

philippine studies

Ateneo de Manila University · Loyola Heights, Quezon City · 1108 Philippines

Interview with Benito Lim
Philippine Citizenship through Mass Naturalization,
a Dictator's Largesse?

Filomeno V. Aguilar Jr.

Philippine Studies vol. 60 no. 3 (2012): 391–415

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Interview

FILOMENO V. AGUILAR JR.

Benito Lim

**Philippine Citizenship
through Mass Naturalization,
a Dictator's Largesse?**

On 11 April 1975, with the Philippines two and a half years into martial rule, Ferdinand Marcos issued Letter of Instruction (LOI) 270, officially titled “Naturalization of Deserving Aliens by Decree.” It marked the turning point in the quest of ethnic Chinese and other “aliens” living in the Philippines to acquire Philippine citizenship. In lieu of the cumbersome and costly judicial process, Marcos ordered a simple procedure that enabled mass naturalization. After campaigning for years to gain this right, ethnic Chinese almost overnight could become Filipino citizens, but it had to come from a dictatorial regime. Benito O. Lim, then a 38-year-old professor at the University of the Philippines Diliman, became a key actor in a historic process. In an interview conducted on 20 July 2012, with subsequent conversations held on 1 and 14 August, Lim explains the broad context that led to this unprecedented policy, illustrated by aspects of his own personal history.

FA There has been no written account of this episode in Philippine history, so can you tell us the background of what happened in the 1970s that led to the opening of diplomatic ties with the People’s Republic of China (PRC) and President Marcos signing LOI 270, which allowed mass naturalization? What led to that LOI and could you explain why it was Marcos who granted mass naturalization to ethnic Chinese and other foreigners in the Philippines?

BL This is going to be a long story. The circumstances that led to Marcos’s decision to issue the mass naturalization law were part of broader social, economic, and political realities in the 1960s and the 1970s. At that time most of the world, especially the West, depended on oil imported from the Middle Eastern countries. These countries, realizing that this resource is vital to world economy and that it is nonrenewable, decided to organize themselves into the Oil Producing and Exporting Countries (OPEC). And in order to negotiate for more favorable returns for their oil exports they decided to form a cartel in 1970. Together with the combined efforts to negotiate for better terms with oil-importing countries, the OPEC also organized the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC) whose efforts included

mobilization of Muslims around the world for mutual social and economic assistance. Clearly, the OPEC was using their oil reserves as an instrument of foreign policy. Then US Sec. of State Henry Kissinger panicked. His views shared by many top US policy makers triggered animosity, if not hostility, toward oil-rich countries that happen to be mostly Muslims. In fact, Samuel Huntington’s book, *The Clash of Civilizations [and the Remaking of World Order]*; Simon and Schuster, 1996] raised the “specter of Islamic jihad.” The US and western European policy makers believed that, next to Communism, Islam was the other imminent threat to their security.

These external global events coincided with the growing militant consciousness of Filipino Muslims, who had long harbored resentment toward “the Christian-dominated government” they believed had ignored their demands for a fairer share of the country’s resources. They also believed that the Philippine government deliberately sent Christianized settlers from Luzon and the Visayas as well as foreign corporations to take over their lands. These grievances helped fuel the formation of the Bangsa Moro organizations, but the most militant was the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) led by Nur Misuari, which advocated armed revolt. What made Nur Misuari’s rebellion even more frightening to Marcos was when he succeeded in obtaining the support of the OIC, the political arm of the OPEC. Misuari was able to persuade the OIC that Marcos and the Christian-dominated government was committing “genocide” against all Filipino Muslims. Military offensives against Muslim rebels, displacement of thousands of civilians, and the bombing of Jolo in 1974 ordered by then Sec. of National Defense Juan Ponce Enrile were proofs enough to persuade the OIC to take action in favor of Misuari.

Misuari was able to win the support of Moammar Khadafy of Libya who was also the target of attack by the US and western European countries. Khadafy allegedly provided the MNLF large amounts of funds, equivalent to the national defense budget of the Philippine Republic.

FA How much was it?

BL I do not know the exact amount, but only what the AFP Intelligence Office claimed. Having won the sympathy of the OIC and with funds supplied by Khadafy, Misuari's MNLF became a stronger fighting force with international clout among fellow Muslims. Misuari was even given observer status in the OIC where he presented the plight of the Filipino Muslims. Hence, the OIC and the OPEC cartel were predisposed to limit, if not halt, the export of oil to the Philippines.

We must bear in mind that 80 percent of our oil needs were imported from the Middle East. Marcos was at a loss as to how to prevent the OPEC from imposing a ban on oil exports to the country. He had to prove to the OPEC and the OIC that the Philippine government was not out to "exterminate all Filipino Muslims" as claimed by Misuari but in fact was conciliatory to Muslim demands. Khadafy arranged a meeting between the Philippine government and Misuari. However, Marcos inhibited himself from attending such a meeting, knowing that if he did so it would be construed as recognition of Misuari (whom he considered a rebel) as a "head of state." This is the reason why, instead of sending a high government official, he sent Mrs. Imelda Marcos to the meeting. Khadafy accepted Mrs. Marcos in the belief that she was the official representative of the Philippine government, when in fact she was only his private emissary to assure the OIC that the government was not committing genocide. Mrs. Marcos was the one who negotiated with Khadafy and ironed out the Tripoli Agreement that granted many of the demands of the MNLF. Marcos did not sign the Tripoli Agreement; hence it was not an official treaty binding the government to implement its provisions.

Having negotiated successfully for cessation of hostilities with the MNLF, Marcos had to face another problem, the victory of the Vietnamese communist forces. Member countries of the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) like the Philippines that had fought against communist forces in Southeast Asia (from the 1950s to 1979) had to adjust to the new geopolitical situation. The SEATO was organized by John Foster Dulles to combat communism in

the region. Dulles theorized that if ever one country in the region turned Communist, like a row of domino tiles all the rest would collapse. Dulles further stressed that only US military forces could deter such an eventuality. US withdrawal from Asia following US defeat in the Vietnam War made former SEATO member countries organize themselves into the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), an organization purportedly no longer focused on combating communism, but one that seeks cooperation in social and economic development and ensure peace in the region. Marcos wanted to strengthen the ASEAN as a negotiating bloc to confront common problems such as separatists and rebel groups and, since some members of ASEAN are predominantly Muslim, to negotiate as a bloc with OPEC.

Marcos was a man who considered all possible sources of problems and alternative solutions. He found out that several Western oil-exploring companies had surveyed the Reed Bank (what we recently called Recto Bank) and that the area contained considerable oil deposits. Marcos entered into an agreement with a Swedish company to drill for oil or natural gas. Marcos knew that the islets, reefs, shoals, and others in the South China Sea that we were claiming were not comprehended by the Treaty of Paris. Nonetheless, Marcos continued his negotiations with foreign oil-exploring corporations in the area. This is where the Chinese came into the picture. Once they heard of oil explorations being conducted by the Philippines, they protested. Marcos was confronted with another problem—how to deal with the PRC which claims sovereignty over the entire area of the South China Sea, including portions claimed by the Philippines. He was also worried that the PRC might support the armed rebellion of the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP) and its armed group, the New People's Army (NPA). He sought advice on how to deal with China from his top advisers in the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) and the Department of National Defense (DND). These advisers told him that we could invoke our Mutual Defense Treaty with the US. According to this treaty, "in case of armed attack against the metropolitan area in the Pacific or any vessel thereof, the two countries would consider the situation dangerous to their peace

and security and their respective constitutional processes would take its course.”

Marcos wanted to ascertain what exactly the Mutual Defense Treaty meant by “metropolitan area,” so when Henry Kissinger came to the Philippines, he inquired whether the US would come to our rescue in case the Chinese launched an attack against oil-exploring activities by the Philippines in the area. Marcos was told that the Mutual Defense Treaty covered only the metropolitan area and the Pacific but not the Spratly Islands in the South China Sea. So as early as the 1970s the US had told the Philippines that, if the Chinese were to attack us, the Americans would not automatically defend us over our territorial claims in the South China Sea.

Marcos decided that the best solution was to use diplomacy. Having replaced the anticommunist organization of SEATO with the formation of the more conciliatory ASEAN, this paved the way for opening up diplomatic relations with a communist state [cf. Benito O. Lim, “The Political Economy of Philippine-China Relations,” in *China’s Economic Growth and the ASEAN*, edited by Ellen H. Palanca, 271–301; Philippine APEC Study Center Network and the Philippine Institute for Development Studies, 2001].

- FA** Did Marcos discuss with the Americans that he was considering the opening of diplomatic ties with the PRC?
- BL** Not yet. First he tried to enlist the opinion of his ministers. He consulted Salvador P. Lopez who was the foreign secretary of Pres. Diosdado Macapagal. Lopez was against opening diplomatic relations with the PRC and wrote an aide-memoire to Marcos. I learned about Lopez’s aide-memoire from then Executive Secretary Alejandro Melchor who asked me to go over the document, study it, and write a reply. In addition, Gen. Romeo Espino who was Chief of Staff also submitted his opinion, and so did former Philippine Ambassador to Taiwan Narciso Ramos. All three gentlemen suggested that, if ever the Philippines would open diplomatic relations with socialist countries, it should be with the USSR and Eastern Europe first and

that it was prudent to postpone opening diplomatic relations with the PRC, given China’s close proximity to the Philippines and the risk it might influence the ethnic Chinese in the country. At that time the Bureau of Immigration estimated there were 125,000 overstaying Chinese in the country. The Philippines had long established diplomatic ties with Taiwan, known as the Republic of China. During the presidency of Elpidio Quirino, Taiwan was allowed to supervise, oversee, and manage all Chinese schools in the country. Taiwan sent its own teachers and textbooks and devised the curricula of these Chinese schools. Naturally, most Chinese schools in the Philippines propagated anticommunist teachings. Another objection posed by the three aide-memoires was the suspicion and fear that, once the Philippines opened diplomatic ties with PRC, Chinese schools in the Philippines would be used to indoctrinate ethnic Chinese in communism.

- FA** The citizenship of ethnic Chinese in the Philippines was also tied to Taiwan.
- BL** Ethnic Chinese in the Philippines had no choice but to become citizens of Taiwan, the Republic of China, unless they would go through the difficult and expensive process of naturalization. Philippine diplomatic ties with Taiwan had an adverse effect on the citizenship status of native-born Filipino citizens. Taiwan citizenship laws stipulate that any female married to a Taiwanese citizen automatically becomes a Taiwanese citizen. My wife, Aurora Roxas-Lim, lost her Filipino citizenship by virtue of marrying a Taiwanese citizen like me.
- FA** Did the objections to opening up diplomatic relations with China raise the possibility that the PRC could send spies and use the ethnic Chinese as a fifth column?
- BL** It was precisely because of the fear of communist espionage that the military strongly objected to diplomatic relations with China, followed suit by Salvador Lopez and the Federation of Filipino Chinese Chambers of Commerce (FFCCC) many of whose leaders

were pro-Kuomintang and fiercely anticommunist. Well, I know because my own father was a member of the Dagupan branch of the Kuomintang, which indicated the extensive influence of Taiwan on ethnic Chinese in the Philippines. The writers of the aide-memoires also pointed out that during the Second World War the Japanese used resident Japanese in the Philippines as spies for the Japanese Imperial Army. They claimed that a similar situation could happen if we opened diplomatic ties with the PRC.

Marcos was not totally convinced by the three aide-memoires and sought another opinion. At that time I was teaching Contemporary China at the Asian Center of the University of the Philippines, a course that attracted many students and apparently was being monitored by the military. Information about courses on the PRC at the UP reached Malacañang and that was how Alejandro Melchor came to consult me on how to prepare the groundwork for the opening of diplomatic relations with the PRC. It was decided that the best way to start was to send feelers on whether the Chinese were predisposed to receive the Philippines. The method chosen was through sports.

It so happened that Benjamin Romualdez, younger brother of Imelda Marcos, in anticipation of opening diplomatic ties with the PRC, was aspiring to become Ambassador to China. He asked me to give lectures on China and assigned me to brief our athletes on China and how they should behave in a communist country. That was how we initiated ping-pong and basketball diplomacy. We sent athletes to China to play friendly games. Our athletes were warmly received by the Chinese as if we were never ideological enemies.

Another inducement to opening diplomatic ties with the PRC was oil. The Chinese discovered large deposits of oil in the Daching oil field in the northeast province of Heilongjiang; they informed Marcos that China was willing to sell oil to us at a “friendship price.” This would mean a lot of savings for the Philippines since the Chinese were willing to barter oil in exchange for Philippine copper, coconut oil, sugar, and other agricultural products.

FA Did China need to open diplomatic ties with us?

BL Certainly. China wanted to demonstrate her willingness to befriend Southeast Asian countries after SEATO was dismantled. She wanted to expand her good relations beyond socialist countries in Eastern Europe to Southeast Asia, her nearest neighbors and possible trading partners. Moreover, China stressed that, unlike Taiwan who claimed all overseas Chinese as its citizens, the PRC enjoined all ethnic Chinese around the world to be loyal and pay allegiance to the countries where they were domiciled. The PRC wanted to avoid and put a stop to anti-Chinese riots that occurred in Malaysia and Indonesia in 1965, where thousands of ethnic Chinese were slaughtered.

The other questions raised by Marcos pertained to the allegiance of ethnic Chinese, their views regarding the PRC, their citizenship status, and what the government should do with the Chinese schools in the country. To answer these questions, we conducted a survey. The results showed that majority of ethnic Chinese in the Philippines were apolitical, if not outright anticommunist; that majority did not want to become citizens of the PRC. With respect to Chinese schools based on my study of how Malaysia and Indonesia dealt with similar issues, I proposed that the Philippine government through the Department of Education take over designing the curricular programs and supervise the operations of all Chinese schools in the country. Subjects on politics and culture of China, which were taught from the Kuomintang perspective, were removed, while subjects on Philippine history and culture were highlighted. I also proposed that, in order to facilitate Philippine government control over Chinese schools, ethnic Chinese in the country should be expeditiously naturalized for this would prevent the PRC from using Chinese schools for their propaganda purposes.

FA How big was the survey?

BL The survey was conducted by the Philippine Center for Advanced Studies (PCAS), a policy research agency established by Marcos

in 1974 to help him formulate national policy. Researches were conducted on a variety of issues foremost of which was our foreign relations, especially with communist and socialist states, with the USA and ASEAN, as well as problems on peace and security, economic development, and alternative sources of energy. Since I had been teaching survey courses at that time, I was assigned to undertake the survey not only in Metro Manila but also in several provinces. We enlisted the help of several government departments such as Agriculture, Education, Social Work, and local government units whose field officers were trained by PCAS to conduct the survey to ensure that data were reliable and bias minimized. Our findings showed that 85 percent of ethnic Chinese in the country were “afraid of the communists,” that they opposed the communists for fear that their businesses and properties would be expropriated. Upon learning of the results of the survey and agreeing to the recommendation that all Chinese schools be placed under the supervision of the Philippine government, Marcos decided to proceed with steps to open diplomatic ties with the PRC.

FA Did your survey ask the ethnic Chinese if they would like to become Filipino citizens? Did you consider the possibility that some, perhaps a tiny fraction, might be willing to be a fifth column for the PRC?

BL That is exactly one of the problems raised by the opponents of opening diplomatic ties with China, that the ethnic Chinese could be a fifth column of the PRC. Our survey showed that majority of ethnic Chinese feared communism, so how could they become spies of the PRC? About their preference for Filipino citizenship, we did not ask that question directly, but their answers to the other questions regarding the PRC and their sentiments on communism implied their preferences at that time (1974). We can conclude that 90 percent of those surveyed would prefer to become Filipino citizens rather than citizens of the PRC.

FA But to have a fifth column all you needed would be 5 percent, 10 percent. Did Marcos think about that possibility?

BL No, that issue was not considered. The more pressing problem faced by Marcos at that time besides the MNLF rebellion was the protracted rebellion waged by the CPP and the NPA. He wanted to ask the PRC not to support the communist-led rebellion in our country. So opening up diplomatic relations with the PRC would not only provide us oil at friendship price, but also help weaken the CPP-NPA rebels.

FA Can we go back to the mass naturalization issue? Why was the LOI made applicable to all non-Filipino citizens in the Philippines, thus including South Asians for instance? Why not focus just on the ethnic Chinese?

BL Perhaps Marcos wanted to show that the LOI did not single out one ethnic group against others, but should apply to all foreigners living in the country. He made it appear that the LOI was an instrument to show “humanitarian concern” for all foreigners of good standing and longtime Philippine residents deserving Philippine citizenship. Moreover, data from the Bureau of Immigration showed that there were very few foreigners who would qualify under the LOI, majority were ethnic Chinese. Thousands of Chinese fled China in 1949 upon the victory of the communist forces. Many fled to the US, Europe, and Southeast Asia. That was the start of the massive influx of Chinese in the country. Pres. Elpidio Quirino agreed to receive Chinese refugees fleeing from the communist regime in China, granting them political asylum. That created the problem of the “overstaying Chinese” in the country.

FA In an article published in the *Far Eastern Economic Review* [“The Race to the Top,” 15 February 1990: 70–71], Rigoberto Tiglao suggested that in exchange for mass naturalization “Marcos received about US\$12 million for services rendered in providing citizenship to ethnic Chinese.” [Tiglao’s source was a “letter marked ‘personal and confidential’ from Ralph Nubla, then president of the Federation of Chinese-Filipino Chambers of Commerce.” However, Nubla was federation president from 1966 to 1970, and in 1975 the federation

president was Yao Shiong Shio.] From your point of view, was there in fact money that passed hands over this mass naturalization?

BL I'm not aware of that. One should ask who would give Marcos money to make him open diplomatic relations with the PRC? I remember when Marcos was invited to speak at the FFCCC, he scolded them for lobbying against his policy to open diplomatic relations with the PRC. Let us suppose that Marcos wanted money, he would have gone to the Kuomintang Party that had more cash and controlled a lot of businesses in the Philippines. The Kuomintang was very powerful alongside the FFCCC that together owned big businesses all over the Philippines. If Marcos wanted money it would have been from Taiwan and its local allies in the FFCCC, not the PRC. What Marcos wanted was to obtain oil from China at friendship price, neutralize the MNLF, and obtain assurance from the PRC that she would not support the communist rebels in our country. In addition, Marcos was trying to convince the PRC to buy our agricultural and marine products.

FA How did you actually recommend to President Marcos that mass naturalization should be the policy?

BL It was through the mediation of then Executive Secretary Alejandro Melchor who was instrumental in the establishment of the PCAS as a policy research arm of Malacañang. Every time Marcos faced a problem or an issue cropped up, he instructed Melchor to send memos to PCAS to undertake research on the issues at hand and to examine problems from several different angles and perspectives. When the impending move to open diplomatic relations with China came up, Melchor called me up and asked me to see him immediately at his office in San Miguel. He sent his driver who brought out the three aide-memoires of Salvador Lopez, General Espino, and Narciso Ramos. I was told that Marcos needed answers to their objections. Melchor gave me two days to come up with my written reply. When I submitted my report, Melchor brought me to the president to whom he said, Meet our China man. He gave my report to Marcos who read it; afterwards he said, Okay, okay.

FA What questions did Marcos ask you?

BL He asked whether mass naturalization would work in the Philippines. I replied that it worked in Malaysia and other countries and that there was no reason why it should not work in the Philippines. President Marcos nodded, he did not say anything; he just dismissed me since he probably wanted to study the matter more closely. Later on, I realized that I overlooked another problem—that of Filipinas married to Taiwanese citizens like my wife who automatically lost her Filipino citizenship by virtue of marrying a Taiwanese citizen. Hence, I raised the citizenship status of Filipinas who became technically Taiwanese citizens by marriage. They too had to be granted Filipino citizenship rights like the Chinese residents in the country. Another issue raised was the extent of Philippine control of Chinese schools. There was fear among administrators of Chinese schools that property holdings and other resources might be expropriated by the Philippine government. The Chinese schools had to be assured that the Department of Education, Culture, and Sports (DECS) would only supervise and oversee the curricula to make them conform to Philippine standards and regulations, and all the rest would be left to the discretion of their own school administrators and officials.

FA To become naturalized under the LOI, what did one have to do or undergo?

BL Well, one should have the following qualifications: mature age; no criminal record; must have a source of income, livelihood, or profession; and must have some knowledge of any of the Philippine languages and culture, and so on. The LOI was framed by then Solicitor General Estelito Mendoza. As an aside, Marcos considered Estelito Mendoza and Blas Ople as two of the brightest among his cabinet members, and they were the ones he listened to. Mendoza is considered as the legal luminary by many Filipino lawyers.

FA Did Estelito Mendoza discuss the LOI with you before he made the final draft?

BL No, he did not. It was Melchor who discussed the LOI with me and it was with Melchor that Mendoza discussed the LOI.

FA Did Melchor show the LOI to you for comments?

BL No. After I submitted the recommendations and answered the issues raised by the three aide-memoires, and suggested mass naturalization and placing all Chinese schools under the supervision of the Philippine government, Estelito Mendoza framed the LOI and then Marcos signed it.

FA Do you think Marcos was aware that for many years people—and ethnic Chinese at that time—had already been talking about Philippine citizenship? You know, the whole debate between assimilation and integration, was he aware of that?

BL Yes. Marcos knew very well about the problems many ethnic Chinese faced in acquiring Filipino citizenship. He knew how difficult and how expensive the process was. I knew how expensive it was to apply for citizenship. In the late 1950s when I was an instructor at UP I applied for naturalization. I had to get clearances from so many government agencies beginning with the UP, then with the police of Quezon City, the Philippine Constabulary, the Dagupan police, the NBI, and from agencies that were later on abolished, the Anti-Dummy Board and the Investigating Board of Anti-Filipino Activities. The police interviewers had about 100 questions and picked out the most obscure ones. They were clearly skeptical that an ethnic Chinese could answer all of their questions. Not only did I answer all questions but I even corrected them about the precise location of the Cry of Balintawak, which should be at Pugad Lawin in Caloocan. The policeman said, “Pilosopo ka, ha (You impertinent fellow)” and said, “Are you a communist?” I replied, “Not yet.” The police officer was flustered, but he cleared me anyway.

FA If you were not yet a Filipino citizen, how come you were employed by the Philippine government?

BL Although the University of the Philippines is a government institution, it has its own charter as an independent academic and scholarly institution, so the UP is free to employ faculty of whatever nationality it considers qualified to teach.

FA Why did you not pursue your naturalization with the courts?

BL According to my lawyer, the judge who was handling my petition wanted a bribe of P20,000. How could I afford such a large sum of money when my salary at UP was only P300 a month? Even though I had the help of the best lawyers from the UP College of Law, they were unable to help me make the judge attend to my case. I should also add that ethnic Chinese seeking Filipino citizenship were often objects of ridicule. The interviewers did not ask important questions about Philippine history and society. Most of the questions were downright silly, like asking the Chinese to name three animals beginning with “M.” The expected answer was “Manok, Maka, Mamoy” (*manok*/chicken, *baka*/cow, *baboy*/pig). They also asked me to sing the Philippine National Anthem. So I replied, “What version do you want? Spanish, English, or Tagalog?”

FA Which version did you sing?

BL I sang “Bayang Magiliw.”

FA Looking back into your own role in making mass naturalization possible, what do you think of it now?

BL Certainly the mass naturalization law helped the longtime resident Chinese and other foreigners. Beginning with the Spanish colonial period, the Chinese were restricted from engaging in the professions (such as medicine, law, engineering, and the like) and most of all in the government bureaucracy. But Chinese who converted to Roman Catholicism were encouraged to enter the priesthood to minister to other Chinese and eventually the Spaniards hoped that they would go to China as missionaries. The Chinese were confined to trade (like itinerant vendors, *sari-sari* [convenience] stores), crafts

(tailoring, metal work, masons, carpentry), services (cooks, bakers, barbers, *cargadores* [stevedores]), and small processing activities (rice milling, sugar milling, wine making, pickling, and vinegar making). The practice of restricting Chinese entry into the professions was continued by the US colonial regime and the successor Philippine state. As late as the 1970s many Chinese professionals in all kinds of disciplines like medicine, dentistry, engineering, chemistry, and so on were barred from taking professional board exams and could not therefore obtain licenses to practice their profession. I will only cite one example to demonstrate how erroneous this kind of policy was. The son of Mr. Lu, the owner of the largest coconut-oil extracting company in Cebu, graduated as an engineer and wanted to take the board examination. He was turned down. No amount of appeal by the father could persuade the examination board to allow the son to take the test. Frustrated by this rebuff, the son immigrated to the US where he took and passed the board exams, then in less than ten years he became vice president of Intel, a big multinational corporation. I believe that our government should not bar anyone from pursuing his or her career and profession based on race and citizenship. The US, Japan, and Germany, for example, attract the best and the brightest immigrants to help them advance in science, technology, manufacturing, industry, and many important endeavors for socioeconomic development.

There is still the prevailing misconception that the Chinese in the Philippines as an ethnic group monopolize and even have a stranglehold of the Philippine economy and that this has been the case since the Spanish period. Little is said about the roles of other nationalities like Spaniards, Americans, British, Japanese, Koreans, and other nationalities. O. D. Corpuz wrote in the same vein. When I was a student of Teodoro M. Agoncillo I decided to study if the Chinese indeed controlled the Philippine economy at that time. I read as much as I could and examined Spanish documents to obtain as much information about the Philippine economy during the Spanish period. My findings showed that the biggest companies in large-scale commercial agriculture, manufacturing, import-export businesses, logging, and shipping were British; Americans, who were allied with

the Spaniards and with businesses in Hong Kong that were also British-owned; and Hong Kong Chinese. Chinese in the Philippines were small-scale processors, retailers, distributors of consumer goods, and craftsmen. The Chinese sari-sari store owner and itinerant vendor-distributor were the ones most visible to ordinary native Filipinos who rarely had direct contact with the bigger British, American, and Hong Kong Chinese. After reading my paper, Agoncillo told me to major in history, but I replied that I preferred to study Mass Communication.

FA Did you actually finish Mass Communication?

BL I obtained my Master's degree in Mass Communication from the University of Pennsylvania.

FA But what was your undergraduate degree?

BL I majored in English literature and was president of the UP Writers' Club and served as editor of the *Literary Folio* of the *Philippine Collegian* and the *Literary Apprentice*. My experience growing up as a Chinese in the Philippines demonstrates how much Chinese value going into business above all other human endeavors. After I graduated from high school, my mother insisted that I put up my own business and that my elder brother would help me contact wholesalers and importers from whom I could get goods on consignment, paying them only after I had sold the goods. This was the usual practice among Chinese who were trying to put up their own business. When I insisted on going to college, my mother was furious since she, like most Chinese, looked down on those who finished college but ended up as mere employees.

However much Chinese value business as the best human activity, most of them, including those who have amassed capital like Lucio Tan and Henry Sy, do not venture out to undertake large-scale manufacturing in advanced industrial technology. They are for the most part retailers, distributors of consumer goods, and renters. Ours is a developing country. What we need are not more beer, cigarettes, and shopping malls but industrial manufacturing that can produce

vital goods, equipment, and machinery out of our agricultural and mineral resources.

FA Apart from the economic, what were the other implications of mass naturalization?

BL Many Chinese have gained more self-confidence and are no longer easily intimidated by police, military, and other government agents. Those who have become professionals, doctors, engineers, and lawyers know and assert their rights as Filipino citizens. In fact, after the closure of the US military bases and the American Chamber of Commerce and their businesses weakened under Japanese and German competition, Filipino politicians turned more to the Chinese for financial support. Come campaign season, many politicians appeal to the “kabise” for financial support.

FA What does “kabise” mean?

BL The term developed during the Spanish colonial period when certain Chinese who were well off and had leadership qualities were assigned to collect taxes from their fellow Chinese. Those designated as tax collectors were given the title *Cabesa de Barangay*, which was shortened to kabise, a term that has persisted up to today.

FA What happened to the Kuomintang in the Philippines?

BL After we opened diplomatic relations with the PRC, the Kuomintang still tried to fight a last-ditch battle. But because it was martial law, they could not operate openly. In fact, Marcos suppressed many rabid Kuomintang members. The FFCCC suddenly became pro-PRC.

FA What happened to your father?

BL My father died when I was in grade school. Before he died, he sent me to a Chinese school only for one year, and then decided that among all his eight children one should be raised as a Filipino. So I

was sent to Philippine public schools from elementary to high school. At that time, the Philippine government was about to nationalize all retail trade, so my father had the foresight to prepare me to become a Filipino citizen.

FA What was your birth rank? You said there were eight of you?

BL I was seventh. Most of my siblings by the way were valedictorians in the Chinese schools, except me for I was sent to public schools where I somehow passed even though I was not proficient enough in Filipino languages and English. I graduated high school at 14 and enrolled in UP. People had the mistaken notion that I was a genius to be in college at that age.

FA When did your father say that you be the Filipino out of the eight children? Were you all small then?

BL Only my two sisters and I were small, the others were already married. My elder brothers were my father’s assistants. What made my father decide to raise me up as a Filipino was the anti-Chinese attitude of many Filipinos at that time. Chinese were ridiculed if ever they spoke Chinese in public. Most distressing was the way politicians used Chinese as scapegoats. Every time there was fire in Dagupan, the politicians quickly accused the Chinese as arsonists, charging them that they deliberately set their stores on fire to get insurance.

FA When your father said, “You become Filipino,” did you think about how you could become Filipino? Did you think of going through the naturalization process?

BL I did not think about those things. I just went to school and tried to interact and play with Filipino children. However, I was constantly persecuted, often called names like “Intsik baboy” (Chinese pig). Of course I fought those children and received blows. Sadly, my mother did not understand what actually happened. She punished me for getting into fights.

FA Where did you study high school?

BL At Dagupan City High School. At that time I could speak Pangasinan but not English, but neither did my teachers, so they passed me anyway. My mother did not want me to go to college but my elder brother agreed with me but on condition that I would go to the University of Santo Tomas and study medicine. He asked his friend, a third-year UP College of Law student, to help me enroll in UST. Instead of enrolling me at UST he enrolled me at UP, telling me that UP was the best school.

FA How did you end up teaching in UP and becoming the China hand there?

BL After I graduated from UP with a degree in English Literature, I was recruited as instructor at the UP College of Forestry in Los Baños. I was assigned to teach General Education courses that involved teaching English and Social Sciences. Social Sciences classes in UP covered East Asia China, Korea, and Japan. That made me study China more seriously. After teaching for four years at UP Los Baños, I was recruited by Dr. Ricardo Pascual who was Dean of the UP branch in Tarlac, where I was assigned to teach most of the General Education courses. Then Tarlac Governor Benigno Aquino Jr. converted an old hospital as the college premises. There were many problems at the college. We lacked facilities like a library, laboratory, and there were not enough teachers and administrative staff. So I decided to take up graduate studies in UP Diliman and was lucky to get a scholarship grant by the Rockefeller Foundation to study Mass Communication there.

While I was studying at the College of Mass Communication, I was hired to conduct a nationwide survey among Chinese in the Philippines. We were tasked to find out their sentiments and attitudes about their status in Philippine society, their views on the PRC, on communism, what newspapers and magazines they read, their preferences for radio programs, films, and so forth. I drew up the survey instruments, had them translated into Chinese (Fujian

and Mandarin) as well as Tagalog. I recruited and trained high school students from Chinese schools and we traveled all over the Philippines. Halfway into the survey, I was told that the Rockefeller scholarship funds were exhausted. So I decided to try my luck by applying for scholarship in US universities. Fortunately, I reached a high GRE score that qualified me for a tuition scholarship to study abroad. I applied at the University of Pennsylvania and was accepted in 1969. After obtaining my MA degree I returned home and was hired by UP to teach Mass Communication and Asian Studies at the Asian Center.

FA Why did you not pursue your PhD?

BL My wife Aurora suffered retinal detachment in the US. She went through two operations. The Rockefeller Foundation that supported her studies at Cornell University advised us to return home. No sooner were we home when martial law was declared. My former professor in Sociology, Dr. Ruben Santos Cuyugan, recruited me as a faculty member of the former Institute of Asian Studies. Later, when PCAS was organized by Alejandro Melchor in 1974, I was appointed head of the Division on Basic Research. I was the one who undertook organizing the data bank for PCAS.

FA So, they needed you for research, not for China?

BL Apart from basic research they needed me for China, too.

FA Can you tell us a bit more about the consequences of mass naturalization in terms of identities?

BL Of course the Chinese changed their sense of identity a lot. Philippine citizenship bolstered their self-confidence and no longer made them feel alienated. In fact, through the years, and even before mass naturalization materialized, Filipino bias against Chinese and anti-Chinese sentiments have lessened. Young Filipinos and Chinese studying together in schools and constantly interacting during many other social occasions can only lead to smoother and friendly relations.

Indeed, intermarriages between Filipinos and Chinese were formerly discouraged, if not prohibited. These days they are fully acceptable. More significantly, most Filipino politicians today do not use the Chinese as scapegoat, nor do they provoke anti-Chinese sentiments. That is why some Chinese disagree with Teresita Ang See's use of "Chinoy" to refer to the Filipino Chinese. They feel that the Philippines is their country that provides them their livelihood. Being called Chinoy is a form of self-segregation from Philippine society.

- FA** Going to the maritime dispute in the South China Sea, how do you think the citizenship of ethnic Chinese as Filipinos has affected their stand on this issue?
- BL** Most Chinese in the Philippines are deeply affected by our territorial dispute with China. While a handful may think that the areas contested belong to China, the majority wants a peaceful solution to the dispute. Many of them have held meetings to discuss the problem, especially the FFCCC. They are afraid that the dispute could provoke anti-Chinese sentiment in the country. Since most Chinese businessmen have business dealings with China, they refrain from expressing any form of condemnation of China. What they want is a peaceful solution to the conflict.
- FA** Do you think that mass naturalization would have happened if the country was not under martial law?
- BL** It is difficult to say that martial law was the precondition that enabled Marcos to enact the mass naturalization law. The naturalization process before was very difficult, laborious, and expensive. One needs to engage an astute and well-connected lawyer and should have at least P250,000 and more. Handling naturalization cases was a very lucrative business to many Filipino lawyers, politicians, and bureaucrats. At the same time, many Filipinos looked at Chinese with suspicion. Those involved in processing naturalization papers demanded that Chinese learn, besides English and/or Spanish, Filipino languages, as well as Philippine history and culture even though they knew that

the Chinese did not get educated in a Philippine college. They made the procedures excruciatingly painful and humiliating.

- FA** Apart from the lawyers who handled naturalization cases, who else objected to mass naturalization?
- BL** Some politicians were also against the passage of the mass naturalization law. They made use of attacking Chinese, often blaming them for all sorts of problems like high prices, unemployment, shortages of commodities, and others.
- FA** How did the lawyers and politicians resist?
- BL** Since they could not fight Marcos, they tried to limit the granting of citizenship only to the head of the family. The wife and children were made to undergo the entire process of naturalization. The case was brought to the Supreme Court. Associate Justice Claudio Teehankee was interested in making the Chinese integrate into Philippine society. So, he ruled against the suit that sought to require wives and children to undergo the naturalization process separately. Marcos then issued Presidential Decree 836 on 3 December 1975; it expanded the coverage of mass naturalization to include wives and minor children of the principal petitioner.
- FA** How did the different sections of the Chinese community react to Marcos?
- BL** They loved Marcos who made it easier for them to become Filipino citizens, for it made it possible for them to pursue other professions and even serve in government.
- FA** Did the ethnic Chinese in the Philippines realize that Marcos allowed mass naturalization because it was part of a whole package of opening ties with China?
- BL** Many of them were probably not aware of the connection between mass naturalization and the opening of diplomatic ties with China.

They were just happy that the process was easier and less expensive. The extent of their contacts with the PRC was mainly sending money to their poor relatives in Fujian. China at the time of Mao Zedong was still very poor and concentrated on reconstruction after so many devastating wars.

Marcos had his own reasons for issuing the mass naturalization law. He made sure that the Chinese in the Philippines would not be used as spies or fifth column by the PRC, that Chinese schools would not be instruments of communist propaganda, and he got the assurance of the PRC that it would not support the CPP-NPA rebellion. Moreover, since the US defeat in Vietnam, Marcos had to accommodate the new power structure in the region, which was why he supported the establishment of the ASEAN as a bloc that could negotiate with external powers. He realized too that to stay in power he had to address the many economic and social problems of the country. He knew that Kissinger had already gone to China to pave the way for full US–China diplomatic relations, and that many countries were already trading with China via Hong Kong. All of these required that, if he had to be a credible leader, he also must address the problems that came along with those realities.

FA On that note this ends the interview. Thank you very much.

BL You're welcome. I hope I said something useful to you.



The photo here and the one on page 391 were taken by Estrella "Teya" Sabado of the Ateneo de Manila University Communication and Public Relations Office, whose kind assistance is hereby gratefully acknowledged.

