Obituary

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Aileen San Pablo Baviera (1959–2020)

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 UNIVERSITY OF THE PHILIPPINES, DILIMAN ([HTTPS://WWW
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 GVBMK](https://www.ac.upd.edu.ph/index.php/resources/news-announcements/2100-aileen-baviera-tribute-asian-center?fbclid=IWAR3WJYP-9Z_4ETT2ZNSNWT1FVUPFC153Y_0WBBCGXPKAQZUWLYQ6FGVBMK))

Aileen San Pablo Baviera, one of the foremost China experts in the Philippines and commentator on international affairs, passed away on 21 March 2020 at San Lazaro Hospital, one among thousands whose individual stories were cut short by COVID-19. Her story, however, is about a legacy of scholarship, public intellectualism, institution-building, and mentorship. Her clear-eyed appreciation of the country's international situation and pragmatic thinking on how to respond will be sorely missed.

This narrative about Aileen Baviera begins a third into her life with her completion of a Bachelor of Science degree in Foreign Service in October 1979, graduating cum laude at the University of the Philippines (UP) Diliman. Caught up in the idealism of the anti-Martial Law movement that was particularly strong

at the UP during her University days, she became involved in the Philippine Left's revolutionary struggle.¹ Yet she herself admitted that while she got caught up in Mao Zedong's ideas and rhetoric in the same way as so many of her peers, she was too "bookish" to engage in more overtly revolutionary activities.² In the years following the completion of her degree, however, it seemed that Mao did have a deeper and more lasting impact on her. It was less his ideas though than it was the land that spawned him that Baviera developed a lifelong fascination for.

Ironical as it may seem, working after her graduation as a researcher at the Foreign Service Institute (FSI) provided her with the opportunity to indulge a growing interest in China. She was awarded a Chinese government scholarship to study modern Chinese history at Peking University from 1981 to 1983. She made the most of her stay, receiving a diploma from the Beijing Language Institute, and traveling around the country. The latter in particular opened her eyes to a China that remained with her for the rest of her life and continued to inform her perspective about China. She wrote that

[m]ore than taking me places, these travels took me to the people: fellow travelers on a train asking me if I were an Uyghur because they hadn't yet seen one, a lily-footed grandma skillfully scaling the steps of a mountain trail while I huffed and puffed my way up, a village circus troupe performing all muddled and ragged in a park, a young Mongolian woman making cheese from horse's milk.

This was the China I came to know during those first two years.³

She continued with her studies on China even as she went back to her work at the FSI. In 1987, Baviera received a Master of Arts in Asian studies, specializing in China and East Asia. She wrote her thesis on the agricultural policy of China working with Professor Benito Lim, one of the foremost China experts in the Philippines during that time.

She began her teaching career at the Department of Political Science at UP Diliman where she taught until 1990. Teaching Political Science at UP, however, did not give her much scope to continue her work on China. She joined the

1 Eduardo C. Tadem, "Aileen San Pablo Baviera: Revolutionary at heart, more than a China watcher," *Rappler* (25 March 2020) available at <https://rappler.com/nation/aileen-san-pablo-baviera-revolutionary-at-heart-more-than-china-watcher> and accessed on 5 August 2020.

2 Aileen Baviera, "Forty years of China-watching from the eyes of a Filipino," *Tulay* (14 October 2019) available at <https://tulay.ph/2019/08/20/forty-years-of-china-watching-from-the-eyes-of-a-filipino/> and accessed on 5 August 2020.

3 *Ibid.*

Philippine-China Development Resource Center where she stayed as a research coordinator until 1993. It was, however, when she joined the FSI once again in June 1993 as the inaugural head of the Center for International Relations and Strategic Studies (CIRSS) that she more directly became involved in an aspect of diplomacy that would eventually shape her professional life.

In 1995, she found herself in the middle of a diplomatic crisis between the Philippines and China involving China's occupation of Panganiban Reef. She was in the unusual position of being an outsider (someone not from the Department of Foreign Affairs bureaucracy) included in a team that sought to put together the Philippine response to the Chinese action.⁴ She attributed this involvement to the willingness and courage of then Undersecretary for Policy Rodolfo C. Severino to think outside the box. It was not unlikely also a testament to her growing reputation as a China analyst. She noted the "sleepless nights while preparing for talks with China" and acknowledged "the lessons about Chinese foreign policy and negotiating behavior ... [that] were priceless."⁵ She noted how the Philippines used "all peaceful and legal means within its reach both to defend its claims and to find long-term solutions to the disputes" even if this proved to be "in vain."⁶ The lesson on the value of diplomacy and dialogue stuck with her even as she moved on to the next phase of her professional development.

She had joined the Faculty of Political Science of the Ateneo de Manila University as a part-time member of the teaching staff in 1996 to 1997 even as she was with FSI and starting on her PhD at UP Diliman. She, however, found her academic home when she joined the Asian Center of UP Diliman as a full-time member of the faculty. She completed her PhD in Political Science at UP Diliman in 2003. Shortly thereafter, she was appointed Dean of the Asian Center, a capacity she served in until October 2009. During her tenure as Dean, she expanded the networks that institutionally involved the Asian Center and was responsible for taking in young academics and researchers in various capacities. In July 2010, she became the chief editor of *Asian Politics & Policy*, a journal dedicated to deepening "understanding of political development and policy innovations in Asia, the growing trend of economic and political

4 Aileen Baviera, "Remembering diplomat Rodolfo Severino," *Philippine Daily Inquirer* (14 May 2019) available at <https://opinion.inquirer.net/121340/remembering-diplomat-rod-severino> and accessed on 6 August 2020.

5 Baviera, "Forty years" op. cit.

6 "Philippines Prioritizes Diplomacy in South China Sea Disputes," *World Politics Review* (1 December 2015) available at <https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/trend-lines/17339/philippines-prioritizes-diplomacy-in-south-china-sea-disputes> and accessed on 6 August 2020.

integration in East Asia, and the dynamic relations among Asian countries and between Asia and other parts of the world.”⁷

Her work gained her international recognition. She was invited to lecture and hold visiting fellowships in various academic and research institutions in Australia, China, Japan, India, Malaysia, Singapore, Taiwan, and the United States. As one academic acquaintance noted, she “was a highly regarded expert and just a very nice person.”⁸ In the Philippines, she was a lecturer at the RSI and the National Defense College of the Philippines. She was a member of the Board of Trustees of Economic, Social, Cultural Rights-Asia, Director of the Philippine Association for Chinese Studies, and a member of the Board of Advisers of the Philippine Navy.

Her advancement in the academic world, however, came hand in hand with the lessons on the importance of diplomacy and dialogue in advancing and protecting the country’s interests. It was one of her frustrations that when the Philippines once again faced a crisis with China over *Bajo de Masinloc* in 2012, it seemed like there had been little learning over the 20 years since 1995, and that the country seemed to “be worse off now than when we started as far as territorial tensions are concerned.”⁹ She became personally involved in trying to develop a Philippine response to the crisis. As a well-known resource person and media consultant specializing in contemporary China studies, China-Southeast Asia relations, Asia-Pacific security, territorial and maritime disputes, and regional integration, she became one of the intellectual faces that the public became familiar with and trusted to provide pragmatic recommendations on how the country should defend the West Philippine Sea against the incursions of China.

It was not just about her, however, as she believed in the need to harness and involve expert knowledge in the conduct of Philippine foreign policy and the pursuit of its international relations. In 2014, she became the principal conveyor of what eventually became the Strategic Studies Program of the University of the Philippines’ Center for Integrative and Developments Studies (SSP-UP CIDS). In her vision and that of her co-collaborators, the program would become the venue for getting academics and practitioners together to discuss foreign policy issues and formulate recommendations on how to respond to

7 “About the journal,” *Asian Politics and Policy* available at <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/journal/19430787> and accessed on 6 August 2020.

8 Simon Drapler, “Coronavirus: The untold story of New Zealanders losing overseas friends, colleagues to Covid-19,” *Stuff* (30 March 2020) available at <https://www.stuff.co.nz/business/120657026/untold-story-of-new-zealanders-losing-overseas-friends-colleagues-to-covid19> and accessed on 3 August 2020.

9 Baviera, “Forty years,” *op. cit.*

these. She recognized, however, the limitations imposed by being an institution within a state university, and established Asia Pacific Pathways to Progress Foundation, Inc. (APPF1). The APPFI became the Philippine member institute of the ASEAN Institutes for Strategic and International Studies (ASEAN-ISIS) network of ASEAN think tanks in 2018. In the meantime, the SSP-UP CIDS has been the convenor of the Katipunan Conference, an annual forum that tries to bring together experts and students to discuss the conditions faced by the country from its strategic environment.

Perhaps, however, her most important legacy is paving the way for younger generation/s of scholars and academics to take on the work she had engaged in. In a sense, this is her way of paying forward the debt she acknowledges she owes her own mentors such as Professor Ben Lim of the Asian Center, and ASEAN Secretary General Rodolfo Severino. She was conscious and active about nurturing and encouraging the interest of younger scholars, providing them with the opportunities to pursue those interests, and involving them in projects where those interests could be allowed full expression.

True to her advocacies, Baviera contracted COVID-19 while attending a conference on regional security in the Asia Pacific in France. This eventually led to her succumbing to pneumonia caused by the disease. She will be missed, but her legacy will live on.

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