

2025-05-22

Chess in the Philippines

A visit to the nation which popularized chess in Asia



GM Eugenio Torre and CHLS President Frank Hoffmeister at the Torre museum

by Frank Hoffmeister

Introduction

The Philippines, an archipelago of more than 7.000 islands in South East Asia, offers a stunning array of landscapes, cultures, and experiences that captivate travelers from around the world. It is probably most known for its pristine beaches, rich history, and diverse wildlife. But the country has quite some attractions to offer as well or the chess historian, albeit less visible and hard to find without connections.

From 13 – 24 April 2025, I had the chance to discover some of those hidden treasures during my family vacation in the Philippines. Thanks to the amazing help of Joan Joy, an excellent free lance tourist guide from the “Blue Horizon” travel company, I was able to meet the living legend GM Eugenio Torre in Manila and the life-long friend of FIDE President Campomanes Leonides Bautista in Baguio City, a co-organiser of the world championship between Karpov and Korchnoi in 1978 in his home town. The present report tries to present to our society the hidden chess beauties of this amazing country.

The origins of chess in the Philippines

The origins of chess in the Philippines are obscure. What can be said with certainty that the Spaniards, who colonized the islands in the 16th century, had chess in their baggage. The impressive San Augustin Church in Manila can serve as a good example. Located in Intramuros, it is one of the oldest stone church complexes in the Philippines. It was built by Spanish friars of the Order of St. Augustine in the late 16th century and completed in 1607. In the recreation rooms of the first floor, I could detect an old wooden chess board. The guide confirmed that the inhabitants played chess and billiard as their pastime. It can therefore be assumed that the game found its way into the Philippines at least through this Spanish avenue.



The chess set exhibited in the San Augustin Church in Manila

The local population consisted of several tribes, One of them are the Igorots, living in the mountains of the biggest island, Luzon. They were known as the “headhunters”, as they kept the heads of their enemies and would exhibit them as a trophy in their huts. We gained an idea of these former tribes when visiting the “Tam-Awan” village near Baguio, where a dozen of huts and local art are exhibited. While the Irogot most likely did not play chess, they are nevertheless depicted in Filipino chess boards. In the Torre chess

museum (see next section) a nice example of the headhunters fighting the agriculturors is on stage. The board explains:

“This unique wood-carved chess set is designed after the ethnic groups who inhabit the mountains of Luzon called the “Igorot”. Since they live in the highlands, they devised a way to carve terraces on mountainsides for crops and various grains. The name “Igorot” came from the Tagalog term “golot”, which means “mountain chain” and the prefix “i”, meaning “dweller in” or “people of”. Early Spaniards used the term “Ygolotes” more frequently. The substitution of the letter “R” for the letter “L” came around the 18th century. As seen on the set’s pieces, the Igorot soldiers hold severed heads on one hand, and an axe on the other. This is because the Igorots were known to practice the ritual of headhunting. This was linked to many aspects of the indigenous culture including ancestral connections, abundance of wild game and crops, warding off bad spirits, fertility, revenge, and many others”.



The Igorot chess set, exhibited in the Torre Museum and its proud owner, Dionisio Jundio Salvador

A Spanish colony for three centuries, the local population demanded independence at the end of the 19th century. A leading figure was José Rizal, an intellectual who had studied medicine in Heidelberg (Germany). He returned to his country and inspired resistance to the Spanish rule by his writings. In 1896, he was executed in Manila for allegedly planning a revolt. Today Rizal Park, also known as Luneta, is a sprawling urban park that commemorates him with a grand monument and sculptures that depict his execution. Among many talents (as a writer and speaking numerous languages) Rizal was also an ardent chess player.

In 1898, Philippines fell to the United States who purchased the island from Spain after a short war. The first elements of self-government were introduced in 1903, and in 1908 national tournaments started being organised. The webpage of the National Chess Federation of the Philippines (www.philchess-ncfp.com)

offers no details though – relevant information comes from Wikipedia [Philippine Chess Championship - Wikipedia](#)).

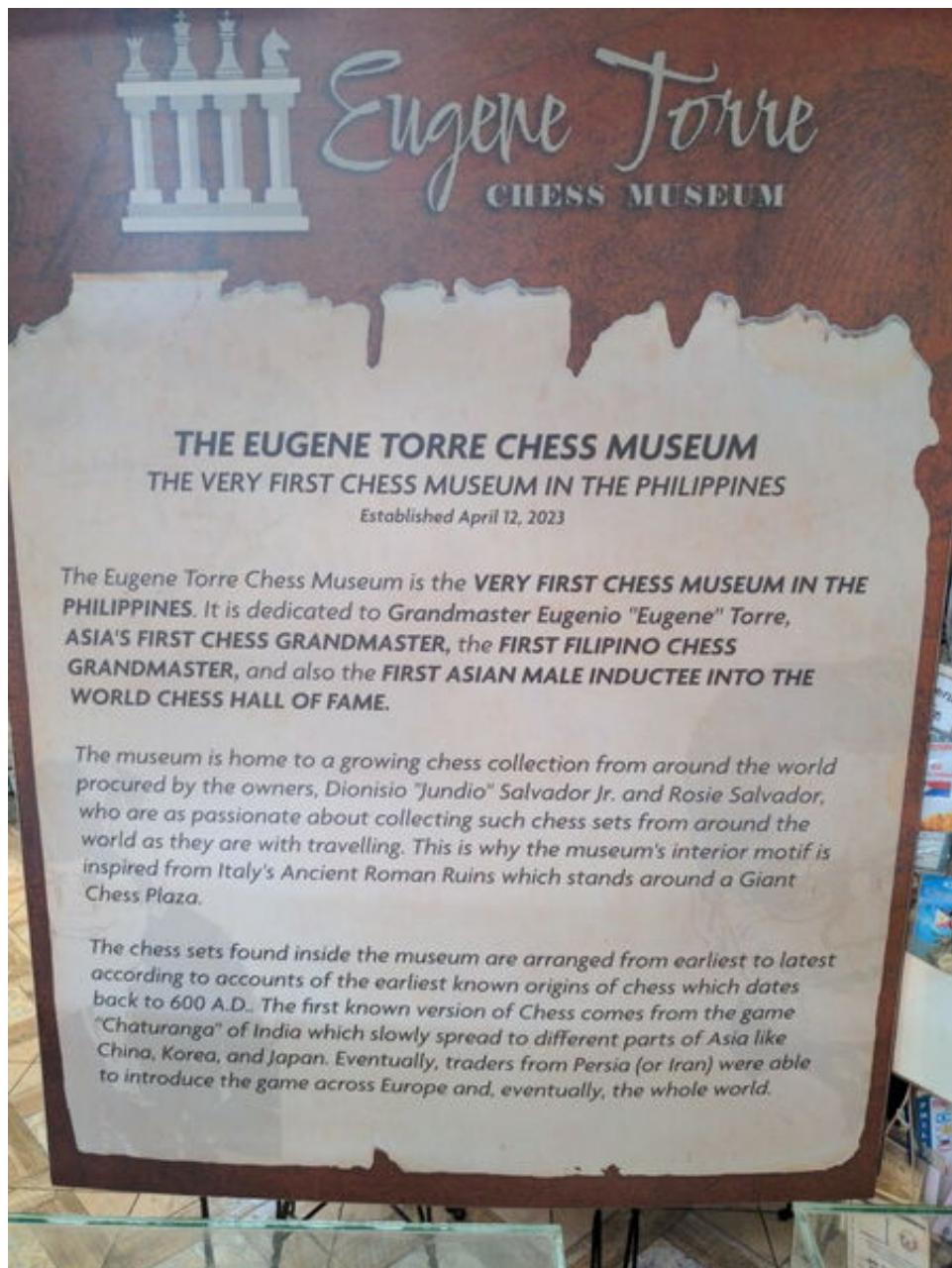
The Eugenio Torre Museum in Marikina

Located roughly one hour from Manila City, Marikina is known as the “shoes capital” of the Philippines for its progressive shoes industry. In 2023, another element was added, when Eugenio Torre opened his museum inside a fancy restaurant. Following the advice of his lovely wife Babushka, he showcases pictures, prizes and trophies of his career. Moreover, the owner of the restaurant has added a couple of chess board from around the world.



the museum on the road

The sign indicating



• A short description of the items



The first impression

of the Torre museum from the inside

To my great joy, Eugenio Torre himself had time to show me his museum and to share with me some interesting details from his life. He was very open and friendly. Although this was our first contact, the exchange was very agreeable. So, our two hours talks went by in no time, and I am happy to present a few highlights from his museum!



GM Eugenio Torre and

CHLS President Frank Hoffmeister at the Torre museum

Eugenio Torre was born on 4 November 1951 in the province of Iloilo. In 1969 and 1971 he participated in the Junior World Championships. In the 1971 edition in Athens, Torre scored a shared 4-6th place among the juniors with 6.5/11 in a strong field of 44 players (Werner Hug won ahead of Zoltan Ribli). Already a year later, Torre won the Asian Zonal tournament and became an IM. This paved the way to

participate in the Interzonal tournament in Leningrad 1973, where he was supposed to play the world elite. “How to prepare?”, I asked him. Torre explained that the only way was to gain practical experience by playing various tournaments in Europe. His patron Florencio Campomanes “phoned” a few friends, who were willing to accommodate him. Thus, he toured in Spain and Italy – his greatest success being a victory in Reggio Emilia in 1972-1973. He also earned a bit of money by writing the chess column for the Philippines Daily Express.

According to his own recollection Torre was “overwhelmed” in the 1973 Leningrad IZT itself of playing with such greats as Korchnoi, Karpov, Larsen and Tal. And what a start: In the second round, he beat ex world champion Tal with Black! Two rounds later he held a hard fought draw with Black against the tournament favourite Larsen in a memorable rook ending. The young Filipino thus stopped the Dane, who had made 100% in the first three rounds, in his march to the top. However, in the fifth round Torre suffered with White an unfortunate defeat against GM Robert Byrne after a wild king hunt and could not hold Gligoric thereafter. The other top seeds also proved superior. Nevertheless, at the end, Torre finished with a respectable 7/17 at 13th-14th place (of 18 participants) and gained 59 ELO points. Korchnoi and Karpov took the first places with 13/17, while Larsen got eliminated from the FIDE cycle.

The next bang followed at the Nice Olympiad 1974 in Nice. In Group 6, the team of the Philippines with an average of 2356 ELO scored 2nd place after Bulgaria and made it to the final group A. Even more amazing it came out on place 11 (of 16 finalists). This national success was partially due to Torre’s outstanding results. As first board of the Philippines, he won the silver medal behind Anatoly Karpov! This performance earned him the title of Grandmaster, the first Asian player to have earned it! When I had interviewed the Belgian player De Bruycker about Nice 1974, he remarked that night life there was even more interesting than the tournament. When hearing this comment, Torre smiled but politely said: “I found the atmosphere not distracting, but inspiring!”.

After having won the title at the green table in 1975, world champion Karpov proved his strength by remaining unbeaten in various strong tournaments. He also accepted to play in a double round-robin in Manila 1976 with Ljubojevic (Yugoslavia), Browne (New Zealand) and Torre. To the great surprise of many, it did not prove to be a walk in the park for Karpov, though. Rather, Torre stole him the show by beating him in the second round with Black and winning the tournament with a clear 4.5/6! Torre is still very fond of this game, as it was the first loss of the world champion in office. Only “drawback”: “I could have mated Karpov, but overlooked the mating attack in Zeitnot”. But the game is very present in his mind. Whereas I had the chance to replay it on the evening before in my hotel room, Torre still had the position present in his mind after almost 50 years! Here is the game, which wrote chess history in Asia.



[World champion Karpov v.](#)

Torre, Manila 1976

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