

# Who's Afraid of the Big Bad Wolf? A Study on the Filipino Youth's Perspectives on Philippines-China Relations

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## Background

This study examines the Filipino Youth's perspectives on the Philippines-China relations, using *Wolf Warrior II* as a vehicle for discussion. The Philippines and China currently have a strained relationship. On one hand, the Philippines and China have competing sovereignty claims on the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) in the South China Sea, and the Philippines has concerns about China's increasing military presence in the disputed territory. The Philippines even refers to the disputed territory as the West Philippine Sea (Ballesteros-Lintao 2018). Meanwhile, private Chinese investors and the Chinese government provided huge loans and investments in the Philippines in the past decade, helping boost the country's economy (de Vera 2020). China has also been the Philippines' main supplier of healthcare infrastructures, like the Sinovac vaccine, that the Philippine government relies on during the COVID-19 pandemic (Valente 2021). The Chinese government then has a major presence and influence in the Philippines.

## Purpose

This research aims gain insight into the Filipino youth's attitudes towards an increasingly nationalistic and militaristic China, using *Wolf Warrior II* as a vehicle for discussion.

## Methodology

This study's methodology utilized focus groups to gather data because they elicit insights on how a specific demographic understands a particular phenomenon (Stanley 2016). Ethics approval was obtained for this project (ID: Pro00111485).

- Focus groups discussions were conducted remotely and recorded using the Zoom application.
- Ten participants of Filipino youth ages 18 to 24 were recruited using the researcher's personal networks. Participants need to at least be attending post-secondary education and resides in the city represented in the focus group, i.e., Manila or Iloilo.
- There were two focus group of five participants each.
- During the remote session, participants watched the Chinese blockbuster film *Wolf Warrior II* before focus group discussions. The film was intended to prime participants to learn about China's emerging dual role in international relations.
- Focus groups discussions were transcribed and analyzed using the MAXQDA software.

## Findings

The findings for this study show that the Filipino youth have concerns regarding the current President Rodrigo Duterte's administration appeasement strategy towards China. Participants are especially concerned with the increased military presence in the South China Sea and the threat this poses to the fisherfolk who rely on the disputed territory for their livelihood. A participant commented,

**"[Filipinos] security is at risk, given that [China is] able to go into our territories unwarranted and unchallenged"**

Participants want the Duterte administration to assert the Philippines' sovereignty rights. Many fear Duterte's inaction would lead to the Philippines having to make compromises with more countries when it comes to the Philippines' territories. A participant raised a concern,

**"Once [the South China Sea] has been treated as if [China] can easily access it, other countries would have [a] tendency to do it as well"**

Two other themes also emerge as salient areas identified by the Filipino youth characterizing the Philippines-China relations: the Philippines' increasing indebtedness to China and concerns regarding the influence of Chinese culture on Filipino identity. Participants acknowledged China created jobs for Filipinos through Chinese loans and investments.

However, participants are worried that the Philippines would not be able to repay these Chinese loans. They fear this can result in the Philippines having to cede territory to China to pay off its loans. One participant encapsulates the current relationship between the Philippines and China under the Duterte administration by saying,

**"[China] is very influential and can be seen as mostly as someone na puwede mong utangan (you can get loans from), and also someone that you actually can't fight with, kasi baka magalit sila (because what if they get angry)."**

## Conclusion

This study suggests that the Filipino youth's perspectives towards the influence of China on the Philippines stem from the sitting administration's response to Chinese foreign policy. Much of the Filipino youth's perception of fear and concern about Philippines-China relations stem from the Duterte administration's pro-China foreign policy. The Filipino youth's attitude towards China is then flexible, suggesting that the future of Philippines-China relations depends on the outcomes of the 2022 Philippine Presidential Elections.

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