

## Tribute

### Aileen S.P. Baviera: Thinker, Teacher, (Track-Two) Soldier, "Spy"<sup>1</sup>

Herman Joseph S. Kraft

Aileen San Pablo Baviera passed away on March 21, 2020 after having contracted COVID-19. She had just come back from Paris, having attended a conference that discussed the security situation in the Asia-Pacific region. Her attendance to the conference, in the midst of an emerging pandemic, is illustrative of her dedication in advocating the importance of cooperative security in maintaining international security, and the role played by experts, scholars, and academics in the processes involved in sustaining it. Her loss goes beyond her family, friends, and colleagues as it affects an entire cross-boundary undertaking directed at avoiding interstate conflict and seeking resolution to international disputes without resorting to the use of force.

Aileen's academic development included being a visiting scholar to China as she took advantage of one of the first exchange programs opened to Filipinos. Aside from learning Chinese culture and history, she was provided access to training in the Chinese language. Indeed, this background led to strongly-held suspicions within some circles in the Philippines that she was well-disposed toward China. Yet, even as China fascinated her, she learned not to be enthralled by it. The Tiananmen Square protests in 1989 cured her of any romanticism she might have harbored about China, if indeed there were any (Baviera 2019). Looking back a few decades later, her writings revealed her

skepticism about China's self-projection. She noted that China, under Xi Jinping, has shown "little inclination to make the compromises and sacrifices that lasting regional leadership entails" (Baviera 2016a). She warned current and future China watchers that one should learn to "recognize and shun the shallowness of political propaganda... Mao's as much as Marcos" (Baviera 2019). Nonetheless, the continued nurturing of her interest in what she described as a country that was complex in many facets led to Aileen being recognized as one of the country's few *bona fide* China experts.

The rise of China in the international scene in the early 2000s, however, brought forth Aileen's metamorphosis from being primarily a China watcher to one with an eye for the wider strategic environment within which the Philippines had to engage China. As the inaugural head of the Center for International Relations and Strategic Studies of the Foreign Service Institute in the 1990s, Aileen was forced to view, firsthand, the realities of geopolitics as an analyst looking at China, not just as a subject matter of academic interest, but rather as the object of policy action during the Mischief Reef crisis of 1995. The episode embedded in her consciousness a conviction about the need for, and effectiveness of, dialogue and confidence-building as an essential tool of conflict avoidance and de-escalation. In a paper she wrote for the Canadian Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade, she pointed out that

...while fundamental differences exist in the goals and approaches of China and the Philippines vis-à-vis their handling of the [Mischief Reef] dispute, and despite the absence of any real progress on the resolution of the dispute, both find the confidence building process useful and continue to be committed to it. Asymmetry notwithstanding, their constant engagement through multi-level dialogues forces each side to justify to the other its policy and actions, emphasizes the importance of finding a "win-win" compromise, and, albeit incrementally, helps bind both parties to acceptable norms and principles of behaviour. (Baviera 2001, iii)

By the time Aileen completed her Ph.D. in Political Science and joined the University of the Philippines (UP) Asian Center as a member of the faculty, the belief in the importance of dialogue and confidence-building (i.e., the continued championing of what

scholars in International Relations refer to as Track Two or informal diplomacy) had become a central tenet of her advocacy. Her active and level-headed participation in Track Two events drew the attention of an international audience.<sup>2</sup> Track Two for Aileen, however, went beyond conferences and the presentations discussed under Chatham House Rules: It included more direct engagement with the “enemy” in an effort to find scope to informally discuss issues that are too sensitive to be brought out openly in more formal settings, effectively paving the way for formal talks and informing what takes place in them.

In July 2014, even as relations between the Philippines and China remained in their nadir, following the faceoff at Panatag Shoal in 2010, Aileen took a mixed group of young scholars and a few who were no longer in the teeth of Beijing to discuss the state of bilateral relations with their counterparts in Chinese think tanks. That trip to the lion’s den was both an eye-opener and an affirmation of long-held observations to most Filipinos. On one hand, it unveiled how little China knew of the Philippines: Beijing saw the Philippines as a stalking horse of the United States and that the latter’s actions of challenging China were at the instigation of Washington. On the other hand, it showed just how unprepared the Philippines was in dealing with China. Of greater consequence was the fact that the Philippines knew and understood China only to the same degree (or worse than) as what China knew about the Philippines. For Aileen, this was a source of frustration considering that more than 20 years after the Mischief Reef crisis, “and with so much engagement having taken place, we seem to be worse off now than when we started as far as territorial tensions [were] concerned” (Baviera 2019). True to her training on China, however, these frustrations were turned into opportunities.

The lessons from this engagement with Chinese scholars and from further consultation with other observers of the ongoing troubles with China led to the establishment of the Strategic Studies Program (SSP) of the UP Center for Integrative and Development Studies (CIDS) in 2015. It started out as the China Studies Program, though China was not its sole concern. 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” (UP CIDS n.d.). 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” (ibid.). 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.

The China/Strategic Studies Program included a number of projects in its early years; among these were four that were directed at networking and capacity-building. One was to hold a Philippine Studies short course with the intention of inviting young Chinese scholars to learn about the Philippines. The idea was that if they learned more about the country, then they would be able to open up thinking in China that the Philippines was more than just its relationship with the United States and consider that China should engage the Philippines on the basis of mutual interests and concerns, not on the basis of China-US relations. Within such context, it would be better to have their initial impressions informed by experts from the University of the Philippines. A second project was directed at mapping Philippine experts and/or students of China and Strategic Studies, a first step toward building an epistemic community. A third project was concerned with establishing a platform where that epistemic community would be able to come together and exchange ideas on the country’s strategic situation. This eventually developed into the annual Katipunan Conference of the Strategic Studies Program of UP CIDS. A fourth project was able to develop and pilot a short-term course on Strategic Studies, which involved a number of analysts and researchers from different state and private sector institutions across the country. While all these were the result of brainstorming and collaboration among scholars from the University of the Philippines, Aileen was the initiator and the monitor.

The limits of operating within the confines of government accounting rules and changing institutional visions, however, provided constraints that limited the pace at which these plans could evolve. Aileen established the Asia Pacific Pathways to Progress Foundation Inc. (APPPFI) as a parallel track to the Strategic Studies

Program. Unlike the Strategic Studies Program of the UP CIDS, APPFI is a private foundation and is not subject to the constraints of government agencies in planning and financing activities. This became her platform for expanding the network of experts and civil society groups involved in foreign policy.<sup>3</sup> In 2018, APPFI was accepted as the Philippine member-institute of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations Institutes of Strategic and International Studies (ASEAN-ISIS), the long-standing network of strategic studies think tanks in Southeast Asia.

In Aileen's vision, however, the APPFI furthered one of her other advocacies: the deepening of the strategic studies community through the greater involvement of young scholars. The presence of young researchers in the Beijing trip in 2014 was intentional. They were not just spear-carriers, clerks, and scribes. They were there to learn and be the next generation to carry on the task on hand. When she became the editor-in-chief of the *Asian Politics & Policy* journal (APP), Aileen's idea was for it "to be a repository of the knowledge of the next generation's politics and policy scholars in Asia" (Arugay as cited in Nolasco 2020). Aries Arugay, APP's current editor-in-chief, remembered "the many times Dr. Baviera patiently worked with first-time publishers, mostly young academics looking for opportunities to get published in a reputable journal." APPFI itself is staffed by researchers who are mostly in the beginning or middle of their careers; where the APPFI is the launchpad for the future direction of their careers, Aileen provided the guidance system.

This brings us to the last part of Aileen's story. She was not a "spy" in the James Bond sense, and certainly not in any way that is associated with Mata Hari. Her work in Track Two diplomacy allowed her to rub elbows with not just experts but also policy influencers. As Track Two diplomacy can easily be a venue for intelligence gathering, Aileen excelled in gathering and assessing information. Sideline conversations in these meetings were no less important to policymaking than sideline meetings in official diplomatic engagements. Track Two diplomacy for Aileen was a means to a number of ends, not the end itself. Her participation in these meetings allowed her to give feedback to policymakers and agencies whose operations would have benefited from her assessment of gathered information. In recognition of her expertise and her connection to sources of information internationally, she was invited to be a member of the

Philippine Navy's Board of Advisers. Her contributions in upgrading the Philippine Navy, particularly "her expertise on matters relating to strategic studies, maritime law, and international affairs" (ibid.) were acknowledged by those who worked with her.

Nonetheless, her most important legacy is the idea that all these should be done with the Filipino people in mind. As she noted in 2019, "the Philippines... will have only us Filipinos to defend our interests and to promote our welfare" (Baviera 2019).

Aileen San Pablo Baviera: thinker, teacher, track two soldier, "spy."

---

**Herman Joseph S. Kraft** is Professor and Chair of the Department of Political Science at the University of the Philippines Diliman. He is also the Convenor of the Strategic Studies Program at the University of the Philippines Center for Integrative and Development Studies.

### Notes

1. With due apologies to John Le Carré.
2. Simon Drapler voiced a general sense of loss in the Track Two community upon her passing when he wrote that "[w]e knew Aileen through her involvement in Track II (informal diplomacy) dialogues. She was a highly regarded expert and just a very nice person." See Drapler (2020).
3. Her discussion of the importance of domestic stakeholders in foreign policy is outlined in Baviera (2016b).

## References

- Baviera, Aileen S.P. 2001. "Bilateral Confidence Building with China in Relation to the South China Seas Dispute: A Philippine Perspective." Paper prepared for the International Security Research and Outreach Programme, International Security Bureau of the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade of Canada.
- . 2016a. "China's Strategic Foreign Initiatives Under Xi Jinping: An ASEAN Perspective." *China Quarterly of International Strategic Studies* 2, no. 1: 57–79.
- . 2016b. "Territorial and Maritime Disputes in the West Philippine Sea: Foreign Policy Choices and their Impact on Domestic Stakeholders." *Public Policy* 15: 12–49.
- . 2019. "Forty years of China-watching from the eyes of a Filipino." *Tulay Magazine*, October 14, 2019. <https://tulay.ph/2019/08/20/forty-years-of-china-watching-from-the-eyes-of-a-filipino/>.
- Drapler, Simon. 2020. "Coronavirus: The untold story of New Zealanders losing overseas friends, colleagues to Covid-19." *Stuff*, March 30, 2020. <https://www.stuff.co.nz/business/120657026/untold-story-of-new-zealanders-losing-overseas-friends-colleagues-to-covid19>.
- Nolasco, Janus Isaac. 2020. "A World Without Fences: The Life and Scholarship of Dr. Aileen Baviera (1959-2020)." *Asian Politics & Policy* 12, no. 2: 263–87.
- UP CIDS (University of the Philippines Center for Integrative and Development Studies). n.d. "Strategic Studies Program." <https://cids.up.edu.ph/programs/strategic-studies-program/>.