

PHILIPPINE CULTURAL DIPLOMACY: UNRAVELING ITS FULL POTENTIAL

by Andrea Chloe A. Wong

Cultural diplomacy plays a vital role in international affairs. It is defined as “the exchange of ideas, information, art, and other aspects of culture among nations and their peoples in order to foster mutual understanding.”¹ It serves as an avenue through which states promote their national interests and build relationships with other nations.

As the world becomes more globalized and interdependent, cultural diplomacy is becoming a vital tool in enhancing interaction within the international community. It creates a foundation of trust with other countries, which policymakers can build on to reach political, economic, and military agreements. It also provides a “positive agenda for cooperation in spite of policy differences, creates a neutral platform for people-to-people contact, and serves as a flexible, universally accepted approach towards countries where diplomatic relations have been strained.”²

The growing significance of culture reveals that it is no longer marginalized in the field of international relations. This perception is reinforced by what Joseph Nye calls as “soft power”. It is defined as “the ability to get what you want by attracting and persuading others to adopt your goals.”³ Many countries prefer using soft power to co-opt other states through the promotion of culture and political values, rather than coerce them through military force or economic sanctions. This essentially suggests that “culture is no longer *subordinate to politics*; instead, it provides the *operating context for politics*.”⁴

Such awareness has since prompted a growing number of states to actively promote their culture as a vital component in their foreign policy. They consider it as the “linchpin of public diplomacy, for it is in cultural activities and exchanges that a nation’s idea and image of itself is best represented.”⁵ The significance of culture has consequently induced countries to advance cultural diplomacy in enhancing their international standing. The UK government implements its cultural diplomacy through its British Councils worldwide to boost its diplomatic stature and economic relevance, going beyond Europe and its former colonies in Asia and Africa. Amidst global suspicion and ideological conflicts, the US meanwhile continues to employ its cultural diplomacy to advance American ideals of freedom, individuality, tolerance, and opportunity through its Fulbright programs, Hollywood movies, and multinational corporations such as McDonald’s and Facebook.

As with other states, the Philippines recognizes the value of culture in its global affairs. This paper argues that, through its promotion of cultural diplomacy, the country is abandoning long-held assumptions that culture is inferior to politics. Because of this, it recommends that the Philippines mobilize its cultural diplomacy to boost its international status. This requires planning long-term strategies and implementing high-impact activities in an overarching program that will promote the country’s culture abroad. This paper also contends that, since politics and culture are essentially linked in international relations, the global promotion of cultural diplomacy rests not only in the hands of the Philippine government, but also among the Filipino public and other stakeholders.

The Global Campaign to Promote Philippine Culture

For the Philippines, cultural diplomacy has important functions that can enhance its foreign policy. Cultural diplomacy can help build inter-state relations and develop socio-cultural understanding among people all over the world.

The country can draw on cultural diplomacy to compensate for political differences with other states and counterbalance negative notions about the country. And most importantly, it employs cultural diplomacy to promote the country's identity and distinctiveness especially amidst rapid globalization that tends to standardize cultural expressions, "though such phenomenon also leads to the fragmentation of cultures due to various influences brought about by international migration."⁶

As proof of its important regard for cultural diplomacy, the Philippines has continuously engaged itself with several initiatives related to cultural promotion. In the past decades, the Philippines has signed more than 30 cultural agreements with various countries. It is also active in hosting events and activities in ASEAN that showcase its culture and encourage people-to-people exchanges.⁷ From 2010 to 2011, the Philippines has been the first ASEAN Culture Capital, which projected itself to be the lead advocate for the socio-cultural community pillar of ASEAN.

The potential benefits that the Philippines will gain from cultural diplomacy could enhance the promotion of its national interests abroad. These interests also serve as the basis of the country's policy approaches to cultural diplomacy that include soft power (political), creative economy (economic), and cultural identity (social).⁸ As a small power, it uses cultural diplomacy to court prestige and respect in the international community. As a developing economy, it draws on cultural diplomacy to market its local products and advertise its tourist attractions. As a multicultural society, it employs cultural diplomacy to highlight its diversity and consequently promote understanding and appreciation of its cultural identity, not only among foreigners, but among Filipinos as well.

The long-term prospect in the promotion of Philippine cultural diplomacy looks promising. This is because of an increasingly globalized world reinforced by rapid advances in information and communication technology that make it easier for the country to promote its culture abroad. With the growing value of culture as a positive tool to highlight cultural similarities with other countries, the Philippines can further advance its diplomatic engagement and strengthen its external relations. Moreover, the growing interdependence between culture and economy can also provide potential profits for the Philippines if appropriately incorporated in its cultural diplomacy. In addition, the expanding population of overseas Filipinos can help the Philippine government enhance its cultural relations with other nations.

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Given such opportunities, the country can further maximize the potential of its cultural diplomacy and raise its international profile in several ways:

(1) Incorporating nation-branding strategies in cultural diplomacy

To maximize the potential of its cultural diplomacy, the Philippines should widely project a distinct image of itself by building a "nation brand." A nation brand is defined as "the unique, multi-dimensional blend of elements that provide the nation with culturally-grounded differentiation to its target audiences."⁹ It also enhances a country's image and "gives it the impetus to gain competitive advantage over its competitors."¹⁰

As an important component of cultural diplomacy, the "Philippine brand" would encompass various aspects of its culture and economy. This includes not only the cultural aspects of the Philippines such as art, music, film, food, and clothing, but also its products and places that are estimated to result in tangible profits for the country. In effect, the primary objectives of building a nation brand include stimulating inward investments, boosting exports, and attracting tourists.¹¹

There are already a number of government-initiated ventures and programs that market the various cultural assets of the Philippines. The Department of Trade and Industry's (DTI) Center for International Trade Expositions and Missions

(CITEM) actively markets the country's local products through its major industry promotions such as Design Philippines, Fashion Philippines, and Food Philippines. Through CITEM, Filipino artists and exporters are given avenues to sell their products to foreign buyers. Every year, several trade shows and exhibitions are organized abroad to showcase the Filipino brand of workmanship and artistry infused with both modern influences and traditional inspirations. Meanwhile, the Department of Tourism (DOT) highlights "It's More Fun in the Philippines" campaign in various promotional activities and travel fairs worldwide to lure more foreign tourists to visit the country. This tourism campaign essentially underscores the enjoyable experiences that the Philippines can offer to foreign tourists with its hospitable people and breathtaking sites.

It is therefore crucial for the government to synchronize its nation-branding strategies into an overarching "Philippine brand" and incorporate it in its cultural diplomacy. These include marketing activities, trade shows, and promotional campaigns that should effectively represent the country and showcase the best of what it can offer. These strategies are expected to widely promote a "Philippine brand" that is fun, artistic, and innovative, similar to the global representation of the "Japanese brand" known for its durability, elegance, and precision. These concrete depictions of the Philippines must be emphasized in its cultural diplomacy to visibly portray the country in the international community and to strengthen the value of its domestic goods and services to be exported in other countries.

In addition, integrating a strong "Philippine brand" in cultural diplomacy is important to generate potential benefits for the country. Since a nation brand essentially links culture and commerce, both can reinforce each other to produce a favorable image for the Philippines and at the same time, serve its economic interests. Some of the marketing programs overseas that showcase Philippine exports and tourism can be included as part of the government's cultural promotion. This will result in better recognition for the Philippines, highlighting both its cultural distinctiveness and the competitive advantage of its local products and tourist destinations. Therefore, having a powerful and positive "Philippine brand" is essential in raising the country's global reputation as the world economy is increasingly becoming more competitive due to globalization and trade liberalization.

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(2) Supporting creative industries as part of cultural diplomacy

The Philippines can also feature its burgeoning creative industries in its cultural diplomacy. Essentially, these industries lie at the crossroads of business, technology, and the arts. According to the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), creativity involves "various pursuits with a strong artistic component and any other economic activities that produce symbolic products with a heavy reliance on intellectual property for a wide market."¹² It also divides the creative industries into four segments:

- a. Heritage group- composed of traditional cultural expression, arts and crafts, festivals and celebrations, and cultural sites;
- b. Arts group- includes visual arts and the performing arts;
- c. Media group-encompasses publishing and printed media;
- d. Functional group- covers designs and new media such as software, video games, architecture, and advertising.¹³

With a rich source of artistic and creative talents, the Philippine government can tap into these segments of its creative industry. These can generate global awareness of the country's cultural products, artistic performances, and creative services. These can also potentially create jobs that will consequently benefit the Philippine economy.

The animation industry, for instance, has a great potential to draw in economic benefits for the Philippines and showcase creativity among Filipinos. This industry serves major sectors such as film, television, videogames, and mobile applications (apps) in Japan, Australia, and the US. In 2014, it posted a three percent growth and generated USD 142 million in revenues for the country and employed 10,000 people who work as full 2D and 3D animators,

utilized in the visual development of content for cartoon television shows and animated films for international animation studios.

Given the Filipino animators' competitive quality of services and their professional experiences, they can be tapped to likewise produce television cartoons and animated films with an all-original content that are locally made and globally marketed as a cultural export of the Philippines. For example, the country's first ever all-digital full-length animated feature film "*Dayo: Sa Mundong Elemental*" or "The Wanderer" was created by Cutting Edge Productions, a local animation produced by Filipino animators. Screened during the 34th Metro Manila Film Festival in December 2008, this animated film features images of Philippine mythical creatures as heartwarming characters in a young boy's adventure. Such animated films can be used as part of the country's cultural exports, especially those that feature important aspects of Philippine culture.

In recent years, the government has been cooperating with the private sector to provide support for the local animation industry. The Technical Education and Skills Development Authority (TESDA) and the Animation Council of the Philippines Inc. (ACPI) have worked together to design a curriculum for animators as part of the government's Training for Work program to provide the industry with highly-skilled employees.

In addition, the government is also recognizing the value of ACPI's flagship project called "*Animahenasyon*," an annual competition and exhibition that showcases original Filipino content in animation. For the coming years, it is hoped that the winning entries in the competition will be featured in the country's programs and activities abroad as part of its cultural diplomacy. This will not only enhance the prestige of the event, but will simultaneously enable the government to assist the industry in promoting Filipino animation abroad.

At present, the creative industry in the Philippines generally remains a marginal player in the global market despite the country's inexhaustible pool of talents. Its slow growth is partly due to the fact that "it cuts across multiple economic sectors and does not constitute a cohesive or distinct sector in the traditional sense of an industry cluster."¹⁵ In order to nurture it, the country can start by clarifying the components of this sector and organizing its various stakeholders to effectively map out and implement an industry master plan.

In addition, the limited financial incentives, infrastructure, and technical support from the government and business sector thwart the rapid development of the creative industry in the Philippines. The government could provide assistance through legislative action, tax incentives, or IP policy regulation as the industry expands.¹⁶ The government can also support the industry by marketing its creative products and services overseas, which can generate revenues for the economy and earn cultural and creative distinction for the country.

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(3) Advancing Philippine pop culture in cultural diplomacy

The Philippines can also benefit from featuring not only its traditional, but also its popular culture in its cultural diplomacy. Given the fluidity of culture, the distinction between 'high' and 'popular' culture appears increasingly outmoded. This is because the established institutions of culture in its traditional sense are gradually interacting with popular culture. Therefore, the promotion of cultural diplomacy should not be based on preconceptions about which art forms are worthy of global promotion and government support, "but on cultural values that can manifest themselves in many ways, across many forms and genres."¹⁷ This should be considered in the design and implementation of Philippine cultural diplomacy to effectively adapt to the increasing proliferation of opportunities for global contact and exchanges.

Advancing pop culture in Philippine cultural diplomacy has many advantages. Because of its global reach and mass appeal, pop culture may increase the Philippines' cultural visibility, especially in this digital age of advanced communication that transcends national borders. If projected well, it has the ability to attract international audiences

that may enhance the contemporary image of the Philippines. It can also be used as a prelude to lure foreign interests into learning more about the country's heritage and traditional culture. The Philippines must take inspiration from the global appeal of Japan and South Korea's pop culture that are 'making waves' around the world, employing it as a means to project their soft power and enhance their international images.

In recent years, Philippine pop culture has been gaining prominence with its world-renowned talents and cultural exports in various mediums. Aside from Filipino singers creating a name for themselves abroad,¹⁸ Filipino soap operas are well-received and frequently viewed across Southeast Asia and some areas in the Pacific Islands.¹⁹ Likewise, some of these TV dramas are widely shown in Africa, which are dubbed in French, English, or Portuguese depending on the language spoken in a particular country.

The government can take advantage of the booming popularity of its musical talents and cultural exports by including them in its cultural diplomacy programs. It can coordinate with record companies, TV stations, and film studios and use their products and talents as part of the country's cultural promotion abroad. For instance, the NCCA and the Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA) through its embassies abroad can cooperate with local television networks such as GMA and ABS-CBN in organizing variety shows abroad that feature world-class Filipino talents. Since these media companies provide entertainment, particularly during the Philippine Independence Day celebrations, they can be commissioned to produce unique and artistic performances that appeal not only to the Filipino community, but also to foreign audiences. Aside from featuring popular celebrities, these shows can also include up-and-coming singers, dancers, and stage performers who have outstanding talents that showcase the distinct Filipino flair for the performing arts.

Moreover, the Philippine government can capitalize on the global reputation of Filipino talents through promotional support overseas as part of its cultural diplomacy. It can also assist local entertainment companies and media outlets by offering tax incentives for high-quality cultural exports such as television dramas and films that feature Philippine culture and Filipino values. Such cooperation on the promotion of the country's pop culture is expected to reach a wider international audience through various mediums, which can gradually raise the Philippines' cultural profile abroad.

(4) Crafting country-specific programs in cultural diplomacy

The Philippines must also continue to create a variety of programs in its cultural diplomacy tailored for specific countries or regions. This requires appropriate yet innovative activities that are designed for different nations, taking into account their society's uniqueness and cultural sensibilities.

This should not be a difficult task for the Philippines since its multicultural features can be used as references for country-specific programs. Essentially, the country can capitalize on its rich cultural landscape to explore similarities and differences with other nations. With an Asia-Pacific culture enriched with Hispanic-Latin and Euro-American influences,²⁰ the Philippines shares several historical links with other countries (such as Spain, Mexico, China, and the US), making it convenient to initiate programs that will further reinforce cultural commonalities and historical connections. At the same time, the country can highlight various cultural differences with other nations that should inspire creative activities to advance mutual understanding and stimulate bilateral ties.

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Designing country-specific programs should take into account existing cultural agreements between the Philippines and other countries. This may require reviewing the various cultural agreements that the Philippines has entered into, and reviving those that have long been inactive by initiating programs with the country concerned. Among the various cultural agreements that the Philippines signed with other countries include India (1969), Australia (1977), Bangladesh (1980), Russia (1997), and Czech Republic (2013) among others. Such bilateral cooperation can serve as a guide in

crafting high-impact activities that underscore the uniqueness of both countries and promote better cultural and people-to-people relations. Essentially, these exchanges are expected “to appreciate points of commonality, and where there are differences, to understand the motivations and humanity that underlie them.”²¹

(5) Promoting Philippine culture among overseas Filipinos through cultural diplomacy

The Philippines can also use its cultural diplomacy as a dynamic tool, not only in relating with people from other countries, but also in developing a strong consciousness of culture and heritage among its people. Recognizing this dual purpose, it could thus cater to different audiences. Aside from the international community, Philippine cultural diplomacy must continuously accommodate the large number of overseas Filipinos and their children who feel the need to revisit their roots and rediscover their identity in order to find meaning and esteem in their existence.²²

To achieve this, various government agencies should regularly initiate innovative programs to encourage awareness and appreciation of the country’s culture and heritage among overseas Filipinos. These programs require continuous cooperation between Philippine representative offices (embassies, consulates and missions) and the Filipino communities abroad to be effective in instilling cultural pride and promoting collective ties and kinship among fellow Filipinos.

One of these cultural initiatives is the *Sentro Rizal*, which is envisioned to be the hub of Filipino culture, history, language and arts around the world. Patterned after the *Alliance Francaise* of France and *Instituto Cervantes* of Spain, *Sentro Rizal* is a repository of Philippine tangible and intangible cultural treasures. Named after the national hero Jose Rizal, the center aims to educate the children of overseas Filipinos about their ethnic roots and to encourage Filipino communities abroad to take pride in Philippine culture. To achieve these objectives, *Sentro Rizal* plays host to various cultural events such as language training, film showing, cooking lessons, poetry reading, and art exhibits. There are about 20 centers overseas, which are commonly located inside Philippine diplomatic posts, with plans for more branches to be established in other countries.

A government-sponsored initiative such as *Sentro Rizal* is a vital institutional endeavor that is expected to stir pride among overseas Filipinos about their culture and identity. This will effectively cater to most Filipinos who have a desire to stay connected to their homeland and yearn for significant reminders of their cultural heritage. This provides an important motivation for the government to use cultural diplomacy to forge and reinforce cultural connections with Filipino migrants all over the world that will in turn motivate them to promote Philippine culture in their various countries of residence.

(6) Engaging Filipinos as promoters of cultural diplomacy

The existence of Filipino diaspora networks spread across the globe represents a precious resource and an important asset for the Philippines in promoting its culture. Therefore, it is vital for the Philippine government to engage its citizens in the promotion and implementation of its cultural programs. Aside from being the target audience of the government’s cultural diplomacy, Filipinos living abroad can also be tapped as propagators of Philippine culture.

There are various ways to mobilize the large population of overseas Filipinos. Aside from seeking financial support from the Filipino communities abroad to fund important cultural programs, government agencies can encourage overseas-based Filipino performers and artists to showcase their talents. They can be tapped to highlight some aspects of Philippine culture in their performances and artworks in their countries of residence. This reflects the value of Filipino migrants as promoters of Philippine culture and global ambassadors for the country.

In addition, the government can push for the collective involvement of Filipinos at home to promote the country’s culture. It must motivate Filipinos to consciously introduce and promote the various local cultures to foreign relatives and tourists visiting the country. While tourism is “everybody’s business,” culture should similarly be regarded as a shared “marketing venture.” This ought to be a national endeavor that would enable the rest of the world to understand and appreciate Philippine culture.

In effect, the promotion of Philippine culture, or cultural diplomacy, is not only the duty of the country's diplomats but also the responsibility of every Filipino. This is especially true as cultural interactions grow naturally and organically, even without government intervention. Trade transactions, tourism flows, student exchanges, media communications, international migration, and inter-marriages – all point to the daily cross-cultural encounters among people.²³ Such realities create more opportunities for Filipinos to represent the country and to shape global perceptions about the Philippines.

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To be credible advocates for the country, it is therefore important for Filipinos to have a strong sense of national identity and cultural pride. This premise underscores an important notion that the ability to relate with other cultures starts from an understanding and appreciation of one's own. Indeed, an empowered citizenry proud of its identity and culture is fundamental in the successful promotion of Philippine cultural diplomacy.

(7) Emphasizing a positive Filipino image to enhance cultural diplomacy

Given their vital role in promoting cultural diplomacy, it is therefore important to emphasize and project a constructive image of Filipinos. Essentially, the image that people create for themselves “brings about the psycho-cultural basis of their strengths and weaknesses, triumphs and failures.”²⁴ As a reflection of national identity, it is therefore important to promote a positive image of Filipinos for “a people's image of themselves tends to become a reality.”²⁵

This can be achieved by constantly echoing anything positive about being Filipino. Essentially, “we have nothing to lose by discovering and constructing the most exalted and inspiring images of ourselves.”²⁶ There are certainly many positive qualities that Filipinos possess. But what is strikingly recognized and appreciated about Filipinos all over the world is our highly relational, people-centered orientation. We are admired for our strong nurturing and caring spirit, which are considered noble and inspiring social images of ourselves. This is reflected in our warm hospitality towards guests, excellence in the services sector, compassion to people in distress, and resilience in times of crisis. Since cultural diplomacy fundamentally reveals a nation's idea of itself to the world, such affirmative qualities and positive values should be the prominent feature of the global image we must promote.

Generally, a nation's identity fails to be appreciated by external observers because of either indifference or overwhelming negative stereotypes. In effect, this image gap tends to produce some unflattering impressions of Filipinos who are commonly seen abroad as unskilled migrant workers from a developing country. Thus promoting a more positive representation of Filipinos through cultural diplomacy is critical in order to counter such stereotypes and to close, or at least reduce, existing image gaps.

Ultimately, an effective cultural diplomacy highlights not only the best of the Philippines, but also the finest among Filipinos. It is therefore important to have a constructive and inspiring image of Filipinos, for it is the people who represent and personify the country to the rest of the world. This is considered vital for Philippine cultural diplomacy to appeal to other nations and consequently counterbalance the negative publicity about the country in the international community.

(8) Coordinating national efforts in crafting and implementing cultural diplomacy

With the increasing importance of culture in its foreign policy, the Philippines must all the more develop and implement a strong, holistic, and well-coordinated cultural diplomacy. All of the various activities must be synchronized and linked to a broader and overarching cultural program. This must be firmly institutionalized to be effective and must be regularly implemented to have a lasting impression. Moreover, cultural diplomacy requires long-term investments and planning for five or ten years to be successful and for its impact to be markedly felt in other countries.

Philippine cultural diplomacy therefore requires collaboration and coordination with different agencies at the government level. These include the DFA, NCCA, and CCP that are tasked to create and implement cultural activities at home and abroad. DTI can also make important contributions in this collective endeavor to integrate the “Philippine

brand” in its trade and investment promotions overseas. Likewise, the DOT should be constantly engaged to incorporate its tourism campaign in the various activities under the country’s cultural diplomacy to attract more foreign tourists. There must also be regular consultations with the Philippine diplomatic posts and the Filipino communities abroad on possible cultural programs for overseas Filipinos.

Moreover, Philippine cultural diplomacy not only requires inter-agency coordination but also government engagement with other stakeholders. These include various educational institutions, civil society groups, business sector, media and broadcasting networks in the country as well as the Filipino associations overseas. Given the country’s perennial problem of limited funding, the government can tap these institutions to generate financial assistance and seek artistic support in the implementation of cultural programs.

In addition, the government can establish a formal mechanism for nationwide collaboration with these stakeholders in the policy-making process as well as the coordination and implementation of activities that contribute to cultural diplomacy. Such formal mechanism is expected to streamline all efforts in promoting cultural programs by prioritizing important countries and regions with the efficient use of the limited resources the country has.

Prospects on Philippine Cultural Diplomacy

Given the increasing importance of culture in foreign policy, the Philippines is expected to mobilize its cultural diplomacy to manage its international affairs. This is considered essential as the country faces the growing cultural dimensions of its national interests within the wider context of globalization. Meanwhile, as the world becomes more interconnected, cultural diplomacy will be an important tool to prop up the Philippines’ distinct identity to the rest of the world. Its relevance is even more evident as Filipino culture is in constant dialogue with other cultures.

(Cultural diplomacy) requires a strategic vision, a multi-dimensional plan of action, a more coordinated approach, a large endowment, and an extensive collaboration among various stakeholders.

In the long term, the Philippines is expected to further develop its cultural diplomacy. This requires a strategic vision, a multi-dimensional plan of action, a more coordinated approach, a large endowment, and an extensive collaboration among various stakeholders. Moreover, to have an effective cultural diplomacy entails commitment, passion, and pride among Filipinos as advocates of Philippine culture. These are regarded as essential elements that will enable the Philippines to realize the full potential and reap the benefits of cultural diplomacy. 🌸

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