quezon City 1980