

Leocadio de Asis *From Bataan to Tokyo, Diary of a Filipino Student in Wartime Japan 1943–1944 (1944)*



Ken'ichi Kamigaito



Leocadio de Asis. (Source: Shōichi Saeki & Tōru Haga, Eds., *Gaikokujin ni yoru Nihonron no meicho - Goncharov kara Pinguet made*, Chuokoron-Shinsha Inc., 1987, p. 189)

Leocadio de Asis was born in Manila in 1919, the fifth son of a dentist returning from Spain. He graduated with honors from San Beda High School in Manila, the University of San Beda, and the University of Santo Tomas College of Law, respectively, but was called up into military service at a time of tension between the U.S. and Japan and participated in the Battle of Bataan Peninsula, where he was captured as an officer of the Second Regular Division of USAFFE (United States Army Forces in the Far East). Recognized for his abilities, he entered the training course of the Philippine Constabulary and became an instructor after graduation. In July 1943, he came to Japan as a member of the Philippine Constabulary Academy for training in police administration, and received training in Japanese until October

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of the following year, during which time he recorded his observations in an English diary.

Upon his return to the Philippines, de Asis became second-in-command to Teófilo Sison, Minister of Justice in the pro-Japanese Laurel government, but in the face of the American reconquest, he managed to escape from Baguio, to which the Laurel regime had evacuated from Manila, and surrendered to the U.S. military.

After serving as an officer in the Philippine Army for a while after the war, de Asis moved to a law firm and taught law at East University and the University of San Beda. In 1960, he became general manager of the Delgado group, and later ran a real estate, insurance, land development, and import/export business in Manila. He was the Founding Chairman and First Executive Governor of the ASEAN Council of Japan Alumni (ASCOJA), an organization of people who once studied in Japan, from the ASEAN region. He was also Director of the Philippines-Japan Society, Inc. He was conferred the Order of the Sacred Treasure, Third Class, by the Japanese government on April 29, 1985.

In July 1943, as the war in the Pacific was turning against Japan and Japanese civilian life was becoming increasingly difficult, de Asis stepped on Tokyo's soil as a member of the student group "Nampō Tokubetsu Ryūgakusei" (Special Southern Foreign Students) from the Philippines. The group members were selected from the occupied areas of Southeast Asia by the Japanese Ministry of Greater East Asia with the intention of fostering local human resources, striving to build the Greater East Asia Co-prosperity Sphere. The program was intended to deepen their understanding of Japan by providing them with training and Japanese language education.

It is unlikely that de Asis, who had received American-style education in the Philippines, would have actively tried to come to Japan, and it is assumed that there was a near coercive Japanese solicitation at work there. However, de Asis, who had been sent to study in Japan, an unknown neighbor and enemy country (they had fought each other in the Battle of Bataan Peninsula), almost by a quirk of fate, decided to keep a diary of his daily events from the day he left Manila, anticipating that his life and experiences in Japan would be of great significance to him throughout his life.

The goals of his training in Japan were preliminary education in Japanese and learning about police administration, but his diary does not mention much about that. The majority of the contents are about friends and observations outside of the school.

Being Catholic was one great source of pride for Filipino de Asis, and he frequently attended the Catholic Church in Tokyo. Most of his friendships with Japanese people were through this Catholic church, especially the women of the Catholic Women's Association who entertained the Asian students like him. These women belonged to the highest class of Japanese families of the time, and at their gatherings, English was spoken, pianos were played, Western songs were sung, and cakes were served. De Asis was familiar with and sympathetic to these more Westernized people in Japan.

It was ironic, in a sense, but also natural, that it was these very Western cultural things that brought Japanese people together with the Asian students invited under the "Greater East Asia" policy. The policy was anti-Western, yet the Japanese

military power that had forced De Asis to come to Japan in a semi-coercive manner was itself introduced from the West.

De Asis, who was warmly received as one of the future leaders, was allowed to tour military installations and factories that were off-limits to ordinary people, and he naturally viewed these modern facilities in a positive light. Many students from Asian countries who came to Japan after the Meiji era sought to learn, first of all, about modernity in Japan, or the West in Japan, and de Asis was no different. However, we can see the uniqueness of the Philippines, which has long been deeply influenced by Spain and the U.S., in the fact that not only modern science and technology, but also Christianity and Western-style lifestyles, which could be described as peculiarly Western, are sources of empathy.

This does not mean, however, that de Asis was indifferent to the Japanese way of life. His curiosity was aroused by tea ceremony demonstrations and kabuki, and he loved the lavish Japanese furnishings of Meguro Gajōen. He realized that “the Japanese unique concept of beauty” is “to hide as much as possible.” However, his understanding of Japanese culture was limited by his short stay in Japan which was not much more than a year. De Asis, who could not claim to be completely fluent in Japanese, could not understand the kabuki plot even when it was explained to him in English, and the kabuki music remained outside the framework of his musical sensibilities.

Conversely, Japanese prejudice against Filipinos was another source of friction. One stereotype is that Filipinos are imprudent and frivolous due to American influence. The strict discipline of dormitory life may have been designed to correct such a Filipino disposition, but in the eyes of the foreign students it was a restraint on their freedom, and even led to a confrontation with the dormitory supervisor. In connection with the major event of Philippine independence, a play set in the Philippines is performed, but the heroine’s father, dressed in a sarong, looks like an Indonesian, and de Asis criticizes the director’s lack of understanding of Philippine customs.

However, such misunderstandings were a common occurrence in the life of foreign students, and his diary entries clearly show that the people who took care of foreign students generally worked hard with good intentions to make their lives comfortable, despite the scarcity of food and other supplies under government’s control. It can be said that de Asis’ experience in Japan was considerably brightened by the goodwill of these people, which led to the formation of the Japan Student Association and his work with the Philippines-Japan Society after the war.

His diary avoids outspoken political comments. Although de Asis must have been suspicious of Japan’s victory and the idea of a Greater East Asia Co-prosperity Sphere, there is no explicit mention of these points. However, his diary records that he repeatedly expressed his, directly to the Japanese, of Japan’s military rule in the Philippines. The Japanese to whom he speaks are upper-class people who are well-informed about international affairs, and they do not respond to his direct criticisms by refuting them or getting angry, but rather they are shocked. This shows that the upper-class Japanese of the time, as depicted by de Asis, were willing to listen to the direct opinions of others, not only with regard to material matters, but to political and

ideological issues as well. In his diary, there are numerous exchanges suggesting that the existence of people with such a broad view of the world may have had a significant impact towards the end of the war.

It is this passion for the fate of the Philippines that prompted de Asis to make such direct statements. In his relatively calm diary entries, the only place his heightened emotions are revealed is where he exposes his ethnic consciousness as a Filipino. Such consciousness among foreign students reached its peak on October 14, 1943, when the Philippines gained independence. On the eve of that day, his diary entry reads:

Tonight our neighbors, the Yokois, presented us with a beautiful bouquet of chrysanthemums on the occasion of our country's coming freedom. We are all excited about tomorrow's event, especially the Flag Ceremony when we shall see the Filipino flag once again fly proudly beneath the sky as a symbol of our country's long-cherished freedom.

Furthermore, in November, President Laurel visited Tokyo to participate in the Greater East Asia Conference. De Asis was impressed by the president, who spoke proudly of his own views and preached the inviolability of the sovereignty of the Greater East Asian countries. At least, at this point, the Laurel administration was seen by the Filipino students as the establishment of a dignified independent government, rather than simply Japan's puppet regime. An interesting perspective on the complex issue of re-evaluating Japan's Southeast Asian policy during the war can be found here.

Another climactic incident during his stay in Japan was a meeting with Lieutenant-General Honma Masaharu, the supreme commander of the Philippine Islands invasion force. After de Asis answered various questions about the condition of the U.S.-Philippine forces (the Philippine Army formed by the U.S. with local recruits) in the Battle of Bataan, he told the General the following:

When we were in Bataan, we never thought of losing the war and much less of being captured prisoners; when we were in the concentration camp, we never expected to be released; when we were released, we never thought we would become Constabulary officers; as Constabulary officers we never thought of going to Japan as government scholars of the Imperial Government; and, finally, while in Japan, we never even dreamed of meeting in an intimate interview the Commander-in-Chief of the Japanese Forces in the Philippines, our grand enemy in Bataan.

His interlocutor, Lieutenant-General Honma, was executed after the war for his mistreatment of prisoners of war in Bataan, while de Asis remained a central figure in Philippine society and in the Philippine-Japan Society. One might say that the sword's life is short and culture's life is long. In fact, "Nampō Tokubetsu Ryūgakusei" did not have much meaning from a short-term, short-sighted perspective, with regard to the completion of Japan's war aims and the establishment of a Japan-centered Greater East Asia Co-prosperity Sphere. However, from the long-term perspective of idealistic "co-prosperity of greater East Asia," this foreign student project achieved great results in terms of promoting friendship between Japan and Southeast Asian countries. This book deserves repeated reference as a document that tells a significant aspect of the history of Japan-Philippine relations.

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