

The Multiple Vantage Points of Aileen S.P. Baviera

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The key to understanding the scholarship of Dr. Aileen S.P. Baviera, lies in an essay where she reflected on her “forty-years of China-watching.”

Wherever my career path took me—at one time or another as an academic, an armchair activist, a government analyst, an author, an editor, a policy adviser, a public speaker on international relations, an advocate of people’s diplomacy, a keen observer of global affairs—sometimes nationalist, sometimes internationalist—China always rose to the front and center of my work, she wrote. (Baviera 2020)

She was all these things, and although that essay focuses on her China expertise, it must be said that she never was just a China-watcher. She also was an ASEAN-watcher, a keen analyst of Philippine foreign policy, and much else besides, and this multifacetedness shaped her scholarship. As someone who said, “simplistic thinking will not do,” she always saw things from multiple vantage points—that of the state, civil society, nation, region, academe. Ever a civil servant and once a member of the foreign policy establishment, she was part of the state, and directed her analysis thereto. At the same time, as a few of her works show, she could be critical of the state itself, and not just of its policies, and strove to practice a diplomacy that accounted for nonstate actors. She loved the

Philippines, but as an area studies specialist, she always saw it in light of regional and global developments. She was an academic, but went out of her way to bridge the university, government, and civil society. She balanced her passionate commitment to the Filipino people, her pursuit of scholarly objectivity, and her trademark approach of “understanding and engaging with the many perspectives that shape and balance our understanding of, and response to critical issues,” which Professor Caitlin Byrne (2020) of Griffith Asia Institute noted.

Domestic Interests: Writing for the Filipino People

Not many can match Dr. Baviera’s expertise on the territorial disputes in the South China Sea/West Philippine Sea. As a friend once said (words to the following effect), “*kahit pagbali-baligtarin mo yung issue, hindi mo siya mapapaikot*” (roughly, no matter how much you shuffle the issue, you won’t be able to pull a fast one on her). Among her numerous publications on the disputes, several stand out. A year after the Scarborough Shoal standoff, she came out, with Jay Batongbacal, *The West Philippine Sea: The Territorial and Maritime Jurisdiction Disputes from a Filipino Perspective*. An 81-page primer, it offers “a simplified and objective rendering of the historical background, current conditions, pertinent issues and policy questions regarding the territorial and maritime disputes in the West Philippine Sea” (Baviera and Batongbacal 2013, Preface).

The primer was not just a scholarly work, however. It was also, more importantly, illustrative of her commitment to the Filipino people. The primer “focuses on information...most important and of interest to citizens of this country, rather than information that may be highlighted by various foreign authors, organizations, or governments” (ibid.).

Even when she was writing about China, ASEAN, or global geopolitics, she always had the Philippines in mind, even if it did not always appear in all her writings. In a book chapter, *Domestic Mediations of China’s Influence in the Philippines* (Baviera 2016c), she examines the

extent of Chinese impact on Philippine foreign policy by looking at three case studies: the Joint Marine Seismic Undertaking, the NBN-ZTE Agreement, and the Scarborough Shoal standoff. Published in *Rising China's Influence in Developing Asia*, the article concludes that

...the way China's power translates into influence... depends less on the amount of power than it does on other factors. Such factors may include... its successful cultivation of allies among members of the Philippine political elite... and whether or not there are countervailing sources of influence at the systemic level.... (Baviera 2016c, 127)

Dr. Baviera adds

Philippine foreign policy decisions ... were responsive to persuasion and inducements by China when elite networks prevailed...but political actors and interest groups not in favor of Chinese interests can quickly block China's channels of influence and undermine outcomes that might otherwise have been in Chinese interests. In the third case of the Scarborough Shoal standoff, coercion and intimidation played a more important role when China perceived high strategic stakes with the involvement of the U.S... in each of the cases, the Philippines has not been so helpless in the face of China's superior resources, and Chinese influence is not as efficacious as might be deduced from the scale of power asymmetry alone. (128)

Shifting away from the Philippine political elite, she inquired in a *Public Policy* article (Baviera 2016e) whether, how, and to what extent Philippine foreign policy decisions affected domestic stakeholders—defense and maritime law enforcement frontliners, provincial and municipal governments, fishing communities and companies, energy players, and the Chinese-Filipino community, among others. Conducting extensive field work, Dr. Baviera notes, among other things, the “poor coordination between the central and local governments” (25). She observes that “local government executives of frontline provinces take little interest in the broader foreign policy goals of the state,” (25) while state leaders rarely

capitalize on the knowledge and capacities of local governments, who are better informed and well-placed to respond to local realities (26).

Her Filipino-centric perspective shines through in many other publications, such as “Defining the National Territory: Security and Foreign Relations Dimensions” (Baviera 2015). In this respect, she exemplified the advice she gave to “younger China watchers.”

...in the context of recent years’ difficult relations between the two states: if one has to take a side, one must take the side of the Filipino people....The Philippines, on the other hand, will have only us Filipinos to defend our interests and to promote our welfare. (Baviera 2020)

Critique of the State

In looking at the domestic stakeholders in the disputes, Professor Baviera was advocating for a people’s diplomacy, and essentially offered a critique of state policy. In an essay in November 2016, *Can Anyone Really Rule the South China Sea?* (Baviera 2016a), she wrote that the disputes arose precisely because of the nature of states.

It seems that governments have let their primordial territorial instincts rule them. There is folly in this. They seek control of the waters, as if oceans could be tamed, claimed and fenced off like the land. In truth, no one knows exactly what they are claiming...

Recently, I was on a six-day cruise in the East China Sea that started in Shanghai and docked in Okinawa, Nagasaki and Fukuoka... When not conferencing on the boat, I spent some time on deck watching the sun rise from the sea and set into the sea, day after day.

Looking out into the seemingly limitless ocean, one could not help but have a sense of being free from territorial boundaries. I thought

of how being creatures of the land has taught most of us to think in terms of the state and its narrow interests. Just exactly at such a moment, another passenger standing beside me - also looking out at sea - nodded his head in one direction and said: "That is where the Senkakus are, not too far from here. That is where Japan and China might yet end up having a war over their contested islands."

...I envy the free creatures of the sea, for we creatures of the land have become captive of our own illusions of conquest and control.

This essay echoed the anarchist critique of the state (Nolasco 2020b, 277–78). Foreign policy was often state-centric, but she could retain enough distance to problematize it and see its limitations. This anarchist streak arguably stems not just from her trademark multi- and interdisciplinary approach, but also from her student activist days (Tadem 2020a; 2020b) and her ability to identify, and reject, state propaganda (Baviera 2020).

Seeking Dialogue

Dr. Baviera's commitment to national interests was matched by an equal passion to enhance Philippines-China relations. As a scholar-diplomat, she organized and took part in many dialogues over the years, meeting with Chinese scholars and officials, speaking in various conferences in China and the Philippines, and even inviting Chinese academics to deliver two lectures on Chinese foreign policy (UP Asian Center 2017) at the UP Asian Center in May 2017. Reflecting on her long productive career, she wrote,

I worked with fellow China-watchers in the Philippine Association for Chinese Studies and Philippines-China Development Resource Center to help strengthen civil society linkages, including with groups like the Nanjing-based Amity Foundation and the China Association for NGO Cooperation. (Baviera 2020)

Similar efforts continued under the Asia-Pacific Pathways to Progress Foundation, Inc. (APPF), a nonprofit think-tank which she established in 2014 to help promote, among others, “future-oriented, people-centered, peaceful and independent Philippine foreign relations” (APPF, n.d.). As President and CEO, she wanted APPF to “develop issue-based partnerships and networks among governmental and non-governmental organizations, the private sector, and academic institutions in the Philippines and the Asia Pacific” (ibid.). Among other projects, Dr. Baviera “worked closely with the Stable Seas Program” of One Earth Future “to convert the Stable Seas: Sulu and Celebes Sea report into something that would become a foundation for direct policy engagement” (Stable Seas 2020). Many of these and other similar initiatives can be found in the APPF website.

With her extensive network and expertise, she was frequently invited by many organizations to serve as consultant, advisor, or speaker, including the Philippine Navy, the Department of Foreign Affairs, the China Association for NGO Cooperation, and the International Network of East Asian Studies Academic Programs, to say nothing of international conferences abroad. Dr. Baviera was a member of the Board of Advisers of the Philippine Navy.

Regional and Long-Term Perspectives

In many ways, Dr. Baviera’s publications reflect and respond to the evolution of Philippines-China relations since the 1980s, as well as of ASEAN diplomacy, Philippine foreign policy, and broader geopolitical trends since the Cold War. From *Managing Territorial Disputes* (Baviera 1997) to *Philippine Domestic Interest Groups’ Perceptions of China’s Rise and the International Environment* (Baviera 2018), one can also glimpse the vicissitudes of foreign policy regimes from Ferdinand Marcos to Rodrigo Duterte. If the *Domestic Mediations* (2016c) article engaged the Arroyo administration’s China policy, the *Domestic Stakeholders* article (Baviera 2016e) and *The South China Sea: The Way Forward Post-*

Arbitration (Baviera 2017d) exemplified her analysis of Philippines-China relations under the Aquino and the Duterte Administrations. In these and other publications, she shared her insights to critique and help guide Philippine foreign policy (cf. Nolasco 2020c). She was also part of an “Informal Expert Group” that sought to provide “a strategic framework for the management of the West Philippine Sea” (Baviera 2015, 39). In 2015, she was instrumental in the establishment of the Strategic Studies Program of the UP Center for Integrative and Development Studies (CIDS) to help cultivate a more strategic approach to foreign policy making.

Aileen and her collaborators realized that Philippine foreign policy lacked a strategic perspective, hence the oft-cited criticism that it was largely reactive. The genesis of the China/Strategic Studies Program owed much to Aileen’s insistence that the strategic element of the program cannot solely focus on the use of military power for defense and security, as was traditional with programs on strategic studies across the world. Instead, the program had to take the perspective of the Philippines as a developing country, ‘which cannot draw much leverage from military resources and therefore need to rely more on diplomacy and political stratagem’....The focus then could lean heavily on “Philippine foreign and security policy, the management of international conflict, and how the country can develop the means to match its long-term goals”... The major gap, however, was in the latter, which meant that there was a need to train analysts and those who would advise policymakers on how to think strategically. (Kraft 2020, 167–68)

Having studied Philippine foreign relations, and ASEAN diplomacy for four decades, she always wrote with the *longue durée* in mind, even if that history did not always come to the fore in her work. Her immersion in the history of her field(s) is exemplified in a 2017 publication (Baviera 2017c), where she compiled various sources to produce a table that identifies “ASEAN’s Role in the Changing Security Environment of Southeast Asia, 1967–2017.” The table appears on page five of an integrative chapter,

“Preventing War, Building a Rules-based Order: Challenges Facing the ASEAN Political–Security Community” (Baviera 2017c).

Trained in area studies at the UP Asian Center, she always saw the big picture, and never lost sight of the regional and global contexts of her work. She infused her incisive takes on Philippines-China relations with an intimate knowledge with geopolitics, including U.S foreign policy in Asia and China’s relations with ASEAN member states. Apart from her PhD dissertation, “Post-Cold War China-ASEAN relations: Exploring Worldview Convergence and its Security Implications,” (Baviera 2003), two other works stand out: “Challenging Geopolitical Seascapes: Southeast Asia and the Big Powers in the South China Sea” (Baviera 2017a) and “Changing Dynamics in Philippines-China-U.S. Relations: The Impact of the South China Sea Disputes” (Baviera 2014a).

Policy Making in Government

Her stint in government policy making in the 1990s gave depth, grounding, and authority to much of her writing. At the Foreign Service Institute, she became the Head of the Center for International Relations and Strategic Studies. In this capacity, she interacted with diplomats, and saw policy-making up close. She learned much from Ambassador Rodolfo Severino, who invited her to be an “adviser on China matters” amidst China’s occupation of Mischief Reef in 1995. In her tribute to Severino, who passed away in April 2019 and also served as Secretary General of ASEAN, Professor Baviera wrote, “...he was to me an inspiration and a source of learning for what Philippine diplomacy should be like, now and in the future” (Baviera 2019). She notes how he spoke of

‘concentric circles’ of Philippine foreign policy—about how our national interests were most deeply intertwined with those geographically closest to us, with the first circle involving Malaysia (where he also served as Philippine Ambassador), and Indonesia

(where as Secretary-General he presided over the ASEAN at its Jakarta headquarters). Today, the three countries' ongoing efforts at cooperation—especially on boundary issues, maritime security and countering violent extremism—underscore this. (Baviera 2019)

This concept of concentric circles would later find echoes, if not direct parallels, in her own approach—seeking dialogue and seeing things from multiple perspectives—to diplomacy and foreign policy analysis. Apart from the formative experience of working at FSI, she also helped chronicle the story of Philippine foreign relations. She co-edited *Philippine External Relations: A Centennial Vista* (Baviera and Yu-Jose 1998), a must-read for anyone studying the diplomatic history of the Philippines, according to Dr. Ariel Lopez, Assistant Professor at the UP Asian Center. He read the book when he was a history undergrad at the University of the Philippines Diliman.¹

A Country Specialist: The China Major

For all her expertise in regionalism, diplomacy, and global affairs, Professor Baviera did have a “narrow” country focus: as many know, she specialized on China, specifically on its politics and foreign policy. After graduating from university, she studied there for two years in the early 1980s, just a few years after Deng Xiaoping rose to power. She was thus a witness to a country on its initial steps towards becoming a regional, and eventually, a global power. Chronicled in her essay (Baviera 2020), this experience was crucial to her development as a scholar, not least because it gave her a historical background with which she could compare later developments in China's history. Back home, she finished in 1987 her masters thesis at the UP Asian Center, *Rural Economic Reforms in China, 1979–1984* (San Pablo 1987), which sought, among other things, to account for the country's transformation after 1978.

Several of her early publications on China, edited or sole-authored, came when she was working at the Philippine-China Development Resource Center in the 1990s. Notable here is *Black Cat, White Cat: An Inside View of Reform & Revolution in China*, edited with Theresa Carino and published in 1993 (cf: Nolasco 2020c). “...as part of civil society, Dr. Baviera saw China not just as an academic, and that additional perspective significantly enriched her research agenda...” [and] “helped her realize that diplomacy was as much about people as it is about the state” (Nolasco 2020b, 268). Her “lifelong engagement with civil society,” not least her work at the Asia-Pacific Pathways to Progress Foundation, dates from this period (*ibid.*).

By the time she joined the UP Asian Center as a faculty member in 1998, she was already a recognized China expert. Over the years, she taught the Politics and Governance in China course in the UP Asian Center, and kept abreast of political developments in the country. In a July 2017 lecture, she gave an overview of the Belt and Road initiative (BRI) (Baviera 2017b). Her article, “China’s Strategic Foreign Initiatives under Xi Jinping: An ASEAN Perspective” (Baviera 2016b) examines Chinese foreign policy initiatives until 2016.

Her greatest scholarly contribution arguably lies in her advancement of China Studies in the Philippines since the 1990s. She was one of thirteen senior China specialists interviewed for the book, *China Studies in the Philippines: Intellectual Paths and the Formation of a Field* (Clemente and Shih 2018), co-edited by her Asian Center colleague and fellow China scholar, Dr. Tina Clemente. In a February 2016 interview (Baviera 2016d), part of a Global Oral History project by National Taiwan University, Dr. Baviera shares how she got interested in China, her studies in the country from 1981 to 1983, her development as a scholar, and her valuable comments on the origins, evolution, and current state of China Studies in the Philippines. Asked about the future of the discipline in the country, she said,

.....I think it is important to put more China content across different fields so that a broad range of stakeholders will come to appreciate the different aspects of China. For instance, increased attention can be given to the impact of China to regional and global economy, as well as business skills, techniques, and negotiation styles necessary in dealing with Chinese business people. It is not just simply the setting up of China Studies programs. Aside from that, there is also a need to strengthen China Studies program at the graduate level. Organizations promoting or advancing China Studies, like PACS, should have an institutional base for them to grow. The private sector should be mobilized to support the academe. The goal is to publish more original research and come up with research-based analyses and recommendations. Relationships between those who produce research and its end users must be institutionalized. Right now, linkages between the bureaucracy and the academe are not institutionalized although there are instances when government agencies actively engage other stakeholders in the performance of their duties.

Living Without Fences

The outpouring of tributes from different sectors—from academe and government to civil society in the Philippines and abroad—has been heartwarming. The extent of her network is staggering, and her stature in international academe no less so. Amidst our pain, they have been a joy to read. Her passing is an undeniably immeasurable loss for her family and for the scholarly community, both in and out of the Philippines. She leaves behind an intellectual legacy that scholars will continue to grapple with, and one hopes, can continue to guide Philippine foreign policy in the 21st century.

Professor Baviera dreamt of a time when borders would no longer matter. “We have often heard it said, and rightly so,” she wrote, “that good fences make good neighbors. But there is also no gainsaying the value of sincere dialogue and patient engagement in working out misunderstandings and sowing the seeds of trust. Where there is trust, it may even be possible to live without fences at all” (Baviera 2019).

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