

# H-Net Reviews

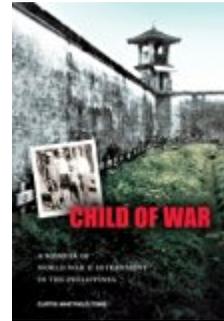
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Curtis Whitfield Tong. *Child of War: A Memoir of World War II Internment in the Philippines*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2011. xiv + 252 pp. \$65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8248-3464-7; \$27.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8248-3539-2.

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*Child of War* gives a unique view of the Japanese occupation of the Philippines from a man writing about his experience as a child in the midst of that crisis. It is not intended to be an intellectual recitation of facts, nor an academic examination of historical events. As a memoir, it relates one small portion of the war as seen by one small person who was inadvertently caught up in the events.

Curtis Whitfield Tong gives us a glimpse into his life prior to the Japanese occupation. He lived in a comfortable home with his parents and two sisters, with servants to cook and clean for them. He went to school and played with his friends. He went with his missionary father to visit neighboring villages. While he lived a life of privilege, his life was quite comparable to his peers and commonplace. There was little to distinguish his family from the families of other foreign missionaries and businessmen. There was nothing extraordinary about Tong or his family. All these comforts were taken for granted.

Tong's childhood took an abrupt turn when the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor. He sensed the adults around him becoming nervous, wondering what the future would bring. They began to conjecture about the large influx of Japanese civilians in the preceding months, wondering if there was a connection to the impending invasion that everyone seemed convinced was imminent. There was little confidence that the small American force would be able to defend the Philippines and protect the civilian population. With Tong's father temporarily in another location, his mother made the decision to take the children to a local school with other foreigners, where they planned to peacefully surrender. They had no knowledge that would disabuse them of their belief

that a peaceful surrender would lead to humane treatment by the invaders. They would soon learn just how very wrong they were.

The Japanese invaded, and suddenly paradise was no longer paradise. Tong was taken into Japanese custody along with his mother and two sisters. His father was incarcerated in a different prison camp, and was separated from his family for two years. The suffering following the Japanese invasion is in stark contrast to the life Tong and his family led until that moment. Tong paints a vivid picture of the suffering endured by the prisoners. At seven years old, he had to give up his carefree life and all the comforts he had taken for granted. He had to learn how to deal with the realities of hunger, overcrowding, physical discomfort, and constant fear. He spent the next three years learning to cope with these hardships.

The journey to the camp, Tong realized later, was in itself designed to demoralize and humiliate the prisoners. They had to walk several miles, with whatever possessions they were able to carry. People accustomed to riding in chauffeur-driven limousines had to hike the distance closely watched by rifle toting Japanese guards while their Filipino servants sat by the roadside and observed. One woman, tired of carrying her silver, stepped out of line to press it into the hands of her Filipino maid. It was clearly going to do her no good where she was going. Much wiser were the people who had chosen to leave their treasures behind and instead bring sleeping mats and mosquito nets.

Tong describes life in the prison camps in stark detail. Prisoners were crowded shoulder to shoulder, with little space for their meager possessions and virtually no pri-

vacy. They were regularly threatened with death should anyone attempt to escape. Food supplies were nowhere near adequate, and sanitation was almost nonexistent.

Nonetheless, he witnessed moments of humanity on the part of his captors. Tong tells of teaching the Japanese soldiers to play baseball. When an older male prisoner began making sexual advances toward him, a Japanese guard noticed and intervened. The man never bothered him again. Another time, he got lost in the dark when he got up to use the latrine. A guard saw him and, with his flashlight, guided Tong back to his family. He also describes one of the camp commandants who treated the prisoners with compassion and made an effort to improve their conditions.

There are also moments of serenity. Tong describes taking walks with his mother. She was able to express her worry about his father, not knowing where he was or even if he was alive. Tong tried to distract her, coaxing her into playing word games with him. Tong remembers, "I enjoyed those rare hours on the quiet mountain-side with Mom. In camp we were so close and yet so far from each other. My time alone with Mom was invigorating and reassuring" (p. 117). Fortunately, Tong's father was eventually reunited with his family. This was a great relief to Tong, as he watched his mother's health deteriorate. He was able to shift some of the responsibility that he felt back to his father.

Shortly after the Tong family reunion, all the prisoners were relocated to a prison near Manila. Conditions there were even worse. Food had become scarce. Remarkably, the prisoners discovered that survivors of the Bataan Death March were being held on the other side of a prison wall. Tong and his father received permission to visit with them. Tong describes men with "blank, stonelike faces." Most of the men wore only loincloths. "Their upper bodies were bare and showed multiple scars on their backs, suggesting that they had experienced hard times" (p. 209). The experience clearly had a great impact on Tong.

Shortly after the relocation, the prisoners heard gunfire in the streets of Manila. The prisoners gathered on the roof, which "came to resemble a crowd at an athletic event" (p. 207). There they watched flights of Ameri-

can planes. Optimism began to grow. The fighting drew closer. One day while on the roof, Tong heard voices but realized the language was neither Tagalog nor Japanese. "It was exciting to hear American voices so close by." The prisoners felt the building vibrating. Their first thoughts were of an earthquake, but then someone called out, "American tanks! American tanks!" (p. 217). Freedom was near. The description of the first contact with American soldiers is particularly moving. "Tears welled in my eyes. I sobbed as my sisters and I lived those very happy moments. I had not seen such smiles in a long time" (p. 221).

One incident that stood out in Tong's memory occurred as he and his father walked through Manila, searching for his father's friend and her son. They encountered many American soldiers who helped them on their way. Then they came across a soldier who at first appeared to be walking a dog. As they neared, they could see it was no dog. It was a Japanese soldier wearing a collar and leash, forced to crawl on all fours. It was a reminder to Tong that cruelty was not the sole purview of the Japanese.

Part of what makes this book so interesting is the fact that it is war as seen through the eyes of a child, as remembered by Tong. A child sees things differently than an adult, and different things are important. For example, Tong kept two of his small toys in the pocket of his shorts, guarding them carefully lest they be taken by his Japanese captors. These toys became very precious to him, a tie to the normalcy of the life that he had been forced to leave behind. He did not understand the politics. He only understood that he was frightened and hungry.

This is an easy and pleasant read. There is little to quibble with it. It does not deal with military strategies and tactics, or broader questions of politics or morality. It is very narrow in scope, and does not deal with anything beyond what Tong personally witnessed and his perception of events. It is nonetheless a valuable book for the military historian. It serves as a reminder that innocents get caught up in military actions. Their lives are turned upside down. They suffer. They die. We should never forget this.

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