

Ethics, Politics, and Society in China and the Philippines: Comparative Impressions

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AS A CHINESE WHO LIVED in the Philippines for several months, I would like to make some brief comparative impressions on Philippine and Chinese societies, and on the dispositions and personalities of the Chinese and Filipinos. I was a visiting scholar at the Asian Center, University of the Philippines Diliman. In between field work, reading, and writing, I had the opportunity to travel around the country, visiting, apart from Metro Manila, Baguio, Boracay, Davao, and Negros, among other cities.

On Family

As neighbors living together in East Asia, the Chinese and the Filipinos share a few similarities. Both cherish family, especially children. For the Chinese, having more means more luck, while Filipinos see them as God's blessing. In fact, families rather than individuals have been the basic units of the two societies and of many social customs. Norms emerge and evolve because of the family. Among these values include solidarity, fraternity and cooperation in families or between relatives. Others are negative, such as cronyism, corruption and backdoor deals in society and politics.

On Political Traditions

Both Chinese and Filipinos traditionally respect their superiors and obey authority. But because of a two-thousand-year tradition of centralized rule, the Chinese feel less antipathy towards an authoritarian polity. One

result is the overstretching of state authority into social life, which contributes to the prevalence of materialism and pragmatism. This social philosophy shapes the political values of the Chinese; they judge a political system according to its achievements on, say, promoting safety and social well-being. In contrast, under the influence of Christianity and American values, Filipinos are less materialistic and have more admiration for freedom and democracy. Thus, although Filipinos do not hide their resentment of the defects of Philippine democracy, many would not like to go back to the Marcos era. Also, until recently, the Philippine economy for several years lagged behind many Asian countries, but the democratic regime that managed the economy largely did not meet a large substantial challenge.

On Population Management

Seeing the disadvantages of overpopulation, the Chinese government has enforced the strict one-child policy from the late 1970s. After more than 30 years, population growth has been checked, but China is also beset by the new challenge of an aging society. In the Philippines by contrast, under fierce objection from the Catholic Church, the government has never successfully carried out any policy of population control. Currently, over 100 million people live in a 300,000-square-kilometer archipelago.

On Hospitality

Chinese and Filipinos value hospitality, but showcase it in somewhat different ways. Chinese tend to treat guests with an overflowing sense of etiquette, effusive words, and nice dinners. When the Chinese take their guests to a restaurant, they order so much food that there will inevitably be leftovers, much of which may be wasted. In some cases, this kind of hospitality may seem ostentatious, even hypocritical. In contrast, Filipino hospitality is simpler. In a banquet to celebrate a wedding, for instance, Filipinos just treat their guests to a buffet dinner; and the guests can move around and talk to each other freely rather than sit on a roundtable, a practice favored by the Chinese.

On Religion

Another important distinction lies in religion. In traditional China, Confucianism provides moral values and underpins social norms. Although Buddhism and Taoism are influential as well, their practice is, to some extent, geared towards secular ends. For example, many Chinese pray for safety, luck, and even fortune in Buddhist temples. In Taoist practice, more attention is paid to how to preserve and extend life rather than to seek spiritual eternity. In the Philippines, many are devout Catholics. Churches are crowded on Sundays; some even make the sign of the cross when they pass by a church. I think Catholicism gives Filipinos better social morals. Unlike the Chinese, Filipinos voluntarily queue when taking the train; and there are few incidents of cutting in line.

On Money and Daily Expenses

Always abstemious, the Chinese like to save money for health and education and to purchase apartments or houses for their families. Filipinos in contrast would rather spend more on food, clothes, and entertainment, among other commodities. These different attitudes on money and consumption precipitate different economic effects. For example, in the Philippines, the main driver of GDP growth is consumption, while investment has raised GDP in China. The Chinese have spent so much money on houses that the real estate industry has hijacked the economy. Of course, the related consumer demands on infrastructure, steel, cement, furniture and electrical appliances, etc., have also boosted Chinese manufacturing. At any rate, the corresponding result of Filipino spending habits pertains to the building of more and more shopping malls and restaurants, including fast-food chains like Jollibee. The service industry, rather than manufacturing, is more prosperous in the Philippines.

Philosophy of Life

As for their philosophy of life, Filipinos believe more in naturalism and have a live-and-let-live-attitude. This thinking is a little similar to that of Taoism in China. Actually, a book, *Filipino Philosophy Today* by Florentino Timbreza, extensively quotes the aphorisms of Lao Tzu, the founder of Taoism. But in China, besides Taoism, Confucianism has been the dominant philosophy for thousands of years, while it is Buddhism that has a deep influence on the daily life of ordinary people. Thus, you may find a more complicated philosophy of life among the Chinese. They may show more eagerness to achieve success and obtain wealth. In contrast, many Filipinos can enjoy life just by meeting their basic needs. In addition, the Chinese like to literally change their environment just to satisfy their desires. The extreme disadvantage of this mentality is the massive environmental pollution that results from the disruption of ecological equilibrium amidst China's economic boom. Filipinos prefer maintaining the original ecology. For example, in the University of the Philippines Diliman, there are fewer man-made green areas, unlike in Chinese universities, where artificial greenery abounds.

To generalize, the people and society in China are mostly dominated by an ethos of pragmatic entrepreneurialism which has contributed to the huge success of China's economy and an all-pervading low interest in its politics. In contrast, Filipinos are less materialistic, more engaged in the lasting pursuit of personal happiness, and have more interest in political affairs. In the recent presidential election in 2016, over 80 percent of electorate came to the poll station to vote for their favored candidates. Both Chinese and Filipinos have benefited from and at the same time have been hampered by their respective ethos. At any rate, these dispositions complement each other and may be a bridge for mutual learning. If the Chinese were to reduce their excessive pragmatism, they may improve their political and social life. In contrast, Filipinos may benefit from personal wealth and overall economic development, which will, I believe, lay down a solid foundation for democracy and freedom.