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The Philippines in China's Soft Power Strategy

By Aileen San Pablo-Baviera (*Guest Writer*)

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:

- China has expressly recognized the value of soft power as an instrument of diplomacy. The Philippines, because of its maritime disputes with China and its close security ties with the United States, is an interesting case for studying the efficacy of Chinese soft power.
- While awareness of Chinese culture and appreciation of its consumer products have grown in the Philippines, there are hindrances (language gap, perceptions of shoddy product quality, competing cultural influences, etc.) remaining that prevent these from translating into useful soft power.
- Chinese and Filipinos have widely divergent political values despite shared aspirations and common problems. China's authoritarian political model does not offer great attraction for Filipinos in light of the Philippines' own experiences.
- China's approaches to development can provide many positive as well as a few negative lessons for the Philippines as the latter strives to achieve similar progress and prosperity.
- China is likely to emerge as a major investor, creditor and source of development assistance for the Philippines, but development cooperation needs to be consistent with certain partnership norms and governance principles already in place in the Philippines.
- Soft power is welcome, but in light of heightening territorial tensions, Filipinos are likely to feel more reassured if China commits instead to using its hard power less in the future.

SOFT POWER IN CHINESE FOREIGN POLICY

Since Joseph Nye wrote about soft power in 1990,¹ the concept has attained considerable traction among scholars of international relations. Referring to the ability to attract and co-opt rather than coerce, use force or give money as a means of persuasion, the ‘soft power’ concept has drawn adherents among many China watchers, and in China itself it has been translated into an actual foreign policy strategy. In 2007, Hu Jintao told the 17th Communist Party Congress that China needed to increase its soft power.

The creation in December last year of the China Public Diplomacy Association as a membership-based arm of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs underscores the importance Chinese leaders are placing on rebuilding China’s image. In East Asia, this image has been battered ever since China dropped its earlier ‘charm offensive’ in the region to give way, since 2009, to a more assertive, even confrontational posture where its sovereignty, territorial and resource interests are concerned. Among this new association’s evolving functions, which are part of China’s soft power projection, are: to promote people-to-people ties, “to learn how to tell China’s story”, and to “educate China’s citizens about Chinese foreign policy”.² In other words, ‘public diplomacy’ and ‘soft power’ are largely intended as counterpoints to soften the edges of the ‘hard power’ that China has accumulated and now displays, following its remarkable advances in economic status and military capability. It is moreover directed at both China’s internal and external audiences.

In the academic as well as policy-oriented literature, the idea of soft power remains contested, with some arguing that soft power comes only on the wings of hard power, or that without hard power, soft power cannot really translate into much diplomatic or political influence. Various analysts also point to the futility of deploying soft power after a strong country has already bared its teeth and flexed hard power muscles against a weaker one in a situation of conflict. Definitional issues have likewise come up, especially around the question of whether economic leverage (being, like military strength, based on material capability) is an instrument of soft power or hard power, or both. I find it best to start with Nye’s definition, whereby a country’s soft power rests primarily on three resources: the attractiveness of its culture, the political values it represents at home and abroad, and the legitimacy of its foreign policy.³

Foreign policy legitimacy is crucial to how China’s future role as a regional power in the Asia-Pacific or even Indo-Pacific will be perceived, having in mind China’s still-unresolved sovereignty problems and the expanding footprint of its interests in its extended neighbourhood. But foreign perceptions of Chinese culture and political values certainly influence predispositions of other societies to engage China actively or at least to lower their guard against its influence.

The Philippines, which has long contested China's claims to a part of the Spratlys and which last year bitterly lost control over rich fishing grounds around Scarborough Shoal to China, is one of the targets of China's soft power campaigns. With its close geographic proximity to and traditionally strong people-to-people ties with China, but with its Western colonial historical baggage, membership in the US alliance system, and its protracted process of development and modernization, the Philippines provides an interesting case for testing the efficacy of China's soft power.

FILIPINO RESPONSES TO CHINESE CULTURE

Just how attractive is Chinese culture to Filipinos? One might say that to some extent, Chinese culture is familiar and mundane rather than exotic and alluring to the ordinary Filipino. There are many elements in Filipino daily life that can be traced to Chinese influence, particularly through waves of migration from southern China (mainly Fujian) over past centuries that have impacted on food, language, customs, superstitious beliefs, business practices, the economy, and other areas, and which are now barely distinguishable from what is known to be local culture.

At the same time, there is still a small but economically influential ethnic Chinese minority who remain culturally distinct because of longstanding Chinese social networks such as schools and family associations. These local Chinese act as the main vessel for transmitting Chinese cultural influence in the Philippines. Filipinos' respect for and emulation of some of their cultural practices (e.g, feng shui, or the Spring Festival celebration) have grown over time due to their own improved social status in Philippine society, from mainly uneducated peasants when they came three or four generations ago, to some of today's most successful entrepreneurs, merchants and industrialists. However, their younger generation has much less affinity for Chinese culture than their elders, and share the more globalized cultural outlook of other Filipino youth. It is important to note that cultural tensions and business competition exist between these earlier Chinese migrants (the already acculturated *jiuqiao*) and new migrants (*xinqiao*) who have arrived from China since the start of Deng Xiaoping's policy of opening up.

When it comes to Chinese influence on popular culture in the Philippines, a cursory scan will show that no mainland Chinese pop culture figure or medium has attained the iconic status that Japanese anime, Korean and Taiwanese television dramas, or Hong Kong martial arts movies have enjoyed in the Philippine mass market. There is also hardly any market for Chinese traditional or popular music among Filipinos. As to high culture, ancient Chinese heritage or contemporary high culture (especially films and visual arts) may have many adherents among Chinese-Filipino and Filipino intellectuals but this is more likely not to the exclusion of other cultures.

One obstacle to Chinese cultural attraction is difficulty of and, therefore, lack of interest in learning the language. Most educated Filipinos are already multilingual, with English still a key medium of instruction and being the preferred foreign language because of the advantages it brings for local and foreign employment. Even in many Chinese community schools in the country, the quality of language training and instruction has declined, rather than improved, despite higher global demand for the skill. The Chinese government has however established three Confucius Institutes in the Philippines since 2007, hoping to improve Chinese language proficiency and cultural acceptance in the country, thus contributing to more people-to-people linkages. More than 30 Philippine secondary schools also offer Chinese language as an optional course, and significantly more scholarship slots are being offered to Filipino students to study in China compared to past years.

Other cultural diplomacy initiatives to promote Chinese culture include sports exchanges⁴ (with basketball star Yao Ming recently visiting Manila), library support programs, exchange of teachers, media cooperation, and holding of film festivals, photo and art exhibits and other cultural events.⁵

Lower-income Filipino households hugely benefit from access to affordable consumer items and daily necessities sourced from China, and have gradually become more familiar with Chinese brands in household appliances and electronics, particularly mobile phones. Shopping centres that carry mostly low-priced China-made goods, including pirated products, have prospered. On the other hand, unscrupulous traders and smugglers bring in Chinese imports of such inferior quality that Chinese products in general still carry a rather negative reputation, keeping away middle- and high- income Filipino consumers who in the first place tend to be loyal to Japanese or Western brands. Concerns about safety and health issues pertaining to food, toys and other small commodities imported from China also occasionally arise, affecting demand for the said items.

Tourism in China is a major attraction to Filipinos, and seemed to be reciprocated when the Philippines was voted “Best Honeymoon Destination” in year 2011 by the China Travel and Meetings Industry Awards.⁶ More and more Filipinos also take their chances and look for employment opportunities in major cities in China, whether in professional and technical positions in multinational companies or in service jobs catering to expatriates and affluent locals. The more adventurous ones also manage to find work in secondary cities and towns where the demand for English language teachers continues to grow.

In general, therefore, people-to-people exchanges may be stronger than generally assumed, with awareness of China having grown due to its economic success. However, cultural attraction as an element of Chinese soft power cannot yet be considered highly successful in terms of creating a very positive view of China that may translate into significant influence on Filipinos.

CHINESE POLITICAL VALUES

China's political system is seen by many Filipinos as widely divergent from their own. Among the Filipino ruling political elite, decades of Cold War anti-communist ideological posture have contributed to a high degree of mistrust of the Chinese Party-State, especially given the fact the Philippine state itself has yet to conclusively defeat at home what has become Asia's longest-running communist insurgency. The perception of China as an atheist society by Filipinos, many of whom find religiosity and spirituality integral to their identity, also adds to the ideological distance.

On the other hand, among middle-class professionals and intellectuals, especially the activist generation who fought against the Marcos dictatorship in the 1970s-80s, there are those who are critical of abuses of civil liberties that take place in China, and the lack of a programme for democratic reform.⁷ The slow pace of political liberalization in China has, moreover, stifled the emergence of a civil society, and this stark contrast to the structure of Philippine society has to some extent limited what could otherwise have been far more active NGO-level interactions across different social sectors between the two societies. This does not mean that many Filipinos actively advocate political change in China, as there are enough political problems at home to worry about. It merely indicates that the Chinese authoritarian political model does not exert great attraction on Filipinos in light of the Philippines' own experiences, in the same way that Philippine-style democracy may be seen to be too exuberant for the harmony-and-stability-conscious Chinese.

The Philippines and China however share similar problems of systemic corruption and of having an entrenched elite unwilling to give up power and privilege. In both countries, political scandals abound, though a culture of transparency in one country and of secrecy in the other, and the possibility of competitive elections in one and its absence in the other, may account for different ways of handling these. The point is that, although people on both sides may have shared aspirations for good governance, neither country offers itself as a good model for the other.

Corruption on both sides has in fact led to disastrous outcomes in their foreign relations and official interactions, such as happened in the now infamous scandals of the NBN-ZTE and the NorthRail deals, where overpriced investment deals would have led to much money going to Chinese and Filipino rent-seekers, at huge expense to the Filipino public, were they not exposed earlier.

CHINA AS A DEVELOPMENT MODEL AND DEVELOPMENT PARTNER?

While China is not seen as a model for the democratic politics that Filipinos aspire to, there is much higher respect for China as a source of learning about approaches to development. Its record in lifting millions out of poverty; its ability to generate growth leading to employment and wealth creation; its strong, visionary leadership; and its

successful rise in world status while overcoming its own structural constraints, are enviable to Filipinos, because of past Philippine failures in this regard.

Because China is still a developing country, it faces similar problems as the Philippines, although certainly on a much larger scale. How it has succeeded in approaching issues such as managing food production and distribution, labour productivity, energy shortages, social welfare needs, popular education, disaster mitigation, and others can provide lessons for the Philippines and other developing countries. For instance, the China Foundation for Poverty Alleviation has proposed to study the development of a cooperative mechanism with the Department of Social Welfare and Development of the Philippines.

The strong role of local government in China, as a primary force driving local economic and social development, is also worth emulating, though it will have to be adapted to local Philippine conditions requiring partnerships with the private sector and civil society organizations.

Then there are also negative lessons to be learned from China's experiences. For instance, the disastrous consequences of China's obsession with high growth on its environment.

The question of China's value as a development partner is, indeed, a very pertinent one to the Philippines, as China is likely to emerge as a major investor, creditor and source of development assistance, particularly in light of continuing economic difficulties in Europe and the United States. Two-way trade and tourism are currently bright spots in the relationship. With regard to its outside investments, China's major areas of interest are in Philippine agriculture, fishery, infrastructure, mining, energy, information and communications technology, manufacturing, tourism, engineering service, and forestry.⁸ To date, however, Philippine direct investments in China (\$130 million in 2012) still exceed Chinese investments in the Philippines (\$65.45 million in 2012). With this current trend, China is unable to wield much economic leverage over the Philippines.

On the other hand, China's official development assistance (ODA) to the Philippines grew from US\$35 Million in 2001 to US\$1.14 Billion in 2010⁹, reflecting its close ties with the Arroyo administration.¹⁰ Compared to the Philippines' traditional sources of aid, there are less cumbersome conditions to Chinese aid and payment terms for loans are easier, thus potentially making it an attractive partner. However, the Philippines has had many decades of experience of working with a number of creditor governments, donor agencies, and international NGOs, such that various models of successful cooperation have evolved, including in many cases a role for and principled partnerships with Philippine NGOs. As a latecomer, China has yet to fathom the norms and institutional rules of development cooperation work in the Philippines, and may find it quite unlike the situation in other developing countries. The previously mentioned botched NorthRail and NBN-ZTE projects were lessons learned the hard way, both for the Chinese and Philippine sides.

LEGITIMACY OF CHINA'S FOREIGN POLICY

China's foreign policy goals and interests have a much wider reach than is often appreciated in the Philippines. As a new global power that also happens to be a developing country, an Asian voice, a balancer of other major powers' influence, and a strong supporter of ASEAN's integration efforts, there would appear to be many areas of convergence and potential mutual support in the Philippines' and China's foreign policy positions.

However, Chinese foreign policy tends to be judged by most Filipinos on the single issue of how it handles its disputes with the Philippines in the South China Sea. Over the last two decades, both governments have invested much in trying to improve the atmosphere for the proper management of disputes, but both have also failed to prevent tensions from heating up. This is where the largest gap in mutual perceptions and lack of mutual trust prevails.

In recent years, and particularly since the April 2012 standoff over Scarborough Shoal, this mistrust among governments and militaries has spread to ordinary citizens. Non-state sponsored cyber-attacks by netizens of the two countries on each other's sites during the height of the standoff provided evidence of this. Moreover, although public opinion can be fickle, opinion polls in the Philippines also show that China's net trust ratings among Filipinos would fall precipitously whenever tensions rose, e.g. after the 1995 Mischief Reef and the 2012 Scarborough Shoal incidents, and are slow to recover.¹¹

The South China Sea issue is indeed the weakest link in Chinese soft power in the Philippines, and if not handled properly, is capable of trumping any advantages and opportunities for soft power influence that other areas of cooperation may provide. In the perception of many ordinary Filipinos today, whether rightly or wrongly, living with China in the last few years has become a battle of David against Goliath, and when they look at China in this context, there is great concern about Chinese intentions and its growing capability to use hard power to unilaterally assert its interests.

Hu Jintao may have been right to say in 2007 that China should use its soft power more. However, Filipinos would feel more reassured if China would commit to using its hard power less in the future.

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Endnotes

- 1 Nye, Joseph S. (1990). *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power*. New York: Basic Books.
- 2 Author's interview with Ma Zhenggang, Vice Chairman of Public Diplomacy Association, 19 April 2013.
- 3 Nye, Joseph S. (May 2013). What China and Russia Don't Get About Soft Power. *Foreign Policy*. <http://www.chinausfocus.com/foreign-policy/what-china-and-russia-dont-get-about-soft-power/>.
- 4 PSC receives P5M sports equipment from China . April 11, 2013.
www.philstar.com/sports/2013/04/11/929522/psc-receives-p5m-sports-equipment-china
- 5 Sino-Philippine cultural festival opens in Manila. February 19, 2012. http://cn-ph.china.org.cn/2012-02/19/content_4834040.htm; <http://web.nlp.gov.ph/nlp/?q=node/6403>.
- 6 http://www.philembassychina.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=68:best-honeymoon-destination-of-the-year&catid=93:tourism-news&Itemid=590&lang=en.
- 7 A small section in this group are socialists or former socialists who see China as having abandoned the cause of socialism.
- 8 <http://business.inquirer.net/120231/china-urges-more-open-ph-market>.
- 9 Data provided by National Economic Development Authority, Philippines.
- 10 The Chinese side uses the term "preferential loans" rather than outright aid, which its officials argue is more in keeping with its own status as a developing nation.
- 11 See Gallardo, S. & Baviera, A. (December 2012) Filipino Media and Public Opinion on the Philippines-China Disputes in the South China Sea: A Preliminary Analysis. <http://bavierablogonintlrelations.blogspot.com/p/papers.html>.

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