



Chapter 6

FILIPINO MIGRATION TO CHINA: NEW TREND IN PHILIPPINES-CHINA RELATIONS*

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Introduction

The research on this topic started in 2007 – for my master thesis in Fudan University. During that time, in-depth interviews and field observations were done in Xiamen, Guangzhou, and Shanghai. Sources of information included materials written in both English and the local language. Direct sources included official manuals, newspaper reports, magazine articles, non-academic books, brochures, and online services of the employment agencies, government studies, laws, and academic studies.

In my 2009 thesis defense, when Philippines-China relations was going well, one of the panelists asked me, “What is the significance of Filipino migration,” that being the number of migrants was just a little above 10,000. My answer then was that the effect and

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issues of the Filipino workers in Hong Kong and Singapore will be replicated and magnified because they are natural destinations and the demand for their skills was increasing too.

A decade after, the relationship between the two nations has been strained, as every step and interaction between the two have been heavily scrutinized by everybody involved. The years 2018 and 2019 have the announcements by the Philippine government about the signed agreements with China on hiring hundreds of thousands of Filipino teachers, cooks, caregivers, household service workers, musicians, and nurses.

This paper will shed light on the timeline of the migration, as well as discuss the issues that this movement of people is likely to encounter once the thousands of workers start coming in.

Filipino Migration

Filipino migration has been traced to the early 1900s. The destination then was the strongest and most globalized nation in the world – the United States of America. Decades passed and the migration branched out to nearby Canada and Europe. Nurses and medical personnel were some of the occupations that the migrants used to handle during the 1970s and the 1980s; these came to a halt after the new provisions barring foreign workers from doing this line of work.

Driven by the desire to attain prosperity, these foreign migrants took in jobs as domestic helpers. Prof. Ricardo Jose (Ludden 2006, 2) explained that emigration of working talents was the short-term solution to unemployment of the then-president Ferdinand Marcos. President Marcos was all-out to use labor migration as an answer to the country's economic woes. The nation was hell-bent in promoting and maintaining this export of skills to the rest of the world. The 1974 Labor Code formalized the Philippine skills migration program and had as its major goal

the promotion of overseas contract work for the administration to reap the economic benefits of lessen unemployment and workers' remittances. In 1982, Executive Order 857 was implemented; the Central Bank of the Philippines, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and Ministry of Labor and Employment ordered the overseas workers to remit 50 to 70 percent of their salaries (*Official Gazette* 1982).

During the Marcos' era in the 1970s, the term OCW (overseas contract workers) surfaced. The OCWs left their homeland and headed to the countries with flourishing economies. Some of the destinations were Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Hong Kong, Singapore, Taiwan, and even Malaysia. Filipino men and women had different job descriptions in their assignments in the Middle East and the Asia-Pacific regions then. These workers' migration to other territories would be a phenomenon to this day. The diverse group of Filipinos is classified into permanent residents, temporary Filipino workers, and undocumented overseas Filipinos.

More than 11 million overseas Filipinos work worldwide, that figure corresponds to more than 10 percent of the total population of the Philippines. Yvette Collymore of the Population Reference Bureau, in her June 2003 article, noted: "At average 2,500 Filipinos leave the country every day for work abroad, and the Philippines is second only to Mexico as an exporter of labor. An estimated 10 percent of the country's population, or nearly eight million people, are overseas Filipino workers distributed in 182 countries" (2003).

Florian Alburo and Danilo Abella's article "Skilled Labour Migration from Developing Countries: A Study on the Philippines" (2002) interestingly noted that Filipinos who worked in Northern America (United States and Canada) and Oceania (Australia) tended to become permanent migrants while those worked in the Middle East and Asia tended to stay temporarily. Alburo and Abella pointed out that migration to Asian countries was only a recent development. The Filipino migrants in European countries have been studied by the Commission for Filipino Migrant Workers (CFMW).

According to *Europe-Philippines in the 1990s: Filipino Migration – The European Experience*, non-government organizations (NGOs), combined with official data from the different government agencies and several other international agencies, came up with the following findings: In Italy, the Filipinos legally staying there were 42,072 as of 1991, unofficially; the NGOs and research institutes believe the figure would surpass 200,000. The CFMW estimate would make Italy the biggest population of Filipinos in Europe. Other interesting notes are 80 percent of them are female, and they are mostly employed in the service sector. Most of them are living in Rome, Bologna, Florence, Milan, and Naples (*Italy-Philippines Migration* 2010).

Philippine-China Relations

The Philippines and China have maintained good diplomatic relations after the opening of bilateral relations in the middle of 1975. From Marcos regime to former President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo's term, the relations were pleasant to good, as heard in her speech, "In our administration, we have made the choice very clearly; we have embraced the opportunity to become China's strong partner" (Arroyo 2005). With the Philippine leaders' commitments to good bilateral relations, there was nothing much to worry about Philippines-China relations during those times. In 1999, China's Ministry of Agriculture and the Department of Agriculture of the Philippines signed the agreement on strengthening cooperation in agriculture and related fields.

In 2000, relevant government agencies have signed an agreement where China offered the Philippines USD 100 million credit facility. In March 2003, through China's aid project, the China-Philippines Agricultural Technology Center was completed. China's fine hybrid rice and corn have been growing over large areas in the archipelago. In 2004, both sides signed

the memorandum of understanding on fisheries cooperation. In January 2007, Chinese and Philippine Ministries of Agriculture signed memorandum of understanding on broadening and deepening agriculture and fisheries cooperation. In 2007, trade volume between the Philippines and China surged to a record high of USD 30.62 billion, way higher compared to USD 3.14 billion seven years earlier. That made the Philippines China's 19th biggest trading partner and fourth among the ASEAN countries.

This took a turn in March 2009, when the bilateral ties turned sour due to China's reaction to the Philippine Archipelagic Baseline Law. However, during former president Benigno S. Aquino III's state visit in 2011, the two governments issued a joint statement reiterating their commitment to jointly pursue a long term and stable relationship of strategic cooperation based on mutual respect, equality, and mutual benefit. Philippines-China relations had a big boost of positive drive with the installation of the current regime, as seen in President Rodrigo Duterte's fifth visit to China in 2019. The visit built on the comprehensive strategic cooperation. Chinese President Xi Jinping urged his Philippine counterpart to view relations from a broader standpoint, in reference to the much-publicized sea incident which shocked the whole nation. The outcome of the visit netted six agreements signed (Ranada 2019). The highlight of the visit was forming a joint steering committee and a working group on oil and gas exploration. One of the highlights of the Duterte's trips was an MOU on hiring English teachers and domestic helpers.

Filipino Migrants in China

Filipinos have been staying in China since 1500, according to William Henry Scott's (1989) research. Before 1967, Shanghai even had a road named Manila Road, while most of the Filipinos worked in the entertainment sector during those times. Chairman

Mao Zedong's 10 years of Cultural Revolution forced Filipinos to head back home to the Philippines, though some still stayed behind. In 2002, Shanghai Philippine Consular Office record showed that there were 300 Filipino workers listed in the megacity. And in 2007, the same consular office said the number dramatically shot up to 4,308.

The listed occupations of Filipino workers in China were professional/senior managers, middle managers/ supervisors/ technical staff, teachers, service staff and entertainers. Filipino workers lived in company dormitories. Workers who have stayed outside still preferred to stay near the workplaces. The undocumented Filipino workers in China were either holding tourist visas or business visas through their connections, e.g., foreign employers. The undocumented Filipino workers in the mainland were either musicians or domestic helpers. The working conditions of overseas Filipinos workers listed guide at the consulate is as follows (Bata 2009).

1) Professionals/Senior managers are provided with housing by their employers. Most of them can bring their families with them and their children's tuition fees are provided for by their companies.

2) Middle managers/Supervisors/Technical staff are provided housing or dormitory facilities by their employers. Those working in hotels are billeted in their hotels or for some, they are provided with apartments.

3) Service staff are mostly employed by Filipino expatriates or foreigners. They are usually in China working under a tourist or business visa. They have live-in arrangements and have salaries matching those in Hong Kong.

4) Entertainers. Quite a lot of the entertainment places in Shanghai have Filipino bands or entertainers. For the major ones, the overseas Filipino workers have valid working visas and are billeted by their employers in local apartments. However, Post (the office) has encountered several instances when the entertainers are working under tourist or business visas and whose

living conditions are very poor. Most of the bands have short term contracts (i.e., three to six months).

“The Filipinos here are highly respected,” Philippine Ambassador to China Sonia Brady said (Uy 2009). She said that most of the Filipinos who work in China are professionals, engineers, and workers with high technical skills. She said that teachers in English, musicians, and hotel managers and workers are also increasing in number.

Veronica Uy, in her 2009 article, noted that the Filipino technical workers in China often work in United Nations agencies, hotels, other embassies, and multinational companies. “The growing Chinese demand to learn English has led to an increase in the number of Filipinos working as English teachers and tutors. Those teachers working in schools licensed to hire foreigners often have adequate compensation and good working and living conditions.” That article is related to another piece regarding the proficiency in English being a tool in finding jobs here.

The article “Shanghai Rich Hire Undeclared Filipino Servants” wrote, “Some rich Shanghainese are willing to pay RMB 6,000 (USD 750) a month to hire a Philippine servant with college education background, much higher than the average salary of RMB 3,000 to RMB 4,000 (USD 375 to USD 500) that most Philippine servants can get” (August 2006). This reflects the data collected by the consulate, the real number of unskilled workers is still unknown, with the great demand comes the supply. They are recorded to be staying in Shanghai under three to six-month visas or some are holders of business visas. The article continues, “But the market is still outlawed by government regulations. According to the Shanghai labor and social security bureau, individuals and families are not allowed to hire foreign laborers.” The consulate is fully aware of this policy and is working hard to help the government control the legality of the stays of the Filipinos here.

Interestingly, 60 percent of them were brought to the mainland by the employers themselves, while the rest (40 percent) have been

introduced by Shanghai's homemaking agencies, which bring in Filipinos apparently as foreign teachers for private schools and preschools (Bata 2009). An interview with a consulate officer surfaced an interesting note:

The registered Filipino migrants here in the consulate as well as the embassy are mostly the white-collar workers. They come to the mainland with complete documents and register in our online groups. Even in the events organized by the consulate, such as the Philippine Independence Day and Christmas celebrations, the attendees are mostly the white-collar workers and the ones with proper documentations staying here. This has been our desire to legalize all the stays of the Filipinos here. My advice is for you to check them in the Sunday masses everywhere. These individuals are staying here under just three to six-month visas (Bata 2009).

To be able to monitor the Filipino community, the consulate said they started the online registration of the Filipinos working or staying in Shanghai, the online sites has an exclusive corner for it called philcongshanghai.com.

The Chinese have known a popular snack brand called Oishi for so long as they can remember. The popular brand with a Japanese-sounding name has always been close to the hearts of the millions of snack lovers around the nation. According to China Department of Trade and Industry, Oishi is the major line of Liwayway China Company Limited which has 12 companies in the mainland. It was reported in the DTI that it was established by Carlos Chan, a Filipino. *Forbes* listed that in 2015, the big snack food company hit the USD 550 million mark, cementing its place as one of the largest and most successful snack food company in the mainland (Landingin 2015).

Carlos Chan, in his interview in the book, *The Philippines in Shanghai*, narrated that the secret to the success of this business is his expansion to China in 1993. He called it "perfect timing," the company rode on China's rapid modernization in the past two decades. The company started in Shanghai, which had employed

400 employees; it now has branches in big major markets in the mainland. The DTI records show that Liwayway China Company Limited currently has 14 factories in Harbin, Xinjiang, Suzhou, Ningbo, Xuzhou, Changsha, Zhengzhou, Kunming, Jiangxi, and Hubei (Gonzales 2019). Carlos Chan boasts of the feat the company did through the hard work of his three sons – Carlson, Archie, and Larry – and a son-in-law, whom are all hands on in charge of sales and marketing, general administration, and product development. The company also bagged the prestigious Shanghai Famous Brands award in 2001. To reach out more to Chinese market, Liwayway China Company Limited markets its latest products under the brand name Oishi Shanghaojia.

Another Filipino company that targeted the mainstream Chinese food market is Yonghe King. Yonghe King is a subsidiary of Philippine food retailer giant Jollibee Foods Corporation. The *Philippine Daily Inquirer's* June 2007 issue featured Jollibee Foods Corporation's sole ownership of the Chinese food chain. Jollibee chairman and chief executive officer Tony Tan Caktiong said his company had acquired the Belmont Enterprises Ventures Limited's other shares.

The CEO said, "The purchase of the remaining 15 percent share of Yonghe King reflects management's optimism and confidence in the significant future growth and rise in economic value of the Yonghe King business" (Camus 2016). It has shown growing figures since the Jollibee Group took over the Yonghe food chain. Tan Caktiong said, "Yonghe King's sales in the year 2006 grew 20.1 percent from the previous year, and this year, will expand further with the opening of up to 15 new outlets" (Morales 2019). In 2019, the food chain expanded to more than 50 cities and more than 300 store branches across the mainland.

The Filipino companies that entered the mainland have eyed the 1.4 billion population Chinese consuming market, especially the food and beverage market. The Asia Brewery Group of Lucio Tan has entered the China market in the middle of the 1990s.

Their China subsidiary now has factories in Xiamen, Nanchang, Luoyang, Zibo, Suzhou, and Xinxiang. This Filipino venture is into the alcoholic beverages, mainly beer and wine. The company has received several accolades from different Chinese provinces for its excellence in the beverage industry. The tycoon Tan is also the brain behind Eton Properties Group, in the mainland. Several other business companies have entered the mainland during the middle and the end of the 1990s. Other noted companies that have entered are brands Bench/ (a clothing line), Figaro Coffee, Metrobank, Universal Robina, Quanzhou Footwear, and Daiichi Speakers. These mentioned brand names were noted sponsors according to the Shanghai consulate people. Their support for the Filipino community is often seen in celebrations of the Independence Day, Christmas celebration and sports tournaments.

Future Hiring of English Teachers and Domestic Helpers

As Uy (2008) noted, due to the demand of learning English in China, numerous jobs were opened for more than 10 years now. Teaching English has seen a significant increase in hiring foreign talents. With the Duterte-Xi signed agreement on Filipino employment, Filipino teachers may soon find more reasons to look for work abroad. As language will be an obvious barrier, Philippine Department of Education Secretary Leonor Briones (Tomacruz 2019) announced that a proposed education exchange between the two countries includes training of Filipino teachers in speaking Mandarin. These teachers will be sent to different elementary schools, high schools and even colleges all over the mainland. Each contract is for two years, and the possibility of renewal after the it expires.

Philippine Ambassador to China Jose Santiago Sta. Romana shared the news on planning to hire “English-speaking” Filipino

domestic workers. The mainland Chinese, he said, have learned from Hong Kong, wherein thousands of Filipino domestic workers assist busy families in raising their young children. Ambassador Sta. Romana explained, “The Chinese upper middle class are learning from Hong Kong. They want to hire nannies who can teach their kids English, so English-speaking domestics” (Elemia 2017). “But perhaps not in the same scale as HK kasi (because) there’s a surplus of Chinese labor that you’re competing with so it’s very tight, the control, but they’re loosening it” (Elemia 2017), he further expounded on the trend in the changes in mainland’s growing families and demanding lifestyle.

According to Prof. Li Meiting of Xiamen University and UP Diliman, the household service workers currently work for expatriates in five major cities in the country only, namely: Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, Xiamen, and Shenzhen.

Conclusion

After research and interviews, the most frequent concerns of the Filipino workers in China are the following:

1) Failure of securing proper working visas. As some workers did years of service in Hong Kong, several them were given the opportunity to cross to the mainland and enter. Reports showed some stayed and worked illegally for some time now.

2) Chinese language barrier. As Department of Education secretary mentioned, teachers will be given ample time to learn the language, but the same is needed for other workers as well.

3) Non-payment of salaries. With incomplete working documents, workers fall prey to this, consulates or the embassy is the first to respond to this kind of complaints.

4) Dual contract system (in Chinese and English). Countries that do not have English as an official language always reverts to the original version of the contract to settle contract disputes.

5) Unclear contract details of work duties, salary scheme, and other benefits. Such setting is a trend now in Hong Kong, as some workers there cross to Shenzhen to work, when contracts prohibit them from working outside their official workplace; agencies can be a middleman to secure duties and salary is clear and fair.

6) Poor living conditions. Comparing mainland living quarters with other countries might still be a long discussion, as their own local workers do not have ideal living quarters as well.

7) Lower payment rates compared to other expatriates performing the same line of work. For white-collared workers, this has been the complaints for years; contracts' stipulated terms may always be up for negotiations, but it does not guarantee equal pay still.

8) Place of worship. As China only has five official religions, anything not listed in it will not be permissible; one example is the Iglesia Ni Cristo group's request for the government to allow them to conduct religious service.

The Philippine Department of Foreign Affairs records about 12,254 overseas Filipinos in China. The median salary is around RMB 8,000. It with hope that the national government will strictly observe and implement policies, regulations and have a better system laid down before a bigger batch of thousands leave. This must include rigorously selecting and deploying new talents to the mainland, while finding solutions for the illegal workers there to come back and fix their papers to avoid being punish by the Chinese laws.

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