# A rightful veto

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No ifs and buts about it: The Marcos administration did right in rejecting the application for Philippine citizenship of Chinese businessman Li Duan Wang aka Mark Ong. President Marcos’ veto of House Bill No. 8839 came with a particularly pointed justification: “I am unable,” he said, “to blindly ignore the alarming and revealing warnings raised by our relevant national agencies that find the subject grantee’s character and influence to be full of ominous and dire consequences, if not of a clear and present danger.”

Those are grave words, the substance of which should have made Wang’s case a no-brainer for the two institutions—the House and the Senate—tasked to vet his background thoroughly and evaluate the merits of his naturalization application, before the final bill favoring his cause were ever allowed to take up space on the President’s desk. Wang aspired to be granted the full panoply of rights and privileges accorded FIlipino citizens, but the case against him, as laid out by Sen. Risa Hontiveros complete with documentary evidence, constituted a virtual grandstand of red flags: The Chinese national was associated with the shadowy Philippine offshore gaming operator (Pogo) Duanren Wu, allegedly the main operator of a raided gaming hub in Porac, Pampanga, and a wanted fugitive in China.

## Stealthy, unsavory activities

Wang passed himself off as a Filipino citizen in the corporate papers of Avia International Club, a company with links to an entity controlled by another dubious character, self-confessed Chinese spy She Zhijiang. And “in his application for naturalization, Wang did not even disclose that he is the operator of 9 Dynasty junket group that has shared officers with Rivendell, an illegal Pogo scam hub in Pasay,” Hontiveros noted.

“Alarming and revealing” details, indeed, and that’s just scratching the surface of the “character and influence” of this man who was now eager to turn his back on his lifelong Chinese roots and heritage to embrace a different country and culture. Any sensible legislator asked to take even a cursory look at this man’s resume would have arrived at the same conclusion as the President’s: Wang is an unfit candidate for Filipino citizenship. His track record so far hinted at stealthy, unsavory activities, which as the President labeled as “a clear and present danger” to the society he wished to join, given the previous shocking revelations about the bogus mayor Alice Guo (yet another disreputable character in Wang’s orbit) and the disturbing implications of China’s creeping inroads into Philippine institutions.

## Lone dissenting vote

And yet, astoundingly, the bill granting Wang Philippine citizenship, authored by Albay Rep. Joey Salceda and Negros Occidental Rep. Juliet Ferrer, sailed through the House in September 2023, and eventually in the Senate in January this year where an overwhelming majority—19 senators—voted in its favor. The lone dissenting vote was cast by the valiant Hontiveros, who bluntly asked her colleagues: “Hindi pa ba tayo natuto? (Haven’t we learned anything?)”

They hadn’t, apparently. The House has 318 members, and yet seemingly not enough had the gumption, let alone interest, to pause Wang’s naturalization proceedings by first asking the hard questions and probing more deeply his problematic associations and background.

In the Senate, despite the paper trail presented by Hontiveros, a number of senators led by Senate Majority Leader Francis Tolentino defended their vote by saying they had personally looked into Wang’s documents and found them aboveboard, and that agencies such as the National Security Council and National Intelligence Coordinating Agency had no derogatory record on him.

## Laudable moment

Three months later, the President essentially rebutted such assertions by citing the “warnings raised by our relevant national agencies” in his veto of the Wang bill. The ringing presidential “no” came down to this: It was a slap down of the hasty, careless work the lawmakers had demonstrated in a matter of vital consequence—a glaring sloppiness that was all but a disservice to the country.

That the bill all came down to four short paragraphs betrays the lack of due diligence on the part of Congress for such an important matter as bestowing citizenship rights on a foreigner.

“Filipino citizenship is a privilege and should not be given freely to any foreigner. It should not be used as a tool for the advancement of dubious interests,” declared the President through Press Undersecretary Claire Castro. While Congress decided to grant Wang citizenship, the President was “not convinced,” she added.

And rightly so. That the President heeded the warning of Hontiveros, an opposition senator, over the collective assent of ruling-party allies in this case is a laudable moment of bipartisanship and a clear case why a system of checks and balances among the branches of government is vital. It’s also a triumph of common sense, and a reminder to legislators to do their jobs with greater seriousness and diligence.