PEOPLE MAKE HISTORY

AN EYEWITNESS ACCOUNT OF THE REVOLUTIONARY MOVEMENT IN THE PHILIPPINES

Lina D.

FOREIGN LANGUAGES PRESS

Tales from the Front

A Collection of Revolutionary Stories and Poetry

Communists are known for our reliance on and understanding of theoretical knowledge. Our conception of education and self-education comes directly from Lenin's famous formula: "Without revolutionary theory there can be no revolutionary movement." Yet, in our ongoing effort to acquire practical and theoretical knowledge, it may be necessary to engage with historical accounts of concrete struggles in which theory was both forged and applied in the sometimes murky complexity of real life. *Tales from the Front* aims to provide activists with concrete historical examples—both fictionalized and non-fiction—of those instances in which theory and practice mutually produced and intertwined with each other.

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January 20

"I forgot you were coming"

Business class was a mixed experience for Hong, who had previously only flown domestically in China. A shortage of seats in economy class landed him a wide seat up front that reclined to an almost horizontal position complete with footrest and personal video system. But in addition to the obvious discomfort he had with leaving his friends behind to sit with the "common masses," he also confronted the language barrier and lost several times. A great liquor lover, he only knew to point at his neighbor's glass of champagne and downed two glasses before getting lightheaded. And at meal time, the idea of speaking to the flight attendant in English so intimidated him, that he pointed randomly at

the menu, only to find that his dinner consisted of a large fish—a delicacy he did not appreciate.

On our connecting flight to Manila, the captain of our flight engaged the PA to announce that Manila was hot and raining and under the control of a new president. His congratulatory remarks to Gloria Macapagal Arroyo were the first news we had that Estrada had fled that morning. Before leaving Beijing at 5:30am, CNN was still broadcasting his resolute assertion of innocence and legitimacy of his presidency.

Following the announcement, we struck up a conversation with the flight attendant across from us. She sighed and said she had been hoping to hurry home in time to attend a rally demanding Estrada's resignation. She told us a little about the work situation of Filipino flight attendants and how the American airlines preferred locally based women for international flights because they could pay them less and forgo any benefits that the US-based unions demanded for their members.

Filling out the immigration form made me nervous. We had no address in the Philippines, no hotel where we were staying—and yet we were on tourist visas. I had no idea what tourists were supposed to do in the Philippines; we had left our trip planning to our friends in various people's organizations, something I thought we'd do well not to mention to immigration officers. Since we had become friendly with the flight attendant, I

asked her what hotels were nice and where simple tourists like ourselves would be able to find a good place to stay. She suggested the Manila Hotel and a couple others whose names I couldn't possibly remember, so we all dutifully wrote "Manila-Hotel" as our address in the Philippines. An interesting section on the immigration form was the four or five lines reserved for Filipinos returning from work abroad. I got a feeling for just how much labor they must export to warrant an entire section dedicated to their comings and goings. Reasons for return: vacation, termination, family illness. . . The government required its own citizens to provide the reasons why they wanted to come home.

Immigration proved a breeze. Everyone seemed upbeat and smiling, something I attributed to the recent fall of an asshole president and the people's role in removing him. The three of us went smoothly through and out into the arrival area where we stood to wait for our ride. We were early and waited in the sticky heat, sweating through our Beijing –15 thermals.

I was so happy to see Ana as she appeared out of a van that pulled up near the curb but observed that she looked near collapse. When we asked her how much sleep she'd been getting, she said about three hours in the past two days. "In fact," she confessed, "I forgot you were coming. Beth, who's in charge of international visitors told me 'You know

they're coming tonight.' Otherwise I wouldn't have come!" In spite of her exhaustion, Ana talked to us nonstop from the airport to the hostel where we were being put up for the night, giving us a blow-by-blow rundown of the past few days' events. She talked mainly about the role of the Left forces in the anti-Estrada forces and how it differed from the first People Power movement that removed Marcos. In the first movement, the Left forces were in the midst of a confusing and fractious period where ultra-Left and Right opportunist lines were struggling in the CPP [Communist Party of the Philippines], and the Party consequently lost a lot of their mass base. As a result, Corazon Aquino and Cardinal Sin (a name no one in the Philippines seemed to find inherently funny) were able to seize the leadership of the anti-Marcos United Front and marginalize the Left.

This time was different. Even after Arroyo was sworn in and moved into the presidential palace at Mendiola, she had to give credit to the Left forces for their role in the ousting. The night before, as rats jumped off the sinking Erap (Estrada's nickname), two million people gathered at the EDSA shrine, the site of mobilization for the anti-Marcos movement in '86. Many were there spontaneously, but at its core were workers, peasants, students, and middle forces organized by the militant Left. That night, though, as generals in the military, businessmen, and former allies of the isolated

president did the simple math and scurried over the line to the side of the angry people multiplying in the streets, the crowd at EDSA was already being told to practice restraint. The Left, however, led by the Bagong Alyansang Makabayan (Bayan), an umbrella organization of mass organizations and key player in the anti-Estrada alliance, called for the people to march on the Malacañang, the presidential palace.

Citing fear of bloodshed and violence, Aquino, Sin, the former president Fidel Ramos, and even Arroyo directed the crowds to stay put. Undaunted, the Left stuck with their assessment of the situation and at 6am on the 20th, led their base of people on the long (14 km) hike from the shrine to Mendiola. 75,000 people approached the stronghold and were stopped temporarily by barbed wire barricades erected by the police. Leaders of the march negotiated briefly with the cops, who had also seen the writing on the wall, and agreed to stay behind the barricades to prevent provocateurs from inciting a bloody response from within the palace. Within a few minutes though, crowd control slipped an inch and the first line tore through the barricades. They were stopped again by a second barricade line.

In the meantime, according to insiders reporting to the *Philippine Inquirer* in the following days, Erap was shocked to get news that angry crowds were outside the palace gates, demanding his res-

ignation. Apparently, his still loyal armed guards asked for orders to start shooting, but Estrada instead opted for a few hastily packed suitcases and a run for the back door. His reputation was for being short on brains, but he seemed to be pretty quick in realizing that the military defection was a bad turn of events for him. Also the masses milling around outside chanting "Erap resign!!" were probably not going to go away with his promises of snap elections in May. He did meet a few people on his way out, though, probably paid "supporters" who cried for the news cameras. One woman ran to hug him, sobbing "Take us with you to Hawaii!" evidently not aware that even the US had politely distanced itself, not even offering the promise of refuge it had quietly offered the outgoing dictator Marcos.

Transfixed by Ana's narrative, I was only dimly aware of the city nightscape flashing by, but she stopped a couple times to point out some interesting sites. One was a party on the street filled with young people dancing to a rock band's victory melodies. Another was the EDSA shrine itself which so recently witnessed the swearing in of the new president but was currently being hosed down by local cleanup crews.

We'd eaten on the plane, but when Ana asked if we were hungry, we found we were. She also recommended that we avoid drinking the water, which was increasingly contaminated with the

privatization of the water works. So we stopped for food and water supplies. McDonald's seemed like the most likely choice—it was still open at 11pm and on the road. Ana sensed our reluctance and took us to a "local" fast food chain instead. Ana could hardly walk after being on her feet for days on a time, but she waited patiently while we tried to find something that didn't horrify Hong. Then she led us, hobbling, over to the drugstore across the street for two gallon jugs of water.

The hostel turned out to be in part of a church compound, friends of Bayan. We were in Quezon City, a big enough city in its own right but still considered part of the huge sprawl of Metro Manila. We ended up on the deserted third floor. We found one key which led us to a room with two single beds and Hong knocked on a locked door, where he found a bunk and a roommate. Ana helped us get settled and promised Beth would fetch us the next day at 1pm, to give us (and them) some time to sleep. She would probably see us later that day.

Dinner turned out to be dismal and in sharp contrast to the relatively cheap and abundant fare in China. Our first introduction to Philippine portions was rice in a clump about the size of a baseball and spaghetti that barely covered the bottom of a Styrofoam container about the size of a playing card. The even sparser sweet and sticky tomato sauce gave everyone heartburn and the chicken salad container looked like a miniaturized Dixie

cup. We downed it all regardless and fell to bed. Even the bedbugs feasting on my back through the night could not dampen my excitement. I was here, finally, in the midst of people who had confidently explained to me why and how they could remove the despotic, corrupt, Estrada regime less than a year ago—on the very eve of their success. I wasn't too sure what the next 18 days would offer, but I was pretty impressed with the ways things had started out.

January 21

The Falling Peso and Activism in Academia

The next morning we found hot water in the shower and still no one at the front desk. A posted notice instructed us to leave our room keys in the cubby holes marked with their numbers, so we deposited them before venturing out to find some food. Our hostel turned out to be on the EDSA freeway (but quite a ways from the EDSA shrine), teeming with morning traffic emitting clouds of black exhaust. Filipino commuters held folded kerchiefs over their noses and mouths as clouds of pollution rolled in waves over them. Beijing smog seemed tolerable, even mild, in comparison. The sidewalk also stank from random piles of rotting garbage next to stands selling fruit and local street food.

At the major intersection where Ana had suggested we look for breakfast, swarms of jeepneys jockeyed for position below shiny billboards of pale blond women in white underwear. Jeepneys were the private transportation that the public took to get anywhere in Manila. In a landscape of foreign fast-food chains, ads for imported goods, and Japanese cars, jeepneys added one of the few visible local flavors. Each one was like a stretch jeep, with two long benches facing each other on either side, usually crammed with seated passengers and a few hanging off the back. The entire vehicle was usually decorated, painted in stenciled letters, with the name of the jeepney in the front (Tom and Sam, Jesus, Tse Tung) and its destinations on the side (Cubao, Philcoa, Fairview). Some of them were the most spectacular explosions of color and popular artwork but all were spouting black fumes.

Discovery of a Chinese fast food restaurant cheered Hong up until he realized that they served Filipino-Chinese food—not the kind he was used to. And a state of sticker shock ensued as we calculated the exchange rate; food in Beijing was a hell of a lot cheaper and more abundant. Our noodles and *lumpia* (spring rolls), turned out to be about half the size of the same photographed items on the menu.

1:00 was fast approaching so we headed back to our hostel taking the back route through the

church compound. Off the relentless buzz of the EDSA highway the air quality improved exponentially, and by the look of the houses, the church folk were doing OK financially. Beth showed up just as we arrived, and we collected ourselves on the third floor to make our plans. First order of business would have to be changing money. Then Ana had suggested that Beth take us to the University of Philippines campus to soak up the greenery and get some exercise. She knew Phil and I jogged, but after our brief outing in the sweltering smog-laden climate, we didn't even have to look at each other to confirm that we weren't going jogging in the middle of the day—no matter how nice the campus was. We made clear that we would go wherever and do whatever they had planned aside from the exercise. So the plan was to change money first and go to Bayan's office in the evening where food and drinks were going to be served in celebration of the ousting of another president.

Beth led us across the street to a bus, which we took to the super-mall. The main department store in the mall was a mammoth called Shoemart, so the whole mall was named after it. After fighting our way through the jeepneys, stepping around homeless people crouched barefoot and covered in black soot on the concrete, and passing a traffic cop supplementing his salary by selling slippers, we climbed the steps to the mall entrance to have our bags searched. Big modern shopping malls were

apparently popular targets for bombings. Once inside we found what looked exactly like a suburban US shoppers' paradise, complete with movie theater and food court. The place was jammed with cruising teenagers sporting cell phones and couples pushing strollers. Inside Shoemart were three vast tables heaped with clothes on sale at 50% off, and customers crowded around fingering fabrics and judging sizes. All the clothes were the stuff of the casual American uniform: jeans, shorts, t-shirts, and khakis (except in much smaller sizes).

The bank branch inside Shoemart showed the exchange rate was a little over 46 pesos per euro, much stronger than the 55 pesos before Estrada fled from the palace. We took a number and looked at the board in disbelief; we were several hundred numbers off, and the pace was not all that swift. It seemed anyone with euros or US dollars was trying to unload them before the stabilized government brought down the exchange rate. I volunteered to take Hong around to look for some things he didn't have a chance to buy in Beijing. We took a bit of time but managed to accomplish our tasks and returned to Phil and Beth to find that we were still over a hundred numbers away. Phil decided to have a look around—to investigate the commodity market—and took Hong with him.

Beth and I stood watch and talked a little about the events the night before and her experiences in the countryside. She spent six months in the coun-

tryside before returning recently and seemed to miss it terribly. We found out later that the only part she didn't like was that where she stayed, everyone was on rotation for daily chores. She was fine doing everything but the cooking, which she abhorred. So when the time came for her to cook, she would say "Yes, yes," and then quickly find some wood to gather or dishes to wash. When she lived abroad for a couple years some time ago, her housemate was a guy who also hated to cook. So every day they had battles over who was going to wash the dishes. The person who didn't manage to get the dishes washed before the other was stuck cooking. Finally the other guy relented, telling her "OK, but I want to tell you that I don't even cook for my wife and I'm going to cook for you!"

I was surprised to find that the cell phone Beth carried was part of a vast network of phones that proved essential at the rally and march at EDSA. Most of the cell phone use was in the form of text messages. We found out later that there were over 150 million texts sent that night alone, several times the entire continent of Europe. Beth's pinged every other minute in between the messages she sent.

After over two hours and with about 50 numbers to go, I went to search for the rest of my group. They were downstairs looking over all the household goods, trying to find anything that was made in the Philippines. The only piece they found was

an aluminum pot of poor quality. Everything else was Made in China or Taiwan or Indonesia. . . .

We changed our money and headed directly to Bayan's office, late by then. The UP campus would have to wait for another day. We found Ana there looking a lot better and walking with ease. She'd slept until nearly noon but was neck deep in meetings again. Food and drink turned out to be pizza and coke and later a bottle of wine, and the ongoing meetings seemed to indicate no rest for the weary. Ana apologized and left us in the hands of Charlie, a young university professor. He was also part of a cultural foundation that led art and literary workshops with the workers and peasants. Bayan's office was littered with props and murals created through the foundation during the anti-Estrada movement. One mural was on a 2.5 by 3 meter canvas rimmed with light bulbs framing a caricature of Estrada holding an emaciated peace dove on a backdrop of flames. He couldn't show us the Erapzilla that they'd built out of cardboard; too large to store, they burned in it effigy instead.

Charlie gave us a brief overview of the movement in academia: students and teachers, especially pertaining to the recent mobilization at his school. According to his assessment, the students were on the rise again after a period of stagnation in the late '80s and early '90s. The '70s was what is referred to as the First Quarter Storm, a period of

a great upsurge of radical student activism. Later Beth told us that due to the changing enrollment, brought on in part by higher tuition fees, for a while the biggest concern at public universities like the University of the Philippines was parking space rather than the problems of society. In this movement, though, the student activists had managed to mobilize 10–20,000 students very quickly and turn them out on the streets. Together, student and faculty activists put forth a proposal that the semester be changed to pass/fail for all students. If the students participated in the rallies and marches then they would pass. Most people on campus, it seemed, were already active in the struggle.

Ana came out of her meeting to let us know that she would have to keep meeting indefinitely. We could head back to the hostel, and was the hostel OK for us? I had noticed the night before that on the rates posted on the door were 600 pesos a night for Phil and my room, and 200 for Hong's. 12 euros a night for the two of us was about double what we'd expected to pay, so we were a bit unprepared. Ana, surprised at the rates, called around and came up with a solution. The next morning, Beth and Helena (another staff person) would meet us at the hostel and transport our bags to an office. The Federation of Indigenous Peoples of the Philippines (KAMP-Kalipunan ng Katutubong Mamamayan ng Pilipinas) just moved into a new

place that had some floor space we could use for one or two weeks.

Back at the hostel, the three of us engaged in a vigorous debate about "si," the Chinese term for self, and whether there would still be any "si" in future socialist and communist societies. We reached no formal conclusions but decided to call it a night; it was getting late and we had an 8am appointment with Beth and Helena the next day. Our schedule looked like it was going to be full: an arraignment hearing for a New People's Army commander in the morning, a rally at the presidential palace in the afternoon and a dinner date with a peasants' organization.

January 22

Moral support, Celebration, and the First Protest at the Palace

Beth arrived as promised at 8 and Helena shortly thereafter. All of our luggage (which were embarrassing in size because of the sleeping bags we'd brought) fit into the back of Helena's sedan, and we drove to our new temporary residence. The office seemed big and was situated in a neighborhood originally developed for educators. Most of the houses seemed built for middle-class living with driveways for private cars. But the plastic, paper, and food strewn on the streets belayed the general decay of infrastructure. Later we would find the tap water to be unsafe and some families pumping it by hand out in the streets against the backdrop of cases and

cases of Coke bottles. Couldn't drink the water, but plenty of American soda for sale.

Helena dropped us off at the Quezon City Hall, and Beth led us through the maze of city government buildings. The sign at the entrance reminded all people who entered that the grounds were part of a project to counter litter, so there was a remarkable contrast between the compound and what lay just on the other side of the gates. We passed long lines of people waiting to pay taxes or obtain marriage licenses and made our way to the courtrooms. When we finally found the right one, we entered a smallish room packed tightly: one side with prisoners handcuffed in pairs in yellow t-shirts, and the other with activists dressed in bright orange t-shirts that read "Free All Political Prisoners." They all held signs demanding the end of the criminalization of political prisoners. Many people's organizations had representatives there, including human rights, political prisoner, peasant, and worker organizations. Bayan, too, had their people in the room.

Beth gave us a brief history of the guy we were going to see. He was a New People's Army (NPA, the armed branch of the Communist Party of the Philippines) commander who was picked up off the street when he came back from the guerilla front to see his wife. Two years ago, when the NPA captured two Philippine Army officers (one of whom was a general), he was the one in charge of

the negotiations that sent them home. The officers had not a single complaint of mistreatment and certainly no indication of any torture or harassment. In contrast, the NPA commander had been tortured (par for the course for all political detainees) when first captured and had been sitting in a prison cell for over a year already without any legal resolution. No one except his wife and lawyer was allowed to see him, so when he came out for any court dates, friends and allies showed up in force to give him news and lend moral support.

We waited through about an hour of other cases being read off and moved to later dates and heard two accused car thieves plead not guilty to making off with a Mitsubishi. (Car theft was an extremely serious crime in the Philippines—apparently you could spend decades in prison if convicted.) When the NPA commander came out, there was a buzz of excitement; he looked really pleased at the number of supporters in the courtroom and shook hands vigorously with whoever he could reach. His lawyer fighting for his release, working pro bono for the Human Rights organization, Karapatan, looked young and a bit nervous, but made a few points to the judge and motioned to delay the arraignment.

Traditionally when a president was tossed in the Philippines, the incoming president made some moves to release some political prisoners "in the spirit of reconciliation." Since Gloria

Macapagal Arroyo had already made some noises about resuming "peace talks" with the CPP, the hope was the this commander would be released soon anyway. The judge had no problems with it, and the guards ushered their handcuffed prisoner out of the room. Beth motioned to us to follow the handful of supporters rushing after him, and we ran down the stairs and into the parking lot where they raised their fists in the air and shouted some encouragement. The commander grinned and raised his hands in response before the van pulled away.

The mood of the group seemed down after they drove away but more angry than despondent. They dispersed slowly and we followed, stopping by a small outdoor market full of fruit vendors. Phil and I were quite excited to partake in the abundant produce of the tropical climate—only to find the prices comparable to European prices. Natively grown Filipino bananas cost more per kilo than imported ones in Beijing. We couldn't believe it. The cheapest fruit we could find were small oranges imported from Taiwan, and at five pesos a piece, they were no bargain either.

Turned out mangos and pineapples, bananas, and watermelons were expensive because they were produced by huge multinationals like Dole on Philippine land tended by Filipino workers—for export. Fruits not grown for export were not produced—who had the land to grow and the mar-

ket to sell them?—and had to be imported at high prices. The consequence was Filipinos had to pay global market prices for things they could easily grow themselves for their own consumption. Rice, the main staple of their diet was about twice as expensive as the protected grain price in China, and just about what you would expect to pay in the Europe. We would soon find that the same held true for just about any commodity you could think of—except for clothes; most people there could afford to dress well, at the same time they couldn't eat their fill at every meal. Was it because the clothes we saw in Shoemart were rejects that multinationals like Gap and Levis turned down because they didn't make the grade? Was it a glut in the market and their export was restricted to keep the global market prices up? We could only guess. But Hong's observation was that the Filipino people dressed like they are rich but ate like they were poor.

We bought a bag of oranges and some bananas and followed Beth out of the City Hall grounds to catch a jeepney to the UP campus to wander around a bit and kill some time before going to Mendiola, the presidential palace, for a rally put on by Kilusang Magbubukid ng Pilipinas (KMP), a federation of Philippine peasants organizations. But just as we entered campus, we heard a loudspeaker, applause, and chants. We walked into a victory rally for the UP students; classes had been

canceled and speakers, from the students themselves to allied Congress members, roused and congratulated the crowd of happy students.

We stood along the fringes for a while before following Beth further into the campus to look for a place to eat lunch. She remembered a woman who had a small food counter, a former activist who because of personal reasons dropped out of the movement but still contributed what she could by giving free food to activists' children at UP. Her counter was inside the university mess hall, which was milling with students and looked very much like cafeterias looked in Beijing: privately owned. Rows of individual businesses lined the hall and students paid quite a lot to eat there. We found the stand and bought our lunch from her, again surprised at the cost/portion size ratio.

Several jeepney rides and a long walk later, we found ourselves on the doorstep of the presidential palace. Actually, the palace wasn't exactly a palace. Not having seen the inside, I can't say whether its outside appearance was deceptive, but it looked like a big, well-kept, but ordinary looking residence built on the side of a river swimming with insects and garbage.

So why, a day after People Power 2 ousted Erap, was there another crowd gathered in protest? (Someone asked one of the activists: "Aren't you tired?") The explanation was two-fold. That day was the anniversary of a peasant massacre. In

1987, thousands of peasants gathered at Mendiola demanding Aquino implement genuine land reform—land to the tiller. After Marcos fell, not much had changed in the countryside. Wealthy landlords and foreign multi-national agri-businesses still owned most of the country's rich, fertile ground, and they either rented out the land in sharecropper relationships or hired agricultural workers at below subsistence wages. Aquino came from one of the richest landlord families of all.

So when the peasants marched on Malacañang, Aquino ordered the guns in and killed 18 unarmed demonstrators. The commemorative rally in 2001 was a reminder to Arroyo that the peasants were still fighting for land reform. It was also to send a message to the new administration that Left forces were vigilant. They used the occasion to present to the newcomer a list of the "People's Demands," 20 some points in all, covering the release of political prisoners, land reform, the cessation of the "total war" policy in Mindanao (where the indigenous Moro people were struggling for self-determination), and the resumption of peace talks with the CPP/NPA/NDFP (Communist Party of the Philippines/New People's Army/National Democratic Front of the Philippines)—among others. Soon after the crowd gathered that morning, Arroyo invited their representatives into the palace to receive their list. Not much time for the new president to gloat.

By the time we arrived, over a hundred people had gathered, spread pictures of those killed on the pavement, and started a program over a microphone run from a jeepney. Speakers from various organizations came out, one after another: a women's org (who said that you just had to look at Cory Aquino's crimes to understand that the president's gender didn't make much difference if she was from the ruling elite), workers' org, urban poor, indigenous peoples'. . . The speeches, according to the small bits that were spoken in English and some sparse translation, focused on a central message to the new administration: "We'll give you a chance to meet the people's demands. But we're watching you, and you know what we're capable of." In addition was the slogan: "There can be no reconciliation without justice." And with that, a kid wearing a huge paper mâché head of Estrada climbed to the top of the jeepney with a giant "P" for prisoner taped to his back. They wanted criminal prosecution for the man who swindled and gambled away billions of the people's pesos.

The rally dragged on a bit. Word was they were going to keep it up until their people came out of the palace to report what Arroyo's response was. When they did, they said that Arroyo was very courteous and polite, and that she would respond to their demands in two weeks' time. With that, they wrapped up the program with a couple songs, one about the peasants' struggle to own their land,

and another from the New People's Army—just in case anyone had any illusions that the peasants were going to place all their hopes on land reform with the Arroyo government.

We rode in the jeepney to KMU, or Kilusang Mayo Uno (May First Movement), a labor organization's office. From there we met Beth and Jean, a woman from KMP, to have dinner at a restaurant near our new residence. The restaurant was pretty fancy and all outdoors, with little private trellises out in the yard where smaller parties could have dinner in private.

While we ate we talked mostly about the situation in the countryside. The assessment of the Philippines as a semi-feudal, semi-colonial state came from the relationship of the peasant and agricultural worker to the landlord and the multinational agri-businesses. We also talked about the different categorizations of the peasants and landlords into poor, middle, and rich peasants and small, medium, and big landlords. Poor peasants owned no land and no farm implements. Middle peasants might own part of their land and usually had some tools or maybe even a water buffalo—the primary draft animal in the countryside. Rich peasants owned most of their land, usually had implements, and hired labor in the busy seasons. But he/she still spent at least some time laboring on the land.

Small landlords characteristically depended on hired labor and owned all of their land. Medium landlords then, owned bigger tracts of land and had more hired labor. Most of the medium landlords had relationships with multinationals and the comprador class. Big landlords were in bed wholesale with those multinationals as a matter of course. They owned plantations or haciendas worked by contracted temporary workers who got paid for piecework.

The details of our discussion gave us a good overall picture of the what went on in the countryside, where 75% of the Philippine people lived.

We ate well that night and paid a big bill. The tuna alone was about 300 pesos, over a day's wage for the majority of Filipino workers. That included probably the workers who caught the fish, the ones who transported it to Manila, the cook who prepared it, and the waitress who served it up.

We managed to get back to our place by ourselves and introduced ourselves. Having just moved in, everything was in a state of disarray. The anti-Estrada campaign hadn't left much time for unpacking and settling in. Five different organizations representing different indigenous peoples shared the office, and the young, single staff who had no other living arrangements (either because they came from the countryside or their families lived far away) lived in the rooms above the office. We found the same situation in every other

office we went to. We got a huge room where the men usually slept—evidently they were away for a few days. The young women pulled mats out for us to sleep on the hardwood floors and someone brought a bag of linens and pillows for us to use. The giant cracks in the windows and three inch gap under the door made Phil and I glad for our mosquito nets and sleep came easy.

January 23

Militant Labor Unions and Young Activists in the Indigenous People's Movement

In the morning, a phone call from Beth instructed us to return to KMU's office. We got there early and the guy who we were supposed to talk with us was late. So in the meantime, we sat among the anti-Estrada props and moving boxes (they were in the middle of a move to a bigger office) and struck up a conversation with the union president of a big multinational corporation. Karla was also in the leadership of the labor organization, which was really an umbrella under which federations and trade unions operated. They gave support to and helped plan and coordinate collective actions. As a member of Bayan, they also took

part in its activities. No organizations, however, were forced to participate in all of its actions. They all had representatives in Bayan's leading bodies such as the National Council (a democratic committee for decision making) and could withdraw their support for any particular action. But they had to adhere to the general principles of unity or they could be kicked out.

Karla was on her way to another meeting but took the time to sit with us for a while and describe, step by step, the strategies they used to organize a workplace. The first step was to find sympathetic and trustworthy contacts within the company and have them conduct a social investigation of the whole structure: who worked for whom and who had power? What were the relationships within the ownership, management, and workers? Then they identified a few more contacts and began to have some worker education sessions. Each contact was then responsible for finding maybe five more and so the contacts would spread. All the organizing had to be done outside the workplace and under secure conditions.

I asked about the organizing situation among what they called the "contractual workers." In reality, contractual workers were a huge force of so-called temporary workers who worked jobs from between three and six months. Employment laws dictated that employers had the right to automatically lay them off after a few months.

Then they had to go through an entire new application process to see if they could be rehired. The national minimum wage per day was set at 250 pesos (up about 25 pesos thanks to a long struggle by the labor organization members), and that was usually what the temp workers got. Sometimes, if their management was handled through middlemen agencies, the agencies took an additional cut—an illegal but common practice. The 250 peso rate itself was low enough; the government's own estimates were that an average family of six needed over 400 pesos a day to subsist. The intense scarcity of jobs made two wage earners in a family difficult, and even if both parents could earn steady incomes, who would look after the children?

Karla described organizing under these conditions as extremely difficult. The contractualization of the country's work force was in the name of liberalization under the policies of the WTO, and its purpose was to develop a suppliant pool of labor. For instance, in the Shoemart department stores around Metro Manila only 1,500 of the workers were "regular" out of the 20,000 total. So labor unions found they had to change their tactics and began an effort to organize the workers' communities. With the development of community organizations that struggled to fight for basic services came the raised consciousness required to continue that struggle in the workplace. So far the tactic was still in its beginning

stages, and though it wasn't ideal, it was what the conditions permitted.

We made Karla late for her meeting I'm sure, but Luis appeared after a while to continue our discussion. Because he wasn't directly involved in organizing workers, and because he actually wasn't the person they usually had talk to people like us, he mostly read from a pamphlet that the org put out regarding the situation of Philippine workers. He was a bit unprepared for any deeper questions we had, so we didn't stay long. He had a lot of other tasks to take care of in the aftermath of the Erap Resign movement anyway. We left after receiving instructions from their international coordinator, Dina, who told us to be at the office in the morning so that we could go visit a local trade union.

With a newly purchased map, detailed instructions, and just the very beginnings of a feel for the language, we were starting to be able to find our way around. We, meaning Phil and I—Hong was doing pretty well just being patient with our translation and trying to adjust to leaving China for the first time.

For dinner we found a 24 hour cafeteria for the workers from the fancy hotel near where we lived, where we would return as regulars. The people there were very friendly and the food seemed clean and basic in spite of the small servings. It was also in our price range. (It was a good thing we'd moved, because our $3 a day estimate for food was quickly

ballooning to sometimes double that.) We found ourselves ordering double portions of everything and cringing when the server scooped up a serving spoonful of vegetables and meat—only to shake off the pieces teetering on the sides of the ladle before dumping it on our tray. One serving often consisted of three pieces of squash and one piece of meat with some gravy. We ate that with "cups" of rice—servings about half the size of a mug. Was it that we ate way more than most Filipino people, or that they just ate very little? From the looks of their body structures, we naively concluded that due to their size and the oppressive heat, they just didn't eat very much.

Since it was New Year's Eve in China, we tracked down an international phone card to call Hong's family. The only phone we could find to use it in was in the fancy hotel, and after going through the security check, we made our way past a Filipino woman playing loud elevator music on a baby grand piano with an Anglo man on an accordion—the first foreigner I'd seen since we'd arrived. There had apparently been a wedding that day, because we also passed a huge table laden with presents and several sparsely clad (but wearing elbow length satin gloves) young women fluttering up and down the stairs. What a short walk it took to enter a completely different universe! And all the service personnel who made sure the guests

were comfortable were probably temporary workers who would very soon be out of a job.

Hong's family was happy to hear from him. When we got home, Marie and Nelly, two of the young staff women at the office were out on the patio watching TV, so we sat awhile and talked to them. Mostly we asked about the situation in the youth sector, because they both became activists when they were in university. We had the impression that there were a lot of young people in the movement, and especially a lot of young women—a shock to Hong who professed to believe that the reason why there were no women activists in China was because women were not revolutionary enough.

Most people, it seemed, could send their kids to elementary school. But of every 100 elementary school graduates, only 20 could go to high school. Of those 20, maybe five went on to college, and after finally obtaining a college degree, one out of ten graduates could find a steady job. What happened to the other nine? They went abroad. Hong asked them, among others, if many young activists joined these organizations because they couldn't find other jobs. But everyone we talked to assured us that the people who worked as activists in the mass organizations were among the people who would be able to find work elsewhere. In other words, there were a pretty talented bunch of intellectuals in the movement.

That night, after getting his ankles bit to hell the night before, Hong put up his mosquito net too, and we kept the fan on to drown out the sound of his deep sleep snores.

January 24

A Steel Company's Labor Union President's Wages

Hong had had enough. In the morning, he pulled out his emergency cache of instant Chinese noodles and pickled vegetables and had a gleeful breakfast. He exclaimed that the biggest mistake he made was not bringing twenty bags of noodles instead of a paltry five.

Dina met us at the office and together with Emilia, a staff person of the local trade union's federation where we were going, we started off for local steel company. We first traveled by jeepney and then by what they called tricycles. To go short distances that jeepney routes didn't cover, most people went around on converted motorcycles—Japanese bikes with sidecars fashioned on the side to hold two passengers. I thought we'd get two, but after Phil and Hong got in the sidecar, Dina asked them to move their feet and squeezed in the very

minimal space left. Emilia and I got on sidesaddle behind the driver and all five of us were off.

When we entered the compound we noticed an eerie silence. High walls ringed with coils of barbed wire and the unnatural quiet reminded us of a prison. There was no banging of pipes, truck motors revving, or shouting workers—nothing to indicate there was any kind of production going on.

The union president met us at the gate and apologized, saying that we weren't allowed into the workplace, but we could meet and discuss in the union office. We followed him through narrow alleys crammed full of small run-down buildings side by side with laundry lines and children in doorways. We found out later that most of the workers in the steel company rented houses or rooms or bed space in those buildings. Their union office was a small, one room affair with a counter and sink on the far end and a small closet for a bathroom. Two or three men brought in a table and some plastic chairs so we could sit—and bottles of soda. Since their English was not fluent, our translation was three way: Filipino to English to Chinese and back the other way around.

The reason why there were no sounds of production was because there *was* no production. The only metal produced in the Philippines—in spite of its abundance of raw materials—was the low grade kind, the thin plate metal that sat atop of

roofs and was welded together to make sidecars for motorcycles. Any kind of building grade steel was imported from China, Russia, Korea, Brazil, etc. The steel company simply warehoused it and moved it around to different parts of the city for construction. The moving around part was done by the workers, less than 100 of them, 71 of whom were regular workers. Having only 35 contractual workers made it a relatively easy organizing effort. The union was established in 1989.

The rest of the 200 people in the building were part of the management, shuffling papers, and giving orders. Oscar, the union president, gave us a rundown of the wages and benefits of the union members. On the surface, it looked a pretty good deal; folks worked eight-hour days, six days a week. They got about two weeks of paid sick leave, two weeks' vacation time and about ten days for national holidays like Christmas—a big one in the very Catholic country. They also got a "13th month" bonus pay, that is, an extra month's wage at the end of the year. They were not forced to work overtime or Sundays, but if they did, they were given a small percentage extra. While the union could not represent the contractual workers in any grievances, they made sure that any agreements they negotiated with the management applied too to the temporary workers.

Some of the recent struggles in which they had been involved was a fight to get safety shoes

issued to the workers who were always getting injured, and getting severance pay (the workers' own demands) for a worker who was unfairly fired. They both involved the workers conducting a walkout and both were successful, but they only got paid for work days missed during the first.

But while their wages and work conditions were probably light years ahead of union-less companies, the thing was their wages were still at the national minimum of 250 pesos. So overtime was not directly forced, but simple economics demanded it. The three of us sat calculating until we came up with a surprising result. According to the legal exchange rate, Oscar made as much per month as Hong! But Oscar ate two meals a day of rice and a little salted fish, could only afford to rent bed space, and had to spend at least 600 pesos a month on transportation. In contrast, Hong led a pretty middle-class existence in Beijing. He could stuff himself three times a day with however much he wanted to eat, with big portions of meat to boot. He carried a cell phone and a pager and had beer to drink and cigarettes to smoke (a habit Oscar gave up because he couldn't afford it). Once in a while, when he was in a hurry, he could even take taxis without too much strain on his pocketbook.

Of course, one of the main differences—aside from the grossly undervalued Chinese yuan—was that Oscar's wife just lost her job at a fish canning factory. They closed down just as she

was about to give birth to their first child. With no prospects for any work, she returned to family still in the countryside and now relied on their support as well as any money Oscar could send. Hong's wife was in better financial shape than he, and while she didn't give him much support, she certainly doesn't need his.

Regardless of the differences, though, the sobering fact was that these workers who did heavy manual labor could not get enough to eat. And they stayed with their jobs because it was still better than most, especially with the union backing them up. So when a guy appeared with a plateful of white bread sandwiches with nothing in them but a thin spread of mayonnaise, we had quite an appreciation for what it and the soda meant to them. We also realized how precious Oscar's time with us had been. For the sake of our meeting, he took one of his few allowed union duty days. When he ran out, which he always did, he continued going to his trainings and mobilizations, missing work without pay.

We wished them luck in their struggle and they in ours and boarded another tricycle back to the office. The three of us arrived home with some time to take a short snooze before going to meet Ana and her family for dinner. All went as planned, except after we met her at the Bayan office, I stumbled following her down the stairs. I jumped up immediately determined not to be hurt

but could barely hobble to the car where my ankle began swelling with abandon.

Ana's husband and two kids, in their late teens, were in the car. Having heard about Hong's noodle yearnings, they took us to Manila's Chinatown. The ethnic Chinese population in the Philippines was pretty substantial, and they occupied many of the positions of power and money. I never did any real investigation but from some comments and observations, I gathered that discrimination against the Chinese was quite prevalent. In fact several days after taking power, a newspaper article quoted Arroyo's assurances that she was just as pro-Chinese as Estrada (many of his cronies were Chinese) and that she would do her very best to continue building good relations with them. That included trying to stem the current rise in gang related kidnappings of ethnic Chinese. She even cited her husband's great, great, great, second cousin or something of the sort as having come from China way back when.

We had a good and expensive meal. I even got some ice for my ankle.

I was stuffed from the meal but didn't complain when we stopped off at another restaurant, this time European style, for dessert. As we walked into the upper crusty establishment passed the delicate trays of rich pastries and cakes, I couldn't help but think of the mayonnaise sandwiches we had for lunch at the union office. I probably couldn't

afford dessert at a comparable place in the Europe, and the fried dough dipped in a warm mug of bittersweet chocolate that Ana ordered for me was one of the best things I'd ever eaten.

Ralph asked about the Cultural Revolution, and Hong told Mao stories about hot peppers. (Mao, Zhou, and Liu Shaoqi sitting around trying to figure out how to get a cat to lick its own butt—a metaphor to a struggle they were having with the Soviet Union.) By the time they dropped us off it was close to 11pm. We were soon back in our room summarizing the day's events. The following day promised to be another full and educational one. We were scheduled to be with Kadamay (Kalipunan ng Damayang Mahihirap), an organization for urban poor and to go on an exposure trip to the workers' community by the garbage mountain: Payatas.

January 25

The Garbage Pile and the Victory Party

Early the next morning we headed to Kadamay's office to meet Deirdre. She was assigned to take us to the national office of the org for urban poor, whose staff would then be "in charge" of us for the next two days. I was downing ibuprofen to calm my painful ankle, and our progress was slow. Lots of jeepney rides but also lots of walking in between.

Kadamay's office was in a completely different part of town, still in Quezon City, but in a section we'd never been before. It seemed slightly more upscale with less garbage on the streets and less traffic. The mostly residential neighborhood sported bigger houses, and the office itself was large, immaculate, and filled with young staff people. Deirdre turned us over to Sandy, in charge of international affairs, who led us upstairs to a

meeting room with a table, chairs, and a whiteboard. She gave us a brief introduction, drawing graphics on the whiteboard as we talked: the Philippines had an approximate population of 77–78 million people, 20 million of whom they classified as "urban poor." Five million of those 20 million lived in Metro Manila. The figures didn't quite add up if 75% of the people live in the countryside. Sandy couldn't figure it out either but chalked it up to the constant flux of people coming and going from the city.

Urban poor by definition was not a class distinction, but rather a description of standard of living. And while most of the urban poor was made up of the under or unemployed, there were also workers, peasants, and self-employed petty bourgeoisie in its ranks. Most were from the provinces (countryside) where the feudal land relations made it increasingly difficult for poor and middle peasants to subsist on their rented land. So they crowded to the cities and "squatted": found a vacant or abandoned lot usually near wherever they could find work, scavenged for some building materials like cardboard, sheet metal, and old tires, and erected a place to live. Eventually those areas grew into workers' communities.

Some of the problems facing those communities were the lack of basic services, including water, electricity, health care, and education. The biggest problem of all was that the government often

decided to reclaim the land beneath them—for development or simply harassment reasons—and called in the bulldozers and police wielding guns to level the place. Kadamay worked to organize the residents to fight for basic rights and against demolition, mostly through legal struggle. Sometimes they managed to gain some generated electricity and sometimes after the houses were knocked down they could force the government to identify a relocation site for the victims.

They also worked to solve some of the basic needs like safe water to drink and were beginning to tackle some employment issues by helping to set up small industries. Different from other organizations, they tried to stay away from the "roof over our heads" kind of doctrine, which made decent housing the goal of the struggle. Kadamay, through education and training, worked to raise the residents' political consciousness about the system of oppression and how the plight of the urban poor was tied to landlessness and the lack of national industries.

Sandy also gave us a little introduction to Payatas, a relocation site for urban poor formerly in Manila who had had their houses bulldozed. The original site was called "The Promised Land" in Filipino, and while there was nothing there when they moved in 1988 with 2,500 pesos (about 50 euros with the current exchange rate) in their pockets as compensation—no houses, no water,

no work, no schools—it was still a semi-habitable piece of land where they could start over. Until the garbage started piling up. About a kilometer away from Payatas, in a small depression in the land, the government ran a small garbage dump. Over the years the garbage in the depression became a mound, then a small mountain. The trucks kept coming until the small mountain grew into an enormous cliff, pushing closer and closer to the houses in the relocation site. Residents soon found that in place of the forest and stream, they faced a towering wall of toxic waste. And the past July, after a few days of typhoon rain, the wall collapsed and the slide that resulted buried hundreds and killed dozens of people.

Since then, organizing efforts in the community had intensified, and several organizations in the different sections of the community called "phases" were gaining members and strength. We were going to the org in Payatas B, to the phase where the garbage slide occurred.

Our guide to Payatas was late, so we had lunch with the staff, mostly shy young men all of whom seemed barely 20. When Ted arrived, he told us that we had a long ways to travel and most of it would be by jeepney. Payatas *was* quite a long ride from the office but only because of the traffic. It took us over an hour to travel what should have been a twenty minute ride with no other cars on the road. Sitting in that jeepney jammed in

between hundreds of other black exhaust spewing vehicles was suffocating. Phil and I reminisced longingly about the pristine air quality in Beijing (an inside joke for anyone who has ever been to Beijing). As we approached the site, Ted pointed out glimpses of the trash heap, and we started to climb and descend small hills, weaving in and out of clustered houses. We couldn't see too much but still got the impression it was huge.

The Payatas stop opened up onto a long street that looked like a very typical main road in a country village, complete with little shops and children entertaining themselves; the scene was familiar because we'd all spent time in the Chinese countryside. Phil pointed and exclaimed, "Look, the mountains are so beautiful!" I squinted and looked at our guide. "I don't think that's a mountain. I think that's the trash heap." Phil couldn't believe it, but Ted confirmed it. They weren't exaggerating when they said "mountain of garbage."

We met one of the leaders of the community org at a vendor's stand. A crowd of little kids gathered behind us as we talked, and soon one brave one reached out and tugged the strap to my bag. I turned around and made friends. Shy at first, they soon fought to grab my hands and led me down the street after them straight into their little school room. Their teacher didn't seem too surprised to see me and made each student recite "My name is. . . " in English while I tried to convey to her that

I'd lost "my people" and wasn't actually supposed to be there. After some investigation, she directed me to the second floor of the building next door. The kids came in a storm ahead and after me up the stairs only to be shooed out by the adults inside.

This was the small hall where the organization held its meetings and discussions. From that second story window we got our first really good look at the garbage mountain. How do you describe something that is unfathomable, even as you see it with your own eyes? The mountain was a sea—a giant wave of human-made waste, the crest of which towered menacingly over the houses of the village that it dwarfed. Every few meters a puff of unnatural purplish smoke marked a spot where spontaneous combustion was at work. And little dotted figures trudged along the paths that zigzagged the pile—a few of the 2000 plus people who combed over the sprawl every day looking for food only half rotted, or anything that might be sold for a few pesos.

Our hosts showed us a small painting on the wall that one of the community organization's leaders painted of the same view two or three years ago—an identical scene, except it was done back when the mound hasn't reached the height of the top of the water tower. Now the water tower was dwarfed too, and according to the artist, the current height was even down from before the slide, an avalanche that collapsed an entire cliff.

After making more formal introductions, Ted left us with the three community members, Una, Victor, and Willie. Una stayed at home minding her many children, Victor was a construction worker and carpenter who had only occasional work, and Willie was a part time government worker in the traffic department and a drove a jeepney twice a week. There were 45,000 residents of Payatas. After what they called the "tragedy" of the trash-slide (they didn't call it an accident because the government could have easily projected the consequences), the government relocated over 7500 people to a site far north of Payatas, a place called Erap City, which we were scheduled to visit the next day.

Of the 800 plus who were buried in the slide, over 260 were killed. The exact figures were unknown because while the community knew which houses were buried and who was in them at the time, many of the scavengers were unknown. Only about 50 of the 2000 daily scavengers actually lived in Payatas—the large majority were from outside and even more impoverished places. And of the 260 who were known to have been killed, only 80 some had been identified. Many of the bodies still lay decomposing in the slide's path.

After the tragedy, the government with all the nations cameras watching—and some international ones too—offered each family that could prove it had lost someone 15,000 pesos for "emer-

gency relief." Corpse money. But many of the bodies pulled out from the trash were left unguarded on a hill, until one day they were hauled away and buried in a mass unmarked grave, saving the government hundreds of thousands of pesos.

Estrada, after waiting several days to see if the thing would just disappear, finally made it out to the site a few weeks after the tragedy. Bending to growing public anger, he closed the dumpsite at the end of July. In the first week of January 2001, however, with as little fanfare as possible, he reopened the site and started a new one that covered 20 hectares (about 50 acres) of land. And once again the rumble of garbage trucks began, this time fifty a day, each one carrying seven tons of waste.

Now the community org, with the help of Kadamay, was mobilizing people to fight for six major demands from the city:

1. Criminal prosecution of those responsible;
2. Removal of the garbage rather than of the residents (i.e., getting rid of the garbage instead of moving out the residents);
3. Increase in the amount of indemnification;
4. A public apology from the Quezon City mayor;
5. Restarting efforts to retrieve the bodies; and
6. Basic services for those who lost their homes in the slide.

They had a court date the following morning in Quezon City to present their demands.

But how did it get to *be* like this? In 1992, after the small valley was full of trash, the government opened the land next to it as a garbage dump. They promised then that only the trash from Quezon City would be brought there, and about 20 seven-ton trucks went every day to dump. Within six months, though, the number of trucks had quadrupled, and by 1994, 2,000 trucks a day were dropping off their seven tons—way more than what Quezon City alone could produce. But that still wasn't the peak. In 1999, at the time of the slide, 4,000 trucks coming from other cities were making a daily run—that was *28,000 tons of garbage a day* being heaped precariously above a community of 45,000 people.

Trash disposal is a problem of modern society. But the problem here was that the government didn't view it as a problem—they viewed it as a high profit industry. Allegedly, the Quezon City mayor's son gained ownership of the business after it was privatized—and the Quezon City mayor was an old crony of Joseph Estrada's. What, was the mayor going to enact a regulation that would cause his friends and relatives to have a decreased profit margin?

We asked what kept people in Payatas. What were their lives like to have to stay in such a hell hole? Most were contractual workers or unem-

ployed who were originally from the countryside. Unable to eke out a living while paying high land rent to the landlords, they were forced to the urban slums, only to have their homes demolished. Now, at this relocation site, after a few years of rebuilding, a giant mountain of trash came literally to and over their front doors. Which was why, when the government painted them as vagrants or squatters who should've known better than to build their shacks by the garbage dump, they got really pissed off. Hence the demand for the public apology.

So the people of Payatas weren't so much enamored with their homes and thus willing to stay and fight for them, as they simply had no place else to go. They'd already been moved once and with no land in the countryside to return to, they don't have much of a choice. We asked our three hosts: if there was genuine land reform and they got a share of land, would they go back to the countryside? (We said "genuine" because the government had enacted many phony land reforms that keep the land firmly in the hands of the rich.) And how much land would it take for them to go back? Each one said they would go back if they were guaranteed 1/2 a hectare (about 1.25 acres) per adult to farm.

To us this crystallized the connection between land reform in the countryside and the masses of urban poor. In China, where land reform was com-

plete and protected to a large extent these days[1] by the government's restrictions on buying and selling land, there *were* urban ghettos of peasants looking for work in the city. But the great majority were seasonal workers, who went out in search of extra money to send home in between planting and harvesting. They suffered a few months but could always return to their land, where subsistence farming was still manageable—in spite of the growing tax burden and corruption of local bureaucrats.

We were ready to go out for our tour. The path on which we came into the village must have been in a different direction, because as we walked closer and closer to the edge of the dump, the fumes became overwhelming. Imagine what a several-stories-tall trash mountain burning plastic, Styrofoam, and whatever else industry, businesses, and residences put in the bin every day, emits. The smell was of toxic chemicals, and I felt my lungs and my heart tighten. Even Hong, a heavy smoker, felt the air quality hard to tolerate. Yet thousands of people lived there, breathing those fumes day in and day out. We walked out to the edge of the slide where we could see the remnants of a house half buried. A poisonous looking black stream below gave evidence of just how contaminated the groundwater was. Contaminated or not, the locals

[1] This has changed drastically since 2001.

still had to use it—had to pay for it even, at about a peso per gallon.

Phil wanted to get on top of the mountain to get a feel for what it was like, but there was no way across the sticky black river. So they took us down several alleyways for a closer look and told us if we still wanted to go on top afterwards they would take us. Each alley was crowded with residences and their occupants peered out curiously at us. Many of the children looked sick and had evidence of skin disease. Even the hordes of dogs and cats looked slightly ill, with weeping and crusty eyes and patches of skin that wouldn't grow fur. Went without saying that asthma rates were high.

By the time we'd gone down the third alley, my ankle was throbbing and Hong looked like he was going to be sick, so we decided to call off the climb. We went to Victor's home to pick him up—he and Willie were going with us that evening to Bayan's victory party at a nearby college.

Victor's family lived in a row of several rooms originally intended for one family but which now housed three. Because they slept on the floor, which was at most just a scrap of linoleum on top of the dirt, everything was immaculate, and people took off their shoes to enter. We peered into the small room (maybe 2.5 by 3 meters) sectioned off by a wall constructed of strips of bamboo nailed together and covered in grain bags and were told that a family of seven lived there. I couldn't see

how seven people, even if five of them were children, would have enough room even to lie down next to each other in that space. The room where Victor's family slept was divided into two sections. One was slightly raised, so the adults slept above the children crowding on the floor. That room opened into the kitchen which was only partly covered by the tin roof, where the three families shared a two burner gas stove.

Willie soon appeared in fancier clothes and with Victor freshly changed, we set off for the victory party. Ted, our guide from Kadamay's office had told them to take us in a taxi because the fare wouldn't be that much more than several jeepney rides for the five of us. So we all squeezed in. In spite of our destination's proximity, though, we still spent almost an hour on the road, about half of which was at a single jammed intersection.

We found the party without too much trouble. More than a hundred of people milled around the lit up courtyard of what looked like the reception area of the small private college. Many of the people we'd met over the past few days were there and their mood was upbeat and festive. Beth met us at the door and showed us to the room where speakers were giving talks in front of seated guests. We sat clueless for a long period before someone sitting behind us noticed we didn't understand the language and was nice enough to fill in some of the gaps. First was a speaker who gave a general

summary of the entire anti-Estrada campaign. Then came the reading of a list of names and organizations involved in or who supported the broad United Front against Erap.

Soon an acoustic band from the workers' org came up to sing what they said was a revolutionary song. And although the MC gathered from the crowd that everyone was already hungry, she introduced another group, the Jerks, after whose performance she promised we could all eat. The Jerks turned out to be a rock band with electric guitar, bass, and drums, wildly popular among the young activists in the crowd. They seemed to know all their lyrics and joined in the refrains. According to the guy behind me, one was about Filipinos who wanted to be white Americans, and one was about the anti-Estrada movement. One line in English I caught was something about the millions he spent on his mistresses while the workers stood in line trying to buy one kilo of rice. All their songs were dedicated to a Bayan staff member killed by government soldiers while she was on a work trip to the southern island of Mindanao.

Soup was on and the lines were long. The three of us decided to socialize for a while before attempting to get a crack at the food. Outside we met up with Charlie, the university professor, who promised to make me a tape of the Jerks and get me the lyrics.

When we went back inside we made an important discovery: Filipinos did not have small appetites when there was lots of tasty free food for the taking. The smallest, thinnest, young women balanced two or three heaping platefuls of noodles, rice, meat ,and vegetables in one hand and smaller dessert plates and drinks in the other. Wow, we felt stupid. The food was delicious, but I still had the taste of burning plastic in my mouth. What a world of difference. Manila made Beijing seem like an egalitarian society (another Beijing insider joke).

More talks ensued, including one guy who was an extremely animated speaker (later we found out he was an actor). He had been sitting next to us during dinner and through a couple other speakers, so he knew we were struggling with translation. So in the middle of his speech, he burst in with, ". . . speak in English so our foreign friends can understand. . . " and then proceeded to talk to the end in Filipino. We did manage to rope Charlie into sitting next to us for a while to translate. And the video they showed about People Power 2 was without narration or interviews. Most of the time, though we spent people watching, marveling at just how broad the broad United Front was.

Soon the speeches were over and the dance music and strobe lights came on. The result was a handful of young student-aged people left dancing on the floor; most everyone else made a beeline for

the courtyard. Folks from the KAMP office where we were staying offered us a ride in their van, but they had to make a stop at a wake first. Tired but interested, we piled in and found out that the wake was for the mother of a Congressman who was an ally to progressive forces. They would acknowledge the alliance by paying their respects.

The wake was in an ornate church filled with a crowd up yet another notch from the folks at the victory party and yet another planet away from Payatas, where living kin couldn't even get the government to keep digging for the bodies still buried by the garbage. We found the rich treat their own dead a bit differently. We felt a little self conscious in our shorts and t-shirts, but dutifully approached the silk lined casket to view the dead woman and circled back out again but not before hitting the fresh juice bar three or four times.

While we waited outside for our companions to say the right things to the right people, a woman who was also catching a ride in the van gave us the inside scoop on one of the wake's guests. The story was that he was a traitor to the progressive movement and until a couple days before, a pro-Estrada politician. He was there at the wake to make nice with people, but no one seemed to want to have anything to do with him. In spite of his efforts to engage in circles of conversations, he spent most of his time standing awkwardly alone.

We were getting ready to leave when suddenly a big, black limo pulled up with Filipino flags fluttering on the front. News cameras and lights appeared as the Congressman appeared with the President Macapagal Arroyo on his arm. Hong was shocked at how lax the security appeared; in China riffraff like us would've been cleared out hours ago and there would have been a huge circumference of security blocking the crowd from any high-level official. I guess a main difference was that in the Philippines the president was still elected and had to shake hands with people to get votes.

The ride home was short and the crawl to bed easy. Our schedule was grueling and every minute engaging.

January 26

Erap City

Our guide to Erap City didn't show in the morning, so we ended up meeting Beth at Kadamay's office where she turned us over to Felipe and Gabi, a young couple from the relocation site. The jeepney ride we took to Erap City routed past Payatas and then headed north about another hour. We actually entered another province by the time we got there just before noon. It was blazing hot, over 32 degrees[2] and sticky. At the jeepney stop our guides led us to the long line of human powered pedicabs—tricycles with side cars. We found out we were within walking distance, though, and chose to walk our way slowly through the rows of government housing.

The whole place had a desolate feeling to it, though we could see many people on the streets. But the rows and rows of houses with idle but

[2] 90 degrees Fahrenheit.

able-bodied adults loitering in doorways made the place seem like some kind of temporary emergency housing—either that or a prison camp. At first glance the houses themselves seemed OK. They were all exactly the same and weren't too beautiful, but they were neat and all made of concrete blocks. The unit we went to housed three organizers from Kadamay. The interior mirrored the outside: concrete blocks. With no trees and a tin roof, the effect was like being in a giant brick oven. As soon as we got there, they put on a pot of rice and sent Felipe out with a few pesos to buy some cokes.

Xavier, Jaime, and Zak were all oldies in the movement, who were now based in the workers' communities, tasked with organizing and mobilizing the residents to challenge the government. They talked too about their family situation. Zak was a little better off because his wife was a middleman in an embroidery operation. Xavier's situation was not all that clear, but Jaime's was pretty dire. His first wife had died, and his second wife, while not an activist, supported him in his work. But since he lived and worked in Erap City, he got to go home maybe two or three times a month. Oftentimes he found her crying because there wasn't enough food for her and their children to eat.

His story didn't make me feel that great about appearing just before lunch, although we did have some bananas and cookies to share. The rest of

lunch consisted of a small pot of rice and a small can (about six ounces) of sardines in tomato sauce split between the eight of us. (Unfortunately, we failed to convey this to Hong, who was given the pot first and took over half of the rice. Even the very poor in China could eat their fill of rice.) We drank Cokes because the water wasn't safe to drink and only ran twice a day for 15 minutes at a time anyway. They had electricity every other day from 6pm to 6am. All times in between were dark and dry.

But the major problem in Erap City was not the water or electricity supplies. Or the mosquito infestation (a couple shakes of some clothes hanging in the corner woke up a cloud of mosquitoes resting from their long night of blood sucking), or the fact that those concrete ovens were actually way below standards and expensive to boot. No, the main problem by far was that the government relocated all these working people to a place hours away from any kind of work. Even if they could afford the time to commute, they were hard pressed to find a big enough paycheck to cover the transportation costs or renting a bed in the city. So, many, less than a year after they moved, had already moved back to the garbage heap.

After we finished lunch we went on a short tour, shortened by the heat and my ankle. We visited a few different families and learned that families lived rent free for the first three years. The fourth

year, they had to pay 500 pesos a month, the fifth the rent went up to 700, then 900 and finally 1,200. After 30 years they could have the deed. That put the total price of owning a sub-standard concrete cube at around half a million pesos. After looking at the quality of the construction, we could see the tremendous profit-making potential there. The houses had no foundation. Or, more accurately, the foundation was a layer of coarse gravel at ground level covered with a crisscross of weak looking re-bar placed less than a meter apart. Felipe went over to a piece of rebar sticking out of one of the half constructed walls and bent it easily—and he didn't look that strong. Their estimation was that the construction cost per house was probably less than 10,000 pesos.

The first group of people who moved there were due to pay rent soon. The prediction was that most would have to leave.

Along the road we met several people who had relocated from Payatas. One man lost his wife and all his children. He bought a tricycle with the corpse money and made about 30 pesos a day. Another young girl was buried waist deep in garbage after she turned back to try and save her infant sister. When the rescuers arrived, she shouted for them to look for the baby first, but because the policy was to save those who were spotted alive first, by the time they got to her sister she was dead.

As we passed a group of residents sitting in a doorway, we got news that there was another garbage slide at Payatas that morning. They first said that another twenty people had been killed but our hosts said that news there was often inaccurate. We hurried to another home where we learned from someone who had a TV and watched the news that one person, a young boy who was scavenging was the sole casualty. The woman who we confirmed the news with turned out to be an activist in the community organization and had been with the Payatas group in court that morning. She talked in angry but quiet tones to our hosts and wiped tears away with one hand. The Quezon City mayor didn't even bother to show up for the hearing; he sent his lawyer instead and they left empty handed and somewhat demoralized. She returned to Erap City to the news of another fatal garbage slide.

Late afternoon approached and Jaime and Zak led us to a small vendor's picnic table for a rest. We bought drinks and rolls with duck eggs for everyone and had the impression that it was a lot of food for them. Main points of discussion centered around the social conditions in the community: was there much crime and things like drugs and prostitution? There was, it turns out, a lot of petty crime like burglary. But robbers usually left the TV's and other valuables alone. They went mostly for the rice and other edibles. Drugs were pretty big, and most kids start off sniffing glue and

hitting alcohol afterwards for a bigger high. Sometimes fights broke out after binges. But for reasons unclear, there wasn't much prostitution.

It was getting that time. Zak, on his way out of Erap City to see his wife, was to guide us back, so we waited while he packed his bag and said goodbye to our other hosts. When we got off the first jeepney we bumped into one of the staff people from the Kadamay office, a 16 year old kid. On the bus ride to Quezon City Hall, we found out that he was from Payatas and had been sent there to investigate the garbage slide that happened that morning. He had, before joining the org, gone to school in the morning and spent his afternoons on the garbage heap scavenging. We paid our fare and turned to pay theirs, but the ticket taker didn't ask anything from them. We hypothesized that maybe he was sympathetic to the movement and knew them somehow, but they just smiled and said they would pay later.

Goodbyes were quick and soon we were back in our "favorite" cafeteria for dinner and home again. The message from Beth was that the meeting for the assessment of the anti-Estrada campaign was the next morning at 9:30, and we were to find our own way to the conference room in the hostel where we spent our first two nights.

January 27

Assessing the Anti-Estrada Movement and a Sudden Change in Plans

At 9:30 we were the only ones in the conference room. I guess we still weren't running on what locals called "Philippine time." It was 10 by the time people started to trickle in and we made ourselves busy collating and stapling copies of the People's Agenda and several statements made by various leaders. Representatives from the many organizations that had participated in the broad front against Estrada showed up—in total there were about 40–50, young and old, women and men.

We had two translators between the three of us at the meeting but still only got general ideas. First off were a lot of long speeches that sounded congratulatory in nature and somewhat longwinded,

but most people seemed very tuned in and able to make corrections and ask for clarifications. And after the congratulating and giving due credit to speeches was the well-received reminder that ousting the president with peaceful mass movements would have been very difficult without the ongoing armed struggle in the countryside. Specifically, they noted that the MILF (Moro-Islamic Liberation Front) in Mindanao fought long and hard against Erap's total war policy, and their just fight against the fascist tactics really helped turn the tide of public opinion, further weakening Estrada's regime.

There was also some analysis about the differences between People Power 1 and People Power 2. Mostly that with People Power 1, there were some unsuccessful uprisings in the countryside, and after Marcos left for Hawaii, Left forces were demoralized because they were not able to seize power in the cities. As a whole, they were pretty marginalized in the struggle. People Power 2, on the other hand, was characterized by strict adherence to the United Front line which resulted in the Left forces directing the ultimately successful peaceful mass movements in the cities.

Several people also gave updates on the status of Arroyo's response to their demands—basically that there hadn't been any. The assessment of her power base was that it came from a coalition of Ramos, Aquino, and Sin forces. Ramos was at the

forefront, recently appointed as special presidential advisor and mostly his people sat in Arroyo's new cabinet. Ramos, consequently, had been the head of the military for a long while under Aquino before ascending to the presidency.

One minor point of contention was about what the United Front forces should call their relationship with Arroyo. Was it an "alliance," and if so was it a "critical" or "tactical" one? Someone proposed and another seconded a separate meeting to discuss and decide, which brought forth a flurry of other proposed meetings and times set. The larger meeting soon petered out.

After the meeting, we were left with the afternoon off. Beth was still trying to put together our schedule for the next few days, which would include an appointment with the women's organization and a trip to a multinational company's union. But after leaving the meeting, we got word from our contact that if we wanted to go into the guerilla fronts, we would have to leave the next day. Our afternoon off vaporized as we set off in a flurry to get ready to go. After apologizing to Beth and asking her to pause our schedule because we decided last minute to go out of town for a few days, our first stop was to the Shoemart mall to change some more money. The rate had actually improved for those holding euros: three more pesos per every euro exchanged. We exchanged our money and picked up six or seven packages

of chocolate, apparently the most requested item from the front, next to cigarettes.

Our contact arranged for us to go with a guide to a street market about half an hour away to buy some things for our trip. We would each need several long sleeved shirts and pants, dark enough to conceal us when we traveled by night. And we were instructed to buy hats to hide our foreign faces.

Our guide turned out to be a university student, Antonio, who had two more years before he graduated, after which he planned to go to the provinces to join the Red Fighters. When we asked him why he joined the movement, he paused and said in the beginning he became active peripherally, sort of as a do-gooder. But after he went to the countryside and saw the desperate situation of the peasants, he became radicalized. "I want to join the Red Fighters," he said, "because I want to free *all* people." His family apparently thought him a lunatic, and of his seven or eight siblings, he was the only activist.

The market was another jam-packed arena full of low quality shoes and clothes stamped with American brand names: Levi, Nike, Tommy Hilfiger. . . Rows and rows of vendors sold identical items far outnumbering the customers. We went from booth to booth buying lightweight black nylon pants and thin long sleeved shirts, a task complicated by our various larger than Filipino sizes, but the main problem was trying to find a hat for Hong's big head. Finally after hours of

searching, we found a woman selling rows of huge baseball caps. Antonio looked more relieved than any of us, and after a quick meal and a short ride, we parted company. Still cheerful after having to schlep us big-sized foreigners around for an entire evening of shopping, Antonio shook our hands warmly and looked sincere when he said that he hoped we'd meet again.

We spent the evening sorting out our purchases and combing through our things, debating what to pack and what we should leave behind. It was hard to imagine what we would find on the red front, so we found ourselves debating over every extra pair of socks and numbers of underwear. The overall instruction to "travel light," however, was something that all of us got. But after hearing gleeful stories told of how mosquitoes in the countryside resembled "kamikaze fighters" that sometimes carried malaria, we put the nets in the non-negotiable pile.

Even though we weren't to meet our contact until late afternoon the next day, we slept early in anticipation of vague hypothetical scenarios that would leave us tired in the days ahead.

January 28

The Wait and the Journey

The three of us slept the morning away and then spent some quality time lazing around. Phil very typically found some broken appliances (fans and refrigerator) to fix, and the people in the office suddenly invited us to eat lunch with them. Not that there was a direct correlation, but it did seem to help warm the relationship!

We left well ahead of our scheduled meeting time so that we could run a few last minute errands. Hong, who appreciated most the craving for cigarettes, bought a carton of Winstons for folks we would meet. We were still early at our meeting place, and so was our contact. In the restaurant our contact told us that we would be meeting a driver of a private van. Our original plans to go by public bus were scratched by the guerilla unit in the area, because of the commotion our arrival might cause

in a rural area with few foreign tourists. That was also the reason why we were leaving later in the day; by the time we got there the darkness would provide some cover.

Our ride was late. Close to 5pm, our contact decided to call and see if the situation had changed. Just as our contact came back to say everything was still on, the van pulled up and we boarded hastily.

The driver was yet another guy in the movement with a happy-go-lucky attitude who liked to laugh. That's something I noticed as time went on—it seemed like the more complicated history, the more hardships endured by activists, the more cheerful they seemed. There's the old cliché about having to laugh or you'll cry, but I think it was more that they'd seen the worst—attacks from government troops, exploitation in the countryside, extreme poverty in the cities, imprisonment and torture—and weren't swayed. They know the only way out for the Filipino people was through struggle, and they were optimistic, because they were part of this very mature struggle that was gathering strength and momentum. So they laughed and cracked jokes and sang cheesy pop songs.

Cheesy pop songs was what we listened to on our way out of the city, but as the landscaped changed from jeepneys and storefronts to lush green fields of rice and trees, so did the music. Soon we were all singing along to the Internationale in three different languages.

On the way, our contact told us that the driver was part of a support network, civilians helped the guerillas in that one area with whatever they needed. He was from the area himself, and when he was 15 joined the Red Fighters.

Looking out the window I could see why people described the Philippines as a rich country in agriculture and raw materials. The land looked like it just ached to be planted and what was planted looked healthy and vigorous. Living in the tropics meant you can plant year round, and if you solved the irrigation problem in the dry season and the drainage problem in the rainy season, you could produce a tremendous amount of food. And in the absence of the exploiting class and imperialist intervention, certainly union workers could eat more than two meals a day and mayonnaise sandwiches on the rare occasion of foreign guests.

I dozed off after a while and by the time I woke, we were entering a small town that had the feel of small highway towns I'd driven through in many different countries. The same fast food chains and gas stations that littered the landscape in Manila made their appearance—they were just more spread out. After dropping our contact off at one such fast food restaurant, we went with the driver in search of a mechanic. The reason why he was late in fetching us was that he had trouble starting his van. The driver switched tapes back to '80s pop and found a gas station that had a mechanic. They

looked under the hood and stopped and started the engine a few times, but they couldn't find anything wrong. Maybe the starter had a bad spot.

We drove back to the parking lot of the restaurant, waited, and listened to the driver's explanation of what was happening. Our contact was to meet another contact in the barrio (village) where the Red Fighters were stationed for the night. They were supposed to meet in the restaurant at 6pm, but now it was approaching seven with no news. He suggested we have some food; we probably wouldn't get any dinner wherever we ended up that night. We chose to go to the place next door rather than go to the restaurant where we would have to pretend we didn't know our contact. The place next door turned out to be a pizza joint. We had quite a time deciding what to order with my intolerance to cheese, Phil's vegetarianism and Hong's refusal to try anything at all. I felt a little embarrassed at being such fussy foreigners, especially when we found that the order was mixed up; there were double orders of vegetarian pizzas and a plateful of spaghetti that we didn't order.

The driver had them wrap up the extra items after making sure we didn't want to eat them, so we urged him to take them home. He told us to take them to the peasants instead. We finally understood; there wasn't any mix up with the order. The driver was looking out for his buddies on the front where food was a lot more scarce.

Throughout the meal the driver casually wandered out several times to see what was up. In between, we talked about his life. He had a wife and kids who lived full time in Metro Manila. They owned a "sari sari" shop (small vendor stand with some convenience items) in a barrio that gave them an income of about 300 pesos a day. The van was his technically, but because of the way he got it, he considered it the movement's. He had run into an elementary school classmate after many years of being out of touch, and after a while they got talking about politics. He shared with his old friend, who was now a small businessman, the kind of work he had been doing in the movement. His friend's response was that he didn't have the capacity to join up, but he admired what he was doing, fighting for their country, and gave him his van as a contribution to the cause.

Suddenly our contact appeared in the doorway and walked out again. It was time to go. When we returned to the van a woman from the barrio rode in the front passenger seat. We found out that she was a member of the underground network in the neighborhood, part of the committee that organized the people to struggle over land issues. She guided us on dirt roads and then through a corn field, u-turning several times. While we drove, our contact gave us aliases. No need for people to know our real names, and we could be sure that we

wouldn't know theirs. Our problem was trying to remember what to call each other and ourselves.

Then down a fairly large street with some businesses and storefronts. We were surprised at how urban the area was—did the Red Fighters really conduct guerilla warfare in these commercial districts? Our contact assured us that just behind the street were residential houses and beyond those were open fields. We just couldn't see them yet.

We finally entered a village on a street with fairly large sized houses and stopped in front of one rather fancy one. The woman got out and rang the bell. She spent some time talking to the person who came to answer it before getting back in. The Red Fighter who was supposed to meet us had to leave. We would have to drive on to the next contact point to find out where they'd gone.

After a few minutes driving up and down different streets, we reached a different section of the barrio where the houses were smaller and more tightly spaced. Still, they were all concrete and looked in pretty good shape. Our contact told us not to be fooled by the appearances of these peasants' houses. Most of them were heavily mortgaged, and if you went inside and saw what they had for meals, you wouldn't have any pretenses that they were well off.

We pulled up in front of a small house with lights on inside. The woman knocked on the door and disappeared inside. We waited. And waited. Until

the driver went out and got the news: the person charged with meeting us after the Red Fighters left also had to leave. He in turn gave his task to another, who then took off for the next barrio. So they made the decision to try and reach the squad commander by a clean cell phone but found that they were in a dead zone and had trouble getting a signal. Soon a motorized tricycle started up with three or four young people aboard and puttered off. They were being sent to try to make a connection in the next barrio.

Our contact was not pleased. It was already approaching 11pm, and if we couldn't get in that night we would have to try again the next day. Our contact, though, had a meeting to attend the next day and could not stay with us or introduce us to the unit. The word wasn't final yet, so we continued to wait quietly. We were cautioned to speak softly and look away when headlights of another car approached. Our contact gave us a little introduction on how squads worked. There were usually seven or eight people in a squad, but sometimes there could be as few as two or three. Each squad had a political officer, a Party member who had ultimate decision-making power, and a commander in charge of the military actions. The financial officer was in charge of keeping track of cash and supplies, buying necessities and also securing food for the squad. And usually there was also a medical officer in every group trained in

basic first aid. But the point stressed was that the Party exercised absolute authority over the unit.

The Red Fighters always moved at night a few steps ahead, hopefully, of the enemy. Once we joined the squad, we would move with them. When we moved, they would assign us a "buddy" to stay with us no matter what happened. They would also give us the password in the local area; if anything happened we would know both the call out and the answer. If we called out and didn't get the right response, or if someone called out a different password than what we were expecting, we would probably have to run like hell.

Each squad engaged in what they called CSC: criticism, self criticism. Taken from the principles of Mao Zedong Thought, cadres led meetings where they laid out all the problems in the unit—practical, personal, and political—and assessed who made mistakes and how they could be solved or avoided in the future. The purpose was to improve the work, not to lay blame, but to own and resolve problems that stood in the way. Our contact suggested that in a CSC session we raise the glitches in that night's planning that left us waiting for hours in front of the house.

The cell phone's ring made me jump. Its sound was huge and made me feel completely exposed. How many people in the countryside had cell phones? Apparently quite a lot. Like China, cell phone technology appeared in the Philippines

before everyone had a phone line in their house and rates were cheap enough to cause a cell phone usage explosion.

The driver leaned out the window to hear the conversation. They'd made contact with the unit. There was another short wait before the tricycle and an additional sedan appeared and pulled in front of us. All the occupants filed inside and soon five or six youth appeared, piled on the trike, and started it up. The driver of our van let us know that they were going to guide us and pulled out behind them. We traveled down several dirt roads, out of one barrio and into another—or so it seemed to me. We hit the countryside before too long and the houses thinned and finally gave way to big stretches of cropland.

We parked and spoke in whispers, "Should we get our things together now?" The driver held up a hand to silence us. Five, ten minutes passed. We could see the boys on the bike talking with some people on the road in the moonlight.

"Let's go."

We got our backpacks on and stepped out of the van into a sea of stars and a luminous moon. They motioned for us to stand quietly for a few moments before taking off single file to the road. We turned and followed it for a while, passing a group of people who stood watching nonchalantly. I kept my head down and followed the driver up a smaller dirt road and then down a small slope to

a river. Our contact said softly, "Here is a bamboo bridge. Go one at a time."

I could barely make out the people ahead of me holding onto a bamboo railing walking carefully on the bridge as it bounced up and down with every step. I took a breath and followed, taking it extra easy; my sprained ankle didn't do much for my sense of balance, and I could just imagine the consequences if I dropped off the side into the water. Someone gave me a hand up on the other side and then we proceeded up the other bank to small group of houses on the flat. We filed into the last house in the group and found a handful of guys sitting on chairs and beds with automatic weapons propped up in the corner. I guessed we'd come to the right place.

Our contact quickly assessed the unit and directed us to the young guy of slight build sitting cross-legged on a plastic chair smiling. "He's the one in charge." I wasn't sure if that meant he was the commander or the political officer or both, but anyway, our contact presented him with our letter of introduction. When we were being pointed out, I heard "sprain" and "brace" as they looked at me. Our contact also motioned for us to give him things we'd brought—the chocolate, cigarettes, food from the restaurant, some Chinese medicine, and a yeast infection treatment I'd brought for any of the women Red Fighters. He redirected them to

a huge guy sitting on the bed. The financial officer? I wasn't sure.

The conversation that followed was mostly in Filipino with our contact translating a few key points. There were actually two units there in the barrio, and the one "in charge" was the commander of a mobile unit of about 16. The big guy was the commander of the local unit with seven people. Squads were usually based in one area that encompassed three or four different barrios. The idea of a mobile unit was something new to us.

Soon the driver poked his head in and spoke to our contact. It was time for them to leave. We shook hands all around and before long were left to our own devices. A whole network of civilians had delivered us into the hands of the Red Fighters, and they now melted back into the above ground world.

Everything previous was translated through our contact, so I was surprised to hear the two commanders speaking fluent English. Our conversation with them would last over three hours; it was close to 4am by the time we got to bed. We all introduced ourselves (of course I immediately forgot everyone's names, including, at times, the three of ours) and found out that the family with whom we were staying had both father and son with the Red Fighters—in different squads according to policy. There was also a very young kid, nineteen, who had been in the front for about three months.

When we asked why he joined up, he smiled and said, "To serve the people." We asked what the age requirements were and they said 18, in line with worldwide standards set by the Geneva Convention, regarding children in the military. They did have unarmed youth, though, who worked as organizers in the community (like the ones who guided us to the house), and even younger ones who acted as messengers. Although there were no women in the two squads they led, there were many women guerillas and a handful of women squad commanders and political leaders.

We then launched into a rapid-fire conversation. It was as if we had so many questions built up that now that we were at a source who could answer them, they all came tumbling out. The commander of the mobile squad sat there, smoking one cigarette after another, taking all of our questions and answering them systematically one by one. Main points of discussion were:

1. How did they know they were safe? What about all those people who saw us coming in? And why did they have to leave the last area? They knew they were safe because this was a very well-organized community. Immediately after we arrived, they sent guys out to ask who had seen us come in. The report back was that everyone who saw us was OK. They left the last area because things were

not as secure among the masses and they noticed some suspicious activity.

As we sat there quite relaxed, Red Fighters were out on the peripheries investigating the situation and securing the area. Later while we were talking, we saw the security patrol coming and going in the kitchen area taking off and putting on their ammunition vests and shouldering their weapons. But their main source of information and security against any kind of unwelcome surprise was always the people, the peasants who housed and hid them. We were only 20 minutes away from the nearest government troops, but no one looked nervous, even with the three unwieldy pieces of strange looking baggage they'd suddenly acquired. Even more astonishing was their description of the area as being totally flat. There were no mountains or forests in which to hide from the enemy. "The masses are our forest," they said. "They are like water, and we swim among them like fish."

2. A brief history of the Party: The original CPP was founded in the '30s by a guy named Evangelista, who spent several years in a factory organizing workers. Later, they integrated with the Socialist Party, which began a whole period of line and armed struggle within the movement and with the government. Eventually most all the original Communist Party leaders were killed and the collapsing Party was led by one family who basi-

cally sold out to the State. By that time, most of the guerillas had gone into banditry and being hired guns for the landlords. So in 1968 Jose Maria Sison formed a new Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP). The following year, he linked up with the one remaining squad of 30 guerillas who hadn't become thugs (Sison said "I have a Party but no army," and the commander said, "I have an army with no Party."). The commander, after talking at length with Sison, agreed to put his army under the leadership of the new Party. Based on the assessment that the Philippines was a semi-feudal, semi-colonial country, they followed mass line with their struggle based in the countryside in the form of a protracted people's war. Marx, Lenin, and Mao guided their theory.

From then the Party blossomed, even as Marcos intensified his assaults on any Left forces and finally declared martial law in 1972. Martial law forced Party members to go underground, and during that period, large numbers of activists became political prisoners, subject to torture and sometimes execution. What they called the First Quarter Storm, characterized by a huge upsurge of mostly youth involvement, was not quelled though. The movement continued to gather strength until the mid '80s when the "Period of Disorientation" occurred. During that time, an Ultra Left line appeared in the leadership of the Party, which called for a quicker seizure of power

in the cities. The mistakes made at the top caused havoc in the ranks below, and the movement lost most of its support among the people. That night we didn't go too deeply into discussing this period and the rectification movement that followed, but we would learn more in the days to come.

After the rectification movement that came in the early '90s, the Party began to rebuild and regain its strength. Currently, the New People's Army (NPA) had over 100 guerilla fronts, which meant they had squads in organized barrios like the local unit in the barrio where we were that night. They, of course, weren't giving out total numbers of armed forces, but they had regained the strength they had at the highest tide in the early '80s. And in addition to the Red Fighters, each organized barrio also had and armed militia that numbered 10-12 times those who were full time in the squads.

3. The land situation in the countryside: Over 70% of the peasants did not own any land. They rented it from landlords who usually took 70% of whatever they produced on it. In some areas, where there were guerillas backing up mass organizations, a system of land rent was worked out so the rent was fixed at around twelve *cavans* (about 45kg./100 lb.) per hectare. Although that stayed fixed regardless of how good or how bad a harvest

it was, it still worked out to be a much better deal for the peasants than the 70/30 policy.

The commander then went on to discuss how much money it took for each peasant to fertilize, plant, and irrigate and then harvest and process their crops, but by that time we were so tired, we had to ask him to save the detailed calculations until the next day. He obliged, saying he would try to find a blackboard so he could write everything out for us. It was 3:30 and our brains were scrambled, but he remained completely alert; the others who remained nearby didn't say a whole lot but listened intently and showed no signs of fatigue. We finally begged off and talk turned to sleeping arrangements.

A policy in the New People's Army was that women and men in the squad could not sleep side by side. Consequently, they had me sleeping in the cushy bed in the adjacent room, while everyone but the mobile squad commander slept on the carpet laid on the dirt ground. He slept on the hard "couch" made out of bamboo that was long enough for him up to his knees. I felt awkward enough getting the softy treatment, but mentioned that Phil and I were together, so at least I wouldn't be taking up the whole double bed by myself. But we weren't legal, so was it against policy? Red Fighters had to be married to sleep together, but our "partnership" seemed to pass because we were foreigners. We mentioned that we brought mosquito

nets, and they agreed that the mosquitoes here were quite vicious—but not dangerous. The big guy said straight face: "We have no malaria here. . . (long pause) just dengue fever." Then doubled over in laughter. The other commander joined in and gave him a high five.

As people got up to go, the two commanders looked over the medicine we'd brought and picked up the yeast infection medication. I explained its purpose and they spoke to each other in Filipino, clarifying among themselves. Finally the smaller guy looked up and smiled: "Not for me."

Phil and I tied up our net on the rafters above and lay down in a state of disbelief. "Is this really happening?" we asked each other. Were we really in a peasant village in a guerilla front with the commanders of two Red Fighter squads sleeping in the next room with their M-16s lying beside them? This was something we'd heard about from old Chinese cadres and seen only in movies (albeit with rifles instead of the M-16s): a disciplined armed branch of a Marxist-Leninist-Maoist Communist Party working and living among the peasants in the countryside, conducting protracted people's war.

Sounds of barking dogs and an occasional motor running chewed at our nerves for a while. But soon I figured that the two of us lying in bed listening to night noises wasn't what they were

counting on for security. Gentle snores in the other room confirmed it, and we soon fell asleep.

January 29

"All they seem to do is sit around and talk and sleep all day"

By time I made up my mind to get up the next morning, most everyone else was out and about; it was a little after 8am. Hong, though, was still lying there trying to forget about having to pee. He had waited half the night and all morning until his interpreters got up so he could find out where to go! We climbed out of bed and found a flock of mosquitoes had spent the night alight on our net. They sleepily drifted away when we took the net down and made the bed. Hong had spent the night not only holding his pee, but also being eaten alive, until he completely pulled his sheet over his head.

In the daylight, I could see that the house where we slept was made entirely of the same strips of

bamboo nailed together, about an inch across with seed bags stretched across them to block a little wind and light. The inside rooms that had beds were separated in the same manner. The kitchen ran the length of the other rooms and through the cracks in the wall I could see someone cooking over a fire.

Hong wasn't the only one who had to pee. But when I looked around to see where a woman might squat, I couldn't find any. The place they led me to the night before was actually a place where people bathed, and I guessed they just took me there for convenience. Finally I just asked, and the woman who was cooking (and the wife of one and mother of the other Red Fighter) dropped what she was doing and motioned for me to follow her. We went past the small cluster of houses where people standing and sitting in doorways nodded in a friendly way to me, down to the river that we'd crossed the night before. It was actually quite small—not the deep water I'd envisioned in the dark, but the bamboo bridge across was more precarious than I'd imagined. Three hollowed bamboo stalks about 10 cm across and maybe four meters long were lashed together side by side and then connected to three other pieces in the middle.

We bounced across one at a time and the woman led the way to a house on the other side. She spoke to its inhabitants and then swung open a door made out of sheet metal that dragged on

the ground. Inside was a toilet. As with almost all Philippines toilets I'd used, this one lacked a seat (Phil and I joked that the toilet without a seat was good evidence that the Philippines was semi-colonial) and flushing was done with the water from a pail. While we trekked back I resolved to find out where the other women in the house relieved themselves; I was pretty sure they didn't make the same journey.

The commander, whose name we only really got to remember the following day, Ka (short for Kasama or comrade) Chuck, sat waiting for us in the same chair from the previous night. We filed in when he said, "We can continue talking now." Wasn't he tired? Apparently not. His thoughts seemed just as sharp and well thought out as they did at 4am. Onward with the discussion:

1. 80% organizing the masses, 20% armed conflict: Why and how did the NPA organize the peasants? They organized them to struggle with the landlords to reduce the rent and usury rates. Because they didn't control liberated areas, real land reform—land to the tiller, where the land was redistributed to the peasants—wasn't possible yet. So the main goal was to raise the peasants' level of consciousness to fight for a better standard of living. The reason why they organized a community to do it rather than just knocking on the landlords' doors with their guns and demanding it,

was because then the peasantry didn't get involved with both feet. In the past, they found that when the NPA did act for the peasants, as soon as they left, the landlords had a really easy time bumping up the rent and interest again. They employed scare tactics and because it wasn't something they fought for themselves, many peasants didn't know what to do—some abandoned the struggle and some even turned traitor.

Now the policy was to organize the peasants to fight for themselves. When they first went into a community, they found contacts from whom they built up a group of known and trusted "civilians" (peasants) and began forming mass organizations. Well-organized communities had committees and/or Party branches. The committees could include organizations of youth, women, poor peasants, etc. Then those organizations mobilized the entire community to struggle against the landlords. Of course, Chuck added, if a landlord was not being cooperative, the Red Fighters might drop by and have a conversation with them, expressing their sincere hopes that the conflicts with the peasants would be resolved.

So in the barrios, the NPA acted as civil servants, helping organizations with whatever issues they had in their work and helping the peasants themselves in disputes. They also engaged in production, planting, and harvesting in the fields by day and moving from place to place at night. In

places like where we were, as a rule they moved every night. Their location was too precarious to risk staying in one place long enough for the enemy to get a bead.

Despotic landlords, rapists, and traitors and spies who caused loss of life through their actions were executed if they are proven guilty in a court. The court was made up of different sectors of the community and their committee members—or the Party branch. If the community was not that organized, the NPA took leading roles in the "people's court." These executions were the bulk of what were called tactical offensives, which made up part of the 20% of armed struggle. Tactical offensives usually included ambushes on isolated government troops, confiscation of weapons, and attacks on government buildings. As far as other military encounters were concerned, they tried to avoid them. Chuck and his unit hadn't had an encounter in over two years.

Just two weeks before, though, a squad of 15 Red Fighters were caught in an encounter in a guerilla front nearby. The former president planned to enter the area, so the squad there assumed that the government troops would just do a sweep up to clear the way for the entourage. They didn't realize that it was a cover to find and eliminate the guerillas in the area. Only one of the 15 survived. They knew already, though, that a traitor in the

village betrayed their whereabouts, and the hunt was now on.

2. Peasant involvement in the anti-Estrada campaign: The anti-Estrada campaign had been nationwide—not just in Manila and not just in major cities. The Red Fighters, Party branches and mass organizations in the barrios played a big role in doing education about the campaign and the importance of the broad United Front against Estrada and turned people out to demonstrate in the towns. They said that in smaller cities on other islands they were able to amass tens of thousands for rallies and marches.

3. Study: There were several layers of study involving different groups of people. For activists who were not Party members, the Party, through mass organizations, and the NPA provided sessions based on the book *Philippine Society and Revolution* and the article "Specific Characteristics of Our People's War" by Jose Maria Sison. There, they learned the history of 400 years of colonialism and the people's continuing struggle against it, as well as the situation of armed struggle in the countryside.

Then, if new recruits in the NPA or activists among the people became candidates for Party membership, they had about a weeklong intensive study in introductory theory: Marxism-Leninism-Mao Zedong Thought. An additional article

included in the introductory class was a document on modern revisionism, analyzing what happened in the Soviet Union and China. In the squad itself, there was ongoing study, maybe once or twice a month, that dealt with theory that was pertinent to the current situation. For instance, as the anti-Estrada campaign built momentum, there might've been a series of articles about the importance of the United Front and its principles.

The time it took a Party candidate from a "good" background, that is, a poor peasant or worker, to become accepted into the Party was about six months. Chuck, although he was from a peasant background, was a Party candidate during the period of disorientation. At that time the review for membership took a lot longer—"mistakes were made" he said, and he only got in after a year and a half. Once you were a Party member, you went into intermediate levels of study. The big guy, Ka Frankie, carried a copy of the thick intermediate study book in his backpack with him. The advanced course was coming soon.

In general, ideological work within the guerilla units was taken very seriously. And while they had formal study at given intervals, the bulk of that work was done in the squad on a day-to-day basis. They held meetings about their work with the masses and how to improve it, did CSC (criticism/self-criticism), and adhered to a strict discipline in all aspects of their lives.

4. Intellectuals and integration: About 50% of Red Fighter recruits that came from the countryside stayed; the other half left after a while, mostly out of homesickness. For every ten people who came from the cities to join the Red Fighters, nine couldn't take it and went back. Why? Ka Chuck said with a slightly devilish smile, "Because intellectuals are afraid to die." They also had a road out of the hard life that Red Fighters lived: moving every night, working every day, putting their lives on the line against government troops and landlord thugs.

The ones that didn't make it though, were not chalked up as losses. Usually, the people who returned home in the countryside went back into the barrio organizations or Party branches. And sometimes city folk went into the above ground, legal mass organizations to continue to work for the people in a different form. But, we asked, if there were so many failed attempts for city cadres to really join up with the Red Fighters and leave their easier lives behind, why did they still try to recruit them? The answer was that the Party recognized the important contributions that intellectuals could make in the armed struggle. Chuck, although he did not attend college would definitely be considered an intellectual, and Frankie was a college graduate. Their positions as commanders and political officers demonstrated how the Party

still relied on intellectuals even as it evaluated their fears and tendencies to capitulate.

In addition to the intellectuals who tried to give up their city lives to work in the front—where the Party assessed was the primary place of struggle—almost all Party members were required to spend three months out of the year in the countryside. That policy was strictly instituted after the rectification movement in an effort to keep Party cadres' feet firmly on the ground. While there were some problems in some cases of integration, Chuck described their contribution as knowledgeable educators as invaluable. When I asked if they spoke the "same language" as the masses, he replied that if what they were saying was on target, the style and vocabulary they used was not important. People still got it.

5. Development and future—Chuck's estimate of how long it would take the Party to seize power came from the Party's own estimation—and the answer was probably within the next two decades. (The official estimate from the Party was within the "next *few* decades.") The biggest restriction to faster development of the Party and the guerilla fronts was that there still weren't enough Party members or Red Fighters. Evidently one of the recent directives from the Central Committee was that peasants and workers had to be actively recruited into the Party at a much higher rate.

Before the rectification movement, many peasants who had worked with and helped the Red Fighters for decades were not actively recruited into the Party. The new call was to recruit them by the hundreds—that the Party should fill its ranks with them.

But how did the Philippine revolutionary movement, in such a small country in land and population plan to fight imperialism? Chuck's short answer was "If Cuba can do it right off the coast of the biggest imperialist power in the world, why can't we?" In 1997, in the last big Central Committee meeting to evaluate the state of international revolutionary movements (they were supposed to happen every five years), the Party assessed that Cuba and North Korea were essentially the only countries left in the world that were still socialist (The official Party assessment was that the two countries were still "staunchly anti-imperialist"). But he confessed that he really didn't know too much about what was going on in those two countries; he depended on the Party's continuing evaluation.

The other point he made was that while one of the principles in the Philippine movement was internationalism, the primary goal and task was to complete the *democratic* revolution in their own country first, to liberate the country from national oppression and US imperialism. This was the first and essential step towards the socialist revolution

that would enable the Communist Party to eventually seize power.

6. Liberated Areas—Did the guerilla fronts include any liberated areas? No. According to Chuck, in the past their goal in the countryside was to establish red bases where the Party was the sole government. But after they did manage to establish one in particular and announced it to the world, they were blown off the map. In a country as tiny as the Philippines, government fighter jets could get to any point on any island in the matter of a couple hours and obliterate any suspected liberated area. Chuck smiled wryly and said that this was no longer their goal, and if they did have any, there sure as hell weren't announcing it anymore.

On a related topic, we asked where they hid government POWs without any liberated areas. His answer was "with the masses." He added that their strict policy was to treat any captured soldiers in accordance with international standards. They did not allow any physical or mental torture; the most they got was their hands tied up and some propaganda to read. "In fact," he said, "the POWs sleep on the bed while we sleep on the floor. And they eat better food than we do too." He then bitterly described the contrast in treatment given to their captured comrades. Almost every Red Fighter captured was either killed or detained in a safe house and tortured. It could be months before

they "surfaced" into the legal system and put into regular prisons. Chuck described one encounter where an older Red Fighter was shot in the leg while his squad was in retreat. He ordered his two comrades who were carrying him to leave him to save themselves. When they wouldn't, he pointed his gun at them to force them to go. When they found his body, his entire face had been blown off. "When we have to kill someone," he said, "we shoot them in the chest at point blank range, and they die quickly."

7. MILF (Moro-Islamic Liberation Front)—We'd heard a lot in the Western news media that Muslim extremists in the southern island of Mindanao were "wreaking havoc and spreading terror"—well what they said was "Communists and Muslim extremists." So we wondered what exactly was happening there and the CPP assessment of the different groups.

Their history proved pretty complicated and a little confusing to us. What was clear was that the relationship between the MILF and the NPA was one of cooperation; they exchanged tactical military advice and were mutually supportive. They both also openly condemned the other Muslim group in Mindanao called the Abu Sayaff, calling their practices anti-people and all-out banditry.

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Before we knew it, lunch time came and the family with whom we stayed provided a simple meal of rice and a dish with vegetables, a few pieces of meat, and gravy. I looked around at the numbers of people waiting to eat and the amount of food there was and felt pretty sure people wouldn't be able to eat their fill. That was OK for us fat foreigners, but what about the people who had to live on this every day? That included the Red Fighters who traveled at night and worked during the day, and peasants who did heavy manual labor in the fields. In that context, armed guerillas in fronts around the country fighting for land reform seemed quite natural.

We sat outside on a low bamboo platform and continued talking. Ka Chuck curled up on the chair inside for a short snooze (it was about time—all three of us were woozy with lack of sleep and Phil had already conked out for several hours), while Ka Frankie played tag team and took over the discussion. We wondered briefly amongst ourselves whether these Red Fighters actually did help in production during the day—mostly what we saw was a lot of lying around and talking:

1. Three stages of revolutionary war: These guys studied Mao—a lot more than I had. Frankie drew a diagram in the dirt with a stick. The three columns were: strategic defensive, strategic stalemate, and strategic offensive. Right now the revo-

lutionary war was in the first stage, where enemies forces were stronger than your own. The strategic stalemate was when your forces were about equal, and the strategic offensive was when you were stronger, which eventually led you to insurrection in the cities and seizing power.

The point was to keep on course and stay within the confines of the strategic defensive. In the protracted people's war, you had to have the patience to keep military units small, mobile, and with the masses, striking only when your enemy was weak, isolated, and could be defeated. Otherwise, run like hell—or, more accurately, conduct a strategic retreat. During the period of disorientation, they made the mistake of going head to head with government troops and suffered enormous losses. Their rationale at the time was that within the strategic defensive phase, there were many different levels of armed conflict, and that they had reached a stage which allowed more direct confrontations. Their justifications eventually ran dry, however, as their casualties increased and their ranks dwindled.

2. Encounters occurred only when mistakes were made: Ka Frankie, ordinarily sort of a goofball and quick to smile, looked grim when he talked about the encounter that killed the 14 Red Fighters two weeks prior. If you did your mass work well, traitors would be countered and government troop

movements tracked. That squad also made the mistake of assuming instead of doing a calculated investigation. He and his wife, also a Red Fighter in a different squad, had both left the area shortly before the encounter, and they knew the comrades who were killed.

3. Family: We asked almost everyone we could how many times they could go see their families, and the answers varied widely. What we came up with was that policies probably varied from region to region, and also according to how much you were needed in your squad, and how busy your squad was. The closest interval we heard was once every three months, and some had not seen their families for over a year. Some family members were approved to come to the provinces to see their relatives in the squad, though. Family members and spouses were not permitted to serve in the same squad.

While we were talking, a Red Fighter, the father of the family, came out from the house wearing a long raincoat. It looked hot. He shrugged a few times and then took it off, revealing a "baby Armalite" (a smaller version of an M-16) slung over his shoulder. He adjusted the position and put on the coat again. Someone standing nearby helped him arrange it less conspicuously, and then he and another guy walked off towards the bamboo bridge. When we asked what was going on,

Frankie explained that a woman had come looking for the NPA to help her settle a civil dispute with her husband. The night before, the husband had gotten super drunk and started smashing things around the house. So those two guys were going to have a word with him.

I wasn't going to make it; I had to get some sleep. I made my apologies and headed back to bed where I got a fitful hour or so. I wondered how they did it; they seemed to sleep soundly enough to block out the sounds of everyday commotion in the house, but how did they know to wake up with real danger? When I finally gave it up and rolled over to get up, I saw one of the younger boys in the family peering at me. He held up an ear of corn and smiled. I gladly said OK and made my way to the kitchen where he fished one out of the pot for me. It was very sweet. The comrades outside said the seeds were genetically engineered from Japan.

Outside, Hong ate a couple off of a plate, and when he was done, he looked around him until he located the young girl of the family. She was 14 and extremely capable. He beckoned to her and presented her the plate with a couple of corncobs and some trash on it. I stared in disbelief. Upon reflection, I hadn't seen anything so grossly chauvinistic since I'd left China. Although the women did seem to do all the cooking in the countryside, the men, especially the Red Fighters, picked up after themselves, did the dishes, got the water from

the hand pump and swept the floor. Phil and I had tried—no matter how unsuccessfully—to make ourselves useful, but Hong had unsurprisingly fallen a bit short. I was about to get up and retrieve the plate and give it back to its rightful owner, but found there was no need as the girl bowed low and backed away from him exclaiming sarcastically, "Thank you, thank you!" There were chuckles all around, and I marveled at how much more liberated women seemed—at least in this guerilla front and in the parts of the city I'd been, women were more treated as equals than China, which had seen socialism.

After a few moments, Hong turned sheepishly to me and said, "I just did something that showed my male chauvinism and feudal customs." I told him I had seen it. "I still have work to do." I tried hard to keep the glee out of my smile.

Ka Frankie eventually lost his concentration along with the rest of us and went up to the porch next door to catch some sleep. The three of us sprawled out on the bamboo platform thinking we would get some rest but soon were swarmed by kids curious about the strange, foreign visitors. While we were playing with them, the young nineteen-year-old Red Fighter tried to communicate with us half successfully. I saw flies landing persistently on an open wound on his heel, so I pointed it out to him. He shook them off but they came right back. Finally I suggested to Hong that he give him some

of the ointment he'd bought in Manila for his toe that was infected with some kind of fungus and a Band-Aid to keep the insects off.

As soon as he brought out the ointment, a crowd of people gathered around showing us their various skin problems. There were a lot of them. The youngest kid of the family was about two, and an adult brought her over and showed us the rotting skin and yellow pus around two bug bites on her leg. The anti-fungal cream and Band-Aids didn't look quite right for the job, so I went to get my first aid kit which had a handy book in it detailing what to do with basic medical problems. Unfortunately, though, the book called for cutting open the wound and draining the pus before applying antibiotic ointment and moist bandages.

First we washed her leg off with soap and waited for it to dry. Then I cursed myself for feeling squeamish and disinfected the blade of my little jackknife. I cut away the dead skin—the girl didn't flinch—swabbed away the pus with a sterile alcohol sheet and applied some antibiotic ointment. We applied a couple bandages and gave the family the rest of the tube and some extra bandages. Change twice a day and keep it clean and dry. But if it got more infected and she came down with a fever, she would need oral antibiotics. They all nodded, but the fact was there was no accessible medical care anywhere and if there was, they probably wouldn't be able to afford it anyway. Ideally

there would've been a medical officer in the squad who could handle such basic first aid. But they said that it was hard to get people to the trainings, and even if they did, medical supplies were expensive. Ka Chuck knew how to practice acupuncture but didn't have any needles.

Once the other kids saw the Band-Aids, they all lined up to show us their rashes, wounds, and bug bites. The heat and humidity made a perfect climate for skin problems. I had enough heat rash and swollen bug bites to get that. Some kids who had already scabbed over wounds picked them open to make themselves bleed—just for a Band-Aid and some attention.

At about 4pm, Ka Frankie asked if we were interested in taking a look around. By that time it was generally more safe to be out and about. According to their experience, the enemy liked to strike earlier in the day. Government soldiers knew that if they caught by nightfall, they would have the distinct disadvantage of being on unknown terrain with a guerilla squad gunning for them. We were eager to get a look at the land; we'd spent all day in the semi-enclosed village in our heads and wanted to get up and stretch our legs.

We walked behind the house away from the small creek and up and saw that we were actually near the bank of a much larger river. We wandered up to the crest of the bank where there were other houses made out of the same bamboo strips nailed

together. A group of men sat in the more open structure talking and eating chunks of something white and potato-like. They waved us over to try the boiled root (it tasted like a cross between a yam and a banana) and were introduced as "comrades."

Our guides asked if we wanted to go down to the river, which I did but the other did not, so we headed back. The young kid smiled and said that maybe that night when we moved, we would be crossing many rivers.

Back at the house, we saw three guys packing their backpacks and guns into grain sacks, hefting them onto their shoulders and heading off across toward the river behind the house. They walked off in broad daylight to scout ahead for our movements that night. We also witnessed a slow trickle of youth, including the ones who had guided us to the house that night, come in and make their way to one of the other houses. Ka Frankie explained that the underground youth organization was having a meeting, and he excused himself to join them to talk about their work and any issues or problems they had.

Ka Chuck was awake. The first thing he did was light a cigarette. The second was ask to continue our discussion. We sat outside on the platform to talk. Chuck got up slowly and painfully; he had arthritis in his knees, but when I gave him some ibuprofen, he wrapped it up and stuck it in his backpack. Frankie also didn't feel tops. He

had back pain because of a kidney problem. They cracked a joke in Filipino that I understood only because they said "yeast infection" in English.

Our next discussion focused on China's current situation. As we presented the issues, Chuck took up the task of telling us the logical path of revolution that China should follow. He claimed that because China was capitalist, no longer feudal, the path had to be through a long parliamentary struggle followed by a brief insurrection where the new Party seized power. (His views differed slightly from the Party assessment.) He used the Soviet Union as evidence to back up his analysis. Hong, however, disagreed with the "absoluteness" of his assessment. And felt a little disgruntled that Chuck should be so sure about China without having a clear idea of the current situation. Dusk fell as they drew dueling circles and columns in the dirt to prove their points and in the end Chuck still got the best of Hong. He said, "It's important for us to know that people like him in China are still this confused." When I dutifully translated to Hong, he didn't respond but looked a bit peeved.

Around 7:30 the young Red Fighter came by to say we would probably be leaving around 8 and that we should change out of our light colored clothes. I was glad my black t-shirt passed scrutiny; it was still hot and I was not eager to put on a long-sleeved shirt. I went in to get my black pants and to make sure my things were packed.

Dinner was short, consisting of rice and small fish caught from the river, deep fried and eaten whole. After the dishes got washed, the scene around the house slowly changed. Men we hadn't met before appeared dressed in somber colors and vests full of ammunition wielding long guns. Conversation seemed to go on in lower tones, and the atmosphere took on a feeling of seriousness. But Ka Chuck still approached us smiling: "OK, let's go."

I had knots in my stomach. Err. What about the whole thing about the password thing? I caught his attention and asked what we should do on the off chance that we got separated. "Good point," he said, but we all filed out without getting it resolved, about ten of us in all. We padded silently up behind the house and approached the two houses by the river. There we stopped, and the squad began talking in quiet tones in Filipino.

After about 15 minutes, Chuck broke into English and explained that they were having their daily meeting during which they reported on the work they did that day. Several of the guys were out patrolling the perimeter, on increased security detail because of our presence. The father of the house reported on the civil dispute with the drunk husband, and several others on the meeting with the youth. "And," he continued, "Ka Frankie and I reported on the discussions we had all day with you." Oh. So they were lying around talking all day because their task was to answer our questions.

And the others couldn't do much work because they had to increase the security.

He then asked us to give a report about how we were feeling about things. The three of us looked at each other trying to find words for how we felt. "Bowled over," is all that I could come up with. Really, I couldn't articulate the tremendous feelings of respect and admiration I had for these guys. I wasn't prepared for how high (exponentially higher than mine) their levels of theoretical understanding, discipline, and practical work were. The idea that there were hundreds of squads like these, dispersed over the entire countryside, systematically organizing and giving militancy to peasant struggles was incredible. I always had a cynical, pessimistic quality to my personality. But witnessing what was going on in an oppressed country like the Philippines completely blew apart those qualities. Here, people were living under conditions where they grew rice for export and could not get enough to eat, and they weren't about to lie down and chalk it up to fate. They were taking up arms and making change. We'd been with these guys less than 24 hours and it already felt like a lifetime.

Phil made a nice speech about how impressed we were and how much we appreciated the opportunity to be with them, while I stood unable to articulate the feelings and ideas that were stretching my brain like so many rubber bands. They

nodded and took it in before moving onto the night's journey ahead.

Chuck called for the group to divide into "alpha and charley" groups, which we found out later had to do with which part of the squad would be the first to engage the enemy if we had an encounter. The men fell out into two sections and Chuck made some minor adjustments. Then he pointed to two guys and told us they were assigned to us. They would stay with us no matter what happened, and they knew where to go if everything went sideways.

Chuck then went on to say that we would be using passwords to get through the area, and we were to use them if we got separated and ran into noises in the night. Unfortunately for us, the passwords were in Filipino. I kept saying them over and over again in my head and the three of us kept testing each other. We fell into a single file line again and moved out. They put us—the weakest link—in the middle of the line with our two guys on either end of us. The moon and stars were out, so I could see vague shapes with some success, but I mostly had to depend on trying to step exactly where the guy in front of me stepped.

We walked briskly, going up over the bank and down to the river, which we didn't cross but followed for maybe ten or fifteen minutes. Then we climbed up the bank again and found ourselves at the edge of a rice field. Staying close to the edges,

we crossed several paddies. By this time I was sweating like mad. I realized that since I'd arrived I had yet to really exert myself physically because of the heat.

The guy in front of me was so skilled in leading the way. No matter how quickly or how slowly I walked, he always stayed the exact same distance ahead of me. He pointed out the big ditches that I would have to jump or branches overhead that I would have to duck under and just showed me the best path by his route the rest of the way. So even though I couldn't see where I was stepping, I had very little problems. Until the cornfields.

We entered the field in the middle of the rows and had to walk between the raised beds. The path was just wide enough for one foot, so we had to walk by putting each foot directly in front of the other. In addition to having a sore ankle that didn't like walking in that straight line I also had the horrible sense of balance that got me the sprain to begin with. It seemed like the more I concentrated, the more I psyched myself out and crashed all over the place. I could hear Phil behind me and Hong behind him having some trouble too. Sometimes I'd try to walk the narrow strip of the raised bed beside the cornstalks before slipping and falling back into the ditch. When I got too flustered and off balance I had to resort to trying to walk with one foot up on the bed and the other down in the ditch. Slowed me down but let me recover

my nerves enough to have another go at balancing. And these guys were all flying along without a single stumble wearing flip flops.

Finally we reached the edge of the corn field and got to a fairly wide road. Down that road was a big light and the sound of barking dogs. The squad fanned out into formation, crouching low to check out the situation. Then, one by one, the Red Fighters came up out of the field, looked down the road for any movement, and then sprinted across and up a slope and then down the other side. We followed their example and ended up in another rice field. Oh man was I happy to walk on those wide paths around the fields, even with the added hazards of irrigation ditches that we had to jump over.

Long minutes passed; we left the rice paddies and ventured into more cornfields, then out again. Once as we were walking along the outer edge of a row of cornstalks, Ka Frankie's cell phone suddenly rang. After about 45 minutes of hearing only the faint rustle of nylon pants and my own footsteps, it made me jump to hear him answer the phone and say hello. We all stood silently until he ended the brief conversation and then continued on.

An hour since we started off after the meeting by the river, we ducked under a wooden fence that Ka Frankie stood holding up for us: "Take a bow," he laughed softly. We walked into a familiar smell. I squinted more closely and realized we were all huddled against a wall right next to a water buf-

falo. The water buffalo stood chewing its cud placidly seemingly unperturbed at the sight of a group of strangers invading its pen.

Ka Frankie waited until the lights of a car by the road in front of the house passed and then crossed the courtyard swiftly. He knocked on the door, once, twice, with no response. He went over to the window and called in softly, then more loudly. Again, no response. Two other Red Fighters joined him and they held a mini conference while we waited. I had no idea what was happening, but obviously something was wrong. We waited there for probably 20 minutes while they pounded on the door and talked among themselves. I hadn't even dared swat at the mosquitoes attacking my feet, so when Phil asked me to get the repellent out of his backpack I whispered back that I didn't think it was a good idea. When the guys behind us against the wall lit up their cigarettes, I decided if they were relaxed enough to smoke, I could get out the bug spray and save us a lot of itching.

What seemed like a long time passes before a man opened the door and stood looking out for a minute before motioning Ka Frankie and two other inside. We continued to wait. Finally, Ka Frankie appeared again and directed us all inside. We took off our shoes just inside the door: many pairs of fairly clean flip flops and three pairs of river sandals completely encased in mud. We entered a big concrete room which led into another where they

told us to sit and rest awhile. I pulled out my water bottle and slugged about half a liter before coming up for air. Some of the Red Fighters sat with us, some in the other room talking amongst themselves, and some were outside doing I couldn't guess what.

One young guy joked with Phil about his daughters—how old were they and what were they like and would he like to be his father-in-law? Phil felt mildly uncomfortable with the chauvinistic quality of the jokes, and when he persisted, Chuck's voice came: "Are you drunk? You're talking like you're drunk."

After about another 15–20 minute wait, Ka Chuck told us we were leaving. The young fighter shook our hands and said he would be staying there that night along with a couple others in the squad. We filed out and, staying close to walls of buildings, made our way past the water buffalo and back under the wooden fence. We traveled a short distance at the edge of the field before going around another fence and into another courtyard, then straight into a house. The two commanders led us in and most of the rest of the squad quickly disappeared. This house too was constructed out of nailed together bamboo strips, unlike many of the concrete houses we'd passed. There was a light on overhead that lit up one main living room and showed two smaller rooms off to the side.

We'd woken the family up. The sleepy faces of several kids appeared out of one room and they carried a sheets with them as they moved out to find another place to spend the night. The woman whose house it was folded up the bedding on floor where she probably had been sleeping and then sat looking rather tired. Ka Frankie, who had gone out in the courtyard came back looking cleaner and refreshed. He asked us if we wanted to wash at the pump and we definitely did. We found the hand pump out back powerful but really squeaky. We sponged ourselves off and felt pretty silly about it but brushed our teeth too.

Back inside Frankie showed Phil and I to our cushy bed in the other room, but Chuck ventured, "We can talk again into the early morning if you want." Most of the other guys were already stretching out on the floor, though, and Hong had curled up on a bamboo chair. Feeling pretty exhausted ourselves, we declined and hung up our mosquito net. After I hit the pillow and made sure no bare skin touched the net, I don't think I moved all night.

January 30

Che, Mao, and a Short Question

The squeaky pump was the first thing I heard in the morning. My watch told me it was already after 8, though, so it probably wasn't the very first sounds of the morning. Phil wasn't moving so I spent some mindless time watching lines of red mites make their way up the side of the wall and out the open-aired window. When Phil finally woke up, he peered into the other room (he was on the outside of the bed) and reported that everyone was gone, even Hong.

But man did it feel good to laze in that bed! We even made motions to get up by taking down our mosquito net and packing it up but then ended up crashing to horizontal positions again. Turned out to be a good thing. While we were lying there, the door suddenly opened a crack and one of the guys who walked with us the night

before showed his face. He looked serious and in a low voice said, "Don't open the door," before quickly closing it again.

We lay silently keeping our heads beneath the window which was only partially covered with a curtain. When Hong appeared, opening the door to let himself in, we told him our instructions. He, however, had not noticed anything unusual going on outside, where he'd been washing up at the pump and having a smoke. We stayed quiet though, until the same guy poked his head in an hour or so later and told us it was clear. An outsider, a vendor selling clothespins had come into the courtyard and would've certainly had some questions about the presence of foreigners in the village. Chuck later told us that government agents often went into villages disguised as vendors, but because this one came regularly, and because he had her followed for a ways after leaving, he was fairly confident that it was OK.

We asked if we could go outside to wash and pee, and they let us go one at a time. When we got back, Chuck offered to show us how to take apart and reassemble the baby Armalite in the corner of the room that Hong kept staring at. He spread out a mat and showed us how to put the safety on and take the first cued bullet out of the chamber. He then used that bullet to push pins out and break everything down. Each magazine held 30 rounds and automatically retrieved another after one

was fired. Putting that first bullet in the chamber ensured that the first time you pulled the trigger you got a shot off instead of a blank, while the mechanism fetched another from the magazine. In addition to the safety position, there were two others: one for single shots and another automatic. When in the automatic position, if you pulled and released the trigger, 3–4 round went off. If you didn't release, you could go through the entire 30 rounds.

After our little lesson in gun maintenance, Chuck said he would soon have to excuse himself to attend a meeting in the barrio. Frankie would be responsible for us for the rest of the morning and would take us out to the fields for a look closer to noon. When Frankie showed up, we saw that he had changed into a bright red t-shirt with the popular head shot of Che Guevara and a revolutionary quote. Since our arrival in the Philippines we actually saw a lot of Che on buttons and t-shirts of activists. Hong got curious and asked Frankie why he had the shirt and what he liked about Che.

Frankie laughed and offered, "I don't know. Maybe just because he has long hair!" He then explained that he actually did not know too much about Che's life (because he didn't like to read), but just knew he was an internationalist and a revolutionary. He was sort of a romantic figure and because Cuba was in the Party's estimation still a socialist country (actually anti-imperialist), its his-

tory and resilience offered a kind of moral support to revolutionaries in a similarly tiny country like the Philippines.

He then asked Hong to elaborate on what he knew and thought of Che Guevara. Hong replied that what he knew about him was through reading his journals quite a long time ago, and that now in China there was a popular play about his life that actually had the subtext of criticizing the injustices of capitalism in revisionist China. His understanding of Che and the Cuban revolution was that first, he was an extremely heroic revolutionary figure. He gave a little background of how he became involved with Castro in Mexico and how they got on a boat to go seize power in Cuba. Since their goal was to fight towards the big cities and incite insurrection, they did not follow a mass line. So while many of the people in the countryside did give their support, there were also a lot of people who acted as spies and turned against them. He continued, saying that by looking at the experiences in El Salvador and Nicaragua, you could see that Cuba's successful revolution was actually by historical chance. And when Guevara went to Argentina to engage in guerilla warfare there, his lack of mass line enabled the government to encircle his group and they eventually were killed. So while Hong admired Che for his heroics (here, on his way out, Chuck interjected that he didn't want

to be a hero because all heroes ended up dead), he relied on Marx, Lenin, and Mao for theory.

Both commanders seemed to agree readily with his assessment and told us that the Philippine Party was also clear that Che did not follow a mass line and was not the one they looked to for theory.

After our discussion, Chuck left for his meeting and Frankie got up and said, "Well, do you want to go out and look at the fields?" We did. He and our host led us out to the fields behind the house to take a look. In the middle of the stretch of land, 10–12 men were threshing rice with a small machine. We stood watching from afar while our host walked ahead to survey the situation and see if it was safe for us to go meet the peasants ourselves. She stood talking to them for a while and then beckoned for us to follow.

The sun was blazing, the sky deep blue, and the rice paddies golden. As we approached the group, they finished the last pile to be threshed and headed to the field's edge where a small stand of trees provided some relief from the heat. One of the men opened up a white grain sack and pulled out bottles of Pepsi, handing them to each of the men, and offering them to us as well. Even in the countryside there was lots of American soda in the absence of clean drinking water. After the short break and a round of introductions, we followed the crew back out.

To move the threshing machine, one guy went to fetch the water buffalo that was tied up in the shade. He put her in the harness and drove her to the next field, which was already dotted with small stacks of rice stalks ready to be fed into the machine. After unhitching the water buffalo and tethering her to the side, they started up the gasoline-powered machine and fanned out across the field to pick up the bundles on the ground. Each person used an empty grain sack to put over the bundle and grabbed the armful to bring to the machine crew. Frankie and Hong joined their ranks. One guy at the mouth of the machine kept the rice stalks flowing in at a steady rate and one guy stood at the side where the kernels came spilling out. He poured four rubber buckets full of grain into a sack (a *cavan*) that another person stood holding open, and when the sack was full, he and yet another guy heaved it to the side where it got stitched shut with a huge needle and a pre-cut thread that spooled out from his waist.

The machine itself had a US-made motor, but the casing was one of the few things still made in the Philippines. The machine, water buffalo, and land were all rented. The men out doing the work were on labor exchange of some sort. The whole question of how much rent and how the labor exchange worked was pretty confusing, but it was something like out of every 12 *cavans*, the owner

of the threshing machine got one, and the people who worked it shared a sixth of the total harvest.

After the machine devoured all the little stacks, we headed back to the sidelines. The work in the field slowed as the last of the rice stalks made it into the thresher. All the fields around still had to be harvested, but the sun hit the middle of sky, which meant food and rest at the hottest time of day. They would be back in the fields by two and work until dark.

Soon after we returned, our host cooked up a bunch of rice and some vegetables for lunch. We finished eating and sprawled out on the floor in the other bedroom, which was really a bamboo platform elevated to provide some relief from the heat.

When we woke, Chuck was back from his meeting, bringing with him some folks for us to meet. Among them was a 22 year old woman who had been a Red Fighter for almost two years. We asked about her personal history, and she told us about how she got involved. (When we started talking, Frankie gave her three pieces of the chocolate that we had brought. She ate one and gave the rest to the kids gathered in the room.) Her activism began in the church. A devout Catholic since she was a kid, she gradually became an activist when she was a university student. She learned that "revolutionaries, like God, serve the people." When she decided to join the movement full time, her family

turned their backs on her. They disowned her as a daughter and said that if she went to the guerilla front she could never return to them. She left anyway. She didn't see her family for a year and a half, but when she finally did go back to the city, they reconciled. They still did not agree with her political views, but at least they reclaimed her as their daughter.

So here was another one of the rare intellectuals who did give up her studies and her life in the relatively comfortable city to become a Red Fighter—and stayed. We asked her whether she had moments of uncertainty, to which she answered, "Of course." She had been a city girl who had never even walked in a field before and never knew much hardship. So the adjustment period of about three months had been difficult.

We were torn between wanting to know what her experiences were as a woman Red Fighter and not wanting to just ask her questions related to women—we didn't want to box her in. But imagining myself with my shortcomings in her position, I had to ask whether she felt like she had something to prove because of her gender. At first she said no, that there was equality in the squads. The Party dictated that women and men be given the same treatment in the context of the material fact that most women didn't have as much physical strength as men. But later, when we asked about what happened when there were instances of chauvinism in the squad,

she offered a little more. She said because comrades in the squad were still from this society, they did have leftover feudal thinking. So in the beginning they did tend to think of her as weak and always put her in the middle of the single file when they moved at night. "But now," she said, "they know I can walk as fast as them in the fields, and I can carry and use my weapon." The fact that she stayed a year and a half before her first visit back to the city earned her a lot of respect as well.

Again putting myself in her shoes, I asked her how it was when she had her period. She laughed and said it was like any other day. But what I wanted to know was, did the squad get her supplies automatically, or was it hard to get them to understand that she needed things like menstrual pads on a monthly basis. Her squad apparently was quite good at getting her pads, but not so good about letting her know when she leaked blood. They were still embarrassed and she would go around for several hours with people staring at her before she realized she had blood on her pants. Since she'd joined up, though, the Party policy changed so that every squad that had a woman fighter had to have at least two. She's found it much easier to have another woman for support.

How about her work organizing peasants? Did she ever find that when she talked to people they respected what she had to say less? Sometimes, maybe. But in general, she found that people

admired and respected her more for dispelling the myth that women were not cut out to be guerillas. She also found that women often had an advantage when doing organizing, because a strange woman's face at the door didn't engender the same kind of distrust and fear that a man's did—even if she *was* carrying a gun.

As the afternoon wore on and dinner came and went, more people appeared in the back room and sat listening to our discussion. I had just finished asking the woman fighter if she ever felt awkward because she had to sleep in a different place, apart from her comrades (for her squad, sleeping apart meant they slept on the floor and she slept on the chair above them), when a voice came from the back of the room telling her to tell me about the dress code. I craned my neck to see a middle-aged guy smiling back. So she said that because we were living in this society which still had feudal ideology, the Red Fighter's dress code prohibited women from wearing shorts.

I was taken aback. "What?" I looked down at my legs trying to imagine sticking them permanently into long pants in this humid heat. And this was the coolest time of the year. Plus I'd seen plenty of Filipinas wearing shorts—why this conservatism in the Red Fighters? The explanation she gave was unsatisfying. Many of the new comrades in the squad had not been entirely "remolded" ideologically. Men were brought up to think that if a woman

wore shorts, she was easy. So it was the women's duty to help her comrades not be attracted to her. I sputtered: "But isn't it the responsibility with the squad and the comrades in it to change the ideology, rather than the women's duty to prevent it?" She looked surprised at my indignation: "But what's the big problem? It's not so much of a hardship for us to wear long pants is it?" I told her the point wasn't whether it was a big deal for me to wear pants—the point was the inequality.

Phil looked at me perplexed, "That isn't right is it?" I didn't think so. Finally I asked, "If that's the way society is right now, that the people don't accept women wearing shorts, then why doesn't the dress code apply across genders so that men and women can be in solidarity with each other?"

"Oh," came the response from the other room, "It does. Men can't wear shorts either. Not short ones." I felt relieved. "So both women and men can wear long shorts?" The cut off point was right above the knee. I looked down again. Mine were at mid-thigh, still conservative by European standards. Phil's were knee length. I got up and changed into my long black nylon pants which immediately plastered themselves against my skin. I thought about it later and thought that I probably still would've changed at that point, even if the dress code only applied to women. If they were willing to take me into their organization, and at great risk, then I had to be unequivocal about fol-

lowing their disciplines. But I probably would've wanted to talk about it a lot more afterwards.

I reentered the room to find everyone talking about China: the Cultural Revolution, revisionism, Mao. . . Was the Cultural Revolution lost? What good come out of it? What was the situation now? Was there a new Party forming to begin the revolution anew? What brought about revisionism? Then Phil said something that took *them* aback for a change: "Even if Mao had lived, he could not have prevented the onslaught of capitalism."

"WHY??!!"

The material conditions, Mao's increasingly isolated position squeezed between the Gang of Four and Deng and Liu, and the shallow understanding and taught hatred of capitalism (versus the gut-level hatred people had for feudalism) were some reason offered. In other words, capitalism didn't come in with such force, speed, and thoroughness simply because one great man wasn't there to stop it.

Three men appeared outside the front door and called to the woman fighter. She apologized and stood up saying she had to go. Before she had a chance, the guy in the other room who apparently outranked her and the three others calling for her said a few words in Filipino to them and she sat back down. We continued talking about China in a lively, sometimes heated, discussion. Night fell and figures shifted and moved in and out of the house

and still the debate continued. Finally the guy who started the China question—who had edged closer and closer until he finally left the side room to sit with us in the living room—got up and said he had to move out. The woman fighter took her cue, shook hands, and disappeared out the front door. The atmosphere had been so warm and energetic that it was hard to say goodbye, and we didn't even know their names.

Soon it was just the three of us, Chuck, Frankie and two guys standing outside by the door in the dark. Suddenly it occurred to me to ask, "Are we moving again tonight?" Chuck replied, "Yes, in fact we can leave now. The other have already gone ahead." We must've looked really surprised because he added, "We should have left a long time ago, but we were having such an interesting conversation we decided to stay."

It took us a minute to throw our things in our bags and get mentally prepared to be on the move again. Where we would end up this time and how far would we travel? We waited until our host returned to give our thanks and then headed out the back into the fields again. Rice fields and then. . . corn, but only for a short while and on the edges where the walking wasn't as treacherous. About ten minutes later we turned a corner and ducked into a big concrete house where we were told to wait. Everyone seemed quite relaxed, talking in normal voices and joking around.

Maybe another ten minutes later, Frankie motioned for us to follow him outside and across a courtyard, around a bend and into another courtyard. There we found some of our old friends, like the young fighter who wanted to hear more about Phil's daughters. We all sat on benches and soon became encased in clouds of blue smoke. Hong made friends by distributing his dwindling supply of cigarettes.

As we waited, Chuck introduced us to the other people in the courtyard, mostly civilians in underground organizations or the Party branch. When word came we filed out in a not so orderly manner (we must've been in a very secure area) and soon arrived at another concrete house. The door was lit by a streetlight above, so the guys took on some seriousness as we ducked inside swiftly one at a time. The house was big with several good-sized rooms and a table in the kitchen. Everything seemed a little frayed at the edges, but the owners we found out later had been pretty well off (maybe rich peasants) in the past. Now they were in a lot worse shape but still owned the house.

The owners were asleep in a second story loft. Chuck showed the three of us into the living room and told us to wait there while the squad conducted a meeting in the kitchen. That room was pretty big, lined with linoleum, and we sat on couches—the first I'd seen in the countryside.

We weren't sure if we were just waiting until after the meeting to keep walking or if we were there to stay for the night. It was already pretty late so I guessed if we weren't staying at that house, it would be nearby. If so, it was sort of anti-climactic; I'd gotten myself all psyched up for another long journey through the dark fields, sprinting across roads, and jumping ditches.

I don't remember how it got started but that evening, while we were waiting for the squad to finish theirs, we had our own little meeting. We talked about our own discipline, whether it was enough or too little, and things like how careful we should be about how much we ate. We argued a little about the "woman question" and discussed our observations of gender relationships in the countryside. One issue we got a little stuck on was the question of whether or not we should be "grateful." Was gratefulness a part of petty-bourgeois ideology? What was the difference between thanking people and expressing appreciation? Was the fact that some of us felt tremendous gratitude to all our hosts in the Philippines—especially those in the other room who risked their lives for us to have this opportunity—a calculation of favors or an acknowledgement of their situation and efforts?

In the middle of our discussion, someone knocked on the door in the living room. Immediately someone went out the front door and two more came to the living room. One lifted the blinds

a millimeter to have a look outside while the other stood by the door with a pistol in his hand. I asked him in sign language if they wanted us to move to the inner room, but he said quietly it was OK. Once they found out who it was, everyone relaxed and went back to their respective meetings.

We didn't arrive at many earth-shattering conclusions but it passed the time. At around midnight, we heard benches being pushed back from the table in the kitchen and soon Chuck walked into the living room. He seemed surprised that we were still up. "Oh," he said, "You could've gone to sleep." I guess that meant we were staying put for the rest of the night. He showed Phil and I into a smaller bedroom off to the side with a big, extremely lumpy bed; the rest of the troops and Hong would sleep on the floor or on the couches in the living room. There was also a bamboo platform bed in another room that already supported the weight of a couple of sprawled out guys.

Chuck seated himself at the kitchen table, lit a smoke, and offered, "We can keep talking if you want." We looked at each other in agreement and sat down on the benches. We noticed Chuck kept a handgun on the table covered by his baseball cap. He started in by talking about the meeting—why they had it and what it was about. We were surprised to learn that it was about what happened the night before and why we had to wait by the water buffalo for half an hour. Apparently the group that

was supposed to make first contact with the peasants in that area did not plan well, and they didn't make it there ahead of us. So our group, with three conspicuous foreigners, had to do the work they didn't do. The meeting was a criticism, self-criticism meeting.

"You notice," he said, "that there was no fighting during the day, no squad members saying 'Why didn't you do your work?' or anything." That kind of squabbling and laying blame was strictly forbidden as part of their discipline. Instead, everyone waited until the first opportunity to have a meeting, where they laid all the problems out and discussed them. They aired all the issues, took responsibility, made commitments to do it differently in the future, and then left it behind.

We offered our own report about our little meeting. He seemed amused (in a nice way).

And so started the third night's discussion. For a while we continued on with the topic of criticism, self-criticism. Hong said that these past few days, the three of us had been constantly evaluating and observing them and drawing our conclusions. So he was interested in what they thought of us. Chuck thought for a minute and then said that overall he was impressed with our discipline. He had been in squads before that hosted foreigners and had problems. When we asked with what, he described several situations. One time his squad was stationed out in a remote mountain

area and had a foreigner with them for a few days. Drinking water there was scarce; they just had one water hole where they got all their clean water, so they took great pains to keep it from being contaminated, always hauling water out first to wash dishes and so forth. Then one day they went to the water hole and found the guy standing waist deep in the water taking a bath.

Another time they had a woman with them. They got their water there from a nearby river. One day he found that all of the Red Fighters had to go get water many times over a short period of time. When he went to investigate, he found the woman stripped naked splashing around in the river waving to the squad members (—the members who had not yet been ideologically remolded he added). Another problem he'd had was with foreigners disregarding restrictions on taking pictures of sensitive areas or people who still worked above ground.

When Hong pressed the issue, saying that everything had two sides to it, and we wanted to know what negative things they had to say about us, he begged off saying he had to consult with the other guys in the squad. After all, he'd been away for parts of the day and he couldn't just say what he was thinking without talking to others who had interactions with us too.

We went on to revisit a few issues we'd discussed before. First we went back to Che Guevara. Why

was it that there were so many t-shirts and pins of Che Guevara and an absence of Mao and Lenin? Chuck answered that many young people especially idealized Che without knowing really what he was all about; that because he had such an air of romanticism about him and his picture was so handsome and rebellious, many youth wore it as a fashion statement. The capitalists had taken a cue from the trend and made a lot of money off of printing t-shirts and buttons. So why, then didn't they try and make money with Mao t-shirts? For one, Mao's picture wasn't all that romantic. And also his ideology was a bit too dangerous to the capitalists to mess around with disseminating his image.

We also went back to the shorts question, just to clarify. Did the Party lead or follow the masses on questions like the perception of women showing leg as easy? In other words, did the Party struggle to change the ideology, or change its policies only when the ideology of the masses moved? Chuck's answer was that of course Party was in the lead, but the example he gave seemed contrary. He said that for example, in the past, gays and lesbians were not allowed to be Party members. If you were "found out," you would be kicked out. But as society changed and gays and lesbians became more accepted in it, then the Party changed too. Now "out" gays and lesbians were allowed in the Party and in the Red Fighters as well. The Party's

position was also to fight for the right for gays and lesbians to marry legally.

Chuck said that this process of ideological remolding was not easy, and he knew that he wasn't completely remolded himself. Because while he fully accepted and agreed with the Party's policy towards gays and lesbians, he knew that if his son said he was gay he would be furious. (I wasn't too surprised; I'd noticed a bit of homophobic joking between he and the other squad members earlier.) He said he knew that his ideology had problems and that he was still working on it. A big turning point for him had been finding out that his very macho childhood friend was gay. His friend had the same partner now for almost ten years, and they were very respected in their barrio.

A few times in our discussions up to that point, Chuck had said that he couldn't answer some specific questions because he wasn't usually based in the area: Ka Frankie would have to answer. So finally that night we asked him why he *was* in the area at this time. "Because of you," he said grinning. Oh. He had only gotten the call the night before we arrived that told him he would be going to the area and hosting three foreign guests. His task was to guarantee our safety and answer our questions. Later we also found out that in addition to his unit, another small unit was in the region just because of us.

The conversation turned in the end to China, and the situation Left forces in China faced today. By this time (not quite 3am) I had startled myself awake several times because my head slipped off my hand and crashed to the tabletop. Chuck suggested that maybe I was tired and could go to sleep, but I shook it off, not wanting to miss anything.

At around 3:30, though, I got my second wind and starting asking more questions. We asked about smoking and how every Red Fighter that we'd met (aside from the woman) seemed to be a chain-smoker. Chuck said a few years ago he was out in the sticks and ran out of cigarettes, so he took the opportunity to quit. He got muscle twitches in his face for a while before he got over the craving. He said that the Party always tried to do ideological work to convince the fighters to stop smoking, but it never really went anywhere. When he stopped, he went around talking to people about how much better his health was. But actually when he quit, he put on some weight and couldn't run fast anymore!

Then one time he managed to secure a whole case of cigarettes for his squad. He carried it a long ways and delivered it to a bunch of very happy guys. He sat there watching how ecstatic they were and thought, "I worked so hard carrying that heavy box here. Everyone looks so happy smoking. Why shouldn't I have just one?" So he had one and went from smoking a pack a day before, to not smok-

ing at all, back to smoking a pack and a half a day. He knew it wasn't good for his long-term health, but he claimed it helped him think. When he had a head full of problems to solve and issues to think through, he sat smoking imagining the answers were in the clouds of smoke he exhaled.

I was moving on to other questions when Phil elbowed me and whispered, "Don't ask any more questions!" Chuck was still going strong, talking and smoking as if he'd gotten more than a handful of hours of sleep in the past two days. But the rest of us were falling apart. We finally had to beg off and postpone the conversation until the next day. After brushing my teeth at the kitchen sink, I headed to bed. On my way out, I saw that Chuck was putting the two benches together to make a platform to sleep, about half a meter wide.

January 31

Christmas and Burgers: The Barrio by the Highway

"Comrade kino! It's already 8:30 and there is someone here to see you!" It was Frankie, cheerfully acting like 8:30am was some unreasonably late hour to still be in bed. Sure enough, by the time we took down our mosquito net and rubbed the sleep out of our eyes, everyone looked like they'd been up for hours. Even Chuck, who had gotten the same four hours of sleep that we had, was busy texting people, cigarette in hand.

The person we were supposed to meet turned out to be another woman Red Fighter. She was actually the wife of the really sharp guy from the night before, who we talked so intently about China with. She had been in the movement for almost 30 years and was obviously a pretty high-level cadre. She too had gotten involved with the movement from a religious standpoint and become radical-

ized. And once she left the city, we got the impression that she never went back; she'd been in the countryside for over twenty years.

The guy we'd met the night before was her second husband—her first was a Red Fighter who was killed in combat. Her four kids (two by her first and two by her second husband) were all in the city being raised by sympathetic family members. They saw either her or her husband maybe once every three months. When we asked whether they understood why she is away so much, she seemed proud to say that they did—at least the older ones. Her eldest son, a teenager, came to visit her often and wanted to join the Red Fighters. When he visited, the Red Fighters took him around, and he trained with them to be a sharpshooter.

While we were talking her cell phone rang, and she got word that she had to be at a meeting. But while she waited for her ride, she had a few minutes. She'd heard about the shorts discussion that we'd had the previous evening and told us basically what everyone else had: that in order to help not yet remolded comrades, they had to go within the norms of society. When we asked if it was difficult being one of few women in the countryside, especially at the time she first joined, she gave us the same sort of description of how the Party policies were to treat women and men the same, etc. Maybe it was a language problem—or maybe an understandable discomfort with showing any vul-

nerabilities to strangers—but I felt with both of our talks with the women Red Fighters that somehow we couldn't get around the "taught" answers. I was more curious about how squads dealt with issues that would inevitably come up—not that they shouldn't come up at all. Or maybe it was lack of time. We soon heard the rumble of a motor outside and we had to say goodbye.

Back in the living room, most of the squad members had gone. Chuck and Frankie were sitting around entering different codes into their phones from a book. The book had pages and pages of text message jokes and different song codes for ringtones. Chuck finally settled on the Superman theme and went off to play it for the other guys, who all went into fits of laughter.

Phil and I decided that the situation was getting pretty serious: we had to bathe, or at least try and sponge off. The Red Fighters may have known how to keep from getting sticky and stinky, but we were a mess. Clean underwear wouldn't hurt either. I asked if it was OK, and they showed us the small closet-like shower stall with a big pan for water on the floor. Chuck told us that we weren't to go outside because the house was right on a main road and anyone outside could be spotted easily. That meant we couldn't go out and pump our own water. I went to get a shirt that I draped over my head and asked if I could go out like that. Frankie gave me a thumbs up, but one of the squad

guys jumped up and brought in a couple pails for us. If women couldn't wear shorts, then we suspected that Phil and I shouldn't bathe together, so we took turns and ended up washing our clothes in whatever water was left. We had to ask the same Red Fighter to hang up our clothes for us—all except my bra and underwear which looked decidedly foreign.

I felt like a new woman! My bug bites even itched less when they were clean.

Back in the living room, it looked like Christmas. Everyone had been lazing around sleepily when Frankie and another member walked in carrying loaded grain bags slung over their shoulders. When they dumped them onto the floor, boxes and boxes of ammunition and empty magazines came tumbling out. Frankie grinned: "From the storehouse."

The four or five guys in the room immediately went to work sorting the bullets by type (some were made in the Philippines and some in the US). They checked over each magazine's mechanism carefully, and then and loaded the bullets 30 at a time. I asked about the different types of bullets, because Chuck was loading only the US kind into his magazines. He said that he didn't trust the others because sometimes they misfired and blew up in the gun. He had an experience once where on a tactical offensive, his gun exploded, cutting open his hand and leaving him weaponless. He had to

direct the offensive wounded and unarmed. From then on he preferred the US bullets. Who, then used the other kind? "Other comrades," he said. I wondered if he had that "privilege" because he was a commander or because his gun had already blown up in his hands once, but I didn't want to put him on the spot.

While we sat there, we heard the bells of ice cream vendors on their tricycles pedaling by. We were *really* close to the road. All the shades in the house were drawn and whenever bells rang, all sounds inside ceased, especially the clink clink of bullets being sorted on the floor. Once a kid peeked in to get a look at the foreigners and was met with harsh reprimands all around. He disappeared quickly.

By the time everyone reloaded their magazines and put them away in their ammunition vests, it was time for lunch. Food seemed more plentiful there, so we all ate a little more to our capacity, but it was still rice and a few vegetables with salted fish. Feeling rather sleepy—or just relatively more sleepy after the meal—I went to the room where Phil and I spent the night, only to find Hong snoring away on the mattress. Just as well, with the noonday sun hitting the tin roof over that smaller room, it was hot as hell in there. The fan was on but it felt like hot air from an open oven being blown around. I found Phil on the bamboo platform in

the other room trying to nap too, and I joined him but we were both unsuccessful.

We soon gave up and wandered back into the living room where Frankie was snoozing on the couch and Chuck was still awake sitting on the floor playing with his cell phone. Since Hong was asleep, we were able to start a more casual conversation with him, rather than the Q&A one after another interview style that we'd been practicing at the pace of the interpretation.

We talked a little bit first about his personal history. His wife was in the movement but lived in the city with their seven year old son. He went to spend a few days with them every few months, and people in his barrio thought that he traveled as a tradesman for his work. After high school he had trained at a vocational school and was certified, so when he went home, neighbors always asked him to fix this and that around their houses.

His wife sometimes took his son out to see him and his son was told that the places they met were friends' houses or places provided by the employer near a job site. I asked him when he thought he would tell his kid that he was really the commander of a guerilla squad in the front. He said in another couple years, maybe when he was nine, and he could begin to talk seriously with him. But wasn't that a big security risk? No, because he wouldn't tell him details, just enough to start teaching him

early about right and wrong and oppression and what people could do about it.

Hong groggily showed up in the late afternoon to join Chuck with a smoke. We remembered then that Chuck never wrote down all the exact calculations of peasant spending and income from crops. He got to work immediately, using his cell phone's calculator and mumbling to himself. By the time he broke it all down and showed us all the calculations, we had a better grasp of the hardships that peasants were under. We also could see in black and white why places like Payatas existed.

Chuck then gave us some other figures to think about: revolutionary taxes. No matter what, if you were a capitalist in the guerilla fronts, you were obligated to pay two sets of taxes, one to the white and one to the red government. They required capitalists to pay two percent of their gross income to the squad in the area. And whenever the peasants gained anything in income or land as a result of the Red Fighter's organizing work, they ask for one percent of the increase. Most times that resulted in less than a peso per person. Sometimes peasants donated more of their own accord, but they were never asked to.

Even local politicians who campaigned in the guerilla fronts had to pay a tax to do so. They received a notice informing them that they were welcome to be in the area but had to recognize the dual government there by paying a tax to them. In

most communities the peasants were glad to let the NPA know if there were politicians in the barrio who hadn't anted up.

Going on with Chuck's personal history, we were surprised to learn that during the period of disorientation, Chuck spent six years in the city as an urban guerilla. He said during that time the Party was really in a confused state and lost its mass line. He hesitated a second and then said, "I was told: 'Don't talk too much to the comrades about the period of disorientation. It can be very confusing.' But here we are and I'm going to talk about it anyway." We assured him that we had already heard quite a lot about it from others and were interested in learning more.

During that time, they pulled a lot of cadres out of the countryside, so there were all these people in the city plotting insurrection and assassinating policemen and politicians. With a lack of ideological education and Party discipline quickly eroding, Red Fighters, rural and urban, became sort of a rough lot, himself included; men with guns who lacked ideology and discipline very easily became bandits and hooligans. He said he lived a comfortable material life and became a killing machine for the Party. If he didn't kill at least one person a month, he felt itchy—agitated, like he wasn't useful. He only had one "buddy" to answer to, so his attitude towards Party policies began to loosen. If his buddy had a bunch of dif-

ferent women at the same time, he knew he could do the same without anybody else finding out. They covered for each other.

We'd learned before that with all the super-secrecy that went with plotting urban insurrection came a spy panic. Suddenly everyone was a suspected infiltrator, and once the thing started to snowball, executions started. So not only did they lose the masses of people behind them, they shot a lot of their own Party members.

When the rectification movement started in '92, Chuck shipped back out to the countryside. He ended up in an area in the countryside where the older cadres resisted the rectification movement. One leader in particular made life difficult for him. Soon he became disillusioned and contemplated returning to the city and giving up his life as a Red Fighter and even a Party cadre. He called his wife about it and she took him to task. She said, "You're not a cadre for that guy. Remember you are there for the masses, to serve the people. Why should you leave? That guy should be the one to leave." He decided she was right and stuck it out. And sure enough, after a while, the other guy hung it up and left the countryside and eventually the whole movement.

Now Party discipline was strict and there was a heavy emphasis on study and ideological work in the units. We could see that reflected in the squad's policy of no squabbling—that everything had to be

resolved in meetings where there was criticism, self-criticism. In the countryside, they studied and practiced strict adherence to the policies developed during the Liberation War in China using Mao Zedong Thought and mass line.

They were the Three Main Disciplines:

1) Be disciplined in following orders in all your actions
2) Do not take a single needle or piece of thread from the masses
3) Turn in everything captured

. . . and the Eight Points of Attention:

1) Speak to people with respect
2) Pay fairly for what you buy
3) Return everything you borrow
4) Pay for everything you damage
5) Do not hit or swear at people
6) Do not damage crops
7) Do not take liberties with women
8) Do not mistreat captives

He laughed and said for the longest time they couldn't figure out the one about the door. (Originally, the first Point of Attention was: "Put back the doors that you used for bed boards.") "We thought, 'What was the Red Army doing taking the doors off of peasants' houses?'" But then someone who had been to China came through and told them that in North Shaanxi, where most of the war was fought,

the peasants' doors came off easily and the custom was for guerillas to borrow them and use them to sleep on. Sometimes they forgot to put them back in the morning and the peasants complained.

One of the most important parts of the discipline was that all captured or donated goods have to be turned in, or centralized. This prevented the Red Fighters from using their guns to gain material comforts for themselves. So everything, from the revolutionary taxes they collected, to the small voluntary gifts they received (like the things we would leave for them when we left) had to go to the central and then be redistributed back down again. I asked about gifts and such from family members, and he said that the Party respected the personal items of its cadres and didn't require them to turn them in.

Chuck then talked a little bit about how the relationship between the NPA and the people in the countryside improved after the rectification. He gave an example of a Red Fighter who was in a bar in a barrio when a local guy brushed by and spat on him. The Red Fighter did not react but later found out who the guy was and where he lived. He went to visit him one night, and when he entered the house, he pulled out his gun and put it on the table. He told him that he could have killed him that night, and that he should be careful of doing that kind of thing, because a government soldier or hired gun might just take a shot at him. Then he

talked to him about why the NPA was in the area. That guy eventually became a trusted contact in the barrio and later even joined the NPA himself.

Another example he gave was of two Red Fighters walking along the road at night in a barrio where the squad was just making contact. They actually only had one contact, but the contact was one of the most respected people in the barrio. That night two other guys approached them and pulled knives, looking for a fight. One of the Red Fighters started reaching for his gun, but his partner pulled him away saying, "You can't do that—they're part of the masses!" So instead of using their guns, even to scare them, they ran away. The other two gave chase, so they ran all the way to their contact's house and told him what happened. Then the contact found the two other guys and took handled the matter.

So using a mass line again, that is, (in a simplified summary) being one with the people and fighting for what they needed most, and re-instituting strict Party discipline, they began to rebuild their mass base and Party membership. The assessment now was that the Party had regained almost all of its former strength and had a great forward momentum.

Soon it was dark and Frankie, who had gotten up from his afternoon nap and left with a couple other guys, returned bearing gifts. He opened a plastic bag and tossed us each a fast food burger.

"What's this?" we asked in confusion. Chuck grinned wickedly: "Revolutionary taxes." Actually they were not part of any revolutionary tax, but part of the negotiation process. In order to show goodwill, the owner of the chain restaurant sent the NPA back with some friendly gifts. Chuck remarked that they should've gotten a whole case full of them. Hong passed his on (he had a bad experience once at a McDonald's in Beijing), but Phil and I happily unwrapped ours. Neither of us were fast food fans, but we ate them with relish. Bad burgers never tasted so good!

While we ate, Chuck answered the incoming text message on his cell phone. He smiled, so we asked who it was. It was his wife and the message was: "So you're still talking to the aliens. You must be very tired because you cannot rest. It's OK just finish your work. I miss you and love you."

We were all of course curious about the revolutionary tax collecting process. What did it mean that they were just negotiating? Well, once the NPA established a guerilla front, they began approaching the local businesses in the area. First, they sent a letter with a civilian to the owner's house or store. In the letter, they introduced themselves and stated (among other things), that as one of two governments in the area, they expected to receive taxes. Their policy was to require two percent of the business' gross income, but that is not a hard number. So they extended cordial invitations to

enter negotiations with them about the exact percentage that they would be giving.

The letter went on to say that if they did not agree to pay taxes then inevitably the NPA had to take action against their business. The owners would not be harmed physically. However, if they did anything to jeopardize the safety of the civilian bearing the letter or any of the NPA negotiators, they would be executed.[3]

So the civilian carried their response back to the squad, and they set up a time and a place to begin negotiations. This was a very dangerous business, though. So many things could go wrong: people could inform, the capitalists could set up bogus meetings and call in the government troops. . . Chuck launched into a great storytelling session about collecting taxes, including some of his own work.

One time, he set up a meeting with a big business owner at his house. He met him alone and negotiated a deal. But in order to bluff his counterpart into thinking he had a lot of back up, he told him that the meeting had taken so long that all his "bodyguards" were probably getting thirsty and hungry. The capitalist got nervous and told his guys to go out and buy a case of coke and some bread and deliver it to the Chuck's "friends."

[3] This was not Party policy. It was unclear to us if this actually happened or it was embellishment on the part of the storyteller.

Chuck received the goods, sent the bearers away, and was left with food and drink and an imaginary legion of bodyguards. So he told the peasants in the barrio that he couldn't just call out his guards and give away their secret locations, and so gave the Coke and bread to them instead.

After they finished negotiations, he went out to the road to wait for a bus back into whatever area his squad was, but soon noticed a massive guy dressed in black crossing the road. The guy walked a couple meters, then crossed again and disappeared. Chuck wandered down to a fish vendor and asked if he recognized the guy. The vendor did not. So Chuck made for the house of the business owner's son, who was a sympathizer to the movement. He told him to go quickly to his father's house to see what was up.

Sure enough, he came back several minutes later, face white and panicked, saying he'd better get the hell out of there; his father had tried to double cross him and there were a kajillion government troops swarming around the house looking for him. Chuck managed to secure a jeep and left word with the son: "Tell your father that he'll have to be quicker next time."

He seemed pretty cocky telling the story and especially gleeful about getting the case of coke, but then he added seriously that he never should have gone alone to do something like that and he very nearly got killed as a result. He made errors

in judgement and did not do a thorough investigation of the situation. I asked if the squad and the Party criticized him for it. He looked at me steadily, "Oh yes."

Another story had to do with a small busing company. They started negotiations at two percent, but since the company owner begged hardship—his company was small and his buses old—they went down to one percent. After all, it wasn't Party policy to bleed these small capitalists to death by overtaxing them.[4] But, since Chuck had conceded so much ground, he insisted that the owner do something to show some goodwill. "Like what?" the owner asked. How about 20 pairs of boots? He named a top brand, the specific style and various sizes and after some mild protestations, the owner eventually delivered. So maybe there was at least one squad of NPA out there somewhere who were not wearing flip flops.

Hong was curious about stories where things went wrong. Apparently there were plenty. One was that two NPA members showed up at a house to begin negotiations with a local business owner only to discover that the owner, his brother, and his son were all undercover agents. After the negotiations ended, the agents stood up and handcuffed them both.

[4] Party policy, we found out later, was that the rate of taxation was based on class analysis.

It was about 7:00, getting around the time to think about packing up and leaving. Hong still hadn't eaten and Phil hadn't eaten enough, so they foraged in the kitchen while I repacked my backpack. It only took a couple minutes, but when I wandered back into the living room, the entire atmosphere had changed. All the squad members who had been sort of lounging around cracking jokes were now all standing with their backpacks on, wearing their ammunitions vests, and carrying their weapons. Their expressions were totally serious as they stood around a CB radio.

I blinked. Phil and Hong gathered round Chuck as he explained. The squad always had the radio on monitoring government troop movements. They had just heard that enemy soldiers had sighted some NPA activity in the barrio where we were. Their assessment was that they had to move quickly to get us as far away from them as possible. "If they find you and you are not with us, they might not hurt you," he said. "One of us will take you now to a civilian's house. Someone will take you to the bus station tomorrow. Remember you are tourists."

His words set off a flurry of activity. We weren't quite as practiced as they, so it took us some chaotic moments to get all our things together and our dark clothes on. While we waited for our guide, Chuck told us when we got to the civilian's house that we should take out our notebooks and hide

them outside of our bags. We should also change our clothes back into tourist clothes, and take out all of the "guerilla gear" from our bags too, and hide them in the house.

Our guide arrived. We asked if we would see any of them again, and they said probably they would come by the house the next day or something. But we shook hands anyway, just in case. What do you say in a situation like that? "Thanks for everything, good luck"? It seemed grossly inadequate, but it had to do. We followed our guide to the doorway and ducked past the light into the fields. We met two other guys who came with us, young kids who were probably in the underground youth organization in the barrio. They led the way and the Red Fighter, the only one with a gun, brought up the rear.

We spent maybe 10 or 15 minutes going through fields where those damn corn rows got me twice. After falling the second time I crashed to the ground and broke one stalk coming back up. I made a mental apology to whoever's crop it was and thought about one of the points of concern: don't damage any crops. Soon we reached the edge of a barrio. The last Red Fighter told us the others would take us from there. We shook his hand with emotion and with a few quick movements he melted back into the fields.

Our two remaining guides introduced us to two other youth and handed us off to them. We

thanked them and continued our trek. I was happy when we hit rice fields but jumping over an irrigation ditch, the loud noise of ripping nylon filled the air. I saw everyone stop to look around and suppressed a nervous giggle. My thin pants had just ripped through the crotch. I was glad I'd washed my underwear.

We went on until we hit another edge of a village. After we crossed a courtyard and approached the street, someone appeared. One of our guides already reached the street, but the other dropped to the ground and motioned for us to do the same. We crouched behind a short wall under the road for several minutes while the two guys on the street had a conversation. Finally he moved on and one by one we sprinted across the street.

Our destination was a house on the other side. The backdoor area was lit up and we took off our shoes and went inside. The house was very well kept, made of concrete and furnished with a TV and other modern amenities. I remembered what our contact told us when we came in that first night: "Don't look at their houses, look at what they eat." We went upstairs to change while the woman talked to our guides. We separated all our things into what we were going to leave behind and the things we could keep in our bags as tourist gear and hid our notebooks and "guerilla gear" as directed.

Then we went downstairs where a youth told us to wait. He had to leave but would come back soon. So we sat there, the three of us in our tourist outfits (me in my too short shorts) watching the movie version of Fantasy Island on the tiny TV—talk about surreal!

We waited for maybe an hour before our guides returned and told us that it had been decided that we'd better surface that night and return to Manila. We were completely mentally unprepared. We hadn't even said a proper goodbye and had been anticipating spending the night and meeting our friends the next day before returning to Manila. The change in plans made us uneasy about the situation. Were our friends OK?

The youth asked for the things we were leaving behind, which the younger brother carried away, and led us outside where a roofless low riding jeep was waiting for us. We drove at a fast clip through several small neighborhoods, avoiding the big roads until we hit a small city. We wondered briefly whether they planned to drive us all the way back to Manila that way, but maybe 20 minutes later we pulled into a bus depot. They pointed us to the right terminal and said goodbye. They were in a big hurry. We asked them to pass along thanks and goodbyes to all the people we didn't have a chance to see again and they promised to do so.

We were left just the three of us again.

The bus—one of those retired in Japan and shipped to the Philippines—pulled in less than half an hour later and we boarded. We froze in the air conditioning all the way back to Manila having given away all of our long-sleeved clothes. We didn't notice after we fell asleep though, after making sure the ticket collector would call us at our stop.

Our stop landed us right in front of the hostel where we stayed our first two nights in the Philippines. Standing there in the exhaust fumes amid the billboards advertising underwear and fast food, I remembered the city. And I hoped our friends were in some safe place laughing about the rip in my pants. Lucky for us, a stray tricycle puttered by and stopped when we raised our hands frantically. 30 pesos later, by 1am we were back at our house, putting up our mosquito nets for the night. It seemed the lap of luxury: no threat of enemy troops, plenty of food within a five minute walk, and whole day to sleep away if we needed. But I already missed the countryside and all our friends in it.

February 1

Food and Rest

Sleep the whole next day is exactly what we did. I got up to pee a few times but had no trouble climbing back into the mosquito net and passing out for a few more hours. When I finally woke up for good, my first thought was of the squads we'd been with and whether they had been able to get any shuteye that night. It was mid-afternoon by the time we all got up. After showering and doing some laundry, we spent a long time in reclined positions in our room talking about what happened the night before.

I called Beth just to let her know we were back and could schedule other meetings for the days to come, starting the following evening. She said she would work on getting us a slot with a women's organization and also with a non-profit organization that did research on the Philippine economy. A lot of people were also interested in having a

small forum on China. If she could set it up, could we do some preparation?

I reported my conversation back to Phil and Hong who agreed with the plans—but we all seemed to have sort of a lackluster feeling about our remaining time. Hong said he felt like it was time to go home somehow. And while what Beth proposed seemed interesting, I didn't seem to have much energy for it. We figured out that after going to the guerilla fronts—especially the way we left it, our reentry into city life seemed a bit monochrome and anti-climactic.

We decided that since we had nothing scheduled for the rest of the day that we would take it to keep thinking about the countryside, writing down what we learned, and summing up our ideas between the three of us. We also heard from our contact, who must have gotten word that we were back early, that a couple people from the party would meet with us the following day to answer any additional questions we might have. I proposed going to an air-conditioned restaurant where cool environs with lots of food would surely help my foggy brain. We decided on our "favorite" haunt, the hotel workers' cafeteria, for its relatively cheap food and big dining room area.

We got to the cafeteria hungry. Standing in line, looking at the serving sizes, we ordered double and then triple everything and sat down with our notebooks. There was nothing wrong with our

plan, but our execution was a little sketchy. After a full meal and spending a whole hour on notes from just the first night, I got a little discouraged. I looked up and found Hong staring into space, but Phil scribbling away. So Hong and I started a conversation which Phil soon joined—a discussion that returned to our favorite argument about gender issues (or as Hong always put it, "the woman problem"). He labeled me a petty bourgeois feminist who forgot that the main contradiction was class, and I labeled him one of those typical Marxists who used the "main contradiction" phrase as a convenient excuse to keep oppressing their wives. But it was all very friendly and in good humor.

By the time we were ready to call it a draw, it was already past 9pm, and we headed back to the house, not much further along in our work. At least Hong had written down some questions, so we wouldn't be completely unprepared for our meeting the next morning.

February 2

The Party and the United Front

We waited for Paula where she said she'd pick us up at 10. When she pulled up, she gave us the option of going to the park where we could bring a few chairs and talk outside, or go indoors. We opted for indoors in anticipation of table space and a little relief from the searing sun. We drove for a while and ended up in a middle-class neighborhood. Paula borrowed a fan and we filed into a room with a square table and chairs.

To get things going, we introduced ourselves. Paula's personal history was enough to fill a whole day in itself. She was late in her activism, compared to most of the people she said we'd met who'd entered the movement in their university days. She was in her late 20s, already working for a multi-national company when the First Quarter Storm (early '70s) hit her political con-

sciousness. When Marcos declared martial law in '72, all mass organizations were declared illegal, and she and some friends began helping full-time activists who had to go underground. One day in 1973, when she was at a safe house where some activists were hiding, the police raided the house on information that a captured activist gave under pressure. Several of the small group were killed, some escaped, and they arrested and detained Paula and a few others.

After enduring mental torture, they released her, not because they didn't have charges against her, but because one of her fellow arrested activist's distant relative was in some position of power over the raiding team. Her father had helped that relative go to university, so after almost three weeks, by calling in that favor, they all got out.

Paula lost some interest after her release and went back to work in the company. By the mid '70s though, she decided she had to commit herself to the movement. Her commitment took her to the countryside where she joined the NPA. I asked if she had doubts after she went to the countryside, and she said, "The second day!" The place where they sent her was a remote mountain location. The second day, they had to climb and hike many kilometers, and she soon developed blisters on her feet. She began cursing herself: "What do you think you're doing here? You can barely even walk—how do you think you're going to be of any

use?" Finally someone in the group asked her if she was having a hard time and she burst into tears. So they stopped and rested at a peasant's home until her blisters healed up a little. Paula thanked them and told them to please not tell anyone that she cried. But all along the way, everyone she met would shake her hand knowingly and say, "Oh, you're the one having a hard time!"

Once she got into the area and started working, she still had doubts, but she kept getting letters welcoming her into the area and thanking her for coming. She had a hard time thinking about how she would explain that she didn't want to stay.

She eventually made the adjustment and stayed for over a year until they assigned her to begin organizing in the white area just outside the guerilla front. That was 1977. Before beginning her new assignment, she returned to Manila to make some arrangements. While in town, the police picked her up for the second time. This time there was a government agent involved in her arrest, and although they arrested her, she never surfaced. That is, no one knew where she was or what happened to her. Her family, though, took a wild guess and managed to use their connections to locate where she was and gain her release after a month's time.

After she got out, she found herself screened off for a period from the movement as was Party policy for people just released; they were too easy to

trail and bug and could lead the police to all sorts of different people and organizations. And she had some doubts about what she was going to do for the rest of her life, so she ended up going back to work as a consultant and doing part-time underground work.

Two years passed before she decided again to return to the guerilla areas, where she spent several years organizing peasants. In the early '80s the Party called her back again to do underground work in Manila. This time she made it for a few years, to 1988, before they picked her up for subversion. Unlike her two previous stints, this time they locked her up with the criminally charged prisoners in the city jail. And they physically tortured her using mostly sexual molestation. Apparently, the first 48 hours were always the worst.

She spent six months in prison, during which time she organized the other female prisoners. They liked her so much they elected her their representative. On the outside, different groups led mostly by a woman's organization began making some noise. They held protests and rallies in a campaign for her release. Through their efforts to expose the government's "non-case" against her, the courts had to let her go. To prove subversion, you had to come up with two witnesses. The police forged the two witnesses when they picked her up to keep her in prison, but when pushed to come up with them, they were a couple witnesses

short. After her release, Paula went above ground for good.

By the time we heard her story and told our own, our stomachs were grumbling. Paula suggested we go get some lunch, either at a Thai or Chinese restaurant. Phil was easy either way. I looked at Hong. I really wanted Thai food. Hong said no problem; he would soon be back in China where he could eat whatever Chinese food he wanted. So we drove to a very nice Thai restaurant owned and run by Filipinos and ate a delicious Thai meal prepared by a Filipino chef and served by Filipino waitresses.

On the way back, Phil asked how many people in the Philippines could afford to buy their own cars. Paula didn't answer with a hard percentage, but said that car owners had always been a pretty elite bunch. But back in the mid-'90s the economy swelled a bit and suddenly many in the middle class could afford to buy imported cars at affordable prices and very very low interest rates. The boom only lasted for a little while and buying became difficult again. Then a few years later, the Asian Crisis crashed into the country and suddenly cheap, good quality cars were back on the market at low prices as bank repossessions.

Seated back around the table, stuffed, we started into Hong's list of questions. Actually, since he had a long list and this was a rare opportunity to talk in detail about the Party, our discussion focused

there. While we had up to that point learned a lot from many different sources, Hong asked Paula to provide a more detailed and deeper analysis and background.

1. Party history: As Ka Chuck had explained, Evangelista formed the Communist Party in the early '30s when the labor movement was strong, and the CP relied mostly on the workers to fill their ranks. There was also a socialist Party, led by the Lavas at that time, whose following was mostly in the countryside with the peasantry. Eventually, the two parties merged, which was good for the short-term strength of the movement, but actually ended up weakening the CP because the socialist Party was not based on Marxism.

During WWII, the Party and the army played big roles in defeating the Japanese. But later when the US appeared on the scene, the Party entered negotiations with the government to disarm. Most of the Red Army did disarm, and thousands of their ranks were massacred. Soon the leadership of the Party consolidated in the Lavas family. By the '60s, the Lava family leadership had lost most of its mass base because of the family's ultra-Right opportunist line. Most of its army became bandits, and the Party swung alternately between ultra-Left and Rightist lines. They aligned closely with the Soviet revisionists and membership dwindled.

At that time, a group of young revolutionaries rose up led by Jose Maria Sison. They had a sharp struggle with the older group of cadres in the Party which led in the end to bloodshed and also to the conclusion that the Party could no longer be reformed from within. So on December 26, 1968, not coincidentally Mao's birthday, they formed a new Communist Party of the Philippines. Their work especially in the student and youth sector led to the First Quarter Storm in the early '70s.

Marcos passed martial law to try to crush the upsurge of youth activism, which forced the activists underground and actually served to build the ranks of the NPA. They went out to the countryside in hordes, helping to build the Red Fighters (which was mostly still a peasant army) and organize peasants.

In that repressive environment, all mass demonstration were outlawed. But the movement built alliances with above-ground organizations like churches and unions, slowly wiggling into little cracks in the martial-law armor. Then one tobacco factory managed to have one strike. Then the urban poor held the first rally and slowly the people's movement began to gather momentum, until finally mass organizations had to be legalized.

Things were looking good—momentum was in the Party's favor and guerilla fronts were growing along with Party membership. But in the early '80s

certain mistakes appeared and were not checked. Those mistakes matured in the late '80s and soon appeared as a line struggle. They started suffering setbacks, including losing their mass base and losing some guerilla fronts. One of the big symptoms was the premature regularization of the army. That is, their goal became having big battalions of 300 people or more in each front looking to confront government troops directly. The government troops easily assessed their lack of strength and called in the guns and tanks to obliterate them. The mass base was clearly not ready for those kinds of direct battles, and time and time again guerilla fronts and liberated areas—once established and announced—were crushed.

The Red Fighters lived off the peasants, sleeping during the day and looking for a fight at night. They didn't do any organizing and didn't engage in production. People started to become afraid of them.

In the cities, the ultra-Left line in the Party began to call for urban insurrection. They'd had enough of the protracted people's war and wanted to seize power more quickly. Sison, in jail at the time but still in touch with the Party, was a minority voice struggling against the ultra-Leftists who were maneuvering in the organization to gain power within. Their tactics were to hold study sessions and meetings that weren't approved by Party organs. Mostly they used the examples of Nicara-

gua and El Salvador to prove that the time was ripe for urban insurrection in the Philippines too.

While some people were confused and bought into the line, actions proved louder than words: the shrinking mass base and guerilla fronts told a stark story. In the city, the Party was still able to mobilize big demonstrations but became increasingly marginalized by the time of the first People Power that ousted Marcos in 1986. After Marcos fell, however, Cory Aquino released all the political prisoners, which she came to regret, because the bunch included Sison. She soon rectified her mistake by having his passport seized in 1987 when he was in Europe giving a speaking tour.

The struggle for rectification, however, continued and in 1992, the Central Committee held a plenum that approved three documents: summing up of experiences, major policy decisions in line with the summing up, and against modern revisionism.

Immediately following the plenum, Party leaders who didn't accept or didn't want to pass the three documents split off into their own faction. That faction, however, split again and again into different opposing factions. Their mass base dwindled. But from 1992 onward, the CPP steadily regained its previous strength. The estimation was that they had recovered from the line struggle and were near the previous peak (1982–1985). They had over a hundred guerilla fronts, most which

were recoveries from previously lost ones, but they also expanded into new areas. We asked about the total numbers of Party members and Red Fighters but those numbers were not public.

They had only been able to hold one Party congress because of the danger involved in getting all the members together in one location. But they did hold Central Committee plenums where they did criticism, self-criticism and elected the next Central Committee. And although it may have seemed like the same leaders getting together to reelect themselves, the ideology was such that nominations from the different provinces went up through the ranks, and people's positive and negative aspects were discussed—and leadership did change.

2. What were the biggest constraints on the development of the Party structure? One was the effect of the collapse of socialism all over the world. The USSR and China were big blows to their morale, and the lack of a strong international socialist movement hurt their current development.

Another was that they were not organizing fast enough, because although they had recovered their original strength, there were still residual effects from neglecting the mass line. Another problem was in some sectors they hadn't hit on effective means to organize. For instance, they hadn't figured out how to mobilize the public school teach-

ers yet. The Department of Education could issue an order saying that no teachers were allowed to participate in demonstrations. So the teachers didn't participate, because although their jobs didn't pay very much, the paychecks were steady, which was hard to come by.

A third constraint was the NPA was still lacking members and effective leaders to command squads. When the Party decided to build battalions, the Red Fighters got used to being in a big company where the whole leadership and chain of command was quite different than a 7–10 person squad.

3. Party education: There were three levels of Party courses for members: beginning, intermediate, and advanced. But before that there were courses for the masses, not based on book learning but on their situation, whether it be peasants, workers, women, students, etc. Then there was a course for activists, who were then recruited into the Party and took the beginning course. The groups of people who were not activists continued in their education, including lessons on Marxist theories. They also held forums and group discussions and had cultural activities like film viewings.

Aside from formal study for Party members, there was also continuing education on the current situation like globalization and women in the movement. In the squad or Party branch, ideolog-

ical education continued on the basis of the situation in the unit. Studying and education were all instituted into the way of life, and Party members, barring extreme situations, conscientiously followed a schedule of study. (Paula mentioned that some of the schedules were thrown off during the climax of the anti-Estrada campaign.)

4. Minority groups' independence: The Party supported the rights of a people to secede from a government that oppressed and exploited them. After the CPP seized power, the new government would try to convince them that there was no need to secede and if necessary would establish fully autonomous regions. Phil asked what would happen if they still wanted independence after all that. Paula replied that her personal opinion was: "Why not?" (Officially the Party said it would respect the national minorities' decision to secede.)

5. Party's plan to oppose imperialist globalization: The Party's assessment was that globalization was imperialism's new alias. So they started fighting it before it even happened. Their strategy was to strengthen and win the revolution in the Philippines while doing secondary work on the international socialist front, such as organizing conferences and conducting internationally coordinated mass actions.

The Philippine movement had also done a lot of work in deconstructing all the globalization pro-

paganda in the world. In demonstrations in other parts of the world like Seattle, they lent militancy to the struggle. And in Beijing, their women's group staged two rallies against US imperialism at the International Women's Conference in 1994. In the Philippines and the world the term "imperialism" was passé just a few years before but had now reappeared in common vocabulary. Now they're trying to do the same thing with "socialism."

6. Democratic Centralism and Party structure: The Party operated on a committee system. There was a Party secretary, but the process was still democratic. That is, there were democratic discussions after which decisions were made and Party members were expected to follow. If after the decision was made someone had an objection, then they registered it. However, they could not circumvent the decision just because they didn't agree with it; discipline was crucial in the underground. Differences of opinion were of course common in the Party and they led to more discussion. But the Party allowed no factions that organized and worked to carry out different lines.

The Party branch was the basic unit. To begin with, wherever there were Party members, they made contact with those who seemed to have potential who understood the need for armed struggle and other important issues. They then organized those people into a bigger group and in

that group, pinpointed activists to recruit into the Party branch. Each Party member's task was to do the same in every situation.

There were Party branches within mass organizations and in their leadership. But Party policy was that in those organizations, Party members were to lead, not control. Most of the time the relationship between Party and non-Party members within one organization was not a problem, but sometimes people had to be careful not to be too open or to step on toes.

In the countryside, the organization started with armed propaganda units in the barrios that used the masses as their eyes and ears. The NPA started organizing the people into different committees on issues like livelihood, health, education, etc. From those committees they formed mass organizations of different sectors like peasants, women, youth, etc. Then, when the situation was ripe (not necessarily after the formation of mass organizations) came the formation of the Party branch, which required at least three Party members, same as in the city.

From there, the organizing unit was disbanded—sometimes they were even disbanded after the committee level, and after the Party branch was established, all the committees were absorbed into the mass organizations.

7. Cultural leadership: Paula raised her eyebrows when we told her about the shorts incident in the countryside. She herself was wearing shorts that day, probably shorter than the ones I had worn. She said that the Party should be in the lead in cultural matters and personally she found the Party had a tendency to be conservative. The most important discipline to keep in mind was "politics in command." And by keeping that in mind and applying it to local situations you could see the appropriate path to take.

8. Conditions that allowed the Red Fighters to exist in the countryside:

a. Land was the basic demand of the peasants
b. Organizing and developing the masses
c. Armed struggle

The ideology of the Red Fighters was critical to their survival in the countryside. They had to remember that they carried guns. That meant that they had to do mass work and raise the peasants' political consciousness to a level where the peasants felt comfortable telling them off if need be.

I looked at my watch and realized that we would have to leave to meet Patricia soon. After such a long and intense afternoon filled with such deep issues and insights, we parted company, hugging like old friends.

Patricia was already at her office when we arrived, but she had some odds and ends to finish up. Plus a driver was picking us up and he hadn't gotten there yet. When we did go, Isak came with us. A couple weeks before, he had read a *Time* magazine article about corruption in China that really pissed him off with its anti-socialist language. He wanted to know whether it was true or not, so others suggested he ask us, which he did on the ride over. I'd read the same article in China, and I was sorry to say that I thought it probably wasn't any exaggeration. And that you could be pissed at the anti-socialist language, but the problem was China was not socialist anymore. So it was a little complicated.

Our discussion was supposed to be on United Front work. But after a big meal, a day full of Q&A and still trying to recover from getting three or four hours a sleep a night in the guerilla front, I only got a few main points. Essentially, the Party developed a lot of its thinking about the United Front from Mao's experiences. Like in Mao's China, the Party assessed that the three main strengths of the revolution were the United Front, armed struggle, and Party leadership.

In their United Front work, they always strove to follow six principles:

1. The United Front was always led by the Party of the proletariat;

2. It built a solid alliance with the largest amount of people: with workers and peasants making up about 85–90%;
3. It aroused and mobilized the petty bourgeoisie which made up about 8–9%;
4. It won over the national bourgeoisie;
5. It took advantage of splits within the ruling class; and
6. It isolated the worst enemy, the representative of the ruling class

I must have missed a lot of the discussion, because it was midnight by the time Patricia woke the driver to take us back. The house was msotly asleep when we got back, but there was a message from Beth that the next day was set aside for us to do some of the shopping we'd told her we needed, having given away many of our things. Also Hong still had to buy presents for his family. She would call us in the morning with further details.

February 3

The Commodities Lure

Further details the next morning included directions to the peasants' organization's office, where we were to pick up a guide—a young kid tasked to bring us to a handicraft market, a bookstore, and Shoemart. Gerard was good natured, with a "serve the people" badge pinned to his bag, and he accompanied us to lunch at the cafeteria while earnestly trying to learn English from a cassette in his walkman. But we found it almost impossible to communicate with him. After struggling through conversation at lunch, we decided that after he showed us to the handicraft market and bookstore, we could handle going to the mall ourselves.

The handicraft market turned out to be two rows of vendors on either side of a street that ran underneath an overpass. Cars and jeepneys stuck in the perpetual traffic jam under the bridge made

stopping and browsing almost impossible. I made a few passes, choking on the exhaust before heading out. I hated to think what the carbon monoxide had done to those vendors who are in that enclosed space day after day. That's how desperately alienated kids in my high school days committed suicide, sitting in their garages with the car engine running—a different kind of death by poison in advanced capitalist society.

Hong couldn't seem to find anything appropriate for his wife there (it had to be cheap, useful, of good quality, and have at least a possibility of being something that she might like). It had also started to rain sporadically, and all our raingear was sitting at home. Hong ended up buying a set of windchimes for his daughter but had no luck finding anything for his wife. Maybe at the mall.

The bookstore that we ended up at turned out to be a big chain store with stacks of how-to books and guides to your personal health and not much else. Phil was looking for some books on Philippine economy and I was looking for some Filipino language instruction books, but we both found the selection lacking.

We left the store and walked down the street looking through some used books sold by street vendors without any luck. While we walked, we were confronted by a woman, a beggar standing in the middle of the sidewalk with both hands outstretched towards passersby. She was totally naked

and covered in mud, her hair a chaotic black mane. Most of the people on the street though walked by as if she were just another stray dog on the street looking through the trash for food. Which is pretty much what society had made her. Animals get thrown scraps sometimes, but all she got was a few turned heads and a couple of smirks. I thought about what it would take for people in a society to become so desensitized.

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Feeling a bit frustrated about our thus far unsuccessful trip (amplified by the fact that all of us detested shopping to begin with), we decided to go back to the big street market that we'd gone to get our things for the countryside. We could probably get a backpack and sneakers there cheaply, and we wouldn't have to drag poor Gerard around the city anymore. We knew how to get there from the light rail, so Gerard pointed it out and we thanked him and parted company.

From the subway terminal we made a pit stop at the street market's attached mall for Phil to take use the toilet. Hong and I, very cranky from shopping, sat in the shiny new fast food restaurant while Phil looked for a comfort room, as it was called in the Philippines. The sights out the window were incredible. From that modern, tiled, fast-food restaurant with its bright orange seats and huge advertisements for the special of the month, we

could look directly out onto a story high pile of garbage—a mini-Payatas. Clearly the city had no plan for the garbage generated by the crowd constantly milling around the market looking for bargains, and so a small pile for convenience probably just grew into a mountain, less and less likely to be moved away. Shoppers walked by the rotting pile and a row of vendors selling shoes and household goods sat less than four meters away. Obviously the garbage pile had come to them. The contrast from where we sat in burger-land was almost incomprehensible.

The market from the ground was a mess. The rain turned the already dirty and chaotic streets into lakes of greasy water and slippery mud. We headed away from the garbage pile—even though we were a ways away from it, we could still smell the rot and wanted to escape it. Looking for a backpack was easy; there were booths upon booths of luggage vendors crammed full of all different sorts of US name-brand backpacks. The problem was on closer examination, they looked like they would last about a month before the zippers gave out and the nylon itself disintegrated. We found the same problem with sneakers and gave up. We would go back to Shoemart, pay more, and get what we needed.

We slopped through the mud back towards the light rail—and the garbage pile. The rain probably hadn't made the smell any better. As we

approached, we looked with growing disbelief at the enormity of the pile. What kind of government borrowed billions from the IMF and World Bank, but couldn't manage the most basic sanitation? In that disgusting pile of rotting food ripening in plastic bags right in the midst of a bustling street market and an attached shopping mall, you could smell the inevitable demise of the current system of governance.

I did my best to hold my breath and walk fast. Phil, however, didn't make it all the way through without having to take a breath and almost lost his lunch.

Collapsing onto thankfully empty seats in the train, we all looked glum at the prospect of heading to the mall, already exhausted. But the idea of returning to sub-zero temperatures in Beijing in sandals drove us onward.

We kept switching worlds and I was having a hard time keeping up. From our middle-class neighborhood to the naked woman on the streets, to nearing suffocation in the handicraft market under the bridge, to the neatly kept store designed for tourists and foreign currency, to the shiny Jollibee in the mall, to the muddy rot of the market below, to the new air-conditioned Japanese-made light rail, to the street entrance of the mall crowded with jeepneys spewing black smoke and vendors selling cigarettes one smoke at a time, to the inspection for firearms and explosives at the

entrance, to the squeaky clean mall that was more American than American suburban malls—all of it was becoming difficult to process.

Once inside, we made the unfortunate discovery that the entire place was having a Three Day Sale. The place was packed full of eager buyers already carrying telltale blue plastic bags with Shoemart printed on them. Phil was lured by a bookstore, so Hong and I agreed to meet him inside the department store. Hong and I set out to solve the problem of the gift to his wife. The problem was, we couldn't find much that looked like it came from the Philippines. After endless circling back and forth, we finally settled on a pair of pajamas in a print that looked indigenous to our ignorant eyes. We both felt tremendous relief after he paid, and we went to locate Phil.

When we found each other again, our next task was to find sneakers—backpacks I couldn't locate. I bought the cheapest pair of canvas sneakers I could find. Hong marveled at the price difference between shoes in Beijing and in Manila and looked with increasing regret at the shoes he'd bought for the trip. They were twice the price and half the quality. He went from stand to stand looking and contemplating taking another pair home for future use.

I found Hong's sudden interest in shopping pretty funny; we'd had a whole debate before about who hated shopping more. But he was discover-

ing that shopping was depressing when you were surrounded by advertisements and displays that told you that you had to have whatever it is—and whatever it was always turned out to be something way too expensive to be necessary. So shopping as a foreigner in the Philippines turned out to be kind of fun because you could save a huge sum of money in clothes that you would eventually have to buy, but be loath to buy at home.

Phil's feet were too big. He was having a hard time finding anything to fit, so we ended up scouring the entire mall, store after store. At 10pm, an hour after the official closing time, we found ourselves back on the second floor of Shoemart. Hong and I, in a daze, collapsed on the benches while Phil kept doggedly on. He finally bought a pair of running shoes as the salespeople were trying haplessly to encourage lingering buyers to give it up and go home. We soon found ourselves among the hordes of people streaming out of the mall clutching our very own blue Shoemart bags. The brilliance of big sales at the mall: you left completely broke but so happy about all the money you saved.

Back home another message awaited us with directions to Gabriela's (the woman's organization) office and an appointment time. We'd have to get our brains in gear again after a full day chasing commodities.

February 4

Women Hold Up More than Half the Sky

Our directions were good, so we were early for our 10:30 meeting time. Walking the last few blocks to the office Hong joked nervously about how he was preparing to enter the frightening lair of the *women's* organization. He was half joking about being afraid, but only half. He didn't have much of an idea of how a women's movement functioned within a larger revolutionary movement. I think he was also anxious about how the women might find his "male chauvinism and feudal customs."

Beth was waiting for us in the office. She introduced us to Karina, a young woman activist who would give us our brief introduction to Gabriela's history and work. She led us through the building, outside into the courtyard, and up a flight of stairs to a large conference room. Of all the offices we'd

been to, this was by far the largest and most well to do. It too was a converted house but had much larger rooms and the feel of a compound.

Karina began by saying that Gabriela formed in the mid-'80s during martial law under Marcos because of a need to ally the numerous women's organizations sprouting up in opposition to the regime. This umbrella organization brought them together in a united front, at first to oppose the US military bases, which was and continued to be a movement that drew from many different sectors of society. From there, they moved to organizing workers and peasants against the feudal relations that still existed: peasant women were not allowed to own land and women workers received much lower wages than their male counterparts. At that time, sex tourism was just beginning in the Philippines and Marcos threw his support behind its promotion.

Now, the organization had under its umbrella a large number of smaller organizations including peasant, worker, urban poor, student and youth, and minority women. Their struggles were similar to the struggles of the other organizations we'd visited, but they dealt with the double oppression that women were subjected to as part of society that treated women as property (feudal) and also as commodities(capitalist). Karina listed the service-type work that the organization performed such as legal assistance

to battered wives, counseling for rape victims, campaigns against sexual harassment in schools, and education in unions about wages, working conditions, and gender equality.

Hong observed that while those things are important, they didn't seem to address the root of the issue—and by the way, what did they consider the root of the issue? He seemed happy to hear that even the *women's* organization in the United Front believed that the heart of women's oppression lay within class oppression. Karina explained that in the mid-eighties, they experienced an upsurge of bourgeois feminism and lost their direction. Instead of seeing women's liberation as part of the larger struggle for class liberation, they struggled against women's oppression as a thing unto itself. They encouraged women activists to take gender inequality as the main struggle and ended up in a mess. The enemy became men instead of feudalism, capitalism, and imperialism.

Not surprisingly, during that time they received a lot of international support from different bourgeois feminist NGOs. In fact, the compound that they now used as their office was a donation from a European NGO given in the mid-'80s. But in the early '90s they refocused their direction on struggling for women's rights in the context of the struggle against the system. And that was just about the time their money from abroad dried up. Now, they were even reluctant to call themselves

"feminists"; they preferred "women activists." They felt the concept of feminism had been tainted by the overwhelmingly bourgeois feminist movement, which, in simplistic terms, believed that the system would be fine if only women ran it.

Now, while the larger organization currently was engaged in campaigns like their fight against global sex trafficking, their primary goals were land reform and basic rights for workers. And, as part of the broad United Front, they participated in the anti-Estrada campaign. In fact, they were the first ones to call for his resignation early in the movement. An interesting side note about the "Erap resign" slogan was that it was part of a United Front tactic to mobilize and unite with the broadest groups of people. Originally, the UF called for the people to "Oust Erap," but because the women's organization worked with and attracted a lot of middle forces, they raised the "resign" slogan. So "Oust Erap" became the chant among the more militant workers and peasants, and "Erap resign" the chant among the broader front—including liberal women pissed off by Estrada's assertion that all Filipino women wanted to have his babies.

Karina had joined the movement from the organization's youth sector when she was a student in the university. She studied journalism there, so now worked mostly as a staff writer in charge of press releases, media statements, and publications.

On the subject of publications, Karina ran downstairs for a pile of brochures describing each organization under Gabriela's umbrella. She also returned with a photo album filled with pictures of various demonstrations and rallies, including pages full of their org's banner flying high during People Power 2. Another photo album showcased a "Women's Passion Show," a big press event with different models wearing creative interpretations of political issues like poverty, sex trafficking, landlessness, and imperialism. One particularly memorable one was of a woman wearing a headdress showing foreign multinationals sucking her lifeblood and her skirt below striped black and white like a bar code.

After looking at the pictures, Beth told us about the Gabriela's invitation to lunch and presented two options to us for after the meal. We could go back to Bayan's office for an evaluation of our trip, or we could stay the afternoon and talk with Gabriela's provincial representative organizers who were just trickling in for a national conference beginning that evening. Having been in the Philippines for about two weeks, we'd realized by then that our hosts knew much more about what we should do than we did. Beth helped us decide to stay and talk with the organizers and promised that we would find time to summarize and evaluate our visit before we left.

Five or six women were sitting in the office's reception area by the time we left the kitchen full, and Beth helped translate the introductions. They came from all over the country, all different islands, including the big island down south, Mindanao. We pulled out our map to see just how far they'd come to attend the conference. Most of them came from agricultural areas that were in much tougher shape than the provinces around Manila. One was from the third biggest island where the whole area was planted in sugar and coffee for multinationals to export.

The Mindanaon woman organized workers who fished the big fish, like the tuna we'd eaten in one of our first meals, but who could not afford to eat them themselves. Most went into cans and were shipped abroad. She also worked with the big prostitution population on the coast. Prostitutes there sat at night in "aquariums"—lighted rooms with big glass windows so that customers could peer in and pick out the "fish" they want for the evening. (Aquariums were just coming into Beijing now too.) Prostitutes also worked out of bars, and their fee came from a small percentage of the money the guy spent on beer. So in order to make enough money to feed themselves, they had to work for a customer's drunkenness, never mind how that played out in how they got treated.

This group of women hadn't seen each other in a long time, and while they were happy to

talk to us and answer our questions, they were also clearly eager to catch up with each other and socialize. We tried to just go with the flow and not interrupt too much. One thing we asked though was what kind of struggles they had in the home—whether they still had to cook and clean and raise the kids in spite of being full-time activists to organize women in the community. They all laughed but said that their families supported them. But was there any struggle? They laughed again but didn't elaborate.

One sort of indirect answer we got was that sometimes one woman and her husband, who was also an activist, had to figure out who would go to the meeting if no one else could stay home with the kids. I wondered whether this seemingly across the board unwillingness among women activists to talk about gender issues within the movement was a backlash from what happened in the '80s with the wave of bourgeois feminism. Finally Beth chimed in with a story about how during the anti-Estrada movement, Bayan called a meeting to plan a big mobilization. While they were figuring out logistics, the issue of who would handle the food came up. Immediately someone said, "Oh the women's organization will take care of that." To which came the response, "Oh, no way. We're not cooking for you!" And they didn't.

After that story Hong, Phil and I had a little side conversation after the translation. Hong insisted

that it wasn't an example of chauvinism because of the way society was. Because women in society still did more of the cooking than men, then it was natural to think of them doing it in that situation. The issue was skills, not oppression of women. We continued to argue about that one.

Around mid-afternoon, Beth told us that Gabriela was taking the group to a place where they could rest up from their travels. That evening would begin a round of meetings that would last several days. So we said goodbye and made ready to leave ourselves. Beth, though, said that we might do our evaluation after all in the courtyard. We agreed and sat at one of the big tables set up for the coming meeting.

Our evaluation was not all that long winded. We basically all agreed that we found our time in the Philippines overwhelmingly positive. The levels of organizing and the demonstrated maturity of the people's movement we'd expected—but expectations were totally different than the opportunity to experience them directly. We appreciated the time and effort everyone took to make every minute count. Beth took copious notes on our short meeting, saying she had to log them in the organization's book for foreign visitors when she got back.

Before parting company we found out that we were set up with an appointment at an NGO called the IBON Foundation, which did research and analysis of the Philippine economy the next

afternoon. We also got directions to a progressive bookstore which we could hit in the morning on our way there. Our report on our independent shopping trip apparently demonstrated our ability; we would go without a guide. The China forum was set for our last day in Manila, the sixth. Our instructions were to go home and start preparing for the presentation.

We'd been back from the countryside for four days already but still felt exhausted from the long and fascinating nights we spent there. In other words, we still collapsed readily at the end of the day. The China forum seemed far enough away to warrant some procrastination.

February 5

"Be Resolute" and the Pitfalls of the Philippines Economy

It was hard to get out of bed when you knew your first appointment was at 4pm. Food and books eventually motivated us, though and we headed out in the late morning.

The bookstore where we were headed was in actual Manila (not metro), so it took us awhile to get there by jeepney. The store was pretty small but crammed full of uniquely sized bookshelves laden with books. Above the door a sign read: "We will never pressure you to buy, everyone is free to look and read whatever you want without anyone monitoring you" (or something to that effect).

We found plenty of books on China and several books and pamphlets written by Mao. Most everything was of course in Filipino, though, so I

soon found myself perusing their stack of t-shirts: plenty of Che, lots of anti-Estrada, and... one with a quote that read, "Be resolute, fear no sacrifice, overcome all difficulties to win victory." A small postage stamp size portrait of a familiar Chinese leader looked up from the corner.

The three of us blew our wallets on a stack of books and t-shirts for ourselves—I mean for friends back home. We were even shy on jeepney fare home, much less any other publications we'd find at the NGO later that afternoon. So we got directions to the nearest Shoemart, apparently the safest place to exchange money. It also oddly had a better rate than the banks. The walk there was hot and dirty. Manila was a long ways from even our neighborhood in Quezon City. To me it looked like what Beijing might look like in 20 years after the economy plummeted and infrastructure completely fell apart. At one time maybe Manila looked like booming Beijing, with the sidewalks tiled with colored blocks and busy construction of light rails and new buildings.

Hong was sheepishly eager to return to Shoemart to shop. There was that pair of blue jeans that he had decided against last time... Phil stood in a short line for the money exchange while Hong and I looked around.

The IBON Foundation turned out to be a shorter ride than we thought and we found ourselves walking up a driveway to the security gate

half an hour early. The guard at the entrance took our passports in exchange for security passes and passed us off to a guy heading in our direction who led us into a large compound of buildings several stories high. It looked like maybe people who worked in the offices had apartments in the same compound.

We took a creaky elevator up a few floors and found IBON's office, which seemed to stretch for several rooms down the hallway. We waited for our appointment and read about the history of the organization from an annual report stashed on a shelf. Its founder, under the repression of martial law, had scraped together some resources to do socio-economic research that would help the movement throw out Marcos. They had a couple close calls with running out of funds over the years but managed to get through them. Now they had around forty full-time staff people and five different locations around the country.

Michael, the guy we were set up to meet, arrived before too long and we relocated into a conference room across the hall. Michael was part of the research department, and his description of IBON was that it is an "anti-establishment interpretation of socio-economic analysis." Their big contributions to the movement were their many publications which disseminated various facts and figures about what was really going on with the economy behind all the government's doublespeak, and how

it pointed to a rotten system. After listening to our objectives of learning more concrete facts about how the economy didn't work, he moved on to provide an overview of the entire country:

- Philippine population: 75 million
- Total land area: 30 million hectares
- Total arable land: 10 million hectares
- Forested land: 10 million hectares (down from 20 million)
- 5% of the population in the countryside owned 45% of the arable land

He then drew a pie graph on the whiteboard showing that services comprised 43% of the GNP, a figure that defied the basic principles of mainstream economics. That percentage was what post-industrial countries like the US were supposed to have. So why was it so high? Because most of that growth was from the masses of Filipino international migrant workers. The legal numbers, which were on the super conservative side, were that currently 517,251 land workers and 147,392 sea workers had left the Philippines as overseas contract workers. Which explained in part why the customs and immigration form had a whole section for returning workers.

When the country supposedly gained its independence in 1946, the government provided subsidies to national industries. But they also gave them to multinational corporations left behind

like Coca Cola. Giving them the same "advantages" had the result of quashing the domestic industries to the point where today there was basically none to speak of. And having made their bed with the multinationals, the Philippine government now incurred more and more foreign debt to develop infrastructure for them.

A knock on the door interrupted our session—they needed the conference room for a previously scheduled meeting. So we picked up our things and moved back across the hall, through a different set of doors and into a much larger space filled with printed materials: their database. We rearranged ourselves at the long table facing a row of computers and to the side of enormous old-style card catalogue cabinets. People off the street could come in and do research in that room and find out a completely different perspective on Philippine "development."

Phil then asked about the Philippine application for entry into the WTO and was surprised to find out that they were a charter member. A long standing member of GATT, the WTO's predecessor, made them an automatic candidate of the new agreement. The Senate ratification made it official. Anyone that had any illusions about what the WTO did to Third World countries who prostrated themselves before its "globalization" policies, should go to the Philippines and take a long hard look. Or breath, as the case may be. Even the stink coming

from the trash mountain in Payatas couldn't compare to the rot of the government officials who had sold the lifeblood of their country for a few deposits in secure foreign banks. These guys did everything they were told, and as a result the only thing they could make themselves for their own consumption was low-grade sheet metal. But now the government was even trying to phase out the jeepneys that relied on that metal in favor of the new, imported forms of transportation.

Here we got another surprise: every vehicle in the Philippines had to pass a yearly environmental inspection, including black-fume-spewing jeepneys, or else—or else nothing. They had the law, but no one followed and no one dared enforce it. The masses of people relied on jeepneys as the only semi-affordable form of transportation, so the government didn't dare push the issue too hard. When people were scraping bottom, it didn't take too much pressure on their finances to get them to start thinking about destroying the barrel. Activists in the movement didn't have sole ownership of that piece of knowledge.

Michael got a phone call, so he sent us into IBON's bookstore. It didn't take long for Phil to come up with another whole stack of books, another hard hit to our wallets. Michael popped back in to tell us that the call had been his wife asking about his ETD and for him to pick up

some ingredients for dinner. Time for all of us to head home.

The other staff people in the office recommended that we take a taxi back and were surprised to find out that we'd been all over the city in jeepneys by ourselves. So Michael sketched us a quick map of our route and walked out with us. We turned in our badges and retrieved our passports at the gate before heading to the jeepney stop. Michael considerately waited until our ride came and then ran around front to tell the driver where we needed to get off. The only word I could understand was, "foreigners." We'd only met with Michael for a couple hours—a short time compared to other meetings we'd had, but we felt like we learned tremendous amounts from our visit. We said as much in our goodbye and soon moved off in a cloud of black smoke.

Sitting in that jeepney, I began to calculate just how much money we had left. The problem was dinner. Hong was a vocal advocate for returning to a Japanese restaurant where we'd had tasty noodles and fried rice earlier in our trip. But we still had another day: two meals and then an airport tax on the way out. So I proposed the unwelcome idea of saving a little by eating at our old cafeteria. Hong frowned and rationalized that the other restaurant actually provided more value because we were full and happy when we left. We voiced a few pros and cons until I finally asked if he would

just consider eating at the cafeteria. “I’m not eating there!” was his defiant reply. We ate Japanese food that night and would try to tighten our belts a little the next day.

February 6

Housemates, the China Forum and Four Shots in the Head

I woke up feeling relaxed. The bulk of the China forum fell on Hong and Phil, and since I knew what they were going to say, I didn't even have to take notes!

The forum was at Bayan's office, and we were supposed to be there in time for it to start at 2:00. In the meantime, we organized our things. Our plane was early the next morning and the rumor was that we'd have to leave at 4:30am. I don't know how it happened, but even after giving away much of what we brought with us, we still had to sit on our bags to zip them up. Too many trips to Shoemart I guess.

Downstairs, most of the office's staff were bustling around already. They knew it was our last

day and invited us to have lunch with them. What they really wanted was to have a party in the evening, but since we had plans to eat out with some other folks after the forum, we didn't know what time we'd be back. So they sent out a couple people who came back with a whole platter full of Chinese food. That lunch was really the first opportunity we'd had to sit and talk with the people in that organization. Most of our time we'd spent rushing from office to office and returning at night only to sleep and have some down time. So we ended up spending two and a half weeks living there (minus 5 days in the countryside), without finding out most of their names or anything about them.

Mostly we talked with Otto, an extremely cheerful middle-aged guy who was always singing bits of cheesy American pop songs at the top of his lungs and then bursting out in laughter. What started out as a casual conversation about his life turned into an incredible story of optimism and commitment. He joined the Red Fighters when just a teenager but was eventually captured by the enemy. He only spent a short time in their custody, though. One day when the police put him in a van to transport him to another location, a squad of Red Fighters ambushed the envoy and sprung him.

He disappeared into the countryside for another long period before being captured again, this time during martial law. He spent the following six years locked up, but as they say, the first 48 hours

were the worst. They tortured him repeatedly, first by blindfolding him and facing him against a concrete wall. When they demanded information that he wouldn't give, they took him by the hair and bashed his face into the wall. Then they tied him down on a table, covered his face with a wet cloth and poured water down his throat: the water treatment. Having survived the drowning attempt, he then faced electric shock. They stripped him, tied him up and attached electrodes to his feet and genitals, shocking him again and again.

Otto appeared lost in thought for a few moments and quietly told us that many of his friends and comrades died on the table that way, their hearts unable to take the repeated bolts of electricity. But in a minute, he smiled again and laughed. "But they didn't kill me! And here I am!"

I found myself suddenly blinking back tears. Not just at the horrifying story he told, but thinking about all the people like him that we'd met (and all the ones we hadn't), who were subjected to unspeakable emotional and physical hardships. They'd been tested repeatedly and came out the other side with a smile and a song, even more confident and committed in their activism.

We could have stayed there and talked for hours more, but our afternoon appointment loomed. We felt terrible that we'd spent so little time with these people who had such a wealth of experience. But Otto walked us out and said we could talk

more when we got back. He helped us flag down a motorized tricycle and we puttered away to Bayan's office. We reached the office to find everyone on Philippine time: late.

By 2:30 most people who were going to come had arrived (including Charlie, who remembered to get me a copy of the Jerks' album), maybe twenty people in all. After a round of introductions, Phil started into an hour-long overview of what had been going on in China since the "Reform." He talked about the situation with the workers, (and especially the growing numbers of laid-off workers from the State sector), peasants, intellectuals, middle and ruling classes, and the overall economy. It wasn't a pretty picture. The Q&A session mostly focused on "So what are the people going to do about it?" We all felt sorry to say that as far as any kind of people's struggle is concerned, the Philippines was light years ahead of China. Once the cradle of socialist revolution and a beacon of hope to other people's struggles around the world, Left forces in China now had to pick up whatever pieces they could find and start anew.

In spite of feeling a bit sad about the report, most people who attended seemed extremely interested. In addition to the tremendous influence Mao's China had on the Philippine movement, it was only through learning about it and other former socialist countries' failures that they could hope not to repeat them.

At around 4:30 Beth passed me a note that said that we should wrap things up; people had other meetings to attend. As people trickled out, Bayan presented us each with a poster of Erap's projected prison mug shot on one side and signatures and well wishes on the other.

News was that if we could wait awhile in the office, the leader of KMP, the peasants' organization along with Jean, the woman that we'd had dinner with early on in our trip (also from KMP), would meet with us over our last meal. We agreed, and hung out while all the staff took up their work again. As we sat and waited, though, the office got a phone call and everyone ran to the TV to watch the news. They explained that one of the leaders of a split-off faction from after the rectification had just been shot in the head four times on the University of the Philippines campus. The struggle now was to understand who did it and for what purpose.

I didn't quite get the complexity of the situation until Ana sat down and explained. The guy who was dying in the hospital was pretty much the only leader of a split off faction who still had any mass base. He still had the loyalty of over a hundred trade unions in the city. His group in the anti-Estrada movement was the one that put out the "Resign All" slogan, defying the principles of the broad United Front to unite the broadest number of people to isolate and attack the main repre-

sentative of the ruling class. His group called for the resignation of the whole government, which not surprisingly, didn't win them too many allies. But when the cards were down, when Left forces called on the people to march on the palace that night when Aquino, Sin, and even Arroyo were cautioning against it, the Resign All folks stayed behind at the EDSA shrine.

So who would want to kill him? Turns out lots of people. Since the split off he'd been involved in a lot of wheeling and dealing, bribes, and blackmail. Enemies were easily made in those circles. Another possibility was that Estrada forces were looking to retaliate against members of the United Front that brought him down. When Marcos fell, immediately after Aquino took power, a top leader in the Left was assassinated with motives of revenge and destabilizing the new government. The person who called had warned of this scenario being a possible repeat, which meant Left leaders would have to be on the alert.

But what the press of course came up with was that this was an internal struggle among Left forces. They wouldn't mention that murdering one of the leaders of the United Front probably qualified as a violation of its principles.

Around 8 we finally got a call from the head of KMP saying that he would meet us at a restaurant down the road. But leaving meant saying a final goodbye to everyone in the office (except for Beth

who promised to meet us at the restaurant). It didn't seem real that we wouldn't be seeing these people anymore, because for the last two and a half weeks we'd been completely taken in by them. I couldn't imagine being back in –5 degree Beijing sitting in front of my computer day after day. It seemed so dull compared to being embraced into a dynamic, exciting struggle where theory and practice met on a daily basis.

But there wasn't much I could do about. Goodbyes and hugs and thank yous went all around. Then Jean and the three of us crammed into a motorized tricycle and drove away.

Dinner was nice in a fairly well-to-do restaurant We had a not-too-deep conversation with Sam, who seemed rather distracted, about the land situation in the countryside. He knew firsthand, having come from the peasantry himself.

After the meal, Beth and Jean offered to walk us home. We'd been trying to get Beth to tell us her personal history, but we couldn't pry it out of her. She kept avoiding the topic until that walk home when she gave a very short description of how she became an activist out of a religious school. She'd done most of her work in mass organizations and spent a few years abroad doing international work (where she had fought with her roommate over cooking). We thought there was probably a lot more but didn't push. She'd done so much for us over the course of our trip, arranging meetings

and making sure we knew how to get to them, and putting up with all of our ignorance—but we felt like we still didn't really know her.

Jean talked quite a lot about her experiences and how she'd been an activist since she was very young. She'd also been arrested during martial law. She was with a group of maybe four others in the underground, and together they entered what they thought was a safe house without knowing the police were waiting for them. She was the last one in, and they just got picked off one by one. Her torture consisted of the same kinds of sexual molestation that most other female prisoners got. But the whole time she spoke to them English, which scared them a bit—a consequence of colonialism that intellectual prisoners could actually use against their captors.

Jean also talked about her struggle over her daughter wanting to join the movement. A good student with a scholarship, her daughter wanted to give up her schooling. Jean, though, tried her best to convince her to stay in school—that her time hadn't come yet to become an activist. She urged her to register for classes for the following year, but she only made it a few months before she quit for good. Jean made her peace with it and of course now was very proud of her.

We reached our house and had to say another round of goodbyes. Jean and Beth found it hilarious that Phil pointed out a shortcut to their

jeepney route home. I guess we'd made it past the dumb tourist stage. I could only give them a quick hug and hope they realized how much it meant.

Back inside, we found only some people were still up and around. Otto was gone and we hadn't even said goodbye. It was close to midnight already, so we went up to do some last minute packing and Hong and I fell to our mats. Phil, feeling more energetic and wanting to get to know people in the office more, went back down to see who was still up.

February 7

Security at the Manila Airport

Less than three hours later, my watch alarm went off. I purposefully let it beep through its cycle to make sure all of us were awake to minimize the chances of early morning negotiations (of just five more minutes). We shoved the rest of our things in our bags and hauled everything downstairs. At about 4:20, Ricky and Marie emerged sleepy eyed from their room, brushed their teeth and loaded us into the van. We were amazed at the amount of air pollution at such an early hour, but unlike Beijing, Manila didn't sleep. 24-hour fast food places lit our way down the highway, and all-night jeepneys shuttled workers on their long commutes—probably some all the way from Erap City.

An hour later at the airport we shook hands and said goodbye. Our departure in that pre-dawn lack of sleep grogginess seemed as surreal as much of our stay had been. Soon they were gone and we were throwing our bags onto a conveyer belt at the entrance for an x-ray scan.

Coming into Manila I had been a little nervous about security, but I hadn't spent much time thinking about leaving. How hard could it be to leave a country that you were visiting? I couldn't have been more wrong. After the x-ray and before we could even get to the airline counter, we had to answer to a mean-spirited security agent. He confronted Phil first: "Where did you go while you were here? Where did you stay?" Phil looked stunned. He said we went around shopping mostly, doing tourist things, and we stayed at the Manila Hotel. "Do you have a receipt for the hotel?" I couldn't believe it. Phil looked at me and said, "Receipt? Why would we keep the receipt?" I felt my pockets. Nope, no receipt.

The security guard asked me to step back. I tried to clue Hong in on what was going on, but he was unperturbed: "How can they question me? I'll just say I don't understand anyway." I heard him ask Phil whose bag he was hauling, and when he answered his own, the guard pointed out the name on the bag, which was mine. When Phil explained rather sharply that we were a couple and that we

both owned both bags, he put a sticker on his passport and told him to go on through.

I stepped up next. "What did you do in the Philippines?" Went to the guerilla fronts. Just kidding. I smiled and gave the same shopping story. "Where did you go?" Places like the Shoemart mall and the street market south of town. "Where did you stay?" The Manila Hotel with my partner. "What street is the Manila Hotel on?" Shit. I searched my memory diligently and told him I couldn't remember. "Whose bag is this?" I explained again that Phil and I were a couple, and that we had joint ownership of both of the bags. He stickered my passport and let me through.

We had pits in our stomachs as Hong stepped up to the podium. The security guy told us to step away and go check in our luggage at the counter. I glanced over my shoulder casually to note that the guy had called another uniformed officer over who took Hong's passport away. He came back after a few minutes, though, and returned it to him. He put a sticker on the back and directed him to stand in line.

The guy at the airline counter was nice enough—he seated us all together and took our bags without any questions. Much more relaxed now, we went on to buy our airport fee, and we made it to the next stage: immigration. Phil hit a little snag with the officer asking him when he'd

arrived etc., etc., but Hong and I went through without any problem.

Next stop was the x-ray machine for carry-on luggage where we dutifully put our bags on the belt. I remember thinking it strange that the guy ahead of me set off the alarm when he went through but wasn't asked to empty his pockets and go through again. But I understood when I saw him being body searched in the corridor ahead. *Everyone* got body searched, so it didn't matter if the alarm went off or not.

We were beginning to shake our heads in disbelief. Even Japan, which had a reputation for being so strict with security was totally lax in comparison. Then again, Japan didn't have armed struggle going on in its countryside. . .

I did a double take when we arrived at the gate. Or rather, when we got to the next layer of security around the gate. We waited in a long line for more security guards to examine our passports and tickets and to search our bags again. We then had to go through another body check (spread-eagled for handheld metal detectors sweeps) before entering the gate area to pick up our bags. At this point we were beginning to giggle about it. It seemed so ludicrous. We stopped laughing when they looked at Hong's passport and the sticker on the back and led him away to a quiet corner. I guess his sticker was different than ours. We sat and watched as the guard removed every single item from his back-

pack and examined it carefully before replacing it. We were pretty amused as we watched from afar when the guard pulled out Hong's last bag of pickled vegetables (out of his emergency stash) and squeezed it a few times. Finally he let him go.

A nap, a meal, and a movie later, we changed planes, managed a few more naps and more food and landed in Beijing. The pilot announced it was, in fact, –5 degrees [5], and we saw snow on the ground as we taxied to our gate. Getting into Beijing was simple; they didn't even have you fill out an immigration form anymore—just an arrival card. With hardly any lines and our luggage nearly first off the belt, we found ourselves in a taxi heading home in less than half an hour.

What I remembered about the ride was how clean and uncrowded the streets of Beijing were. That and the taxi driver regretting picking us up. He'd been waiting in line at the airport for five hours and we were only going to be a 60 yuan fare. That meant he had to keep circling the city that night to make his 200 yuan quota. A few questions about his personal history led us to a discussion of the Cultural Revolution and how he actually agreed with its principles—something you didn't hear from many folks in the city, especially if you were mostly around intellectuals. So why did he think what he did? Because if you looked at all the

[5] 23 degrees Fahrenheit.

high cadres who were criticized then, including Deng Xiaoping, there wasn't one who wasn't neck-deep in corruption and abuse of power today.

Hearing his criticism put us in a rather good mood. We wanted to talk more, but he kept saying that the Party itself wasn't bad. When we pushed him on it, he confessed that he was afraid because sometimes taxi drivers would go off about the Party these days to their customers and then get in trouble when eager assholes copied down their ID numbers and reported them.

Phil and I left Hong at a bus stop; he was due home to catch the last night of the Chinese new year celebration. We all laughed and shook hands as we parted, hardly believing that we'd shared such an incredible experience. Phil and I dropped our luggage and went straight to the noodle shop. For four yuan, or 24 pesos, we gorged ourselves on huge bowls of handmade noodles in savory beef soup.

Hong and Phil went back to work. And I went back to sitting in front of my computer day after day. But for the 25 days after I returned, I was lucky enough to spend my time back in the Philippines. Every day I woke, went for a run, and dove back into our experiences there, lost details flooding back as I remembered a Red Fighter throwing his head back in laughter or a child playing in a polluted stream. Tracing the hours and hours of discussion we had, I was able to make sudden

connections between a theoretical discussion and what they showed me in practice.

The Philippines was a colony for over 400 years. The birth of its "independence" was coupled with its prostitution to its imperialist pimps. Now landlords and government officials clawed each other to prostrate themselves before their foreign masters. In their efforts, they devoured the fertile Philippine earth and passed it through their rotten bodies, leaving the remains in the toilet like so much toxic shit—unusable even in its afterlife. They appeared for all the world to be like the maggots we saw swarming the mango carcasses in the gutters of Erap City.

But we heard that prostituted women have picked up guns in Mindanao.

The people in the Philippines have been fighting for their liberty for as long as they've been oppressed. In the CPP's estimation they would finally win it in a few more decades, a mere blink in the context of hundreds of years of struggle. So if you listened closely, amidst the jeepneys' knocking engines, through the clouds of poisonous gas lingering over Payatas, in the homes of land tillers who could not eat their fill—you could hear the government's death knell being sounded:

> . . . the masses on the streets surrounding the palace

. . . the criticism, self-criticism meetings held late in peasants' houses

. . . the political prisoner's fierce smile

And prostituted women have picked up guns in Mindanao.

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