



Pilipino Express • Vol. 3 No. 5
 Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada
 March 1, 2007

Most people know Tomas Pinpin only for the honorary titles that school textbook writers have invented for him, like the “Prince of Filipino Printers” or “Patriarch of Filipino Printing.” The pictures of Pinpin in schoolbooks usually portray him as an ordinary Filipino wearing a *barong* Tagalog, trousers and sporting a mid-20th century hairstyle, but these images are based entirely on the whims of the artists who created them. Pinpin actually lived about 250 years before the *barong* Tagalog shirt or modern slacks came into fashion. In fact, it is unlikely that a true portrait of Tomas Pinpin exists that was made during his lifetime.

Careless or misleading depictions like these do little to help us understand the people in history books. Often, a better way to get to know them is to read their own words. Tomas Pinpin is known today only as the first Filipino printer but he didn’t just print other people’s books; he wrote one of his own and several smaller works, too. Also, his image as a mere statue in the pantheon of Filipino heroes doesn’t hint at his surprisingly informal and down-to-earth writing style, which is what caught my attention.

Pinpin the original...

True, even with just one full-length book to his credit, Pinpin could claim many firsts, such as being the first Filipino author in print, the first published Filipino language expert (Tagalog & Spanish), translation expert (for translating religious lessons), lexicographer (for his bilingual glossary) and poet. He could also be called the first Filipino journalist and publisher of the first newspaper in the Philippines for reporting on Spanish military victories in the 14-page *Sucesos Felices* (Glad Tidings) that appeared only once, in 1637. However, Pinpin’s firsts are almost irrelevant in comparison to the substance of what he

Tomas Pinpin: Tips for the 17th century Pinoy



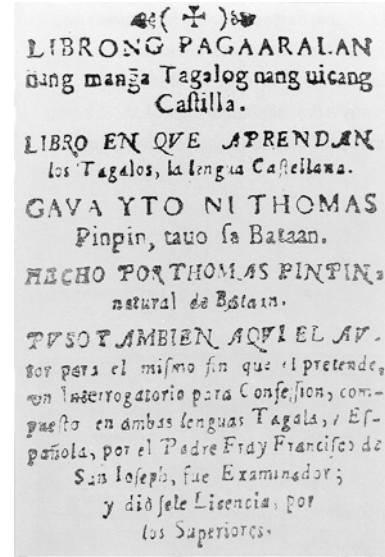
Most textbooks show Pinpin dressed in a style that came 250 years after his time

wrote. In the early 1600s he was able to give his fellow Filipinos insights into the minds of their Spanish rulers while today he gives us insights into the minds of Filipinos 400 years ago.

Tomas Pinpin’s book, published in Abucay, Bataan in 1610, was entitled *Librong Pagaaralan nang manga Tagalog nang Uicang Castila* (The Book for Tagalogs to study the Castilian Language). It was unique because, during the colonial era in the Philippines, it was the Spanish priests who wrote the language books, which were intended to teach themselves the local languages. Spanish authorities were never too keen on teaching ordinary Filipinos to speak Spanish. After more than 350 years in the islands, only about 10% of the population could speak Spanish, according to the census of 1903. So, even though the Spanish authorities allowed Pinpin to publish his book, his intention could almost be considered subversive – to teach his fellow Filipinos the language of their rulers and thus gain access to power.

The secrets of success

In the opening of his book, Pinpin tells his readers in his own cheeky manner why they should learn Spanish:



Title page of Pinpin’s “Book for Tagalogs to study the Castilian Language”

Di baquin ang ibang manga caasalan at caanyoan nang manga Castila ay inyong quinalologdan at guinagagad din ninyo sa pagdaramitman at sa nananandataman at paglacadman at madlaman ang nagogol ay uala rin hinahinayang cayo dapouat mamocha-mocha cayo sa Castila. Ay aba itopang isang asal macatotohan an sapan-gongosap nang canila ding uica ang di sucat ibiguig camtan? ... Bancay na nga cayo, con anong dating mag visting Castila ang tauo, con ualan asal asal na tantong icamuchang Castila niya? Caya nga ang ibay, baquit, na cacasti-castila nang pagdaramit na ualang di cacastila ang asal soloual: bago con saca sila dologui't, paquiosapan nang uicang, castila ay totongag tongag na sa hahangal... Bagcos nanga ito ang naguiguig puno, nang ibang marami, at paran laman ito, at ang iba'y, cabalat cayohan lamang.

[Certainly some of the Spaniards’ ways and appearances please you and you imitate the way they dress, the way they wear their weapons and even the way they walk, and you would even spend everything without regret to look like a Spaniard. So, what about this other authentic trait, which is in the speaking of their language; is it not worth having? ... No matter what

Spanish clothes a person wears, without having this Spanish trait, aren't you just a corpse? So why are these others who dress like Spaniards, not also Spanish in their "underwear" habits: if someone approached them and spoke to them in the Spanish language, they would just gape like fools ... Above all, this [language] is the source of many other things and it is like the flesh and everything else is just a masquerade.]

Pinpin's Tagalog may be difficult for us to understand today but to put it in perspective, this is the Tagalog language as it was spoken in the Philippines when Shakespeare was still alive and writing plays in England.

Pinpin delivers most of his lessons in this conversational tone, often teasing the readers gently as he shares with them the secrets of his success. He must have been quite a character to meet. I can imagine him as the know-it-all type of person who dominates the conversations at parties and constantly asks if you agree with his opinion.

A portrait of the old Tagalog language

The readers of Pinpin's book were eager to learn Spanish. Many had already learned the alphabet and numerals with much enthusiasm, to the surprise of several Spanish commentators, which is why Pinpin was able to publish his Tagalog book with Spanish letters and spelling. Looking back, this was just the beginning of the end for the native *baybayin* writing system.

Although the original purpose of the book is now obsolete, it remains as a valuable record that tells us a lot about the Tagalog language 400 years ago without the effects of foreign biases and misunderstandings. Along with old words and figures of speech, Pinpin's book reveals old Tagalog pronunciations while teaching the importance of correctly pronouncing the then-new sounds and letters of the Spanish language.

Before there was Spanish, Tagalog had only three vowel letters but they could be pronounced in different ways, just as English has only five vowel letters but many more vowel sounds. The sounds of

I and E were interchangeable (*lalaki/lalake* for man) as were U and O (*tao/tau* for person). Pinpin stressed the importance of pronouncing Spanish letters correctly to avoid confusing the meanings of words. This included making clear and consistent distinctions between the vowel sounds. Among his many firsts, Pinpin was probably one of the first writers to comment on the age-old problem that some Filipinos have when they mix up their *Ps* and *Fs*.



Monument in Plaza San Lorenzo, Binondo Manila



Fr. Blancas de San Jose published the first ever Tagalog grammar in 1610. Pinpin printed it in the priest's own shop.

Along with linguistic and cultural insights, Pinpin also preserved for us the old Tagalog counting system, though his intention at the time was to teach Filipinos the Spanish numbers. We still use most of the Tagalog words for the numbers today but the system of counting in Pinpin's day was very different. The number 21, for example, was not said *dalawam-pu't isa* or "two tens and one," as we'd expect. It was said, *maikatlóng isa* or, as some grammarians have explained this to mean, "having one for the third set of ten."

Pinpin's life

Not much is known for certain about Tomas Pinpin's personal life. Some modern sources say he was Chinese but the cover of his book states that he is a native of Bataan, and Pinpin himself says in the introduction that he is a Tagalog. He was born in the barrio Mabatang, Abucay in Bataan, sometime between 1580 and 1585. The parish records of Abucay were lost when Dutch raiders attacked the town in 1646.

Pinpin learned his craft in about 1608 or 1609 from Christian Chinese printers such as Juan and Pedro de Vera, and Luis Beltran who had already printed several books for Spanish missionaries. In 1610, Pinpin was working on the printing press of Father Blancas de San Jose in Abucay, Bataan. He is also known to have worked on printing projects in Pila, Laguna (1613) and Binondo, Manila (1623-27). Pinpin's own book, *Librong Pagaaralan*, was printed by Diego Talaghay, thought to be his assistant as he may have been managing Father Blancas' shop by that time.

Pinpin printed at least 14 books in his career – 15 if we count his own *Libro*. Other books include the first ever Tagalog grammar by Fr. Blancas de San Jose in 1610 and the first Tagalog dictionary by Fr. Pedro de San Buenaventura in 1613. His son, Simon Pinpin took over the business in about 1640, possibly after Tomas passed away, because there are no records of him after that date.

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