

At the old city wall of Xi'an, the PACS delegation takes a break after four days of consultations and meetings. From left: Jay Batongbacal, Filomeno Sta. Ana, Aileen Baviera, Teresita Ang See, Chito Sta. Romana, Sascha Gallardo, Johnny Tioco, Jameson Ong, Rommel Bantaoi, Joey Bacardo.



## Epilogue

### Bridging the Filipino and Chinese Dreams: Creating Room for Communication and Cooperation<sup>1</sup>

*By Sascha M. Gallardo*

Shortly after being named as general secretary of China's Communist Party, Xi Jinping talked about "The Chinese Dream." According to Xi, "We must make persistent efforts, press ahead with indomitable will...and strive to achieve the Chinese dream of great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation."

What this dream actually means has been the subject of many commentaries and analyses that came out as a reaction to Xi's announcement. That this dream is focused on China's economic development and China's becoming a world power are just some of the interpretations of what it means.

On the Philippine side, the term of Philippine President Benigno S. Aquino III took off on a bad start with eight Hong

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Kong tourists killed during a hostage incident in Rizal Park in August 2010, a couple of months after he came to office.

Combating corruption is central to Aquino's platform. With his predecessor entering into the anomalous and scandal-ridden contract with the Zhong Xing Telecommunications of China, the Chinese projects bore the brunt of his anti-corruption stance. Then there was the interception of an exploration vessel in the Reed Bank in 2011 which was eventually followed by a standoff in Panatag (Scarborough) Shoal in April last year.

A little over a year after the events at Panatag Shoal, the Philippines-China relations remain shaky. In January, the Philippine government filed an arbitration case against China, which, as expected, was snubbed by the Chinese government. The recent incursion of Chinese fishing fleet and government ships at Ayungin Shoal last month is but another indication that the resolution to the territorial disputes between the two countries is still nowhere in sight.

## 1. Interpreting the China Dream

In the face of such challenges to the Philippines' relationship with China over the past few years, how then do the Philippines and its neighbors interpret the China dream and its implications? How do we make sense of Xi's Chinese dream considering all the events that have affected the relationship between China and the Philippines? While it is easy to put this "dream" in a bad light, for some scholars and observers of Philippines-China relations, the Chinese dream need not become a nightmare. It need not be incompatible with the aspirations of its neighbors.

"As neighbors, the two countries have had intertwining fates and destinies for centuries. And the presence of the ethnic Chinese in

the Philippines has manifested itself in all events that shaped the Philippines as a nation," noted Teresita Ang See, president of Philippine Association for Chinese Studies (PACS), during an interview.

Instead of just focusing on the negative events that has transpired between the two neighbors, See suggests that more effort be exerted to improve relations, including "opening more channels of communication, having dialogues with China experts, engaging think tanks and policy makers to learn more about each other's points of view and enhancing understanding of where each side is coming from."

## 2. Meeting China Counterparts

To concretize the suggestion, PACS undertook a nine-day research visit to China last April 14-22, 2013, with the help of Special Envoy to China Carlos Chan.

The delegation, headed by See, was composed of professors of the University of the Philippines Aileen Baviera and Jay Batongbacal, long-time China observer Chito Sta. Romana, economist Filomeno Sta. Ana III, defense analysts Rommel Banlaoi and Giovanni Bacordo and this writer.

With Shanghai and Beijing as the main focus of the visit, the delegation met with scholars and analysts in Fudan University, Shanghai Institute of International Studies, Beijing University, China Institute of International Studies (CIIS), China Public Diplomacy Association and the National Institute for South China Sea Studies in its Beijing office.

Among others, the topics discussed included the current Chinese leadership's foreign policy, recent events in relation to the disputes in West Philippine Sea, the sudden change in relations between the two countries after the term of former President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo, the relationship between China and ASEAN (Association



of Southeast Asian Nations), and the economic as well as people-to-people relations of the two countries.

### 3. Cultural Nuances

The delegates observed that there is a big gap between the two sides in terms of understanding the various aspects of the issues. A big contributor to this gap is the differences in culture.

While one side responds to a certain issue according to what its cultural norms consider as appropriate, the other side perceives certain actions as offensive. One example is the filing of the arbitration case which the Philippine government considers as a peaceful and impartial way of resolving certain aspects of the dispute; this, however, was considered by the Chinese as humiliating since they deem it improper and downright insulting to sue one's neighbor. The group believes that such cultural differences need to be analyzed and understood so as to avoid misconceptions that unnecessarily aggravate the tension.

Another contributor to the gap is the media, both in China and the Philippines. It was noted, for example, that whatever is reported in *Global Times* is usually taken as the official statement of the Communist Party of China when it is not. The Chinese scholars' misperceptions of the actions of the Philippine government and even the contradictory statements by certain officials also show the need for constant direct communication between stakeholders in all levels rather than relying solely on what is being presented in the media.

### 4. Productive Discussions

Participants from both sides also agreed that the territorial

dispute is only one aspect of the Philippines' relations with China. Both agree that ways to patch the relations should be sought and a common question raised from both sides is what are some concrete steps that they think could help ease tensions. Among other things, the participants saw the need for a stronger economic cooperation and more people-to-people exchanges.

While the discussions were non-official, members of the PACS delegation believe that communication between Philippine and Chinese scholars can really play a big role in better contextualizing the issues. This was also the view of their Chinese counterparts, who appreciated the discussions especially since the differences in opinions were presented in a candid and friendly manner.

Summing up their nine-day visit to China, Baviera said that "it was a fruitful visit. There is a wide gap in terms of understanding the issues but we gained a lot of insights as a result of our discussions with the Chinese experts."

PACS delegates observed that while China has a whole research institute devoted to South China Sea studies based in Hainan with a branch recently opened in Beijing, the Philippines has to depend on expertise from diverse sources.

Overall, the Philippine scholars likewise believe that their Chinese counterparts were enlightened on vital issues that they failed to understand before. While the Philippine delegates who met their counterparts are Chinese studies scholars, China has yet to develop Philippine studies experts especially in Philippine foreign policy and politics.

### 5. Chinese Scholars Visit Philippines

Efforts to bridge differences do not only come from the Philippine side. Four delegates from CIIS, led by its Vice President Ruan Zongze, and Ju Hailong, senior research fellow



at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies of Jinan University, visited the Philippines in April and June, respectively. Roundtable discussions and forums about Philippine-China relations, South China Sea disputes, regional integration and the Chinese Dream were attended by analysts and members of the academe.

The CIIS delegates headed by Ruan, together with deputy director of the Department for American Studies Liu Feitao, assistant research fellow Cui Lei and research assistant Du Lan, joined professors and researchers of University of the Philippines Asian Center, U.P. College of Law, and U.P. Department of Political Science in a roundtable discussion on April 1 and then attended a discussion organized by the Ateneo Center for Chinese Studies and the PACS at the Ateneo de Manila University the next day. While the participants were aware of the challenges in the region, they also acknowledged that there is room for cooperation, especially in terms of economic development.

Ju Hailong, on the other hand, spoke at forums at the U.P. Asian Center and Philippine Institute for Peace, Violence and Terrorism Research on June 5 and 6, respectively, a few days before the anniversary of the establishment of Philippines-China diplomatic relations on June 9. During the forum at the Asian Center, Ju presented, among others, the elements of the Chinese Dream based on his analysis of articles written on the subject. As explained by Ju, the Chinese Dream includes the development of Chinese society and its focus is on the domestic but the government will respond to challenges from the outside. Ju also touched on improving relations between China and the Philippines. These exchanges between Philippine and Chinese scholars are just the beginning of such talks.

According to the PACS delegates, "There is interest in continuing dialogue on both sides" and that some of those they met on their April visit have expressed interest in visiting the Philippines for a dialogue with their counterparts.

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