Through the Bamboo Curtain

A student-council mandate, a presidential ban, and the quiet breach that foreshadowed the end of isolation

By Benild "Ben" Pires, UP Diliman '64

Sixty years ago I led the very first small group of University of the Philippines [UP] students to visit the People's Republic of China.

We met one of its top leaders and walked among Red Guards just months into their historic and controversial Great Proletariat Cultural Revolution.

The visit caused a political firestorm in Manila.

Our journey in December 1966 was not an official state visit.

It was a UP-Student Council resolution carried out against a presidential blacklist, intense media scrutiny, and the full weight of Cold War suspicion.

Looking back, it stands as an early, almost accidental crack in the "bamboo curtain" that still sealed China from much of the non-communist world.

Six years later, in February 1972, U.S. President Richard Nixon† met Chairman Mao Zedong† in Peking [now Beijing] and began the formal dismantling of China's isolation.

Two years after that, Philippine First Lady Imelda Marcos led a preliminary mission to China; in June 1975 President Ferdinand Marcos† himself visited the country and established diplomatic relations.

These high-level openings came less than nine years after Marcos† had forbidden University of the Philippines students from making the same journey.

Our 1966 trip therefore sits at a curious hinge in Cold War history: a moment when young people from a Southeast Asian campus briefly outpaced their own government and the great powers in testing whether the curtain could be parted.

From Invitation to Blacklist

In mid-October 1966 the All-China Students Federation and the All-China Youth Federation invited roughly 60 UP students for a three-week visit.

UP President Carlos P. Romulo†, diplomat, statesman, soldier, journalist, author and first Asian president of the United Nations General Assembly, supported the idea and secured initial clearance from Foreign Affairs Secretary Narciso Ramos†.

On 30 October, Malacañang summoned student council members to the palace after the violent demonstration protesting the Vietnam war outside the Manila Hotel, where U.S. President Lyndon Johnson† was staying for his summit with Marcos.†

I was at the 24 October demonstration and attended that Malacañang meeting.

During it we raised the China invitation.

Marcos told us we were free to go and asked for a list of intended travelers.

After receiving the list, Marcos† reversed his decision and blacklisted the names on the list and instructed the foreign affairs department to withhold their passports.

On 2 November the student council nevertheless adopted a formal resolution accepting the invitation and allocating a modest sum for gifts.

The political temperature rose sharply.

On 9 November, student council member Jejomar Binay testified before a congressional committee already investigating alleged communist influence among students.

His disclosure that a large UP contingent was preparing to travel to China became, in the words of reports, a "bombshell."

Pressure mounted on Ramos to block the trip.

Newspapers described an all-expenses-paid "first-class" tour; intelligence agents began checking names.

By late November the *Manila Times* was reporting that 66 UP students were under surveillance, me included.

Enrique Voltaire Garcia† led the 1966 student council with Violeta "Violy" Calvo [Drilon]† as vice chair.

Garcia†, a bright young lawyer and activist, would later serve as a delegate to the 1971 Constitutional Convention, be arrested during martial law, and die of leukemia in 1973 while remaining a steadfast advocate of civil liberties.

Calvo† went on to become a pioneering Filipino lawyer, the first woman partner and later senior partner at ACCRALAW; she married future Senate President Franklin Drilon and died of lung cancer in 1995.

Among the student council's 12 "university councilors" elected at large were several who would later occupy prominent national roles.

Miriam Defensor [Santiago]† became a Regional Trial Court judge, Court of Appeals justice, immigration commissioner, agrarian reform secretary, three-term senator, International Criminal Court judge, and three-time presidential candidate.

Jejomar "Jojo" Binay rose to become mayor of Makati for multiple terms, the 13th Vice President of the Philippines [2010–2016], and a 2016 presidential candidate.

Liwayway Vinzons [Chato], a descendant of the wartime student leader and guerrilla Wenceslao Vinzons†, later served as Bureau of Internal Revenue commissioner and congresswoman.

Loida Nicolas [Lewis] became a pioneering Filipino American lawyer, the first Asian woman to pass the New York bar without attending a U.S. law school, and later chair and CEO of TLC Beatrice International.

Ramoncito Z. Abad† went on to lead Air Philippines and serve as chairman and president of the Development Bank of the Philippines.

"College councilors" – representing each college -- included Delfin Lazaro, who later became Secretary of Energy under President Fidel V. Ramos†, and Orlando "Orly" Mercado, who built a

broadcasting career, served as Senate Majority Leader, and Secretary of National Defense under President Joseph Estrada.

Facing the passport ban, the student council in a resolution designated me to represent it in China and ultimately lead the small delegation of whose names were not on the blacklist.

As a non-Filipino student of Indian nationality, I held a valid passport – which the Indian embassy in Manila endorsed for a China visit -- and required no Philippine exit documents.

I had been elected a "university councilor" under the *Katipunan-Makabansa* alliance banner -- *Katipunan* recalled the revolutionary organization founded by Andres Bonifacio† in 1892 while *Makabansa* expressed love of country, patriotism, and nation-building.

Katipunan-Makabansa alliance was led by the UP Beta Sigma Fraternity, with Betans Horacio "Boy" Morales and Ed Soliman taking the lead, in partnership with the Volaire E. Garcia† from Alpha Phi Beta and Jojo Binay from Alpha Phi Omega fraternities.

I had earlier served as International Club of UP president, UP Journalism Club president, *Campus Journal* editor, UP Beta Sigma Fraternity officer, and after my council term, managing editor of *The Philippine Collegian*, the official UP student publication.

Besides a message from Garcia†, I took with me selected books as gifts from the student council, including José Rizal's† *Noli Me Tangere* and *El Filibusterismo*, Teodoro Agoncillo's† *The Revolt of the Masses*, Claro M. Recto† writings, *Banaag at Sikat*, and *The First Filipino*.

On 29 November I left Manila for Hong Kong.

The next day's *New Evening News* carried the headline "2nd U.P. MAN SLIPS TO PEKING," noting that government agents could do nothing because of my nationality and passport.

United Press International soon reported from Hong Kong that a barred-UP student council leader was heading to Peking as the students' envoy, carrying Philippine books as gifts.

Media Storm and Political Theater

Manila's newspapers and columnists erupted.

Of the many cartoons published, one depicted Chibu Lagman [who did not in the end proceed to China] and Benild Pires slipping between the outstretched legs of a figure labeled "Peking Travel Ban."

One columnist called my departure an "outrageous act of Indian student."

Another demanded examination of "the Pires incident."

Senate figures, including former foreign secretary Raul Manglapus† and Senate President Arturo Tolentino†, criticized the ban itself as narrow-minded and counterproductive, arguing that isolation only made China more glamorous and young people more curious.

In Hong Kong, Indian diplomats changed their minds, came to my hotel, and asked me to surrender my passport.

I declined.

My father†, a UNESCO professor at the Asian Institute for Teacher Education at UP, learned by radio that the foreign secretary had declared I would not be allowed to re-enter the Philippines.

With the help of Senator Geronima Pecson†, a former member of the UNESCO Executive Board, he obtained assurance from Education Minister Alejandro Roces† that I would be permitted to return.

Across the Border into a Revolutionary Landscape

On 5 December 1966 I crossed the border at Lo Wu, took the train to Canton [now Guangzhou], and was met by representatives of the All-China Students Federation and the All-China Journalists Association.

In the following days four more UP students joined me: Reynaldo G. "Ronnie" Alejandro†, who became one of the Philippines' leading authorities on Filipino cuisine, food history, and culture; Ricardo S. "Dick" Malay†, later a journalist, writer, and political activist prominent in the anti-Marcos movement; Heherson T. "Sonny" Alvarez†, who went on to serve as one of the youngest delegates to the 1971 Constitutional Convention, Secretary of Agrarian Reform under President Corazon Aquino†, senator (1987–1998), congressman, and Secretary of Environment and Natural Resources; and David Ramos† of the UP College of Agriculture in Los Baños.

Later arrivals -- journalist Ruben J. Cusipag† [who had broken the story of my departure], Imelda Sabelino, Editor Nagpil† and Danny Nagpil† -- brought our traveling party to nine including myself as leader.

We flew via Shanghai to Peking, arriving on 8 December evening in temperatures of four degrees below zero.

Thirty Red Guard students greeted us at the airport, chanting "Mao Zhuxi wansui" – "Long live Chairman Mao -- three times and singing the Cultural Revolution anthem "The East Is Red."

Our hosts issued us the grey Zhongshan suits that had become the visual uniform of revolutionary China, Lei Feng winter hats with earflaps, red armbands marked "Hongweibing," and copies of the Little Red Book.

We stayed at the Peking Hotel – nearly empty because of China's isolation -- and moved through a landscape saturated with political theater: Red Guard processions, factory visits, people's communes, the Great Wall, the Ming Tombs, the Forbidden City, and the Summer Palace.

We watched films of nuclear tests, Mao's† audiences with the Red Guards, and revolutionary ballets.

At a textile mill we danced with nursery-school children.

We travelled overnight by steam train to Shenyang, 627 kilometres from Peking in China's northeast, and by car to Anshan, 92 kilometres south-southwest, where we toured heavy industry and steel plants in deep snow and temperatures reaching 15 degrees below zero.

On the train back to Peking we engaged our hosts in a spirited dinner-car debate over communism and democracy.

The Audience with Chen Yi†

The political high point came on 12 December.

We spent three hours with Marshal Chen Yi†, China's foreign minister and a deputy premier, at the Great Hall of the People.

He was one of the 10 marshals of the People's Liberation Army, a former mayor of Shanghai, and a central figure in Chinese foreign policy since 1958.

The *New China News Agency* later described the conversation as "cordial and friendly."

Wu Shao-lau, president of the All-China Students Federation, was also present.

United Press International reported the meeting from Tokyo the following day under the headline "INSIDE PEKING: 9 Filipino Nationals Meet with Chen Yi."

That afternoon we visited a girls' middle school and spoke with Red Guards.

In the days that followed, we continued discussions with youth federation representatives and presented the Philippine books, and met with *Radio Peking* editors and members of the People's Institute of Foreign Affairs on the nature of the cultural revolution.

The exchange was not purely ceremonial.

The books and our presence asserted a form of independent curiosity that official policy had tried to suppress.

Return and Quiet Resolution

By late December we had returned south. Other delegation members dispersed to other areas of China.

I left Canton for Hong Kong on 23 December to be home for Christmas.

My father met me and we flew onward to Manila the same day, ahead of the expected media scrum on my scheduled arrival the next day, as the condition for my return was to not speak publicly about my trip.

Immigration officers initially pointed to the notice barring my entry, but a telephone confirmation from the education minister resolved the matter.

A few days later Philippine National Bureau of Intelligence officers interviewed me; the official inquiry was closed.

The episode left a paper trail of headlines, cartoons, and congressional concern, yet it produced no lasting formal rupture.

Romulo continued to defend the principle of the visit a couple of years later as foreign secretary when I was covering his department as a ABS-CBN TV News reporter.

He told the diplomatic press corps that he had supported my trip and that I had not "returned a communist."

The students who traveled with me, and those who served on the council that sent us, dispersed into varied careers in law, journalism, politics, business, and public service.

The immediate political temperature cooled, but the symbolic breach remained.

A Small Crack with Larger Echoes

In 1966 China's population stood at roughly 742 million; the Philippines at about 34 million. Today, China has roughly 1.423 billion people and the Philippines about 122.6 million.

The bamboo curtain in 1966 still defined the boundary between the two.

Both countries today have changed enormously, as has the world around them.

Acting on a student council resolution and navigating a presidential ban, we demonstrated that the bamboo curtain was not impermeable.

Our journey did not cause the later normalization of relations, yet it illustrated the same underlying pressures: intellectual curiosity, the limits of isolation, and the capacity of non-state actors to test official red lines.

When Nixon† walked into Mao's† study in 1972, and when Marcos† followed in 1975, the pathway had already been walked, however briefly and controversially, by young people from UP who refused to treat the curtain as permanent.

The 1966 visit remains a reminder that history's larger openings are sometimes preceded by smaller, more improvised ones—carried out with suitcases of books, winter coats issued by hosts, and a determination to see what lay on the other side.

Benild "Ben" Pires and his Philippine-born wife, Laila, also a UP graduate, immigrated to Canada in 1969 and are now Canadian citizens living in Victoria. Both are retired and are active in their community. They have two sons and a daughter and three grandchildren.