

**YAO KEE, SZE SOOK WAH, SZE LAI CHO, AND SY CHUN YEN,
PETITIONERS, VS. AIDA SY-GONZALES, MANUEL SY, TERESITA
SY-BERNABE, RODOLFO SY, AND HONORABLE COURT OF APPEALS,
RESPONDENT.**

G.R. No. 55960. November 24, 1988

Ponente: CORTES, J.

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CORTES, J.:

Sy Kiat, a Chinese national, died on January 17, 1977 in Caloocan City where he was then residing, leaving behind real and personal properties here in the Philippines worth P300,000.00 more or less.

Thereafter, Aida Sy-Gonzales, Manuel Sy, Teresita Sy-Bernabe and Adolfo Sy filed a petition for the grant of letters of administration docketed as Special Proceedings Case No. C-699 of the then Court of First Instance of Rizal Branch XXXIII, Caloocan City. In said petition they alleged among others that (a) they are the children of the deceased with Asuncion Gillego; (b) to their knowledge Sy Kiat died intestate; (c) they do not recognize Sy Kiat's marriage to Yao Kee nor the filiation of her children to him; and, (d) they nominate Aida Sy-Gonzales for appointment as administratrix of the intestate estate of the deceased [Record on Appeal, pp. 4-9; Rollo, p. 107.]

The petition was opposed by Yao Kee, Sze Sook Wah, Sze Lai Cho and Sy Yun Chen who alleged that: (a) Yao Kee is the lawful wife of Sy Kiat whom he married on January 19, 1931 in China; (b) the other oppositors are the legitimate children of the deceased with Yao Kee; and, (c) Sze Sook Wah is the eldest among them and is competent, willing and desirous to become the administratrix of the estate of Sy Kiat [Record on Appeal, pp. 12-13; Rollo, p. 107.]

After hearing, the probate court, finding among others that:

(1)

Sy Kiat was legally married to Yao Kee [CFI decision, pp. 12-27; Rollo, pp. 49-64;]

(2)

Sze Sook Wah, Sze Lai Cho and Sze Chun Yen are the legitimate children of Yao Kee with Sy Kiat [CFI decision, pp. 28-31; Rollo, pp. 65-68;] and,

(3)

Aida Sy-Gonzales, Manuel Sy, Teresita Sy-Bernabe and Rodolfo Sy are the acknowledged illegitimate offsprings of Sy Kiat with Asuncion Gillego [CFI decision, pp. 27-28; Rollo, pp. 64-65.]

held in favor of the oppositors (petitioners herein) and appointed Sze Sook Wah as the administratrix of the intestate estate of the deceased [CFI decision, pp. 68-69; Rollo, pp. 105-106.]

On appeal the Court of Appeals rendered a decision modifying that of the probate courts, the dispositive portion of which reads:

IN VIEW OF THE FOREGOING, the decision of the lower Court is hereby MODIFIED and SET ASIDE and a new judgment rendered as follows:

(1)

Declaring petitioners Aida Sy-Gonzales, Manuel Sy, Teresita Sy-Bernabe and Rodolfo Sy acknowledged natural children of the deceased Sy Kiat with Asuncion Gillego, an unmarried woman with whom he lived as husband and wife without benefit of marriage for many years;

(2)

Declaring oppositors Sze Sook Wah, Sze Lai Chu and Sze Chun Yen, the acknowledged natural children of the deceased Sy Kiat with his Chinese wife Yao Kee, also known as Yui Yip, since the legality of the alleged marriage of Sy Kiat to Yao Kee in China had not been proven to be valid to the laws of the Chinese People's Republic of China (sic);

(3)

Declaring the deed of sale executed by Sy Kiat on December 7, 1976 in favor of Tomas Sy (Exhibit "G-1", English translation of Exhibit "G") of the Avenue Tractor and Diesel Parts Supply to be valid and accordingly, said property should be excluded from the estate of the deceased Sy Kiat; and

(4)

Affirming the appointment by the lower Court of Sze Sook Wah as judicial administratrix of the estate of the deceased. [CA decision, pp. 11-12; Rollo, pp. 36-37.]

From said decision both parties moved for partial reconsideration, which was however denied by respondent court. They thus interposed their respective appeals to this Court.

Private respondents filed a petition with this Court docketed as G.R. No. 56045 entitled "Aida Sy-Gonzales, Manuel Sy, Teresita Sy-Bernabe and Rodolfo Sy v. Court of Appeals, Yao Kee, Sze Sook Wah, Sze Lai Cho and Sy Chun Yen" questioning paragraphs (3) and (4) of the dispositive portion of the Court of Appeals' decision. The Supreme Court however resolved to deny the petition and the motion for reconsideration. Thus on March 8, 1982 entry of judgment was made in G.R. No. 56045.[*]

The instant petition, on the other hand, questions paragraphs (1) and (2) of the dispositive portion of the decision of the Court of Appeals. This petition was initially denied by the Supreme Court on June 22, 1981. Upon motion of the petitioners the Court in a resolution dated September 16, 1981 reconsidered the denial and decided to give due course to this petition.

Herein petitioners assign the following as errors:

- RESPONDENT COURT OF APPEALS SERIOUSLY ERRED IN DECLARING THE MARRIAGE OF SY

KIAT TO YAO YEE AS NOT HAVE (sic) BEEN PROVEN VALID IN ACCORDANCE WITH LAWS OF THE PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA.

- RESPONDENT COURT OF APPEALS GRAVELY ERRED IN DECLARING AIDA SY-GONZALES, MANUEL SY, TERESITA SY-BERNABE AND RODOLFO SY AS NATURAL CHILDREN OF SY KIAT WITH ASUNCION GILLEGO. [Petition p. 2; Rollo, p. 6.]

- Petitioner argue that the marriage of Sy Kiat to Yao Kee in accordance with Chinese law and custom was conclusively proven. To buttress this argument they rely on the following testimonial and documentary evidence.

First, the testimony of Yao Kee summarized by the trial court as follows:

Yao Kee testified that she was married to Sy Kiat on January 19, 1931 in Fookien, China; that she does not have a marriage certificate because the practice during that time was for elders to agree upon the betrothal of their children, and in her case, her elder brother was the one who contracted or entered into [an] agreement with the parents of her husband; that the agreement was that she and Sy Kiat would be married, the wedding date was set, and invitations were sent out; that the said agreement was complied with; that she has five children with Sy Kiat, but two of them died; that those who are alive are Sze Sook Wah, Sze Lai Cho, and Sze Chun Yen, the eldest being Sze Sook Wah who is already 38 years old; that Sze Sook Wah was born on November 7, 1939; that she and her husband, Sy Kiat, have been living in Fookien, China before he went to the Philippines on several occasions; that the practice during the time of her marriage was a written document [is exchanged] just between the parents of the bride and the parents of the groom, or any elder for that matter; that in China, the custom is that there is a go-between, a sort of marriage broker who is known to both parties who would talk to the parents of the bride-to-be; that if the parents of the bride-to-be agree to have the groom-to-be their son-in-law, then they agree on a date as an engagement day; that on engagement day, the parents of the groom would bring some pieces of jewelry to the parents of the bride-to-be, and then one month after that, a date would be set for the wedding, which in her case, the wedding date to Sy Kiat was set on January 19, 1931; that during the wedding the bridegroom brings with him a couch (sic) where the bride would ride and on that same day, the parents of the bride would give the dowry for her daughter and then the document would be signed by the parties but there is no solemnizing officer as is known in the Philippines; that during the wedding day, the document is signed only by the parents of the bridegroom as well as by the parents of the bride; that the parties themselves do not sign the document; that the bride would then be placed in a carriage where she would be brought to the town of the bridegroom and before departure the bride would be covered with a sort of a veil; that upon reaching the town of the bridegroom, the bridegroom takes away the veil; that during her wedding to Sy Kiat (according to said Chinese custom), there were many persons present; that after Sy Kiat opened the door of the carriage, two old ladies helped her go down the carriage and brought her inside the house of Sy Kiat; that during her wedding, Sy Chiok, the eldest brother of Sy Kiat, signed the document with her mother; that as to the whereabouts of that document, she and Sy Kiat were married for 46 years already and the document was left in China and she doubt if that document can still be found now; that it was left in the possession of Sy Kiat's family; that right now, she does not know the whereabouts of that document because of the lapse of many years and because they left it in a certain place and it was already eaten by the termites; that after her wedding with Sy Kiat, they lived immediately together as husband and wife, and from then on, they lived together; that Sy Kiat went to the Philippines sometime in March or April in the same year they were married; that she went to the Philippines in 1970, and then came back to China; that again she went back to the Philippines and lived with Sy Kiat as husband and wife; that she begot her children with Sy Kiat during the several trips by Sy Kiat made back to China. [CFI decision, pp. 13-15; Rollo, pp. 50-52.]

Second, the testimony of Gan Ching, a younger brother of Yao Kee who stated that he was among the many people who attended the wedding of his sister with Sy Kiat and that no marriage certificate is issued by the Chinese government, a document signed by the parents or elders of the parties being sufficient [CFI decision, pp.

15-16; Rollo, pp. 52-53.]

Third, the statements made by Asuncion Gillego when she testified before the trial court to the effect that (a) Sy Kiat was married to Yao Kee according to Chinese custom; and, (b) Sy Kiat's admission to her that he has a Chinese wife whom he married according to Chinese custom [CFI decision, p. 17; Rollo, p. 54.]

Fourth, Sy Kiat's Master Card of Registered Alien issued in Caloocan City on October 3, 1972 where the following entries are found: "Marital status - Married"; "If married give name of spouse - Yao Kee"; "Address -China"; "Date of marriage -1931"; and "Place of marriage - China" [Exhibit "SS-1".]

Fifth, Sy Kiat's Alien Certificate of Registration issued in Manila on January 12, 1968 where the following entries are likewise found: "Civil status -Married"; and, "If married, state name and address of spouse - Yao Kee Chinkang, China" [Exhibit "4".]

And lastly, the certification issued in Manila on October 28, 1977 by the Embassy of the People's Republic of China to the effect that "according to the information available at the Embassy Mr. Sy Kiat a Chinese national and Mrs. Yao Kee alias Yui Yip also Chinese were married on January 19, 1931 in Fukien, the People's Republic of China" [Exhibit "5".]

These evidence may very well prove the fact of marriage between Yao Kee and Sy Kiat. However, the same do not suffice to establish the validity of said marriage in accordance with Chinese law or custom.

Custom is defined as "a rule of conduct formed by repetition of acts, uniformly observed (practiced) as a social rule, legally binding and obligatory" [In the Matter of the Petition for Authority to Continue Use of the Firm Name "Ozaeta, Romulo, de Leon, Mabanta and Reyes", July 30, 1979, 92 SCRA 3, 12 citing JBL Reyes & RC Puno, Outline of Phil. Civil Law, Fourth Ed., Vol. 1, p. 7.] The law requires that "a custom must be proved as a fact, according to the rules of evidence" [Article 12, Civil Code.] On this score the Court had occasion to state that "a local custom as a source of right can not be considered by a court of justice unless such custom is properly established by competent evidence like any other fact" [Patriarca v. Orate, 7 Phil. 390, 395 (1907).] The same evidence, if not one of a higher degree, should be required of a foreign custom.

The law on foreign marriages is provided by Article 71 of the Civil Code which states that:

Art. 71. All marriages performed outside the Philippines in accordance with the laws in force in the country where they were performed, and valid there as such, shall also be valid in this country, except bigamous, polygamous, or incestuous marriages, as determined by Philippine law. (Underscoring supplied.)[**]

Construing this provision of law the Court has held that to establish of valid foreign marriage two things must be proven, namely: (1) the existence of the foreign law as a question of fact; and, (2) the alleged foreign marriage by convincing evidence [Adong v. Cheong Seng Gee, 43 Phil. 43, 49 (1922).]

In proving a foreign law the procedure is provided in the Rules of Court. With respect to an unwritten foreign law, Rule 130 section 45 states that:

SEC. 45. Unwritten law. - The oral testimony of witnesses, skilled therein, is admissible as evidence of the unwritten law of a foreign country, as are also printed and published books of reports of decisions of the courts of the foreign country, if proved to be commonly admitted in such courts.

Proof of a written foreign law, on the other hand, is provided for under Rule 132 section 25, thus:

SEC. 25. Proof of public or official record. - An official record or an entry therein, when admissible for any purpose, may be evidenced by an official publication thereof or by a copy attested by the officer having the legal custody of the record, or by his deputy, and accompanied, if the record is not kept in the Philippines, with

a certificate that such officer has the custody. If the office in which the record is kept is in a foreign country, the certificate may be made by a secretary of embassy or legation, consul general, consul, vice consul, or consular agent or by any officer in the foreign service of the Philippines stationed in the foreign country in which the record is kept and authenticated by the seal of his office.

The Court has interpreted section 25 to include competent evidence like the testimony of a witness to prove the existence of a written foreign law [Collector of Internal Revenue v. Fisher, 110 Phil. 686, 700-701 (1961) citing Willamette Iron and Steel Works v. Muzzal, 61 Phil. 471 (1935).]

In the case at bar petitioner did not present any competent evidence relative to the law and custom of China on marriage. The testimonies of Yao and Gan Ching cannot be considered as proof of China's law or custom on marriage not only because they are self-serving evidence, but more importantly, there is no showing that they are competent to testify on the subject matter. For failure to prove the foreign law or custom, and consequently, the validity of the marriage in accordance with said law or custom, the marriage between Yao Kee and Sy Kiat cannot be recognized in this jurisdiction.

Petitioners contend that contrary to the Court of Appeals' ruling they are not duty bound to prove the Chinese law on marriage as judicial notice thereof had been taken by this Court in the case of Sy Joc Lieng v. Sy Quia [16 Phil. 137 (1910).]

This contention is erroneous. Well-established in this jurisdiction is the principle that Philippine courts cannot take judicial notice of foreign laws. They must be alleged and proved as any other fact [Yam Ka Lim v. Collector of Customs, 30 Phil. 46, 48 (1915); Fluemer v. Hix, 54 Phil. 610 (1930).]

Moreover a reading of said case would show that the party alleging the foreign marriage presented a witness, one Li Ung Bieng, to prove that matrimonial letters mutually exchanged by the contracting parties constitute the essential requisite for a marriage to be considered duly solemnized in China. Based on his testimony, which as found by the Court is uniformly corroborated by authors on the subject of Chinese marriage, what was left to be decided was the issue of whether or not the fact of marriage in accordance with Chinese law was duly proven [Sy Joc Lieng v. Sy Quia, supra., at p. 160.]

Further, even assuming for the sake of argument that the Court has indeed taken judicial notice of the law of China on marriage in the aforecited case, petitioners however have not shown any proof that the Chinese law or custom obtaining at the time the Sy Joc Lieng marriage was celebrated in 1847 was still the law when the alleged marriage of Sy Kiat to Yao Kee took place in 1931 or eighty-four (84) years later.

Petitioners moreover cite the case of U.S. v. Memoracion [34 Phil. 63 (1916)] as being applicable to the instant case. They aver that the judicial pronouncement in the Memoracion case, that the testimony of one of the contracting parties is competent evidence to show the fact of marriage, holds true in this case.

The Memoracion case however is not applicable to the case at bar as said case did not concern a foreign marriage and the issue posed was whether or not the oral testimony of a spouse is competent evidence to prove the fact of marriage in a complaint for adultery.

Accordingly, in the absence of proof of the Chinese law on marriage, it should be presumed that it is the same as ours[***] [Wong Woo Yiu v. Vivo, G.R. No. L-21076, March 31, 1965, 13 SCRA 552, 555.] Since Yao Kee admitted in her testimony that there was no solemnizing officer as is known here in the Philippines [See Article 56, Civil Code] when her alleged marriage to Sy Kiat was celebrated [CFI decision, p. 14; Rollo, p. 51], it therefore follows that her marriage to Sy Kiat, even if true, cannot be recognized in this jurisdiction [Wong Woo Yiu v. Vivo, supra., pp. 555-556.]

- The second issue raised by petitioners concerns the status of private respondents.

Respondent court found the following evidence of petitioners' filiation:

(1)

Sy Kiat's Master Card of Registered Alien where the following are entered: "Children if any: give number of children - Four"; and, "Name - All living in China" [Exhibit "SS-1";]

(2)

the testimony of their mother Yao Kee who stated that she had five children with Sy Kiat, only three of whom are alive namely, Sze Sook Wah, Sze Lai Chu and Sze Chin Yan [TSN, December 12, 1977, pp. 9-11;] and,

(3)

an affidavit executed on March 22, 1961 by Sy Kiat for presentation to the Local Civil Registrar of Manila to support Sze Sook Wah's application for a marriage license, wherein Sy Kiat expressly stated that she is his daughter [Exhibit "3".]

Likewise on the record is the testimony of Asuncion Gillego that Sy Kiat told her he has three daughters with his Chinese wife, two of whom - Sook Wah and Sze Kai Cho - she knows, and one adopted son [TSN, December 6, 1977, pp. 87-88.]

However, as petitioners failed to establish the marriage of Yao Kee with Sy Kiat according to the laws of China, they cannot be accorded the status of legitimate children but only that of acknowledge natural children. Petitioners are natural children, it appearing that at the time of their conception Yao Kee and Sy Kiat were not disqualified by any impediment to marry one another [See Art. 269, Civil Code.] And they are acknowledged children of the deceased because of Sy Kiat's recognition of Sze Sook Wah [Exhibit "3"] and its extension to Sze Lai Cho and Sy Chun Yen who are her sisters of the full blood [See Art. 271, Civil Code.]

Private respondents on the other hand are also the deceased's acknowledged natural children with Asuncion Gillego, a Filipina with whom he lived for twenty-five (25) years without the benefit of marriage. They have in their favor their father's acknowledgment, evidenced by a compromise agreement entered into by and between their parents and approved by the Court of First Instance on February 12, 1974 wherein Sy Kiat not only acknowledged them as his children by Asuncion Gillego but likewise made provisions for their support and future inheritance, thus:

* * *

2. The parties also acknowledge that they are common-law husband and wife and that out of such relationship, which they have likewise decided to definitely and finally terminate effective immediately, they begot five children, namely: Aida Sy, born on May 30, 1950; Manuel Sy, born on July 1, 1953; Teresita Sy, born on January 28, 1955; Ricardo Sy, now deceased, born on December 14, 1956; and Rodolfo Sy, born on May 7, 1958.

3. With respect to the AVENUE TRACTOR AND DIESEL PARTS SUPPLY . . . , the parties mutually agree and covenant that -

(a)

The stocks and merchandize and the furniture and equipments . . . , shall be divided into two equal shares

between, and distributed to, Sy Kiat who shall own one-half of the total and the other half to Asuncion Gillego who shall transfer the same to their children, namely, Aida Sy, Manuel Sy, Teresita Sy, and Rodolfo Sy.

(b)

the business name and premises . . . , shall be retained by Sy Kiat. However, it shall be his obligation to give to the aforementioned children an amount of One Thousand Pesos (P1,000.00) monthly out of the rental of the two doors of the same building now occupied by Everett Construction.

* * *

(5)

With respect to the acquisition, during the existence of the common-law husband-and-wife relationship between the parties, of the real estates and properties registered and/or appearing in the name of Asuncion Gillego . . . , the parties mutually agree and covenant that the said real estates and properties shall be transferred in equal shares to their children, namely, Aida Sy, Manuel Sy, Teresita Sy, and Rodolfo Sy, but to be administered by Asuncion Gillego during her lifetime. . . [Exhibit "D".] (Underscoring supplied.)

* * *

This compromise agreement constitutes a statement before a court of record by which a child may be voluntarily acknowledged [See Art. 278, Civil Code.]

Petitioners further argue that the questions on the validity of Sy Kiat's marriage to Yao Kee and the paternity and filiation of the parties should have been ventilated in the Juvenile and Domestic Relations Court.

Specifically, petitioners rely on the following provision of Republic Act No. 5502, entitled "An Act Revising Rep. Act No. 3278, otherwise known as the Charter of the City of Caloocan", with regard to the Juvenile and Domestic Relations Court:

SEC. 91-A. - Creation and Jurisdiction of the Court. -

* * *

The provisions of the Judiciary Act to the contrary notwithstanding, and the court shall have exclusive original jurisdiction to hear and decide the following cases:

* * *

(2) Cases involving custody, guardianship, adoption, revocation of adoption, paternity and acknowledgments;

(3) Annulment of marriages, relief from marital obligations, legal separation of spouses, and actions for support;

(4) Proceedings brought under the provisions of title six and title seven, chapters one to three of the civil code;

* * *

and the ruling in the case of *Bartolome v. Bartolome* [G.R. No. L-23661, 21 SCRA 1324] reiterated in *Divinagracia v. Rovira* [G.R. No. L-42615, 72 SCRA 307.]

With the enactment of Batas Pambansa Blg. 129, otherwise known as the Judicially Reorganization Act of 1980, the Juvenile and Domestic Relations Courts were abolished. Their functions and jurisdiction are now vested with the Regional Trial Courts [See Section 19 (7), B.P. Blg. 129 and *Divinagracia v. Belosillo*, G.R. No. L-47407, August 12, 1986, 143 SCRA 356, 360] hence it is no longer necessary to pass upon the issue of jurisdiction raised by petitioners.

Moreover, even without the enactment of Batas Pambansa Blg. 129 we find in Rep. Act No. 5502 sec. 91-A last paragraph that:

* * *

If any question involving any of the above matters should arise as an incident in any case pending in the ordinary court, said incident shall be determined in the main case.

* * *

As held in the case of *Divinagracia v. Rovira* [G.R. No. L-42615, August 10, 1976, 72 SCRA 307]:

* * *

It is true that under the aforequoted section 1 of Republic Act No. 4834[****] a case involving paternity and acknowledgment may be ventilated as an incident in the intestate or testate proceeding (See *Baluyot vs. Ines Luciano*, L-42215, July 13, 1976). But that legal provision presupposes that such an administration proceeding is pending or existing and has not been terminated. [at pp. 313-314.] (Underscoring supplied.)

* * *

The reason for this rule is not only "to obviate the rendition of conflicting rulings on the same issue by the Court of First Instance and the Juvenile and Domestic Relations Court". [Vda. de Baluyut v. Luciano, G.R. No. L-42215, July 13, 1976, 72 SCRA 52, 63] but more importantly to prevent multiplicity of suits.

Accordingly, this Court finds no reversible error committed by respondent court.

WHEREFORE, the decision of the Court of Appeals is hereby AFFIRMED.

SO ORDERED.

Fernan, C.J., (Chairman), Gutierrez, Jr., Feliciano, and Bidin, JJ., concur.

[*] The petition for review in G.R. No. 56045 was denied for lack of merit on March 9, 1981. Counsel for the petitioners then filed a Motion for Consolidation and for Extension of Time to File Motion for Reconsideration which was granted on July 8, 1981. On February 17, 1982, however, petitioners' motion for reconsideration of the resolution of March 9, 1981 was denied.

[**] Other than the exceptions contained in this article, this provision of law is derived from section 19, Act No. 3613 and section IV, General Order No. 68.

[***] The presumption that, in the absence of proof, the foreign law is the same as the law of the forum, is known as processual presumption which has been applied by this Court in the cases of *Lim v. The Insular Collector of Customs*, 36 Phil. 472 (1917); *International Harvester Co. in Russia v. Hamburg-American Line*, 42 Phil. 845 (1918); *Miciano v. Brimo*, 50 Phil. 867 (1924); and *Rayray v. Chae Kyung Lee*, G.R. No. L-18176, October 26, 1966, 18 SCRA 450.

[****] Rep. Act 4834 created the Juvenile and Domestic Relations Court of Iloilo. Section 1 of said Act is the

exact copy of section 19-A of Rep. Act 5502.

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