Tribute

Aileen San Pablo Baviera, 1959-2020: A Dissident Tribute to a Scholar, Activist, Colleague, and Friend

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![Image of Aileen San Pablo Baviera with colleagues and friends.](image travelers)

The author with Aileen San Pablo Baviera over the years.

Artwork by Jose Monfred Sy

Most of the tributes that have poured in to honor the memory of Dr. Aileen San Pablo Baviera have focused on her work as a distinguished and highly respected scholar of China studies. There is no doubt that Aileen excelled in this field, such that her guidance and counsel were much sought after by government, civil society, and business sectors. However, I have known Aileen for almost 40 years and I think that it would be a disservice and an injustice to Aileen's
memory if she were to be typecast and profiled only as a China expert, or in the pedestrian designation of being a “Sinologist” or worse, a “China watcher.”

While China studies was her forte, Aileen went beyond single-country confines in her research interests, her numerous publications, the university courses she taught, and in her public engagements with civil society and government. And even while working on China, it was not exclusively the strategic geopolitical aspect that consumed her interest, but rather a more holistic and richer examination of a country and its peoples.

This tribute to Aileen S.P. Baviera is my own personal reflection on her life and work, coupled with stories shared by common friends and colleagues. It does not encompass the entirety of her lifelong achievements particularly on subject matters that are beyond my academic and intellectual milieu.

Student Activist

In the 1970s, the martial law regime of the dictator Ferdinand Marcos was at the height of its repressive and conjugal rule. Aileen San Pablo was a B.S. Foreign Service student at the University of the Philippines (UP) Diliman where she, amidst social unrest, became an activist and eventually joined an underground radical left-wing organization affiliated with the Communist Party of the Philippines-National Democratic Front (CPP-NDF), which conducted protest campaigns and mobilized against the regime. She was also president of the UP Political Science Students Association (SAPUL) and a respected student mass leader. Her revolutionary engagement was mainly above ground and legal; she was instrumental in the successful struggle to restore the University Student Council and the student paper, The Philippine Collegian, both of which had been suspended by the regime. At the same time, to support her studies, she worked as a receptionist for the famous Anito Lodge chain of motels owned by Angelo King.

Aileen graduated cum laude from UP Diliman in 1979 and immediately began her M.A. in Asian Studies at the same university. She joined the Foreign Service Institute (FSI) of the Department of Foreign Affairs in 1980 as a training officer. At the same time, she took
advantage of a free Mandarin language course which FSI offered. In 1981, she applied for and won a fellowship to do a two-year language program at the Beijing Language Institute and to take courses in Chinese history at Beijing University in China.

First China Trip

Aileen’s departure for China was initially compromised when her passport application was rejected by the Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA). It appeared that a dossier on her student activist days was on file at the National Intelligence Services Agency (NISA). Her FSI supervisors, however, vouched for her and a friend's fraternity links with a Malacañang official resulted in her eventually securing her passport.

In an interview with a former comrade of Aileen, it was disclosed that Aileen’s first China sojourn somehow tied in with her revolutionary work, as she had, by this time, been working under the newly formed and fledging International Liaison and Research Section of the CPP-NDF. Her designated liaison/political officer was Jorge Baviera who was already a ranking party cadre and was treated as a very important person by his comrades. Jorge was also a competent musician and played vocalist in his own band. In his younger days, he had been the president of the Beatles Club of the Philippines. The now-iconic *Ibong Malaya* tapes of revolutionary protest songs was one of his projects. When Aileen was preparing for her trip to China, Jorge arranged, through a comrade, a meeting with her for a pre-departure briefing. He fell in love with the mestiza-looking Aileen but the 15-year age gap between the two momentarily derailed Jorge’s attentions. Other comrades had to play matchmakers but Jorge’s facility with music and singing did the rest to win Aileen’s heart.

In China, Aileen’s main party assignment was to examine closely the momentous events that had taken place with the fall of the “Gang of Four” (led by Mao Zedong’s widow) and the subsequent return to power of the pragmatic Deng Xiaoping. The CPP-NDF was in the process of reevaluating its predominantly Maoist line but was suspicious of Deng’s moves. Aileen’s investigation of the situation led her to the conclusion that a specific Chinese road to socialism was taking place and she proposed that the CPP should renew fraternal
relations with the Deng-led Chinese party. The Philippine leadership, however, took a hardline position that simply reaffirmed the political line of the “Gang of Four.” This later contributed to a split within the movement.

Apart from her academic and language studies, Aileen also took the opportunity to work part-time at the *Chicago Tribune’s* Beijing Bureau, which she says initiated her into the “serious study of China.” And so she travelled all over the vast country, getting to know the various peoples of China and its different nationalities:

> From the hot deserts in Xinjiang and Gansu to the grasslands of Inner Mongolia to icy Harbin and Heilongjiang. From Shanghai to visit the former “Paris of the East,” to Tianjin for a taste of its famous dumplings, then to Buddhist temples floating in the clouds, and misty vegetable farms in Sichuan. To Shenzhen before it became Shenzhen, and to Pudong when it was but a vision. (San Pablo Baviera 2020)

**Academic Career**

After being granted a diploma by the Beijing Language Institute in 1983, Aileen returned home to the Philippines, married Jorge, and gave birth in 1985 to their first child, Vita Amalya (Mayi). A second child, Mara Yasmin, was born a year later and the third, Jorge Vittorio (Bitoy), came in 1991. As part of the return-service condition of her fellowship, she went back to FSI as a training officer, researcher, and occasional instructor. In 1987, after having completed her M.A. studies with a thesis on “Rural Economic Reforms in China, 1979–1984,” she left FSI and joined the faculty of the Department of Political Science of UP Diliman.

Surprisingly, she chose to teach Southeast Asian studies courses, probably realizing the need to broaden the scope of her academic scholarly work. In doing this, she risked earning the ire of a senior professor who regarded Southeast Asian studies as her “turf.” But Aileen won this professor over by constantly deferring to her and seeking her advice on how to handle the Southeast Asian courses assigned for her to teach. Later, she started her Ph.D. in Political Science studies at UP...
Diliman which, after many fits and starts, she completed in 2003 with a dissertation on “Post-cold War China-ASEAN Relations: Exploring Worldview Convergences and Its Security Implications.”

Aileen was now deeply interested in “international relations” as an academic discipline and was helping set up a consortium with like-minded faculty at UP Manila. This did not push through when she suddenly resigned from the UP Political Science faculty as she and Jorge prepared to relocate to Spain to continue with international solidarity work for the Philippine Left movement. For some reason, this plan was aborted. Returning once again to FSI in 1993, she was appointed to head its Center for International Relations and Strategic Studies while teaching political science part-time at the Ateneo de Manila University from 1996 to 1997.

Civil Society Engagements

Aileen thereafter joined the Philippines-China Development Resource Center (PDRC) as its research coordinator and produced several works on the South China Sea (SCS) disputes, the Chinese in Metro Manila, food security in China and Southeast Asia, and state-civil society cooperation in rural Asia. She later became PDRC executive director from 1998 to 2001. An important project she initiated was a pioneering research and documentation of civil society anti-poverty initiatives in several rural areas in Asia which culminated in an international conference in 1998 and a publication in 2000 (see San Pablo Baviera and Militante 2002).

At this point, Aileen’s main interest was on China’s social and economic development and she appreciated Deng’s economic reforms as an opening whereby “Chinese and Filipino civil society organizations (could) learn from each other … (both) being developing countries sharing many common problems” (San Pablo Baviera 2020). Accordingly, she established and strengthened linkages between Chinese and Filipino civil society organizations, including “training Chinese development workers in project management, and sending Filipino health workers for acupuncture training in Nanjing” (San Pablo Baviera 2020). These initiatives and interactions showed that
Aileen was far from the typical “China watcher” who simply observed and wrote about another country from a distance.

As PDRC executive director, she proposed the expansion and broadening of the organization’s mandate to encompass the Asian region as a whole, which would have necessitated a change of name. In this regard, Aileen drew up a proposal for setting up an Institute for Community in Asia (IFC-Asia) a nongovernmental organization that would be “dedicated to the promotion of human security, peace, and good governance” in the region (San Pablo Baviera 2001). Her proposal, however, was opposed by a senior PDRC official who wanted to maintain the status quo. Disheartened at this rejection, Aileen resigned from PDRC.

In the meantime, her foreign service career had reached an impasse when, due to policy disagreements with the new FSI Director, she took an indefinite leave. Anxious to resume her academic career, Aileen was encouraged by a close friend, Dr. Teresa Encarnacion Tadem, to apply for a full-time teaching position at the UP Asian Center, a graduate studies institution for Asian Studies and Philippine Studies. She did so in 1998 and was accepted at the same time as myself as I was leaving my faculty position at UP Manila. While the Asian Center recommended us both for the rank of Associate Professor, the UP administration downgraded us to Assistant Professor. After an urgent appeal for consideration that was strongly endorsed by then Asian Center Dean Armando Malay Jr., we were both finally appointed to the rank of Associate Professor.

Scholarly Works

As an Asian Studies faculty, Aileen taught a diverse range of courses that went beyond her China studies background including Asian security issues, Southeast Asian international relations, Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) studies, Asian regionalism, Philippine foreign relations and policy, and research methods. She also researched and published extensively, producing an impressive output of journal articles, book chapters, essays and commentaries, and edited books on Asian regional security, Philippine-China relations, regional peace and conflict concerns and their mediating factors, territorial disputes, geopolitics, US-
Asian relations, multilateralism, Philippine politics, media and public opinion, Chinese investments, and South China Sea issues. In her faculty profile, she listed her varied research interests: contemporary China studies (multidisciplinary), China-Southeast Asia relations, Asia-Pacific security, territorial and maritime disputes, and regional integration. UP conferred on her several academic distinctions including Centennial Professorial Chairs and a dozen or so International Publication Awards. She was promoted to full Professor in 2005.

At the UP Center for Integrative and Development Studies (CIDS), Aileen and I established and co-coordinated the UP CIDS Asia Pacific Studies Program in 1998, which produced scholarly studies on Indonesia, Cambodia, Philippines, and China. Together with Romeo Royandoyan, we both collaborated in producing a comparative study on rural development in China and the Philippines, showing contrasts and similarities between the two countries’ experiences. Aileen’s part in this 2001 unpublished study was to take a political economy standpoint by examining China’s agricultural modernization since 1978 and the strategic shift from centralized planning to a more market-oriented approach and the accompanying state-instituted policy reforms (see San Pablo Baviera, Tadem, and Royandoyan 2001). She lauded China’s attainment of basic food security and the provision of basic needs but noted the continuing challenges of periodic disasters, low levels of productivity, product distribution issues, and food consumption patterns.

The UP CIDS Asia Pacific Studies program was supposed to have been devolved to the UP Asian Center as a full-blown research center but a non-comprehending and unappreciative UP administration failed to lend its support to the plan. Other UP CIDS programs that Aileen headed in the last five years were the Foreign Policy Studies Program and the China/Strategic Studies Program. She was also a recipient of the UP CIDS Angara Fellowship Award.

Aileen’s academic career took an administrative turn when she was appointed dean of the UP Asian Center in 2003, serving two consecutive three-year terms until 2009. A noteworthy achievement during her six-year tenure was the thoroughgoing and radical overhaul of the 40-year-old Asian Studies curriculum, emphasizing
and focusing on comparative cross-country and thematic issues and concerns rather than the traditional country-specific studies. I was her assistant dean for academic affairs at that time and assisted her on the curricular revisions. These changes were important and essential given the growing commonalities in sociopolitical and economic problems across societies and regions, new developments in geopolitical issues, and the globalization of markets, communication, and travel which rendered porous existing national boundaries. The Asian Center’s Philippine Studies curricular program was also reformatted to include the study and analysis of Philippine issues within an Asian and global context.

The new Asian Center curriculum was also significant as it serendipitously aligned with the comparativist approach in Area Studies advocated by Benedict Anderson as expounded in his 2016 memoirs (see Anderson 2016). Anderson basically rejected the nation-state and nations as basic units of analyses as well as the Eurocentric, liberal, traditional Marxist, and East-West dichotomizing models of conventional Area Studies. Of course, at the time we were constructing the new UP Asian Studies program, we were not aware of Anderson’s perspectives or advocacy.

At the UP Asian Center, a major research project Aileen conceptualized, organized, and headed was the “Thematic Assessment of Philippine Foreign Relations, 1946-2008” a three-year study looking at 60 years of Philippine foreign relations with the objective of “identifying present challenges, opportunities, and present analyses and recommendations for policy makers, foreign service officers, program implementors and other stakeholders” (San Pablo-Baviera 2008). The project looked at seven thematic angles: (1) promoting sovereignty, independence and national identity, (2) enhancing security against external challenges, (3) advancing economic growth and sustainable development, (4) democratizing international relations and empowering the people, (5) securing welfare and interests of overseas Filipinos, (6) promoting good neighborly ties with Asia Pacific peoples, and (7) effective governance and management of Philippine foreign relations. Apart from managing the project, Aileen contributed her own study on “Culture, Norms, and Identity in Philippine Foreign Relations: Nation-State in Search of Sovereignty.”
participated in this project with a study on “People-to-People Relations and the Challenges of Democratization in the Philippines.”

This project was undertaken from 2008-2012 with funding support via a research grant from UP Diliman as part of the university’s celebration of its 100-year anniversary, which involved several scholars from various academic disciplines. In more ways than one, the project was pathbreaking in that it veered away from previous works that were primarily chronological narratives “focusing on the state or role of individuals, rather than our progress as a people and nation” (San Pablo-Baviera 2008).

During her deanship, Aileen successfully negotiated with private corporate donors for the construction of a building complex that was meant to house a museum, a 500-seater auditorium, research offices, and a café-restaurant. Completed in 2010, the complex was named the GT-Toyota Asian Cultural Center Building, a move that was fraught with controversy as it was the first time in UP’s history that a campus building was named after a private corporation.

Working closely with Aileen provided me an insight into her character as a person. She was probably the most unflappable person I ever knew. As her assistant dean, we would sometimes disagree on some academic or administrative matter. Our arguments would get so heated (or so it felt to me) that I would find myself literally screaming to her face. Would she scream back? Not Aileen. She would remain calm and unperturbed. She would gently and, in an almost motherly tone, reiterate her position and stick to it. Exhausted by my childish screaming, I would then simply retreat back to my desk to heal my “battle” wounds.

Other Engagements

Beyond her work at the University of the Philippines, Aileen was, at various times, a Visiting Professor at Universiti Malaya, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, and Universiti Pertahanan Nasional Malaysia; Visiting Lecturer at Xiamen University (China) and National Chenchi University (Taiwan); Visiting Fellow at Nanyang Technological University (Singapore) and Japan Institute (Tokyo); and Visiting
Researcher at Beijing University, Shanghai Institute of International Studies, Australian National University, and Griffith University (Australia).

Aileen was also active as board member and later president of the Philippine Association for Chinese Studies (PACS) while continuing development work as a member of the Board of Directors of the famed San Leonardo Rural Bank in Nueva Ecija. The latter engagement was significant as it allowed her to maintain links with progressive Left activists who had gone into development work. The San Leonardo Rural Bank, which was set up by Andres “Boypee” Panganiban (known as the “barefoot banker”) would become the model of a “people’s bank” that successfully serviced the credit needs of the rural poor, particularly small farmers and community entrepreneurs.

She was also a member of the Philippine Council for Foreign Relations, National Research Council of the Philippines, Strategic Studies Group of the National Defense College of the Philippines, Philippine Political Science Association, Philippine Studies Association, Phi Kappa Phi International Honor Society for the Social Sciences, and the Pi Gamma Mu International Honor Society. She also served as vice president and trustee of Economic, Social and Cultural Rights–Asia, trustee of the Korean Studies Association of the Philippines, and member of the Board of Advisers of the Philippine Navy.

In 2010, she was designated editor-in-chief of the prestigious international journal, Asian Politics and Policy published by the Policy Studies Association (PSA) in Washington, D.C. and Wiley Blackwell. The editorship was supposed to be rotated among the many scholars in numerous academic institutions throughout the globe, but Aileen’s tenure was so exemplary and productive that the PSA Board decided that she be the permanent Editor-in-Chief.

Within the last five years, Aileen would reestablish her civil society work credentials with her founding in 2014 of the Asia Pacific Pathways for Progress Foundation (APPFI), a research think-tank where she also assumed the post of Executive Director. APPFI’s vision was to promote “peace, development and cultural understanding for the Philippines and the Asia Pacific through international dialogue
and cooperation.” Its goals were “(1) to enhance capabilities and promote participation and engagement of stakeholders in regional and international discourses on peace, development and cultural understanding; (2) to promote future-oriented, people-centered, peaceful and independent Philippine foreign relations, and (3) 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.”

On Territorial Disputes

During the administration of President Benigno Aquino III (2010–2016), the escalation of conflict between the Philippines and China over competing claims in the South China Sea thrust Aileen San Pablo Baviera to the center stage of an international dispute often characterized by bellicose-patriotic, chauvinist, and racist sentiments on both sides of the disputed sea. As states involved in the SCS territorial disputes bunkered down behind divisive concepts such as “absolute territorial integrity” and “inexpugnable boundaries,” it would be easy and convenient to ascribe to Aileen the same hard line ultra-nationalist posturing taken by protagonists from both China and the Philippines. Quotes attributed to her such as having “her eyes on China (while) her heart stayed with [Philippines]” and: “if one has to take a side, one must take the side of the Filipino people” (Esmaquel 2020) as well as some of her published works on the issue would seem to support the above assessment.

At this point, however, I would like to throw academic caution aside and speculate that, despite some published accounts that show otherwise, Aileen and I were probably essentially and at heart, on the same page with respect to the Philippines-China conflict, in particular, and territorial disputes, in general. My own position was laid out in a 2019 paper I published:

Conventional discussions on territorial disputes have focused mainly on the issues of nationalism, national identity, sovereignty, territorial integrity, and inviolable state boundaries. Manifestations of chauvinism, racism, and right-wing ultra-nationalism have subsequently surfaced that only
serve to heighten conflicts. There is a need to move away from these divisive and counterproductive perspectives and surface alternative approaches anchored on a shared regional identity, common pool resource, common heritage of mankind, joint development, and attention to popular voices. (Tadem 2019)

In a highly refreshing and deeply personal article published in 2016, Aileen wrote her innermost thoughts on the South China Sea dispute, revealing a more enlightened and non-nation-state-centric view. As various claimant states (including the Philippines) “quarreled over the reefs, waters, and resources of the South China Sea”, she wrote:

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 then fenced off like the land. In truth, no one knows exactly what they are claiming. Much of the marine life in the depths of the South China Sea remains unexplored. The fish that traverse these seas migrate from one part to another, recognising no boundaries other than those created by changes in the temperature of the water column. (San Pablo Baviera 2016)

Flying over the disputed seas and “looking out into the seemingly limitless ocean,” Aileen was engulfed by “a sense of being free from territorial boundaries” and “how being creatures of the land has taught most of us to think in terms of the state and its narrow interests” (San Pablo Baviera 2016).

As I look down at the smallness of the land features, and the distances between them in proportion to the vast expanse of ocean, I cannot help but think of how presumptuous and foolish men are to think that this all belongs to certain countries because once upon a time, some person named or mapped or fished or navigated here before anyone else did. These reefs and shoals, these waters, were here long before today’s modern nation-states emerged, and they will be here long after many have passed from the scene. 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. (San Pablo Baviera 2016)
In the conclusion to my 2019 policy brief, I called for giving more attention to people-to-people concerns and people-centered approaches and argued that “notions of absolute sovereignty and permanent territorial rights are counter-productive and their uncompromising assertion will only lead at best to an uncomfortable stalemate or worse, outright war” (Tadem 2019).

Rethinking the Revolution

Aileen’s revolutionary career within the CPP-NDF network underwent profound changes. The hardline position taken by the party leadership on the China question in the 1980s had disappointed her as her experience in China and her direct observations of the Maoist line taught her otherwise. She was also skeptical of the extent of the impact of Marxist ideas and practice on Chinese leaders and society and wondered whether this could also be said of the Philippine experience. In her published reactions to a 2010 paper by Caroline S. Hau on the “Chinese Question and Marxism,” Aileen mused:

If eighty years of Marxism in China may have failed to plant very firmly the seeds of this philosophy given that there were reversals in Chinese Communism in the last thirty years, what are the chances of it moving forward in the Philippine setting? Considering our own varied cultural and intellectual traditions, our tendency of parochialism, our inability to draw upon our own past and to look toward the far future, and our apparent resistance to civic ideals? (San Pablo Baviera 2010)

According to a former comrade, the CPP-NDF split in the early 1990s further alienated Aileen and she maintained her distance from both factions, the so-called “reaffirmists” and the “rejectionists” while keeping her personal friendships with individuals from both blocs. The former comrade believes that while she was critical of the CPP-NDF’s post-1990s strategic direction, she remained to the end a radical and a revolutionary at heart.

Aileen also bemoaned the Philippine Left’s ceding mainstream politics to the elite classes while being embroiled in dogmatic and petty sectarian disputes. Finally, true to her training in evidence-
based research, she would refer to China’s path to socialism with Chinese characteristics as a model for the Philippine Left to pursue. By that, she meant that in developing its strategies and plans of action, the Philippine Left should always consider and fully appreciate the specific historical, cultural, and social context of Philippine society and its peoples.

The Final Days

In early March 2020, Aileen left for Paris, France to participate in a 10-day training course. On March 6, 2020, from her billeted hotel at the Le Cercle National des Armees, she reported on her Facebook page that she was holding meetings at Ecole Militaire. Founded in 1750 by King Louis XV, the École Militaire is a vast complex of buildings housing various military training facilities. It is located in the 7th arrondissement of Paris, France, southeast of the Champ de Mars. Napoleon Bonaparte was among the school’s students.

On March 12, 2020, she posted the following ominous message:

Hi, guys. Kuwento ko lang (I just would like to share) that I am returning from Paris tonight and will self-quarantine. I was there supposedly for a 10-day course. Four days into the program, one of our participants, Dr. Alan Ortiz caught COVID-19. He is still in the ICU under induced coma. Our program was suspended, we went into self-quarantine in our hotels immediately; hotel staff were so concerned; and then our hosts couldn’t wait to get rid of us. No fun, this trip!! Praying for Alan’s recovery.

From the Ninoy Aquino International Airport, Aileen went home to pick up some clothes and other necessities and immediately had herself confined at the San Lazaro Hospital in Manila. On March 17, 2020, she wrote what was to be her last message to friends and colleagues:

Hello. As some of you already know, I will be out of commission for some weeks. During our recent visit to Paris, Dr. Alan Ortiz became infected with COVID-19. He is in hospital still,
in critical condition. I myself tested positive and following my return to Manila checked myself in at San Lazaro. My children are under quarantine at home, thankfully, still no symptoms. Just thought to let everyone know but would appreciate if you can help keep it quiet. There’s enough stress to deal with. I hope you are all fine. Do take care.

Her daughter, Mara Yasmin, reported that “she was okay only with fever and light cough for a couple of days at the hospital. It was only in the last two days that she started to get worse with nausea and pneumonia. It went downhill very fast.”

Aileen San Pablo Baviera was born on August 26, 1959 in Manila. She died in the early morning hours of March 21, 2020 at the age of 60 from severe pneumonia related to COVID-19.

Let me end this dissident tribute with a quote from William Shakespeare:

Farewell, my sister, fare thee well.
The elements be kind to thee and make
Thy spirits all of comfort: fare thee well.

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Notes

1. An abridged version of this tribute was published online in Rappler on March 25, 2020 as “Aileen San Pablo Baviera: Revolutionary at heart, more than a China watcher” (see Tadem 2020).

2. For an excellent summary of Aileen’s more significant scholarly works, see “A Multilateral Life: Aileen S.P. Baviera, Ph.D. (1959–2020).” The piece was written by Janus Nolasco, managing editor of Asian Studies: Journal of Critical Perspectives on Asia.

3. The APPFI vision and goals can be found in its website: https://www.appfi.ph/.

4. Other countries, of course, are part of the dispute, (i.e., Vietnam, Malaysia, Indonesia, Brunei and Taiwan) but the Philippine-China conflict has been the most contentious and attracted the most media attention.

5. See for example, San Pablo Baviera and Batongbacal (2013), which, though disclaiming to represent the position of the Philippine government, actually takes Manila’s side in most aspects of the China-Philippines dispute.

6. Thanks to Janus Nolasco for directing me to this article.

References


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