

Chapter 19

CONCLUSION: OVERCOMING PERSISTENT CHALLENGES IN PHILIPPINES-CHINA RELATIONS BEYOND THE PANDEMIC

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After 45 years of bilateral relations, interactions, conversations, and exchanges, Filipino and Chinese scholars working independently or in collaboration with each other have produced several studies and academic papers that aim to deepen our understanding of China, the Chinese and the Philippines-China relations. This volume has presented some of these scholarly outputs undertaken by established and emerging intellectuals specializing on various topics of Chinese studies and many aspects of Philippines-China relations.

The COVID-19 pandemic, despite all the emotional stress and psychological pressures arising from it, has provided many scholars and academics the needed time under quarantine situation to reflect on, to rethink, and to reevaluate the past experiences, current developments, and future directions of Philippines-China relations. This volume is the product of this serious intellectual process done in the time of the COVID-19 pandemic coinciding with the commemoration of the 45 years of Philippines-China relations in 2020.

Based on newly found ancient Chinese sources and hitherto undisclosed archival references in Madrid and China, this volume has provided readers new discoveries in the study of Philippines-China relations. These new scholarly findings in Part One of this volume by Teresita Ang See, Carmelea Ang See, and Jely A. Galang are confirmations that through diligent researches and investigations of historical data, we can offer new insights and understanding that can challenge our conventional wisdom of China and its relations with the Philippines. Our new understanding of the past based on newly discovered data can offer us alternative perspectives of the current state of Philippines-China relations. These alternative perspectives can also help us examine, if not shape, the future directions of this bilateral relation. The Philippines' shared past with China can provide the two countries the strong foundation to presently create a conducive bilateral environment for the two countries to build their shared future.

Recent developments have also demonstrated perennial themes in Philippines-China relations: cooperation and conflict, love and hate, amity and enmity, and connecting and distancing. Part Two of this volume presents chapters of Rommel C. Banlaoi, Sidney Christopher Bata, Charles Joseph G. De Guzman, Dai Fan, Ivy Ganadillo, Lucio Blanco Pitlo III, and Joahna Pia A. Esquivias, discussing many bilateral issues where themes of cooperation and conflict, love and hate, amity and enmity, and connecting and distancing can be found. Current Chinese migration to the Philippines (particularly Chinese offshore gambling workers in the Philippines), Filipino migration to China, Chinese retirees in the Philippines, Chinese internal migration, China's Belt and Road Initiative, the Philippines' Build, Build, Build Program, and China's Official Development Assistance of the Philippines are pertinent issues covered in this volume describing recent developments in Philippines-China relations. How the two countries respond to these recent developments can have short-term and long-term effects on their bilateral ties. Are the two

countries after short-term gains or long-term benefits? From recent developments, there is no doubt that both countries have already enjoyed short-term gains from the great improvement of their bilateral relations under the leaderships of President Rodrigo Duterte and President Xi Jinping. How to achieve long-term benefits from their friendly relations is a gargantuan task that the Philippines and China should pursue if long lasting bilateral relationship is desired.

There are continuing concerns that the Philippines and China need to face in the current state and future direction of their bilateral relations. Part Three of this volume presents chapters of Wilfrido Villacorta, Paolo Benedicto C. Villar, Rommel C. Banlaoi, Jane Yugioksing and Dai Fan, Sharlene Mae C. Cua, Ambassador Huang Xilian, and Ambassador Jose Santiago L. Sta. Romana, where these continuing concerns are analyzed. These concerns became more challenging during the COVID-19 pandemic. On the basis of these continuing concerns, the following are the persistent challenges that can affect Philippines-China relations in the post-pandemic period: 1) South China Sea disputes, 2) US-China major power rivalry; and 3) low popularity of China in the Philippines. Surmounting these persistent challenges is essential to build a stronger foundation for Philippines-China relations.

South China Sea Disputes

In the post-pandemic period, the Philippines and China will continue to face the persistent challenge of the South China Sea dispute. The South China Sea is the major issue where the Philippines and China have political differences. Depending on how these two countries handle their political differences, the South China Sea can either make or break Philippines-China relations in the post-pandemic period.

Situation in the South China Sea can break Philippines-

China relations if both parties fail to find a common ground to cooperate (See and Sta. Romana 2013). To avoid this grim scenario, the Philippines and China really need to exert efforts to find a common ground for cooperation. Pursuing functional cooperation is one way of ensuring that the South China Sea can make and not break Philippines-China relations (Banlaoi 2014, 228-240). Areas of functional cooperation are already identified in the 2002 Declaration on the Conduct (DOC) of Parties in the South China Sea signed by China and members of the Association for Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), to wit:

- Marine environmental protection
- Marine scientific research
- Safety of navigation and communication at sea
- Search and rescue operation
- Combating transnational crimes including international terrorism

The Philippines and China can implement the DOC bilaterally to strengthen bilateral cooperation in functional areas. Towards this end, the Philippines and China can sustain the Bilateral Consultative Mechanism (BCM) in the South China Sea in order to continue the momentum of bilateral cooperation and to eventually elevate cooperation to the higher level. Bilaterally implementing the DOC and sustaining the process of the BCM can even motivate and inspire China-ASEAN cooperation in the South China Sea, particularly in the context of the negotiation on the Code of Conduct in the South China Sea expected to be concluded in 2022.

US-China Major Power Rivalry

Another persistent challenge in Philippines-China relations is the growing major power rivalry between the United States and China that drastically deteriorated under the leadership of

President Donald Trump. The US continues to be a major factor in Philippines-China relations because of the existing Philippine-American alliance. Because of its security alliance with the US, the Philippines is in the list of the most important strategic priorities of China. Thus, the Philippines continues to be in China's radar screen in Asia.

In the context of US-China major power rivalry, there is a tremendous pressure on the Philippines to take sides: to be a loyal security ally of the US or to be a sincere long-time friend of China. Rather than to be torn between two rival superpowers, the Philippines can make the best of both worlds by continuously pursuing an independent Philippine foreign policy and by maintaining a foreign policy approach that is friendly to all and enemy to none particularly under the administration of US President Joe Biden (Banlaoi 2020).

Low Popularity of China in the Philippines

It is very ironic that despite the long-term friendship of the Philippines and China that dates back many centuries ago, China remains to be unpopular in the Philippines. Past and recent opinion surveys have revealed China's low popularity rating in the Philippines.

This sad reality is mainly due to continuing ignorance about China, the Chinese, and Philippines-China relations. To overcome this ignorance, it is essential for the Philippines and China to exert more efforts in raising the awareness of their people about the two countries' common history, shared experiences, cultural familiarity, and geographic proximity through more educational exchanges, cultural interactions and people-to-people contacts.

The publication of this volume is an integral part of PACS continuing efforts to produce new knowledge that is needed to promote greater awareness and understanding of China, the

Chinese, and Philippines-China relations. Similar efforts need to be done in China so the Chinese people will also have better awareness and understanding of the Philippines and the Filipino people.

Final Thoughts

Filipino and Chinese scholars need to promote greater academic exchanges in order to sustain people-to-people contacts, which are essential to build mutual understanding, trusts and confidence among our people, particularly in the time of the pandemic where international cooperation is much needed. Through our efforts, we can help strengthen our countries bilateral relations amidst some political differences and other challenges in the various aspects of our ties in this rapidly changing world.

There is no doubt that the pandemic has changed our lives as scholars and citizens of the world. The way we responded to the challenges of the pandemic can determine the direction that we need to take in the post-pandemic world. China and the Philippines need the continuing conversations, communications, and interactions among our people in order to settle our differences and find common grounds for cooperation so we can peacefully co-exist in this interesting and challenging time.

The Philippines needs China in building a caring and sharing community in Asia. China, on the other hand, needs the Philippines in its aspiration to build a community of shared future for mankind. We therefore need each other to build a more secure and peaceful post-pandemic world.

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