

My Chinese ancestry - Family ties & Internationalism

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“It is up to the peoples of both The Philippines and China to reach across the waters and biases that divide us and build bridges pylosed on ideals of solidarity beyond boundaries, internationalism, mutual benefit, and a commons-based ownership and management of disputed natural resources. One way of reaching out is by discovering family ties.”

My great-grandfather’s family name was Lú. His first name was U Teh. He was a Chinese immigrant to Zamboanga town in the 19th century. The way he spelled his name, he might have been of Mandarin linguistic origin rather than Cantonese. He married a Teduray native, Juana Borromeo, one of three sisters from Tamontaka, Cotabato, who moved to Zamboanga in the 1880s. I wrote about the Teduray sisters’ intrepid journey in an Inquirer opinion piece published on June 17, 2016.

Lú U Teh later changed his name to Jose Climaco. Why he did so is not clear. It wasn’t mandatory for Chinese in the Philippines in the 19th century, or even at present, to change their family names even if they were Christianized. Perhaps he felt the need to blend in and transition to Zamboanga society. After all, he was in pursuit of a traditional-minded Teduray maiden who would not have taken favorably to a non-native suitor.

If Lú U Teh had not changed his name, I (his great grandson) would have been Eduardo Lú Tadem. The martial law martyr Cesar Cortes Climaco, U Teh’s grandson, would have been Cesar Cortes Lú. Zamboanga City Mayor Ma. Isabelle “Beng” Climaco (a great granddaughter) would have been Maria Isabelle Lú.

As a family name, Lú is shared by 5.6 million people in China. It is especially common in Guangdong, Guangxi, Hainan, and Hebei provinces. It can be spelled in 10 different ways, including Lo, Luo, Loh, Law, Low, and Liu. Literally, it means “to collect, to gather, to catch, and to sift.”

Throughout China and other Asian countries, the name Lú has been attached to emperors, generals, empresses, rebel leaders, warlords, public officials, scholars, playwrights, film directors, poets, historians, sportspersons, communist leaders, prime ministers, novelists, actresses, martial arts masters, models and fashion designers, and the champion weightlifter who placed second to Hidilyn Diaz in the Tokyo Olympics.

The intriguing possible genetic connection with such notable company should elicit pride among the Lú-Climaco clan members. The great past Chinese civilizations that predated the West as well as our vibrant precolonial trade ties also come into mind. Unfortunately, four centuries or so of the

predominance of anti-Chinese racist prejudice inculcated by Spanish colonialism and American imperialism, and carried on by many Filipinos after independence, have made our clan less than enthusiastic about our Chinese roots.

Ultrnationalist, chauvinist, and racist attitudes have been heightened by the Chinese government's unilateral and offensive actions in the disputed South China Sea. Hostile exchanges from both Filipino and Chinese sides have exacerbated tensions and harmed relations. By recognizing and appreciating our ancestral and historical ties to China, perhaps this could serve as building blocks for a common and mutually beneficial resolution of the territorial dispute.

More important are people-to-people exchanges and solidarity. Our often myopic governments and rapacious ruling classes are unable to look beyond self-serving interests and half-blind perceptions. It is, therefore, up to the peoples of both countries to reach across the waters and biases that divide us and build bridges pyloned on ideals of solidarity beyond boundaries, internationalism, mutual benefit, and a commons-based ownership and management of disputed natural resources.

One way of reaching out is by discovering family ties. The Climaco family has millions of potential relatives in China, not to mention thousands more of overseas Lú clan members. But it would be extremely difficult to trace which branch of the Lú family clan our great grandfather U Teh was from.

All is not lost, however. Mayor Beng Climaco, a first cousin, recounts to me that a former Zamboanga city budget officer who is a Climaco relative once visited China to connect with relatives. The visit, apparently, was fruitful and communication lines were established.

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P.S.

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