

“SAVING FACE” (面子 MIANZI) AND CHINA’S FOREIGN RELATIONS: A CASE STUDY OF THE WEST PHILIPPINE SEA DISPUTE AND THE RESPONSE OF THE BENIGNO AQUINO III ADMINISTRATION

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to understand the impact of the behavior of “saving face” and how it has motivated China’s responsive measures in foreign relations. Considering the behavior of China, through the lens of Confucianism, this paper analyzes the public castigation of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) by the Philippines under the administration of Benigno Aquino III regarding the South China Sea. The instance was said to have triggered China’s assertiveness and made their presence more permanent by reinforcing their structures in said disputed area. China’s behavior of “saving face” and other related events to the South China Sea (SCS) dispute with similarly arrogant responses will also be looked into. Hoping it may provide a more in-depth

understanding and alternative view of Chinese foreign policy that can help external foreign bodies navigate their way better when it comes to dialogue and negotiations with the People’s Republic of China.

Keywords: *China Foreign Policy, saving face (面子 mianzi), Confucianism*

Introduction

China’s foreign relations in recent years have been criticized to have taken on an arrogant attitude when it comes to addressing issues on an international level. The South China Morning Post columnist Philip Bowring asserted, “China’s current behaviour vis-à-vis its South China Sea neighbours is aggressive, arrogant and smacks of Han chauvinism and ethnocentrism. Far from being an expression of national pride, it is giving patriotism a bad name.” (Bowring, 2016) In many cases, this attitude is said to be attributed to the behavior of “saving face” (面子 *mianzi*). This is a concept found to be rooted in the long-time culturally ingrained philosophy of Confucianism in Chinese history and society. Featured throughout the paper are sayings by or developed from Confucius’ concept of face.

In revisiting Chinese thoughts and history, which was much influenced by Confucianism, this paper intends to understand the impact of “saving face” and how it has motivated China’s responsive measures in foreign relations. One of the issues of focus for discussion is the public castigation of the People’s Republic of China

(PRC) by the Philippines under the administration of Benigno Aquino III regarding the South China Sea. This particular instance was said to have triggered China's assertiveness and made their presence more permanent by reinforcing their structures in said disputed area. China's behavior of “saving face” and other related events to the South China Sea (SCS) dispute with similarly arrogant responses will also be looked into.

Findings of this study will be used to explain the continuing persistence of Confucian philosophy and the mentality of “saving face” in Chinese foreign relations. While China continues to have a rising presence on the world's center stage, research on the country's political philosophy would prove to be of value for those seeking to understand China's outlook and stance in the international arena. This is important as it may provide a more in-depth understanding and alternative view of Chinese foreign policy that can help external foreign bodies navigate their way better when it comes to dialogue and negotiations with the People's Republic of China.

The West Philippine Sea dispute

On the eighth of April 2012, Chinese fishermen were sighted in the Scarborough Shoal considered to be part of Philippine territorial waters. A Philippine navy warship was then sent to investigate.

“The Philippines says its main naval vessel is engaged in a stand-off with Chinese surveillance ships at a disputed South China Sea shoal. The Philippines said its warship

tried to arrest Chinese fishermen anchored at the Scarborough Shoal, but was blocked by the two surveillance boats. Both countries dispute the ownership of the shoal, which lies off of the Philippines' northwestern coast. The Philippine government said it would "assert sovereignty" over the area. Philippine Foreign Secretary Albert Del Rosario said after meeting Chinese ambassador Ma Keqing on Wednesday that both countries were committed to finding "a diplomatic solution" but negotiations were at an "impasse". The Philippines had summoned Mr. Ma on Wednesday to lodge a protest over the incident. However, China maintained it had sovereign rights over the area and asked that the Philippine ship leave the waters" (McGeown, 2012).

What could have been a simple arrest quickly turned into a tense three-month standoff between Philippine and Chinese vessels (Mogato, 2016). It started off with eight fishing vessels in the Scarborough lagoon being sighted by a Philippine navy surveillance plane. This was responded to by deploying the country's largest warship the BRP Gregorio del Pilar, which apparently was a recent acquisition from the United States of America. (*Philippine warship in standoff with China vessels*, 2012) Two days passed, sailors of the Philippine warship went aboard the suspicious vessels to inspect and confirmed there to be illegal activities being committed. And then

soon after, Chinese Coast Guard maritime surveillance ships “Zhonggou Haijian 75 and Zhonggou Haijian 84” placed themselves in between the vessels creating an even worse deadlock right off the coast of Zambales province. Based on the news account from the Associated Press above, resistance from China could already easily be manifested based on the actions taken on their part.

Responses made by the Aquino Administration

Following the incident, the Philippine government, under the leadership of former president Benigno Aquino III, filed for an arbitration case against China in April 2013 and shut down all forms of communication with them. On July 7, the Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague began deliberations on not just the Scarborough Shoal but areas of the Spratly Islands wherein China had built artificial islands. Below is a news article that describes China’s response.

“BEIJING — An international tribunal in The Hague delivered a sweeping rebuke on... China’s behavior in the South China Sea, including its construction of artificial islands, and found that its expansive claim to sovereignty over the waters had no legal basis... It was the first time the Chinese government had been summoned before the international justice system... Speaking at a meeting with European leaders, President Xi Jinping was defiant, reasserting China’s claim to

sovereignty over the South China Sea “since ancient times,” the state-run People’s Daily reported. His remarks echoed a statement from the Foreign Ministry. The tribunal’s decision “is invalid and has no binding force,” the ministry said. “China does not accept or recognize it.” (Perlez, 2016)

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) was clearly not having it. China had been shamed in an international court for the first time. Their response? Of course, it was but only to reject the ruling. According to Bonnie S. Glaser, a senior adviser for Asia at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington, “Xi Jinping has lost face here, and it will be difficult for China to do nothing... I expect a very tough reaction from China, since it has lost on almost every point. There is virtually nothing that it has won” (Perlez, 2016). In an attempt to gain international support and leverage, Aquino thought it a good idea to call out China on its actions by bringing up the issue on a silver platter to a forum of international relations where major world leaders gathered and wherein the issue could be more openly and publicly scrutinized.

In a forum by the French Institute for International Relations in Paris, the former president Aquino describes China’s moves as dangerous and as acts of aggression in the territorial disputes. He even invited other countries to join the Philippines in its campaign against the PRC. Although in reality he did not explicitly state the

name of the country he was referring to, it was clear to which country his finger was pointing at.

“The Philippines has consistently expressed its concern on rising tensions in our part of the world, due to maritime and territorial disputes in the South China Sea... there is an emerging pattern of aggression bent on establishing new realities at sea and in the air... These violations of international law pose a danger not only to claimant countries, but also to the entire international community, since freedom of navigation and unimpeded lawful commerce are threatened.” Aquino said... Manila has filed several complaints against Beijing’s reclamation activities in Burgos (Gaven) Reef, Kennan (Chigua) Reef and Calderon (Cuarteron) Reef on the Kalayaan islands in the Spratlys... He invited other claimant countries “to join us, to accelerate the resolution of this very long-standing dispute, which has lately caused much tension in our region.” (*Aquino: West Philippine Sea*, 2014)

As it turns out, earlier in that week, the EU called out China and other claimant countries to the West Philippine Sea to abide by international laws like the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). Unfortunately, even so, Beijing continued to act aggressively by brushing off criticisms and rebutting their nine-dash line principle as a basis to claim islets in the disputed area. The best

call then would probably have been to not add fuel to the flame by antagonizing a country that's already been ruled out by an international court. This is especially so when the country refuses to accept the penalties given by a United Nations-backed tribunal because they can without suffering any serious consequence on their part. Speaking of adding fuel to the fire, if China felt they (as Glaser said) lost face due to the international court ruling, what more with the invitation of their number one rival to being a global superpower, the United States of America.

"a man who shoot off mouth, must expect to lose face." –
Confucius (Rainey, 2010)

Involvement of the United States of America

"It was in Panatag Shoal where the standoff between Manila and Beijing started in April last year... Over the past several months, the government issued several diplomatic protests against Beijing, and even brought its case before the United Nations for arbitration. But the Chinese had continuously ignored the protests and snubbed Manila's invitation to send a representative in the international tribunal. And in an effort to avert a direct confrontation, the Philippines agreed to pull out its ships from the shoal... Amid the continuing standoff between Manila and Beijing over the disputed territories, the United States had ratcheted up its

presence in Philippine waters. This year alone, the US has paraded an array of modern warships in Philippine shores as part of its Asian pivot and in ensuring the balance of power in Asia Pacific in the wake of China's growing aggression against its neighbors in South East Asia." (Solmerin, 2013)

The Philippines is known to long have had historically well-established diplomatic ties with the United States from its time being a previous American colony (1891-1912), with the 1951 Mutual Defense Treaty to prove it. It is no surprise then when PNoy thought it would be a good idea to have a global power as an ally in lobbying for international support. Of course, he had to call in no other than Big Brother US to save the day. According to Rappler's Carmela Fonbuena, officials they interviewed were criticizing Aquino's move to ask the US to intervene, which they did by brokering a "face-saving" deal for both parties in the standoff to withdraw their ships (Mogato, 2016). Regarding the standoff, one of the officials recollected that two former Chinese ambassadors cautioned, "whatever problems we have between China and the Philippines, don't bring in the US" (Fonbuena, 2016). The result, the Philippines withdrew their ships, but China did not. The then current Philippine Navy chief Vice Admiral Alexander Pama said,

"[It] ended with the Chinese occupying the shoal in violation of a US-brokered verbal understanding reached with Manila to withdraw all vessels from the

area,"...the US "image, rightly or wrongly, of being equivocal and irresolute" in helping the Philippines further encouraged China.

"This has arguably enabled China to continue to push the envelope on the ground without much effective resistance from other stakeholders around the South China Sea and to a certain extent, legitimizes her actions, to the detriment of small countries such as the Philippines" (Fonbuena, 2016).

PNoy thought with the help of the US the chances of the Philippines to emerge victorious in the dispute would be higher. During former US President Barack Obama's state visit in 2014, Aquino was said to have negotiated a "military-to-military agreement to expand US military presence in the Philippines" (Fonbuena, 2016). As to whether the US was to follow through with their commitment, that remains to be "uncertain" (Cigalal, 2018). The news article goes on further to say that to Aquino's mind it was really about honoring "the supremacy of long-established international law and every nation's right to its waters." (Fonbuena, 2016) However, many feel that maybe Aquino bit off more than he could chew. This is what the Chinese people could probably describe as a "Face-Saving project" (面子工程) by the Philippines in PNoy's attempt to improve the situation. To this day, China maintains its firm claim over the disputed territory. Its hostility

grew for a time under the second Aquino Administration but has since then decreased. The question is, what may have caused it?

“[17-10] 子曰。色厲而內荏、譬諸小人、其猶穿窬之盜也與。(論語)

The Master said: “If you show a tough face, but are weak inside, you are a miserable fellow, like a thief burrowing through the walls.” (The Analects of Confucius 論語)

Understanding China

In order to get a better understanding of China’s perspective, it is important that we look into China’s history and way of thinking to better grasp the process or idea through which China makes their decisions with regard to their foreign policies. In a quote by Wang Gungwu, the historian remarks, ‘Of what other country in the world... can it be said that writings on its foreign relations of two thousand, or even one thousand, years ago seem so compellingly alive today?’ (Jacques, 2012) Wang means to point out how China’s foreign relations, if not its entire existence, is dependent and founded on its history. This is also agreed on in a statement by Chinese scholar Jin Guantao who said, “[China’s] only mode of existence is to relive the past. There is no accepted mechanism within the culture for the Chinese to confront the present without falling back on the

inspiration and strength of tradition.” (Jacques, 2012) This only tells us that we must recognize China’s past and its traditional ways of doing things.

Although current international law demands the PRC (People’s Republic of China) to follow global norms, simply demanding them will not and cannot lead to an automatic implementation because of the way international law works. The international norm of noninterference of a state’s sovereignty in its affairs prevents international organizations and law-policing bodies from actually enforcing laws that were agreed upon by many states. This is all the more, a reality for countries of great power. Herscovitch (2017) maintains that

...China’s limited rejection of the principles of the rules-based liberal world order in the SCS and other discrete cases arguably reflects customary international practice. Great powers typically combine general support with a realpolitik rejection of those principles in certain instances. For example, the United States has failed to ratify UNCLOS, the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty, the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, and other key multilateral treaties and has refused to pay reparations to Nicaragua that were

ordered in 1986 by the International Court of Justice as compensation for intervention in the country's civil war.

If even the United States of America, a great power that typically upholds “rules-based liberal world order” disregards these principles due to national interest, it shouldn't come as a shock or cause for alarm if China would then follow suit (Herscovitch, 2017). It may seem counterintuitive to bother trying to figure out Beijing's agenda at all. However, based on what has already been said, no expectations can be made of them adjusting to the ways of the world anytime soon. Predictions following international norms would can only be deemed of little use. Might as well learn how the PRC deals with foreign relations with “a Chinese character.”

Furthermore, according to Jacques (2012)

“The Chinese scholar Huang Ping writes: China is... a living history. Here almost every event and process happening today is closely related to history; and cannot be explained without taking history into consideration. Not only scholars, but civil servants and entrepreneurs as well as ordinary people all have a strong sense of history... no matter how little formal education people receive, they all live in history and serve as the heirs and spokesmen of history. The author Tu Wei-ming remarks: The collective memory of the educated Chinese is such that when they talk about... Confucius's Analects,

they refer to a cumulative tradition preserved in Chinese characters... An encounter with... Confucius through ideographic symbols evokes a sensation of reality as if their presence was forever inscribed in the text.”

In the book *When China Rules the World*, author Martin Jacques refers to China as a civilization-state being “overwhelmingly a product of its civilizational history” (Jacques, 2012). Jacques claims one of the major binding factors of its identification as such is Confucianism. Confucian tradition has been and continues to be so embedded in Chinese culture and society that it has become necessary to refer to it for assessments and answers. Its relevance is so clearly manifested in the way it continues to shape China even today. It seems odd to be looking back into history and admiring something once ordered to be purged of by former leader Mao Zedong (1893-1976) in the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), as it was considered obsolete by the founder’s own countrymen. Jacques makes a good point as to why and how Confucianism necessarily remains relevant in the People’s Republic of China today. Jacques (2012) further asserts that

“Already, under the previous Shang dynasty, the foundations of modern China had begun to take shape with an ideographic language, ancestor worship and the idea of a single ruler. Chinese civilization, however, still did not have a strong sense of itself. That

was to happen a few centuries later through the writings of Master Kong or Confucius.”

In China’s characteristic of being a civilizational-state bound and tied to Confucianism, we use this particular school of thought as a lens in analyzing the situation better and viewing the issue in a perspective more consistent with that of China and its history.

Confucianism

Confucianism is a school of thought based on the teachings of Confucius and his followers. For Confucius (551-479 BCE) life had just begun and he experienced the declining Zhou Dynasty (1046-221 BCE) up until when the period of Warring States (475-221 BCE) was just about brewing. This was a time of much social unrest, crisis and violence. In his deep desire to restore order, and moral living, Confucius advocated social order, harmony, and good governance with a premium on the practice of social rituals. Consequently, it was traditions from Confucian ethics that became prevalent in terms of social standards in China. This resulted in the emphasis of the primacy of the family system and networks of relationships over the concerns of the individual.

Based on Kongzi’s teachings, benevolence (仁, ren) was man’s greatest moral value and was best expressed through one’s relationships, the most fundamental of which was that of the family. From what is commonly accepted to be the nucleus of society, it was expected and understood that from the family stemmed the basis of

virtue and sociopolitical order. Following this line of thinking, it is only natural that social values have become deeply ingrained into the thinking of an individual. Confucius then established the five basic relationships to reorganize the society. In the words of Bian (2000)

These were the relationships between: 1) ruler and subject, 2) father and son, 3) husband and wife, 4) older brother and younger brother, and 5) friend and friend. A code of proper conduct regulated each of these relationships. For example, rulers should practice kindness and virtuous living. In return, subjects should be loyal and law-abiding.

Based on what was mentioned, one can already see the emphasis on social order and obligations towards one another in relationships. Although the titles are quite specific, the expression of benevolence itself is not limited to those who hold these titles alone. In fact, the rituals practiced within these five relationships were envisioned to be extended outwards and towards one's bigger social circles in life. As Mencius says, to "Extend himself so as to include others" (Feng & Zhao, 2015). Mencius (371-289 BCE), who was the second major philosopher in developing Confucianism, also lived around the same time of chaos and turmoil. He echoes Confucius' value of benevolence that is meant to be practiced through relationships and then extended to the wider networks of society. This is considered to include even the international network.

“Treat the aged in your family as they should be treated, and extend this treatment to the aged of other people’s families. Treat the young in your family as they should be treated, and extend this treatment to the young of other people’s families. (Mencius, Ia, 7.)” (Feng & Zhao, 2015)

A term that has been mentioned, which is quite an integral determinant in China’s foreign relations, is the notion of the “face” or *mianzi* (面子). The concept was cultivated from Confucian teachings, which focuses on harmony and social order (Hwang & Han, 2010). And, *mianzi* is all about relating in an appropriate manner with others all the while striving within the social order. It is generally inferred to be a reflection of one’s character but has come to mean many other things and can be used in multiple ways. This is key to the study in order to be able to pinpoint how things could have been better approached by the Aquino Administration in responding to the matter at hand. Unfortunately, it is difficult to come by direct quotes by Confucius explicitly defining and describing its nature. If there are any, they still require translation by a skilled professional. The next section of this study shall be allocated to narrowing down a definition befitting of this research.

Mianzi (面子)

Before anything else, it is important to note a term similar to *mianzi* (面子), which also means face which is *lian* (臉/脸). *Lian* (臉/脸) is technically synonymous with *mianzi* (面子) and is many times used interchangeably in Chinese texts. It is however more specific to the definition of “sense of shame in relation to social standards of morality and behaviour” (The Cult of Face in China, 2018) For this research’s purpose, this study may include Mandarin phrases that contain this character. As *mianzi*’s meaning of face is not strictly limited to the definition provided nor is there a strict definition of it anywhere. Its English term of “face” is also represented through a number of Chinese characters and can be extended to one’s name, reputation and other things that will eventually be mentioned as the study continues throughout this paper.

Lu Xun, the father of modern literature, characterized the “face” as the “guiding principle of the Chinese mind” and is “a word we [Chinese] hear often and understand intuitively, so we don’t think too much about it.” However, Westerners seem to have a tougher time comprehending what it is exactly although they have been using the term. Lu Xun commented, “Recently foreigners have begun using this word, too... but apparently they’re still studying its meaning. They think that it is not easy to understand.” For everyone’s convenience, the term shall be expounded on in this section beginning with an anecdote by Lu Xun.

“People say that during the Qing Dynasty foreigners would go to the Zongli Yamen [the Foreign Ministry of imperial China] when they wanted to put forward requests. If their demands were rejected, they would threaten Qing officials, who would then get scared and comply at once. Yet they would let the foreigners go out through a side door and not through the main door, so as to show that the foreigners had no face [面子], while, by contrast, China had face and was in a higher position.” (Teon, 2017)

In Lu Xun’s anecdote above, he points out that, when the Qing Officials had the foreigners leave through the side doors, this was more for the Chinese to maintain their *mianzi* more than to prove who had real power. It was their way of avoiding giving the West recognition of their superiority in order to save their own *mianzi*. *Mianzi* is generally social recognition of status, prestige and influence that can be attained by living a cleverly maneuvered life of success and its exhibition. (Teon, 2017) (Hsien)

Hsien, anthropologist and author says, “For this kind of recognition ego is dependent at all times on his external environment.” More specifically, it is based on one’s dignity measured against expectations of their specific social roles within certain situations raised by society. It also works as a way of relation to others as it is “a measure of closeness, of status, which is regulated by “propriety” (Teon, 2017). Teon then describes a loss of face to be

“condemnation by the group for immoral or socially disagreeable behavior.” One can now get a faint idea of what and how *mianzi* works. Another term found through research to note is “shared face”, a collective *mianzi* which means if one is to lose face, the rest of the group one is affiliated with will be put to shame (Understanding the Chinese Culture). This can include one’s family, company, or even one’s country. In a more comprehensible definition, Keith Warburton of the Business Magazine defines it as such:

The concept of face can be better understood with reference to China being a massively hierarchical society. The position a Chinese person occupies relative to others (e.g. a boss to an employee, or a parent to a child) commands a certain degree of respect and demands certain behaviours. Thus, a director within a local Chinese company will expect their subordinates to politely greet them in ritual fashion on arrival at work in the morning and a parent will expect his or her child to achieve high marks in school. If these expectations are not met, the director or the parent will potentially feel slighted or embarrassed. This would then mean they potentially lose face in the eyes of their co-workers or family.

To tailor the term better to the purpose of this study, this research shall look at *mianzi* in the context of the international arena.

In terms of international relations, researcher Qing Yaqin explains *mianzi* through the concept of "relational power," a concept which he considers to be most important in international relations (IR) (Qin, 2016). Citing Hwang (1987, p. 947) Qin defines "relational power" as power that "...comes from relations, or simply, relations are power" and has "...the ability to change the attitude, motivation, or behavior of others and thus make them conform to one's will during the process of social interaction" (2016). It also involves a constant process of manipulation and managing one's circles to one's advantage. The larger and more intimate the circles, the more VIPs involved, equates to more social prestige. And, it is only in the manipulation of one's circles that one can gain even more "relational power." Qin states,

It is reflected in Chinese society particularly by the term of *mianzi* (face or reputation), which itself is called "the power game" (Hwang 2004). Looking into international society from a relational perspective, therefore, power can be derived from a nation's relational circles: The size of the circles and the importance of actors inside are all related to the *mianzi* or prestige of the nation. An international actor, for example, has *mianzi* and is powerful if her initiative is well received by others. Otherwise, she loses face and is not considered influential. Since power is so important and since relations are power, it is natural for an international

actor to seek, maintain, and expand her relational circles to increase her power.

Gathering the data collected, *mianzi* (面子) can be encapsulated to being one's reputation and ability to influence one's social environment through prestige and social status regulated by one's dignity and propriety within the social order. Fully equipped with the terms' definitions, the research can now proceed to analyzing the issue of the disputed West Philippine Sea and where the problem lies in how the Aquino Administration approached it.

“好大的面子三张纸画个人头

... Said of a person who enjoys a good reputation and much respect.” (Berliner, 1970) Three sheets of paper to paint a man's big face.

Responding to China's Way of Foreign Relations

From the very start of the issue, foreign analysts claimed the calls of Aquino to be a tactical mistake when they chose to send a warship over a civilian vessel. For a country to send a warship to suspected poachers, it sends off so many red flags for a fight. It's a pretty bad move in terms of diplomacy, which is what was the appropriate response given that these were not Chinese military ships although they were involved in illegal activities. Sir Harold Nicolson, legendary British diplomat, counselled on being a diplomatist, or someone who is discerning and rational when it comes to negotiations or

relationships, one must be "...be precise. He must leave no room for misunderstanding" (Nicolson, 1963). In the foreword, Sir Nicolson himself was described to have a reputation of "clear judgment, industry and personal congeniality beyond that of any of his contemporaries" (Nicolson, 1963). Clearly, there was room for misunderstanding as the move prompted China's alarm, which instigated the three-month long standoff.

In an interview by Rappler, Supreme Court Senior Associate Justice Antonio Carpio exclaims that China's moves were probably pre-meditated and all part of a scheme to justify its control over the disputed waters. He said "China is actually waiting for other countries to make a little mistake and then counter with a huge reply and grab the territory. If you look at the long-term strategic action of China, you know that they are out to control the entire South China Sea" (Fonbuena, 2016). However, these were all just baseless assumptions made by officials. Although Aquino was able to bag international support, which granted the Philippines a day in the Permanent Court of Arbitration in July 2012, a nameless former diplomat criticized how blown out of proportion the issue has gone to Rappler (Fonbuena, 2016).

If I'm going to grade the president, he's an epic failure... My metric is simple. What a president needs to do is to avoid a skirmish in the West Philippine Sea and make sure we don't lose territories. Where are we? We're engaged in a word war with our neighbor. We filed a case. Our fishermen can no longer go to Scarborough Shoal. China is reclaiming 7 areas," the former diplomat said.

“不要脸

Literally: Does not want face.

Said of a person who has no sense of shame” (Berliner, 1970)

Analysis

Prior to anything, it must first be established that whether or not China’s move to create a standoff against the Navy warship was premeditated, sending a warship is an obviously wrong move. When one sends a warship, then one is asking for a war, and a war from small probably harmless poaching vessels to be exact. This action gives the wrong signal and gives scheming countries good reason to attack. This action was not well thought out.

Secondly, in terms of foreign relations it is common knowledge that the Chinese way of doing things is to do things bilaterally, between one country and another, and negotiations are to be done behind closed doors. Just like the anecdote by Lu Xun, it’s all about showing their *mianzi* and strength given their ambition in the international arena. Additionally, when the Philippines had called in the US to intervene, this became a major slap to the *mianzi* of the PRC. As Herscovitch (2017) argues

The risk of the SCS dispute morphing into a major military conflict increased with the Obama administration’s “pivot” to Asia. U.S. officials displayed greater willingness to

criticize and challenge China's territorial and maritime claims and actions in the SCS. Among other initiatives, the United States stepped up its diplomatic opposition to China's SCS policy, reaffirmed its commitment to resolving the SCS dispute in accordance with international law, and sought to bolster the maritime surveillance and defense capabilities of Southeast Asian claimant states.

It's as if they were playing dirty by bringing in another country to confront China and fight their fight for them, when in the first place they brought out a warship. What's worse is the general contention from the bipolar powers between the United States of America and China together with the race to be the world hegemon.

Thirdly, it was bad enough the Philippines brought an unwanted guest to the party, Manila had its Tribunal from the Hague and won. As mentioned, it was the first for China to be summoned before an international court of justice, and they even lost the case. That's a big loss of “face” for them. Also, for a population as big as China's, that is about 1.4 billion people to govern over who revere the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to protect their age-old civilizational-state. The inability to do so means the inability of the PRC to fulfill obligations and its purpose to its people. That is a very high-level loss of *mianzi* on their part. It's basically setting oneself up for protests, social and political unrest, which equates to failure. This is why China will not ever conform to international laws and the Hague ruling verdict. To them, it will be the ultimate loss of “face” as that

means it has bowed down and recognized another body as more superior. Basically, by doing this, China loses every ounce of dignity through its "face" to both the international stage and more importantly its people. All this resulted in China's arrogant and aggressive response to the entire situation.

Conclusion

"MANILA, Philippines – Less than two months before his term ends, President Benigno Aquino III warned that it would be "political suicide" for any Philippine leader to give up the country's claim on the West Philippine Sea (South China Sea)...

The President said: "Should we push? There is a theory that China will tend to push and if you bend, they will push some more. So we've had to weigh so many things. How to not exacerbate the situation. How do you give them enough room so that the idea of loss of face does not happen? It's a work in progress" (Esmaguél, 2016).

The right answer to this statement by Aquino is no. No, one should not push more. At least not in the way the Aquino administration handled it then. Public confrontation is always a no-no in Chinese foreign affairs because just as it is with people, if one confronts someone to their face, that can be considered as an attack while they are vulnerable, and it is done with the aim to publicly

shame. The bilateral and behind-closed-doors talks exist specifically for negotiations and renegotiations to avoid these kinds of things. Unfortunately for the Philippines, China is at an advantage on all levels. They can actually choose to do as they please.

Causing China to lose face with no back-up plan on how to work things out afterwards, was definitely asking for trouble. As Qin described earlier, *mianzi* is a measurement of closeness, and the Philippines was in fact not deniably un-close to China. But, *mianzi* also is a power game and a game that is very dynamic and sensitive. As such, it is important to play by the rules because failure to do so can have serious consequences in earning back one's status, prestige, and influence. With China's position in the global order, it wouldn't be realistic to for the Philippines to expect to emerge as the victor. To emerge with something, considering the actions taken by the Philippines, would be something. In a negative light, it may seem as if we are at China's mercy, considering the idea that they can plant their flag on every piece of territory they find. This is in reality not the case. A policy analysis entitled "A balanced threat assessment of China's South China sea policy" by the CATO Institute, points out how in putting aside the South China Sea dispute, China is actually found to be a strong supporter of international institutions and norms. This includes, according to Herscovitch (2017)

...(a) enthusiastically pursuing bilateral and multilateral free trade agreements and membership in the World Trade Organization, (b) extensively contributing to the

ongoing multinational anti-piracy operation in the Gulf of Aden, (c) becoming one of the largest financial and personnel contributors to United Nations peacekeeping missions, and (d) demonstrating leadership in post-global financial crisis efforts to govern the global economy via initiatives like the inaugural G-20 leaders' meeting in 2008.

As it turns out, the issue really could have been handled better by the Aquino administration. Although China has taken great interest as a claimant to the disputed territory in the West Philippine Sea, Beijing has none such interest in developing military conflict with the those in its region. They merely want to ensure their chance to establish themselves with trade routes in the region. The CATO Institute analysis stated: "Although China's South China Sea policy is inconsistent with some of the norms and institutions of the rules-based liberal world order, Beijing does not seek to undermine this order as a whole and remains supportive of key elements of the international system" (Herscovitch, 2017).

Perhaps, if more research was done, the entire situation could have been avoided. It seems although PNoy was talking about "loss of face," he didn't really understand the weight and meaning of the concept to China and its foreign relations. In her Rappler article Fonbuena (2016) noted that one of the officials she interviewed "admitted that a better understanding of China would have made it

clear that bringing in the US "almost immediately" would not have helped."

“人要面树要皮

Just as a tree needs a bark to survive, man needs face

Man needs a good reputation in order to survive.”

(Berliner, 1970)

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