



UNIVERSITY of  
SAN FRANCISCO

A publication of the  
**University of  
San Francisco  
Center for the  
Pacific Rim**  
Copyright 2006

**Editors**

Joaquin Gonzalez  
John Nelson

**Graduate Student  
Editor**

Patricia Moras

**Editorial Consultants**

Barbara K. Bundy  
Hartmut Fischer  
Patrick L. Hatcher  
Richard J. Kozicki  
Stephen Uhalley, Jr.  
Xiaoxin Wu

**Editorial Board**

Yoko Arisaka  
Bih-hsya Hsieh  
Uldis Kruze  
Man-lui Lau  
Mark Mir  
Noriko Nagata  
Stephen Roddy  
Kyoko Suda  
Bruce Wydick

**Asia Pacific: Perspectives**  
Center for the Pacific Rim  
2130 Fulton St, LM202  
San Francisco, CA  
94117-1080

Tel: (415) 422-6357  
Fax: (415) 422-5933  
perspectives@usfca.edu

# Asia Pacific:

# PERSPECTIVES

*an electronic journal*

Volume VI · Number 1

15 May · 2006

Special Issue: **PHILIPPINE STUDIES AND THE CENTENNIAL OF THE DIASPORA**

Philippine Studies and the Centennial of the Diaspora: An Introduction	>>.....Joaquin L. Gonzalez III and Evelyn I. Rodriguez	1
<i>Primerang Bituin</i> : Philippines-Mexico Relations at the Dawn of the Pacific Rim Century	>>.....Evelyn I. Rodriguez	4
Mail-Order Brides: A Closer Look at U.S. & Philippine Relations	>>.....Marie Lorraine Mallare	13
Apathy to Activism through Filipino American Churches	>>...Claudine del Rosario and Joaquin L. Gonzalez III	21
The Quest for Power: The Military in Philippine Politics, 1965-2002	>>.....Erwin S. Fernandez	38
Corporate-Community Engagement in Upland Cebu City, Philippines	>>.....Francisco A. Magno	48
Worlds in Collision	>>.....Carlos Villa and Andrew Venell	56
Poems from Diaspora	>>.....Rofel G. Brion	57
Reflections on Philip Vera Cruz and the Filipino Diaspora	>>.....Joaquin L. Gonzalez III	59
An Interview with Philip Vera Cruz, Spring 1971	>>.....Sid Valledor	61
Yuchengco Media Fellowship Announcement, Spring 2007	>>.....	64
<i>Asia-Pacific Social Science Review</i> Call for Papers	>>.....	65
USF Centennial Conference Announcement	>>.....	66

**Asia Pacific: Perspectives** is a peer-reviewed journal published at least once a year, usually in April/May. It welcomes submissions from all fields of the social sciences and the humanities with relevance to the Asia Pacific region.\* In keeping with the Jesuit traditions of the University of San Francisco, *Asia Pacific: Perspectives* commits itself to the highest standards of learning and scholarship.

Our task is to inform public opinion by a broad hospitality to divergent views and ideas that promote cross-cultural understanding, tolerance, and the dissemination of knowledge unreservedly. Papers adopting a comparative, interdisciplinary approach will be especially welcome. Graduate students are strongly encouraged to submit their work for consideration.

\* 'Asia Pacific region' as used here includes East Asia, Southeast Asia, South Asia, Oceania, and the Russian Far East.

# Reflections on Philip Vera Cruz and the Filipino Diaspora

by Joaquin L. Gonzalez III, Ph.D.

## Abstract

As Filipino Americans celebrate the centennial (1906-2006) of the Filipino diaspora to the United States, Gonzalez puts into critical analysis the life of eminent Filipino agricultural labor leader, Philip Vera Cruz through the contemporary economic benefits and social costs of migration. Vera Cruz stands alongside well-known farm worker activists Larry Itliong and Cesar Chavez. Gonzalez argues that just like Vera Cruz and his contemporaries, the millions of overseas Filipinos of today are the modern-day heroes and heroines of the world we live in, a world without borders but still very much a world with limited protection and social justice for them.

As Filipino Americans celebrate the centennial (1906-2006) of the Filipino diaspora to the United States, I put into contemporary perspective the life of eminent Filipino agricultural labor leader, Philip V. Vera Cruz (1904-1994). In my point of view, Vera Cruz stands alongside well-known farm worker activists Larry Itliong and Cesar Chavez. Leaving his home town of Vigan, Ilocos Sur province, Vera Cruz finished high school at Lewis and Clark and then took undergraduate courses at Washington State College and Gonzaga University before being drafted into the U.S. Army. He later on became a grape picker in Delano, California. Vera Cruz went on to become the president of the local farm worker's union and, at more than 60 years old, was one of the oldest strikers on the fields. During the height of the strikes, Larry Itliong could be likened in the fields as the Filipino revolutionary Andres Bonifacio while Philip Vera Cruz provided fighting wisdom like the wheel chair bound Apolinario Mabini. Vera Cruz and Itliong were just two of the many Filipino farm workers activists that changed the face of the agricultural labor movement in America. Because from the moment they arrived in Hawaii and California, Filipinos, as born revolutionaries for human equity and social justice, already began organizing for a non-violent struggle against the greed and abuse of capitalist America.

Philip Vera Cruz' rise to farm worker leadership might no longer be representative of the current context of global migration. However, it nevertheless continues to be relevant in terms of its transnational value to the present-day Filipino migrant's journey. As I reflected on Vera Cruz' life, my own, and countless stories I have encountered in my academic fieldwork, it has become evident to me that the struggles that come with a migrant's journey have remained the same, transcending time, race, and boundaries. Every migrant can connect to Philip Vera Cruz as well as his contemporaries, and the unique social, political, economic, and cultural milieus

they encountered as migrants, whether one worked as a crewmember on board a Spanish galleon in the 1600s or a 21st century immigrant nurse attending to patients at a New York hospital.

Philip Vera Cruz left the Philippines in the beginning of the 20th century along with thousands of young Pinoy males who may have wanted to pursue an education at first but ended up changing their long term plans for the rich agricultural fields of the United States. A millennium after, eight million Filipinos have become part of the exodus this time to more than 100 countries, making the Filipino diaspora the second largest contemporary human migration in the world. Unlike the early predominance of farm workers, their occupations now vary widely: from domestic workers and entertainers in East Asia, construction and maintenance workers in the Middle East, to nurses and managers in North America and Western Europe. Not to mention, close to a million seamen on passenger and commercial ships that traverse the oceans and seas of the world.

Most Filipino migrants enter their countries of destination legally but some cross national boundaries illegally, risking their lives. Others arrive on tourist visas then become contract workers. A number come in lawfully at first but then overstay their visas therefore becoming "illegal aliens". Many arrive by themselves while others are lucky enough to be able to bring their families. Filipino migrants originate from every ethno-linguistic region of the Philippines—including: Ilocanos, Tagalogs, Cebuanos, Kapampangans, Bicolanos, Ibalogs, Boholanos, Ilongos, Samals, Igorots, Chavacanos, Maranaos, and Tausugs.

Many of the early Filipino migrants benefited from the rigorous public school system developed by the United States. Philip Vera Cruz was one of them. His quest for more learning led him to travel across the Pacific to the "land of milk and honey". His writings illustrated scholarly potential. But just like many of his contemporaries, he ended up working to support himself and be able to dutifully send money to help his family in the Philippines. Vera Cruz' experience is still very much the present situation for most Filipino migrants. Altogether, the Philip Vera Cruzes of today send more than US\$10 billion, annually, to the Philippines. The money remitted has kept household budgets afloat, educated siblings and children, paid for medicines and hospitalization for aging parents and grandparents. Balikbayan (returning and visiting overseas Filipinos) spending accounts for a significant portion of domestic earnings and investments. Not surprisingly, the foreign exchange remittances, approximately five percent of the country's Gross National Product (GNP), have even helped the Philippine government address its burgeoning fiscal deficits. How will the homeland survive without them?

Unfortunately, like many Filipino migrants who were led to believe that America was the "land of the free", Philip Vera Cruz immediately came face-to-face with realities of freedom, justice, and equality upon walking the streets and working the fields of California. Harsh labor conditions, unequal treatment, low pay, and racial discrimination came at him and his

peers head on. Even after years of immigrant labor rights protests, strikes, reforms, and deaths, many of the social costs and issues of migration still remain, way beyond Vera Cruz' time. Even before they leave the Philippines, Filipino migrants today have to deal with the prohibitive costs of government and recruitment agency fees and regulations, illegal recruiters, denied visas, and onerous contracts. Once overseas, many have to cope with social costs: from culture shock to maltreatment, over and above some of the lingering problems from Vera Cruz' times. Ironically, aging Filipino World War II veterans granted citizenship by the United States still do not have the same benefits as other American veterans.

Even in this day and age, in some destination countries Filipino migrants are accorded little protection from abusive employers, have no social security nor health benefits, have no labor or employee rights, are not allowed to organize unions and even worship, and are essentially second-class citizens. Those in vulnerable work settings like domestic workers and entertainers, many of whom are women, encounter the harshest social costs, including incidences of rape and forced prostitution. Far away from home, it is hard to provide protection and safety nets for them. In many countries, labor organizations protect only their nationals or could

even be prohibited by repressive laws. International laws and conventions are weak and unenforceable. In many cases, only the goodwill and respect of their new homelands are all they can hope for. So is the migrant journey really worth it? Was Vera Cruz' sacrifice worth the victories he achieved for the larger labor movement? Are the current sacrifices of Filipinos and Filipinas in Europe, East Asia, the Middle East, and North America worth the billions of dollars of remittances that get sent 'back home'? The mixed feelings are reflected in their testimonies, stories, conversations, letters, phone calls, e-mails, blogs, and text messages.

Yes, it has been a century but given the perennial dismal economic, social, and political situations in the Philippines, I anticipate the Filipino diaspora to continue, increasing in scope and magnitude. That is why serious efforts must be made both in the Philippines and destination countries, including the United States, to safeguard the welfare and reduce the social costs for these bold sojourners, who contribute immensely to both their new homeland as well as the Philippines. Just like Philip Vera Cruz and his contemporaries, the millions of overseas Filipinos of today are the modern-day heroes and heroines of the world we live in, a world without borders but still very much a world with limited protection and social justice for them.

**Joaquin "Jay" L. Gonzalez III** is Director of the Maria Elena Yuchengco Philippine Studies Program and Director of the Asian American Civic Engagement Project of the Leo T. McCarthy Center for Public Service and the Common Good. He was co-investigator with The Religion and Immigration Project ([www.usfca.edu/TRIP](http://www.usfca.edu/TRIP)). Professor Gonzalez also teaches at the USF' Politics Department and the Center for the Pacific Rim and has authored, co-authored, and co-edited numerous books, including *Philippine Labour Migration: Critical Dimension of Public Policy* (1998), *Development Sustainability Through Community Participation* (1998), *Governance Innovations in the Asia-Pacific Region* (1998), *Culture Shock! Succeed in Business: Philippines* (2000), and *Opting for Partnership* (2000). He received his Ph.D. in Political Science from the University of Utah.