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## **Philippines-China Relations and China's Image in the Philippines: A View from a Chinese Scholar**

### **Introduction**

As someone who has experienced the honeymoon stage between China and the Philippines during the Arroyo administration, as well as the challenging days of the Benigno S. Aquino III administration, I have never been so worried about the current relations between our two countries. Though it was the best time since 2013 for China and the Philippines to cooperate, resentment, abomination, and disappointment are still very populated among Filipinos. This author, combined with his personal experience in the Philippines, will explore China's image in the Philippines over the past 20 years and the reasons behind such sentiments.

### **The Philippines in the Eyes of a Chinese Scholar: Personal Experience**

I had further immersion about the Philippines as a nation when I went to the University of the Philippines (UP) Asian Center as a visiting research fellow funded by the Philippine government from 2007-2008. However, even before that year and over the past 10 years, I often go back and forth from the Philippines to China; I make it a point to visit the Philippines every year for my research. What I gained from doing research about the Philippines not only benefitted my career but I also formed friendship both with Filipinos (Pinoy) and the Chinese Filipinos (Tsinoy).

During my time at UP, I had a joyful time. I still remember when a couple invited me to spend Christmas with them in their house at UP Teacher's Village, and to my delight, they prepared many Filipino food.





I also remember in 2015, my students, who also went to the Philippines with me to do research, and I were invited by a Pinoy *kuya* for a drink of beer at Victory bus station. *Kuya* cleaned the plastic cup first before pouring the beer for us. His gesture actually moved me, he was very kind.

My experiences in the Philippines were not always good. I was threatened by a taxi driver to pay extra fees before I could drop off. Many Chinese even experienced worse. My colleague, for example, went to Manila to do research in 2018. She was offered a mango induced with sedation drugs. She ended up losing all her valuables and belongings and had to stay in a hospital for two days.

Despite all these sad and bad experiences, my perception of the Philippines and its people never changed. The Philippines and its people for me are always warm, kind, and friendly. Despite some problems like corruption, traffic jams (my biggest headache), and a few cultural differences, all these reasons did not deter many Chinese still willing to live in the Philippines. Although some people may ask why? The answer is simple. Because first, it is wrong to judge a country based from a few bad experiences. Some misfortunes I encountered in the Philippines might also be common in other countries, including China. Second, it is unfair to only see the negative side while ignoring the good side. If my heart is filled with only prejudice, arrogance, superiority, and something like that, I might view the Philippines as a desperate third world country. However, if I look at the Philippines with goodwill and passion in my heart, I may learn to accept its current situation and understand the differences between China and the Philippines and its people. Being objective and neutral about the current situation of Philippines-China relation is very important.

As a scholar, I believe it is my duty to inform the Chinese people, without any exaggeration or bias, about the good and bad of the Philippines. In many instances, I was criticized as being pro-Philippines for “defending” or speaking up for the Philippines to lighten up a Chinese misconception. In the same manner, the misbehavior of a Chinese individual should not be taken as representation of all the Chinese people, or that of the Chinese government.

It is not fair to point finger and blame all the problems to the Chinese or Philippine governments, or hate all Chinese or all Filipinos because of some bad eggs in the basket. There will always be some isolated incidences that neither governments have control over. The news about the Chinese lady who threw tofu drink to the Filipino policeman last February spread among the Chinese media; the Chinese readers and listeners of the news





broadcasts condemned the act of the Chinese lady 100 percent.<sup>1</sup> What we are talking here is not about race but universal common values. I am sure whether the culprit was Chinese, Filipino, American, or Japanese or whichever race, the point here is the act of being rude and disrespectful, and it is universally condemned.

It disappoints me reading some articles which purely criticized China and the Chinese without facts or evidence and based solely on prejudice and bias. It saddens me that some of the media ignore the sincerity of China's contributions and its intention to help; they even try to paint a bad picture for both countries, misleading a lot of Filipinos, eroding bilateral ties between the two countries, and diminishing a supposedly strong Philippines- China relationship. I am not saying that all is perfect and I can understand the frustration and resentment some Filipinos have toward engaging with China. There are some instances that even I myself agree with Filipinos opinion of China, but what bothers me is the many opposition Filipinos have toward President Duterte's pro-China policy. China and the Philippines have gone through unfriendly times since 2013, and it could have benefited the Philippine national interest more had this barrier been eliminated. This is what the present government is trying to do. This is the best time for the Philippines and China to cooperate and work together for the progress of its nation and its people.

So, I appeal to everyone to be open-minded, not focus on the bad side, and avoid any pre-existing notion and prejudice. International relations should be promoted by reasons and high skills rather than by emotion and prejudice. However, the present bilateral relations are suffering from many problems and the worst problem, I think, is the deep distrust of the Filipinos in China.

## China's Image in the Philippines: Data Analysis

The Social Weather Station (SWS), a Philippine pollster organization, since 1994, has been releasing a series of yearly surveys of Filipinos' trust in many countries such as Japan, Australia, China, and the United States. Given that survey data, we were able to analyze Filipinos' attitudes toward the major powers over the past two decades from a historical point of view.

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<sup>1</sup> I was told by a friend who met the "toufu lady" that the story about the widespread toufu girl incident was actually not as simple as the media reported.



According to the SWS data, the Filipinos' net trust in America is generally more than 50 percent since 1994, with the exception of 2005 and 2006 (see Fig. 1). On the other hand, Filipinos' trust in China is only generally positive in 2002, 2007, 2010-2011, that is, more people trust China than those who do not trust China. Further, Filipinos also have more net trust in Japan and Australia than China.

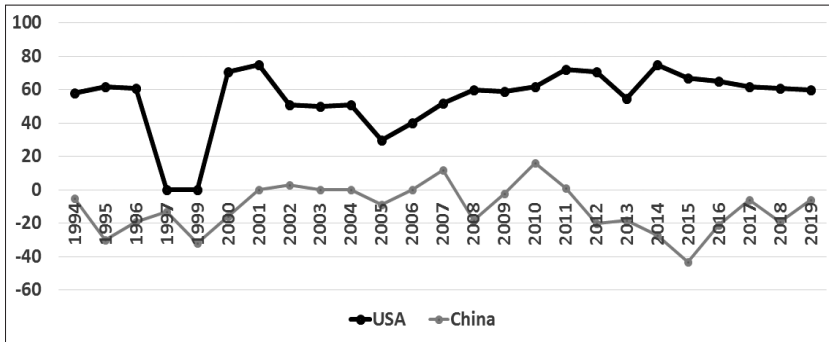


Fig. 1. Yearly net trust in the US and China 1994-2019.\*

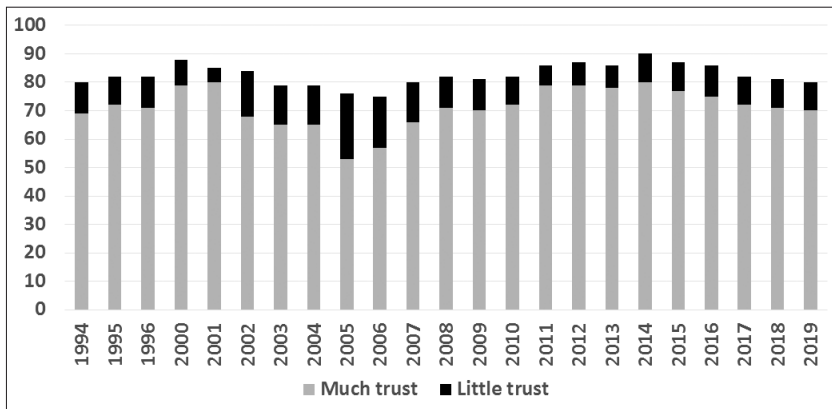


Fig. 2. Filipino's Yearly Trust in the US, 1994-2019.

\* Annual data taken from the average of all research data of this year. Survey data of the US from 1997-1998 is not available; survey data of China in 1998, 2001, 2003, 2004, and 2006 is also not available. *Social Weather Station*. Retrieved from [https://www.sws.org.ph/downloads/media\\_release/pr20190416%20-%20SWR2019-1%20Trust%20in%20Countries%20\(special%20report\).pdf](https://www.sws.org.ph/downloads/media_release/pr20190416%20-%20SWR2019-1%20Trust%20in%20Countries%20(special%20report).pdf).



PHILIPPINES-CHINA RELATIONS AND CHINA'S IMAGE IN THE PHILIPPINES:  
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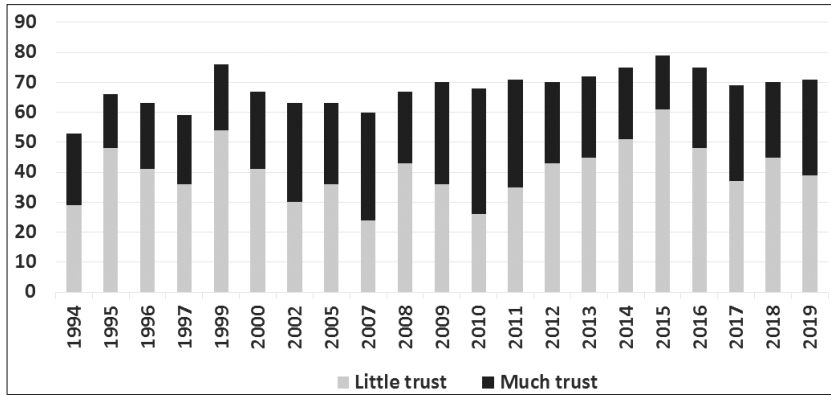


Fig. 3. Filipino's yearly trust in China 1994-2019.

On Nov. 1, 2005, a Filipina girl was gang-raped by five American Marines from visiting forces at Subic Bay Freeport. This case caught media attention and sparked widespread anger among Filipinos and the immediate large-scale demonstrations against the US. In this regard, Filipino's distrust in the US increased and the trust from 2005 to 2006 went down but still remains over 50 percent.<sup>2</sup> Except 2005 (with 23 percent little trust) and 2006 (with 18 percent little trust), Filipinos' distrust in the US is always below 15 percent (see Fig. 2). These data itself, to great extent, demonstrates Filipinos' real passion for the US.

On the contrary, Filipinos' trust in China always remains at the very low level. In 2010, the much trust reached 40 percent, the climax over the past two decades, and year 2007 and 2011 also got 36 percent much trust, respectively (see Fig. 3). All these relatively high trust ratings are related with the Arroyo administration. Even before 1995, the first Mischief Reef standoff between China and the Philippines, much trust only marked 24 percent. In 2015, little trust reached 61 percent, climax over the past two decades, with 18 percent much trust, another valley bottom beside 1995. Because of the relative lag of policy effect, since the revival of Philippines-China relations when President Duterte took into power in 2016, much trust is supposed to rise while little trust to go down. We found that much trust in China still remains low at level while little trust at high level, which is not our initial expectation.

<sup>2</sup>"American soldier jailed for rape in Philippines." *The Guardian*. Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2006/dec/04/usa.philippines>.





To sum up, regarding the relations between the Philippines and the US, no matter what happens to the bilateral relations between the Philippines and the US, the Filipinos will maintain trust in the US as whole though their perception of the US is still subject to influence of emergencies like rape case in 2005. Regarding the relations between China and the Philippines, no matter what China has done to improve its relations with the Philippines, basically one-fifth of the Filipinos always hold little trust attitudes toward China even during the best season of bilateral relations during the Arroyo regime. The second feature of China-Philippines relations is that nearly 20 percent of Filipinos always hold much trust in China and another 20 percent always hold “unknown” attitude even in 1995 and 2015, the most challenging times of bilateral relations because of the South China Sea disputes. The third features of China-Philippines relations is that the bilateral relation is weak, fragile, and vulnerable to influence of emergencies like South China Sea and other issues like illegal workers and online gambling.

## Discussions

The above analysis based on SWS data describes Filipinos' overall pro-American tendency and their long-time distance from China. Then how to understand Filipinos' perception of the US and China?

Generally speaking, Filipinos' pro-Western culture and deep-rooted prejudice against China largely shape Filipinos' attitudes toward the US and China. Of course, problems between China and the Philippines, such as the South China Sea conflict, also greatly affected the trust of Filipino society in China. In addition, domestic political competition in the Philippines, as well as biased media reports, also contributed to the deterioration of China's image over the past few years.

First, the Philippines, though geographically located in East Asia, is exposed to Western culture influence for the long time. This shaped the Filipino identity to the US and also affected their perception of China. Apart from their traditional friendship formed since the end of the 19th century, Filipino society has a very close interaction with America, there are plenty of Filipinos working or settling down in the US, which constitutes the basis of Philippine friendship with the US. According to the data of the Commission on Filipino Overseas in 2013, there are 3,535,678 Filipinos living in the US, the most welcomed destination for overseas





Filipino.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, as English-speaking country, the Philippine society is exposed to English media and western culture, which also imperceptibly shape Filipinos' world outlook and ideology, as well as their perception and judgement of other countries.

Take the Filipino elite as an example. Many Filipino elites are educated in the West, thus, tend to accept some concepts like freedom and democracy in the West. Many Filipinos are even very proud of their American-style democracy and have western prejudices against China, regarding China as a country that lacks freedom and human rights.<sup>4</sup> Not to mention the fact that many Filipinos do not know China at all, and just simply accept the knowledge about China disseminated by English or western media, without their own independent judgement.

Second, the Philippine military force has always been alert to China. On the one hand, the Philippine military and the US military have always maintained close relations, including bilateral military exercises, military personnel exchanges, military assistance, consultation mechanisms, and so on. The military of the two countries has a variety of institutional ties, two of which are the Visiting Forces Agreement and the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement, which is not only the cornerstone of the stability of US-Philippine relations but also may offset efforts to improve relations between China and the Philippines. On the other hand, as the force to safeguard the national security of the Philippines, the Philippine military tends to look at Sino-Philippine relations from the perspective of national security and sees China as a challenge to the maritime security of the Philippines.

Third, attacks by Philippine opposition forces on the current government's policy toward China have also been an inducement to the continued downturn in China-Philippines relations and the deterioration of China's image. The Philippines is a country with separate powers and political families and forces holding power from central to local. With the exception of a small number of nationalists or independent scholars, most political competition is aimed at protecting personal or family interests and cracking down on political opponents.

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<sup>3</sup> *Commission on Overseas Filipino*. Retrieved from <https://www.cfo.gov.ph/downloads/statistics/global-mapping-of-overseas-filipinos.html>.

<sup>4</sup> For example, whenever this author joined a dialogue with Filipino counterparts mainly from the Philippine government, the first question I was asked was to explain the situation of China's human rights.





Therefore, some problems relating to China – the like South China Sea disputes, Belt and Road Initiative and China's loans to the Philippines, illegal immigrants, Chinese tourists and so on – might be used as an excuse by some politicians in order to attack the Philippine government and force the latter to make concessions on its China policy. Further, the persistent quarrels, questions, attacks and so on in the media have undoubtedly made China-related issues the focus of public attention, and largely offset the Philippine government's efforts to improve relations with China.

On July 12, 2018, a large red banners that read "Welcome to the Philippines, Province of China" appeared hanging on various footbridges in Metro Manila. Duterte's presidential spokesperson Harry Roque said enemies of the government are behind the tarpaulins.<sup>5</sup> What is sad is that the photo of red banners were spread on social media and aggravated Filipinos' anger toward China. On June 9, 2019, days before the Philippines marked its Independence Day, Filipino vendors were found selling Chinese flag at historic Luneta Park. This again sparked outrage among Filipinos. "Chinese flags being sold in Luneta! Are we really now a province of China? Digong (Duterte) is so great! Bravo!" Facebook user Martin Masado sarcastically wrote on his wall in English and Filipino.<sup>6</sup> This case is suspected to humiliate the Duterte administration amid its improving ties with China.

Fourth, the bad behavior of many Chinese citizens also exacerbated the "anti-China" sentiment among Filipino society. Since 2017, Philippine government agencies launched unprecedented investigations and conducted law enforcement actions against foreigners engaged in illegal business, illegal employment, illegal online betting, telecommunications fraud, and so on. Chinese citizens were found engaging in all the aforementioned illegal activities, and a large number of them were arrested and even deported.

Philippines Bureau of Immigration (BI) records showed that Chinese nationals topped the list of the most number of deported foreigners from 2016 to 2018. A total of 1,510 Chinese nationals were sent back to China from 2016 to 2018. In 2016, 40 Chinese were deported, 1,248 in year

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<sup>5</sup> *PhilippinesStar*. Retrieved from <https://www.philstar.com/headlines/2018/07/12/1832876/banners-welcome-visitors-philippines-province-china#P1Rk83G2GyH3F7b5.99>

<sup>6</sup> "Chinese flags sold at Luneta before PH independence day." *ABS-CBN News*, Jun 10 2019. Retrieved from <https://news.abs-cbn.com/news/06/10/19/chinese-flags-sold-at-luneta-before-ph-independence-day>.







2017, and 222 from January to October in 2018.<sup>7</sup> All these events were widely covered in all kinds of media in the Philippines; it also aroused widespread concern and repeated voices from the BI, Department of Labor and Employment, Philippine Congress, labor groups, and opposition forces, and finally stimulate Filipino's anti-China sentiments.

Fifth, the maritime dispute between China and the Philippines continues to stimulate the nerves of Philippine society regardless of Duterte's friendly attitude toward China. Despite the turn-around in relations between China and the Philippines since 2016, the dispute over South China Sea is still pending. Reports and comments about the construction on islands in the South China Sea, "illegal fishing" of Chinese fishing vessels, and China's enforcement of Filipino fishing vessels have repeatedly stimulated the sensitive nerves of Filipinos.

According to the second quarter 2018 survey conducted by SWS, 81 percent of the respondents said that "it is not right to do nothing about China's intrusion in claimed territories;" 80 percent want the military, particularly the Navy, to be strengthened; 65 percent "are aware of China's abuse of Filipino fishermen;" and 43 percent said "the government's non-protest of the actions of China is not treachery."<sup>8</sup> Ridiculously, because of the lack of trust in China among the Filipino people, public communication in this age of multimedia, like a double-edged sword, is playing a role that is actually not conducive in constructing and disseminating some positive image of China.

We Are Social and Hootsuite released its annual digital report which gives a global overview of the number of online and social media users, the amount of time people spend online, and the most popular social applications we use. According to its report, in the Philippines, time spent online daily reached 10 hours and two minutes in 2018, the highest in the world. About 76 million Filipinos are using social media, and 75 million of which are on Facebook with four hours and 12 minutes time spending. For mobile phone social media use, 67 percent of online Filipinos access social media on their phone, keeping social media as an influential

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<sup>7</sup> Patinio, Ferdinand. (2018). "Chinese tops list of deported foreigners." *Philippines New Agency*. Retrieved from <https://www.pna.gov.ph/articles/1055408>.

<sup>8</sup> *Social Weather Station Special Report*. July 14, 2018; *Social Weather Station Special Report*, July 20, 2018.





force.<sup>9</sup> Filipinos are also used to watching video on YouTube. Against this backdrop, videos or news that are unfriendly to China or are bad for China's image spread quickly on social media.<sup>10</sup> On the contrary, somefriendly voices toward China have not been disseminated widely.

More importantly, in the post-truth era, the public is tends to believe in their own personal judgment, which is often influenced by prejudice and incomplete information, rather than choose to believe in the truth. Given that, no matter what efforts the Chinese and Philippine governments make to improve relations between them, there will always be some people who choose to ignore the truth and follow their own judgment. As mentioned above, there are always nearly 25 percent Filipinos holding little trust in China since 1994. For example, as mentioned above, some Filipinos are inclined to link the wrongdoings of Chinese citizens to the Chinese government, or ignore the goodwill of the Chinese government, and so on, even make a negative or distorted interpretation of the same thing.

## Policy Reflection

The above analysis seems to show a desperate prospect of Sino-Philippine relations. However, if we have a goodwill of promoting Sino-Philippine friendship in mind, intellectuals, educators, social elites, and politicians should take the responsibility to educate and guide its people on how to know the real China, rather than misleading the people and the country for their own benefit.

People-to-people exchange is very critical for the future bilateral relations. This author finds that Filipinos who have ever studied in China usually have a more rational and balanced, though not always friendly, attitude toward China because they have more knowledge about China. In this regard, if China can open up its labor market to the Philippines and bring English teachers or overseas Filipino workers through which China

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<sup>9</sup> Gonzales, Gelo. "Filipinos spend most time online, on social media worldwide." (2019). Retrieved from <https://www.rappler.com/technology/news/222407-philippines-online-use-2019-hootsuite-we-are-social-report>.

<sup>10</sup> Take the recent ship sinking incident that took place on June 12, 2019 as an example, a cartoon titled "How a Chinese ship sank Filipino fishing vessel Gem-Ver in West PH Sea" is available on Youtube and has 33,000 views; a video interview, "China has record of sinking foreign vessels, expert warns," has 27,000 views.





and the Philippines will be able to form broader contacts, it will be a strong link to maintain the future relations between China and the Philippines.

For the Philippine government and policy makers, a stable and strategic judgement of China, as little as possible influenced by ideology, emergencies, and even emotions is vital. That is, what elements constitute the national interest of the Philippines? What kind of China policy does the Philippines need? How to maximize its national interests when engaging with China?

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