



# NILO JAYOMA CASTULO

## A FILIPINO JOURNEY TO EDUCATION IN CHINA



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Nilo Jayoma Castulo is a PhD Candidate in Educational Leadership and Policy at Beijing Normal University, specializing in Comparative Education. He is the only Filipino recipient of the ASEAN-China Young Leaders Scholarship (2022) and actively contributes to global education networks such as the Comparative and International Education Society (CIES). With extensive experience in curriculum evaluation and research, Nilo is a licensed professional teacher in the Philippines and has earned accolades for his academic contributions.

As the days of my undergraduate graduation drew near, a quiet storm of fear and uncertainty brewed within me. What lay ahead? Would society ever see the worth of teachers—their sacrifices, their dreams? I clung tightly to the promise of my education, a fragile hope amidst the unknown. With my License for Professional Teacher (LPT) in hand, I stepped into the world, eager to begin. But the reality that greeted me was harsh—a job that offered little in return, a salary that felt like an insult to the years of effort I had poured into my craft. I felt unseen and undervalued, as though the role of a teacher was no more than a shadow in the grand stage of life.

It was a teacher of mine who first planted the seed of possibility—an invitation to explore educational opportunities abroad for a master's degree. I applied to several countries, facing rejection after rejection, until two offers emerged: one from a university in Taiwan (China) without full funding and another from a university in Changchun, China, with a fully funded scholarship. At the time, China was often cast in a negative light in the global media, and some of my mentors cautioned me against going.



However, something about the idea of experiencing winter for the first time and studying at a ‘normal’ university captivated me. I made my choice; one I trusted with conviction. After all, China boasts a unique and reputable system of ‘normal’ universities—more than anywhere else in the world—a testament to its commitment to education.

It was autumn of 2019 when I first set foot in China. The breeze cold air carried the scent of change, and the sight of vibrant leaves falling gracefully filled me with joy. I marveled at the grandeur of the sprawling university campuses and the warmth of my classmates from every corner of the world. It was a season of unlearning and relearning—a journey into a new version of myself. However, then came the unexpected: the COVID-19. By January 2020, as the Chinese government announced a lockdown, I found myself far from campus, traveling in Inner Mongolia, savoring the simplicity of rural life and the festivities of the Chinese New Year. Stranded in an unfamiliar place, I could have been lost in fear and uncertainty. Yet, what I experienced was something profoundly human kindness. A newly found Chinese friend and his family members opened their homes and hearts to me. For six months, I was not just taken care of; I was embraced, supported, and loved as one of their own.



More than anything, I found a family here—a community that welcomed me with open arms. Along the way, I met many Filipino teachers in China, each with their own unique journey, and through their stories, I learned so much about resilience, adaptation, and growth. After completing my master's degree, I decided to continue my pursuit of Chinese education for the doctorate. My journey in China was enriched by academics and vibrant experiences on and off campus. From campus activities to trips across China—Chongqing, Xinjiang, Yunnan, Jilin, Qingdao, Inner Mongolia, Shenzhen, Shanghai, Henan, Macau, Hong Kong, Hangzhou, and cultural explorations in Beijing—I immersed myself in the diversity and richness of Chinese life. Moreover, living and studying here deepened my understanding of how Filipinos are intricately connected to Chinese history—a history few Filipinos know. I learned about King Paduka Pahala of Sulu, a Filipino king buried in Shandong, and discovered the monument of a Filipino national hero, Dr. Jose Rizal, in Jinjiang, Fujian. These connections illuminated a shared history and strengthened my sense of belonging.

China did not just give me a world-class education; it gave me perspective, opportunities, and pride. I am grateful and proud to call myself a product of Chinese education with Chinese characteristics, a journey that continues to shape me in ways I will carry forever. I know I chose the road less traveled, stepping away from the path most Filipino students dream of. It was a choice guided by curiosity and conviction that shaped me in ways I never expected. Padayon, Shukran!

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