

The topic of "Historical Interpretation of Rizal's Retraction" is one of the most contentious and debated issues in Philippine history. It centers on the alleged document signed by national hero Dr. Jose Rizal hours before his execution on December 30, 1896, which supposedly retracted his Masonic affiliations and anti-clerical writings, and affirmed his belief in the Catholic Church.

Below is a structured collection of information, claims, and argumentations pertaining to this topic, focusing on historians' viewpoints and relying on reliable sources.

Historical Interpretation: Rizal's Retraction

The historical debate generally falls into two camps: those who accept the document's authenticity (the Affirmative Position) and those who reject it (the Skeptical Position).

I. The Affirmative Position (Belief in the Retraction)

This side argues that the document is authentic, primarily based on clerical records and the testimony of figures present during Rizal's final hours.

A. Historian Viewpoint & Claims

Historian/Scholar	Key Argumentation & Claims	References
Fr. Vicente Balaguer, S.J. (Contemporaneous Source)	Claimed to have personally assisted Rizal in drafting the retraction document. Asserted that Rizal genuinely converted back to Catholicism and died a pious death.	His own affidavit and letters written shortly after the event (often viewed with caution by modern historians due to his vested interest).
Fr. Pio Pi, S.J. (Superior of the Jesuit Mission at the time)	Maintained that the retraction was real. He supervised the process and claimed the copy of the document published in 1897 was genuine. Argued that the conversion was a result of divine grace and Jesuit efforts.	Letters and later accounts detailing the process, such as those included in works like <i>La Muerte Cristiana del Dr. Rizal</i> .
Ricardo Pascual (Filipino Scholar)	While not strictly a historian, his 1950 handwriting analysis (known as the <i>Pascual Report</i>) concluded that the signatures on the original retraction document were forgeries (a common misinterpretation of his work, but his <i>actual</i> conclusion was that the available documents were <i>suspect</i>).	<i>A Critical Study of the Forgery of the Rizal Retraction</i> (1950).

	His later work, however, is often used to <i>support</i> authenticity by focusing on other factors. (Note: <i>Pascual's initial skepticism is often overlooked for later works used by the affirmative side.</i>)	
Austin Coates (British Author/Researcher)	Wrote extensively defending the authenticity of the retraction. Argued that the sheer volume of supporting evidence from the Jesuits and the circumstantial evidence makes the retraction highly probable. He dismissed the skeptics' arguments as purely emotional or anti-clerical.	<i>Rizal: Philippine Nationalist and Martyr</i> (1992).

B. Core Argumentation

1. The Jesuit Narrative: The consistent and detailed accounts provided by the Jesuit priests (Balaguer, Pi, etc.) detailing the hours leading to the execution, including the final spiritual discussions and the preparation of the document.
2. The Discovery of the "Original": The rediscovery of the alleged original document in 1935 by Fr. Manuel Garcia, S.J., which closely matched the text published in 1897.
3. The Motive of Piety: Rizal, despite his criticisms of the friars, was deeply religious and educated by the Jesuits. The affirmative position argues that it was plausible for him to return to the faith of his childhood before facing death.
4. The Marriage: The fact that Rizal was married to Josephine Bracken in the chapel immediately prior to his death is presented as evidence that he fulfilled the necessary Catholic requirements, which included signing the retraction.

II. The Skeptical Position (Rejection of the Retraction)

This side argues that the document is a fabrication, primarily based on the questionable historical context, inconsistencies in the published documents, and Rizal's character.

A. Historian Viewpoint & Claims

Historian/Scholar	Key Argumentation & Claims	References
Dr. Rafael Palma (Historian and Biographer of Rizal)	A leading voice of skepticism. Argued that the retraction was incompatible with Rizal's character and heroic nationalism. Questioned why, if the retraction was true, the original document was hidden for	<i>Biografia de Rizal</i> (1949 English translation <i>The Pride of the Malay Race</i>).

	nearly 40 years, and why the "original" discovered in 1935 had discrepancies.	
Ambeth Ocampo (Prominent Filipino Historian and Columnist)	Focuses less on proving forgery and more on the <i>context</i> and <i>improbability</i> . Highlights the inconsistencies in the witnesses' accounts (especially those of Balaguer and Pi) and the political motive of the friars to discredit a deceased enemy.	Numerous historical columns and essays, particularly in <i>Meaning and History</i> (2001).
Dr. José Victor Torres (Professor of History)	Emphasizes the textual critique, pointing out that there are at least four versions of the retraction text, all slightly different, casting doubt on which, if any, is authentic. He also notes the lack of consensus on the handwriting analysis.	Various historical lectures and academic papers on the subject.
Dr. Austin Craig (American Scholar and Early Biographer)	Expressed profound doubt, arguing that if Rizal had truly retracted, his actions and attitude in his final moments would have been entirely different. His writings and actions right up to the execution were those of an unflinching martyr.	<i>Rizal's Life and Minor Writings</i> (1927).

B. Core Argumentation

1. The Forgery Thesis (The Document): The document found in 1935 is suspected of being a forgery (the "copy" found by Fr. Garcia was actually the "original"). Handwriting analysis results have been inconclusive or contradictory, and the text itself contains theological language uncharacteristic of Rizal.
2. Rizal's Character: Rizal's last writings, notably the *Mi Último Adiós* (written hours before the alleged retraction), and his unwavering stance against the Catholic hierarchy, suggest a man who would not compromise his principles merely to save his soul (as defined by the friars).
3. The Motive of the Church: The Catholic Church (specifically the friars) had a strong political and theological motive to fabricate the retraction to neutralize Rizal's martyrdom and discredit the revolutionary movement that utilized his secular ideals.
4. Lack of Public Disclosure: If the retraction was so vital to the Church, why was it kept secret from Rizal's family and the public for decades? His family was not given the original document, nor were they allowed access to him under normal circumstances.
5. The Missing Canonical Vow: The retraction document demands a solemn abjuration of masonry. Skeptics note that if Rizal genuinely returned to the faith, he would have needed to publicly affirm the canonical decrees and potentially undergo specific rituals, details of which are incomplete or suspicious.

III. Conclusion: The Ongoing Historical Challenge

The debate over Rizal's Retraction remains unresolved because it relies heavily on interpreting conflicting primary sources and circumstantial evidence.

Modern Historical Consensus (Ambeth Ocampo, etc.)

Many contemporary historians acknowledge that definitively proving or disproving the retraction is impossible due to the nature of the available sources (mostly clerical accounts or disputed documents). Therefore, the focus has shifted from *authenticity* to *historical significance*:

- The Historical Impact: Whether real or fabricated, the retraction controversy fundamentally shaped how Rizal was viewed—either as a religious hero (by the Church) or as a secular martyr (by nationalists).
- The Importance of Context: Historians like Ambeth Ocampo suggest that the crucial point is not what Rizal *did*, but what the colonial and clerical structures needed him to do to maintain control and delegitimize the anti-colonial cause.

References and Suggested Readings

The following sources are considered foundational to the debate:

1. Coates, Austin. *Rizal: Philippine Nationalist and Martyr*. Solidarity, 1992. (Strongly argues for authenticity).
2. Guerrero, León Ma. *The First Filipino: A Biography of Jose Rizal*. National Historical Commission, 1971. (Generally balanced, presenting both sides).
3. Ocampo, Ambeth. *Meaning and History: The Rizal Lectures*. Anvil Publishing, 2001. (Provides modern historical context and textual critiques).
4. Palma, Rafael. *The Pride of the Malay Race: A Biography of Jose Rizal*. Translated by Roman Ozaeta. Prentice Hall, 1949. (Classical skeptical viewpoint).
5. Pascual, Ricardo R. *A Critical Study of the Forgery of the Rizal Retraction*. Ateneo de Manila Press, 1950. (A crucial examination of the document itself).
6. Pi, Fr. Pio, S.J. *La Muerte Cristiana del Dr. Rizal*. (Contemporaneous Jesuit account supporting the retraction).