



*The Chinese oil tanker Han Xing sails off the coast of Guadalcanal, Solomon Islands, December 2011.
Author photo.*

THINK PIECE: Is it Possible to Think of a “Chinese Pacific” in the Making? Decolonizing Anthropology in the Asia-Pacific Region

By Rodolfo Maggio, University of Turin

Abstract

The travel restrictions implemented to limit the spread of the COVID19 pandemic prevent fieldworkers from collecting ethnographic data in the Pacific. The possibility of collecting first-hand data about indigenous perspectives on the recent growth of the Chinese presence and influence is therefore limited too. Despite the critical need for this kind of data, the situation provides an opportunity for a concerted reflection on the conceptual tools scholars deploy to study China in the Pacific. A decolonial methodology seems necessary to prevent the superimposition of preconceived ideas upon indigenous views that, at the moment, can only be accessed in journalistic and social media outlets. It interrogates the position from which scholars speak or write, the benefit derived from theorizing indigenous ideas, and the extent to which, in the absence of a decolonial methodology, such ideas might become invisible. Although the theoretical explanation of how the deconstruction of these conceptual tools can be conducted is specifically focused on the Pacific, the proposed interaction between anthropology, environmental science, and geopolitics could potentially be applied in other research endeavors.

Keywords: “China threat,” Sino-Pacific relations, interdisciplinary methods, COVID-19, Pacific Islands, decolonization, everyday geopolitics

In these pandemic times, the opinions of Pacific Islanders are mostly, if not only, recorded by journalists and bloggers, rather than ethnographers trained in interdisciplinary methods. That is especially problematic, for these are also times of great change in the Pacific, as the recent withdrawal of 5 Micronesian states from the Pacific Islands Forum starkly illustrates. In this think piece, I reflect upon studying the game-changing presence and influence of China in the Pacific with an anthropological approach that, despite the methodological challenges caused by the current travel restrictions, seeks to incorporate a plurality of Pacific voices into the analytical process. Taking into account the obvious limitations, I propose to apply a decolonial methodology to look at the interactions between Pacific Islanders and Chinese actors in the region, in order to be better prepared for the time when ethnographic fieldwork will be a convenient research method again.

As even the casual observer of the Pacific knows by now, China's transoceanic expansion is accelerating with the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the exploration of oceanic sea beds, and the diplomacy with Pacific Islands Countries (PICs). However, even though research on and with China is considered a priority in many sectors, not only in academia, relatively few studies are focused on the Pacific theater. Scholars from various disciplines have been studying Chinese activities in Africa, South America, and Eurasia,¹ producing an ever-growing corpus of innovative literature, and contributing to an increasingly heated debate. In contrast, the presence of China in Oceania is much less studied and, most importantly, the existing literature still lacks indigenous voices and interdisciplinary approaches. This lack is exacerbated by the current travel restrictions, hence scholars of Sino-Pacific relations need to rethink their research strategies for the time being.

Reimagining the Research of Recent Sino-Pacific Relations

The scholar who wishes to reimagine the study of these interactions during the current pandemic might focus on national discourses between PICs and powerful regional actors such as China and the United States. Preliminary discourse analysis suggests that, despite President Xi Jinping's recent departure from a low-profile policy, the perception of China in the Pacific is still influenced by a universalizing message to current and future partners that emphasizes people-to-people relations and mutual respect between cultures. Such an attitude sharply contrasts with the message of superiority and separation symbolized by the "America First" slogan and the exclusionary policies of the Trump administration.

Finding and Interpreting Indigenous Statements about the Chinese

Searching relevant expressions for a discourse analysis of Sino-Pacific relations, a very interesting case can perhaps be found in the recent debate about the PICs not being invited at the United Nations Climate Change Conference by US President Joe Biden. At a reception

¹ Carmen Amado Mendes, ed., *China's New Silk Road: An Emerging World Order* (Oxon and New York: Routledge, 2018), 1-7.

at the State House in Suva, Fiji's Prime Minister Frank Bainimarama is reported to have said to the former US Ambassador Judith Sefkin, "You are not a true friend of Fiji. See that guy over there? (Pointing to the Chinese ambassador). That's a true friend of Fiji." "Friendship" is a key term in journalistic reports and diplomatic documents that should be analyzed from an anthropological perspective to suggest new interpretations of the recent successes of Chinese diplomacy in the Pacific.

It is crucial, indeed, to focus on indigenous sources, for the history of colonialism still weighs on anglophone and francophone post-colonial discourses. The fact that criticisms of Xi's foreign policy have mostly come from former colonial powers arguably has the unintended consequence of encouraging many Pacific Islanders to look favorably towards China. Despite some episodes of tension and even violence against Chinese businesses, Pacific Islanders in the past few years have been generally well disposed towards their local Chinese communities.² That partly explains why some Pacific leaders recently invited China to operate in the region. However, these dispositions have not been comprehensively analyzed.

In contemporary literature, the interpretation of such an active role is mostly left to geopolitical scientists and economists who study China's state-led strategic expansion in PICs in isolation and/or in opposition to each other. The three most comprehensive studies of China in the Pacific³ since Crocombe's 2007 work⁴, all came to "similar conclusions in viewing China as less of a destabilizing force in the Pacific than had hitherto been asserted, and in viewing Pacific Islanders as astute and active players pursuing their own interests in dealing with outsiders."⁵ In contrast, a multidisciplinary study seems more appropriate to explore the multiple dimensions in which Sino-Pacific relations are taking shape, including geopolitics, the environment, and Chinese and indigenous cultures.

Information about the "new Chinese"⁶ are usually limited to broad-brush depictions of Chinatowns. There is a valuable section of historiographical literature about Sino-Pacific relationships that partly addresses these issues in combination with each other.⁷ However,

² Rita Parker, *Unregulated Population Migration and Other Future Drivers of Instability in the Pacific*. Lowy Institute for International Policy, 2018.

³ Arguably, these are: Terence Wesley-Smith and Edgar A. Porter, eds., *China in Oceania: Reshaping the Pacific*, (New York: Berghahn Books, 2010); Paul D'Arcy, Patrick Matbob, and Linda Crowl, eds., *Pacific-Asia Partnerships in Resource Development* (Madang, Papua New Guinea: DWU Press, 2014); Graeme Smith and Terence Wesley-Smith, *The China Alternative: Changing Regional Order in the Pacific Islands* (Acton: Australia: The Australian National University, 2021).

⁴ Ronald G. Crocombe, *Asia in the Pacific Islands: Replacing the West* (Suva: University of South Pacific, 2007).

⁵ D'Arcy et al., *Pacific-Asia Partnerships in Resource Development*, 12.

⁶ Graeme Smith, "Beijing's Orphans? New Chinese Investors in Papua New Guinea." *Pacific Affairs* 86, no. 2 (2013): 327-49.

⁷ William Willmott, "Origins of the Chinese in the South Pacific," in *Histories of the Chinese in Australasia and the South Pacific*, ed. Paul McGregor (Melbourne: Museum of Chinese Australian History, 1995), 129-40; Willmott, *A History of the Chinese Communities in Eastern Melanesia* (Christchurch, N.Z.: Macmillan Brown Centre for Pacific Studies, University of Canterbury, 2005); Willmott, "The Overseas Chinese Experience in the Pacific," in *China in Oceania*, ed. Terence Wesley-Smith and Edgar A. Porter (New York: Berghahn Books, 2010), 93-103; Ron Crocombe, 'The Fourth Wave: Chinese in the Pacific Islands in the Twenty-First Century', CSCSD, Occasional Paper 1 (2007); Crocombe, *Asia in the Pacific Islands*.

it mostly concerns the early years of the Chinese diaspora in the region (second half of the nineteenth century-early 1900s), tellingly referred to as “the old Chinese,” overseas Chinese (*huáqiáo* 华侨),⁸ or pre-*huáyì* 华裔.⁹ In very recent years this gap has been partly addressed by a few but notable ethnographic works.¹⁰

When Fieldwork in the “Chinese Pacific” is Not an Option

When fieldwork is not an option, newspapers can provide information about topics currently under discussion in the mediascape. For example, insights about the relationship between diplomatic relations and influxes of Chinese capital came from the words of Samoa’s Prime Minister at the 2019 Pacific Leaders Forum held in Tuvalu, who stated that if “Western powers don’t like what China is doing in the Pacific then they should provide the assistance currently on offer from the superpower.”¹¹ China is now the largest donor in Fiji and the second-largest donor for Papua New Guinea (PNG), Tonga, Samoa, the Cook Islands, and Vanuatu. However, even though foreign investments and aid play a major role, it seems limiting to assume that money alone can explain why some PICs have an increasingly welcoming attitude towards China. To investigate these reasons, data from newspapers and blogs are definitely not enough.

In the absence of first-hand data about local perceptions of geopolitics, diplomatic speeches can be used to frame some of the key issues. Like in other countries with which China has diplomatic relations, Chinese statesmen need to demonstrate a willingness to formulate a purpose for their “expansion” into the Pacific that is also, if not primary, social and shared. Even if influxes of foreign capital might be of primary importance for countries severely affected by the consequences of climate change, a discourse has to be in place to frame the monetary transfer as coming from a partner country whose national identity and geopolitical message is coherent with the agenda of the receiving country. It is indeed the content of the relationship that should be investigated in order to provide a contribution to debates such as that about the tension between China and former colonial powers in the Pacific.

⁸ Laurentina ‘Mica’ Barreto Soares, “Overseas Chinese, Soft Power and China’s People-to-People Diplomacy in Timor-Leste,” in *The China Alternative: Changing Regional Order in the Pacific Islands*, eds. Graeme Smith and Terence Wesley-Smith (Acton, Australia: The Australian National University, 2021), 473–498.

⁹ Paul D’Arcy, “The Chinese Pacifics: A Brief Historical Review,” *The Journal of Pacific History* 49, no. 4 (2014): 396–420.

¹⁰ Anne-Christine Trémon, “Flexible Kinship: Shaping Transnational Families Among the Chinese in Tahiti,” *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 23, no. 1 (2017): 42–60; Trémon, “Cosmopolitanization and Localization: Ethnicity, Class and Citizenship Among the Chinese of French Polynesia,” *Anthropological Theory* 9, no. 1 (2009): 103–126; Graeme Smith, “Nupela Masta? Local and Expatriate Labour in a Chinese-Run Nickel Mine in Papua New Guinea,” *Asian Studies Review* 37, no. 2 (2013): 178–195; Henryk Szadziewski, “A Search for Coherence: The Belt and Road Initiative in the Pacific Islands,” in *The China Alternative: Changing Regional Order in the Pacific Islands*, eds. Graeme Smith and Terence Wesley-Smith (Acton, Australia: The Australian National University, 2021), 283–318.

¹¹ Barbara Dreaver, “China’s Influence and Climate Change: Pacific Leaders Forum in Tuvalu Shaping Up to be Fiery,” accessed October 8, 2019, <https://www.tvnz.co.nz/one-news/new-zealand/chinas-influence-and-climate-change-pacific-leaders-forum-in-tuvalu-shaping-up-fiery>.

At a time when fieldwork is not as accessible an option as it used to, we might want to take the opportunity to distance ourselves from the above-mentioned issues and look at them differently. So, rather than the large flow of foreign capital in itself, a deeper explanation might be sought into *how* money is transferred. One way to do that is perhaps to look at the alleged absence of political preconditions in Chinese assistance, as do those who see the “China Inc.” strategy in the Pacific as a “recolonization by invitation,”¹² as opposed to the conditionality¹³ of Western countries. However, it has been argued that the Chinese government’s political precondition is far from absent. For example, voting compliance by PICs (e.g. in the United Nations) seems to be a fairly strong form of reciprocity. Still, such an argument has been challenged too.¹⁴

Since looking solely at political interests does not provide the basis for conclusive arguments, scholars should focus on natural resources and examine China’s growing need to access these in partner countries.¹⁵ The issue of resource extraction is especially controversial because there is evidence that it weakens the democracy promotion effect of Western aid.¹⁶ However, the latter concept has many detractors, such as the Australian economist Hughes who denounced that “Australian aid” among other sources of Western capital, “has been a key component of the Pacific’s decline.”¹⁷

The lack of consensus among these political and economic scholars signals at once the complexity of this debate and its urgency. Most notably, however, the extant literature reveals the general absence of interdisciplinary approaches to indigenous voices, which is another reason why it is necessary to re-imagine research about these issues at a time when conducting fieldwork in the Pacific is extremely difficult. As evidenced by a long and established tradition of ethnographic studies, Pacific Islanders tend to look at the issues above in connection with their culture and especially the value of the environment, not as isolated phenomena. However, given the current travel restrictions it becomes all the more difficult to listen, record, and give value to these perspectives.

¹² Roland Seib, *China in the South Pacific: No New Hegemon on the Horizon*, Peace Research Institute, 2009.

¹³ David Mosse, *Cultivating Development: An Ethnography of Aid Policy and Practice*. (London: Pluto Press, 2004); Mosse, “The Anthropology of International Development,” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 42 (2013): 227-246; Jonathan Temple, “Aid and Conditionality,” In *Handbook of Development Economics*, vol. 5, eds. Dani Rodrik, Mark Rosenzweig (Amsterdam: Elsevier, 2010), 4415-4523.

¹⁴ Bob Jurriaan Van Grieken and Jaroslaw Kantorowicz, “Debunking Myths about China: The Determinants of China’s Official Financing to the Pacific,” *Geopolitics* 26, no.3 (2019): 861-888.

¹⁵ Rachel Vanderhill, *Promoting Authoritarianism Abroad* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2013), 6; Giorgio Gualberti, Morgan Bazilian, and Todd Moss, “Energy Investments in Africa by the US, Europe and China,” *International Association for Energy Economics* (2014): 31-35.

¹⁶ Charles Wolf Jr, Xiao Wang, and Eric Warner, *China’s Foreign Aid and Government-Sponsored Investment Activities: Scale, Content, Destinations, and Implications* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2013); Thomas Lum, Hannah Fischer, Julissa Gomez-Granger, and Anne Leland, *China’s Foreign Aid Activities in Africa, Latin America, and Southeast Asia* (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service Report, 2009).

¹⁷ Helen Hughes, “Aid Has Failed the Pacific,” *Pacific Economic Bulletin* 25 no. 3 (Canberra: The Australian National University, 2010): 233.

The Importance of Including Indigenous Perspectives on China in the Pacific

During the pandemic, scholars of the Pacific have been mostly unable to include these perspectives in their analysis, hence there is a risk of misrepresenting how Pacific Islanders frame the increasing Chinese presence and influence. Currently, one of the top priorities of PICs is tackling the consequences of climate change, which is why it warrants even more scholarly attention at a time when fieldwork research is not possible. There is a sense of urgency, since for many communities the major concern is not whether they will leave their island of residence or not, but when.¹⁸ Hence, development assistance to respond to environmental issues is perhaps the most important aspect of their relationships with partner countries and international aid agencies.

Although China is the largest producer of CO₂, in some academic and political circles it has been recently re-labeled a “Global Clean Energy Champion.”¹⁹ That has had important consequences on the perception of its role in the Pacific and might play a role in explaining why China is increasingly seen as a Pacific actor with a legitimate regional presence. As a consequence, high-level meetings with Pacific leaders accumulate and new partnerships with diplomats, private companies, and aid agencies result in new projects and infrastructures, such as the Pacific leg of the BRI’s Maritime Silk Road. All this is affecting the perception of Pacific Islanders and in some instances this is having a profound impact on the future of PICs and the Asia Pacific region more broadly.

For example, a few months before the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, in September 2019, the debate regarding new Sino-Pacific relations reached a peak with the decision of the Solomon Islands government, quickly followed by Kiribati, to sever diplomatic relations with Taiwan. These PICs, with a rate of sea-level rise 2–3 times higher than the world average and a capillary debate about the causes and consequences of severing their diplomatic ties with Taiwan, have become “moral laboratories” for China’s maritime diplomacy in the Pacific. There, we can learn about the processes that are seemingly leading to changes in regional maritime sovereignty and, potentially, to a new thalassocratic order.²⁰

In Solomon Islands, local concerns about the negative consequences of climate change are seen from a different perspective as the Government undergoes a three-year transition

¹⁸ However, their preoccupation might be unwarranted as scholars of climate change and its impact on governance only presented irrefutable evidence of relocation solely or mainly caused by climate change in Alaska, not the Pacific. See: Robin Bronen and Stuart Chapin, “Adaptive Governance and Institutional Strategies for Climate-Induced Community Relocations in Alaska,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 110, no. 23 (2013): 9320–9325; Christine Shearer, “The Political Ecology of Climate Adaptation Assistance: Alaska Natives, Displacement, and Relocation,” *Journal of Political Ecology* 19, no. 1 (2012): 174–183.

¹⁹ Philip Andrews-Speed, and Sufang Zhang, *China as a Global Clean Energy Champion: Lifting the Veil* (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019).

²⁰ Patrick L. Barnard et al. “Coastal Vulnerability Across the Pacific Dominated by El Niño/Southern Oscillation,” *Nature Geoscience* 8 no.10 (2015): 801–807; Yimou Lee, “Taiwan Warns Solomon Islands of China ‘Debt Trap’ in Diplomatic Switch,” accessed June 14, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-pacific-china-solomonislands-idUSKCN1VR09W>; Cheryl Mattingly, *Moral Laboratories: Family Peril and the Struggle for a Goodlife* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2014).

(2020–2023) of bilateral ties with China that followed the severance of diplomatic ties with Taiwan (“The Switch,” as the locals call it). The structure of foreign aid is changing and that generates an intense debate about China’s climate-change diplomacy in Oceania.

Another way to take a Pacific perspective on the Chinese presence concerns the value of the sea. In this respect, the Pacific Islands Forum Fisheries Agency (FFA), headquartered in Honiara, the capital city of Solomon Islands, is perhaps the most dominant actor in the redefinition of the Pacific Ocean as a sovereign space, a resource extraction site, and a securitized territory. China, in the attempt to control growing portions of the Solomon Sea, has reached deals to “strengthen” tuna fisheries in Solomon Islands, an industry in which it had “no role” before its diplomatic ingress.²¹ In contrast, fishing was the only industry in which Taiwanese predominated²² before The Switch.

It follows that unprecedented changes are happening, and will be happening in the next few years, especially for the local fishing communities affected by climate change, i.e. two areas where Pacific Islanders express specific perspectives and should be listened to. However, their opinions are being recorded by local journalists and bloggers, rather than fieldworkers trained in multicultural approaches and interdisciplinary methods. The current travel restrictions are worsening this lack of fine-grained data about the perspectives of Pacific Islanders on the Chinese presence and influence. Hence it is necessary to reimagine a methodologically coherent way to produce innovative knowledge about issues of such pressing relevance despite the current travel restrictions.

Travel Restrictions and Data Collection in the “Chinese Pacific”

In response to the problems illustrated above, it would be necessary to collect ethnographic data. Direct observations and interviews should be processed with qualitative methods such as thematic analysis and grounded theory to add theoretical value to bottom-up indigenous perspectives. As travel restrictions make the collection of this kind of data difficult, the study of Sino-Pacific relationships must be conducted with other means. However, as we will see, there is hardly a replacement for the kind of data that can be collected by means of ethnographic fieldwork.

For example, it would be necessary to measure local levels of engagement with the island of residence. Ethnographers could do that by looking at transactions of valued objects, such as materials used to build houses, piggeries, and ancestral shrines. This is not the kind of observation that can be conducted at distance. Although it is possible to interview informants on the phone, their narratives would inevitably be partial and there would be no means to verify the information. Although there is some value in interview data

²¹ Ronald Toito’ona, “China Eyes Solomons Tuna,” accessed June 14, 2021, *FFA’s Tuna Pacific: Fisheries News and Views*, <https://www.tunapacific.org/2020/02/17/china-eyes-solomons-tuna/>.

²² Clive Moore, “No More Walkabout Long Chinatown: As An Involvement in the Economic and Political Process,” in *Politics and State Building in Solomon Islands*, ed. Sinclair Dinnen and Stewart Firth (Canberra: ANU E Press, 2008): 64–95.

about material transactions, the lack of direct observation makes the assessment of island engagement impossible.

That is not to say that there is no value in subjective narratives, of course. Much to the contrary, collecting oral histories about the relationship between the community and the environment is crucial. Oral histories of this kind would help one to understand the value of land, sea, and natural resources as opposed to the value of foreign influxes of capital. However, this kind of data should be supported by direct observations too. Otherwise, the researcher can only use them to formulate theoretical arguments about the actions people consider important, without any description of the extent to which they follow their own principles in everyday interactions.

Observing social situations is, thus, a research practice that cannot be replaced without important losses. Specifically, in the context of this research theme, the Chinese influence must be observed as it concretizes into social action by means of negotiations. For example, land use and access to fishing areas are issues likely to elicit values and give interested parties good reason to take action. This is the kind of data that would provide direct evidence of how local actors handle their resource management duties as they confront the presence of the “New Chinese.”

All this does not mean that the only condition to make such a study possible would be to have ethnographers working in the selected areas. Other conditions should be satisfied, such as active and positive participation of the local communities. That would be necessary for an in-depth understanding of the ways in which the sea, land, and the socio-scape are valued. That can be studied with participatory methods such as 3D Participatory Modeling (P3DM), a community-based mapping method. Large scale tri-dimensional maps could be co-constructed to locate areas of particular value, such as fishing spots or gardening grounds, as well as land affected by climate change, soil acidification, and sea-level rise. In addition to providing first-hand data on the local valuation of land and sea, this method enables the participants to raise issues of local concern that the research protocol does not originally include. The fieldworker should be prepared to incorporate these in the research agenda, if possible and deemed necessary. That is especially important when new perspectives are offered by minorities of fragile actors who would otherwise lack an opportunity to have their voices heard. Methods such as P3DM allow participation regardless of gender, literacy, and status, hence they constitute one of the most indispensable tools of such a methodology. However, this and the other methods listed above cannot be deployed at the moment.

Arguably, the only method that is not irremediably compromised by the travel restrictions during the pandemic is the collection of photographic images taken by the research participants with their smartphones. This kind of image can be very useful and, in some cases, strikingly eloquent. That is the case of the image of the diplomatic visit of the Chinese ambassador Tang Songgen in Kiribati. As he was welcomed on Marakei Island, someone took a picture of him walking on a “red carpet” of I-Kiribati children. Unsurprisingly, when the image began to circulate on the internet, it generated a widespread debate on Twitter,

in the foreign policy sections of newspapers such as the *New York Times*, and university classrooms around the world. Many have openly sided against the ambassador's behavior, judged to be an explicit expression of neo-colonial oppressive relations. The criticism of ethnocentrism was leveled at this accusation, arguing that the welcome ceremony was, if viewed from the point of view of the I-Kiribati, no more than a traditional custom adapted to the circumstances. However, the extent to which this is indeed the perspective of I-Kiribati people remains to be ascertained.

Anthropologists of the Pacific were asked to comment on the image. It might seem appropriate to quote the perspective offered by Professor Katerina Teaiwa, a native of Kiribati herself. However, rather than claiming to speak on the behalf of I-Kiribati and take a side on the debate, she said that it was "frustrating for Pacific Islanders not to be taken seriously or heard".²³ This is indeed the kind of circumstances in which it is clear that the work of ethnographers is necessary and urgent in order to study the ways in which the Chinese presence is perceived in Kiribati or, for that matter, Solomon Islands, and the Pacific more broadly.

Decolonial Methodologies in the Pandemic Pacific

Until ethnographic fieldwork in the Pacific becomes more compatible with the restrictions implemented to limit the spread of the SARS COV-2 virus, other research methods can be envisaged. As argued above, there is hardly a suitable substitution for the kind of research data that would be necessary to study the Chinese presence and influence on Pacific lives. Hence, one alternative research trajectory would be to concentrate on the material published by local newspapers, as well as the testimonies and opinion pieces posted on social media. However, this kind of material should not be analyzed uncritically, that is, within the framework of theoretical legacies that produced and circulated concepts such as "trade war," "debt traps," "Chinese corruption," "dollar diplomacy," and "neocolonialism," as well as non-indigenous ideas such as "climate crisis," and "refugee migration." These concepts have been constructed in contemporary, mostly subject-specific, debates about Chinese "expansionism," hence de-constructing them is a necessary step towards laying the groundwork for a study of indigenous perspectives with an interdisciplinary approach.

Without this kind of preliminary deconstruction, there is a risk of pre-supposing the categories within which indigenous statements and local concerns will be framed once extracted from recently published materials. Given the pressure on academics to contribute to debates that are well beyond the interests and control of Pacific Islanders, such as the US-China "trade war" or the territorial claims in "East Asia" (itself a term coined in the West), there is a potential for the misuse of indigenous perspectives on the Chinese presence and influence. As Grydehøj *et al.* convincingly argued, there is a tendency in Western media

²³ "Why Did a Chinese Diplomat Walk All Over People on a Pacific Island?," *New York Times*, accessed August 19, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/19/world/asia/kiribati-china.html>.

to tag as “China threat” phenomena that might not necessarily be enclosed in such a category.²⁴ That is particularly the case in former colonies such as the PICs.

The “China threat” discourse is, in brief, a complex set of discursive formations that frames former colonies as tokens to be won or lost on the geopolitical chessboard. Focusing on the Pacific, there is no shortage of reports warning about the potential risks associated with the penetration of Chinese power, including environmental, economic, and military risks. The majority of publications about the Chinese presence and influence in the Pacific defends, to a variable extent, a position within the “China threat” discourse. This epistemic framing within the structure of pre-existing discourses requires a conscientious and precise reflection on the part of scholars who wish to position themselves, as much as possible, alongside their Pacific informants. Although, generally speaking, the history of ethnomethodology illustrates the limitations of such an endeavor, the discursive construction of the “China threat” as a pre-existing category that can potentially obliterate the plurality of Pacific voices poses a much more ethically compromising threat. Anthropologists are not necessarily devoid of hegemonic tendencies in their epistemologies. Consciously or not, their biases influence the formulation of what is thinkable and what is not.²⁵

It follows that the integration of indigenous perspectives into a research project about China in the Pacific requires a conscious detachment from the “China threat” discourse. That is possible by focusing on the articulation between processes of knowledge production, circulation, and power in the contemporary Pacific. Such a focus would encourage a deep understanding of the ways in which colonial forms of domination, independentist movements, and neo-colonialism in the Pacific all relate in some ways to concepts originating in discourses.

Despite the commitment of anthropologists to construct epistemological discourses on the basis of knowledge produced by people who are not in positions of dominance,²⁶ that alone does not ensure that their perspectives will be taken into account and applied into concerted conceptualizing efforts. Genuine care for and attention to the emic perspective does not automatically result in a re-evaluation of what is thinkable. Rather, it is the other way around. In order to give value to indigenous perspectives on such a critical issue as the Chinese presence and influence in the Pacific, to the point where they are brought to bear theoretically on current geopolitical issues, our knowledge-production processes should first be liberated from the professional stigma of “thinking the unthinkable.”

²⁴ Adam Grydehøj, Michael Lujan Bevacqua, Megumi Chibana, Yaso Nadarajah, Aká Simonsen, Ping Su, Renee Wright, and Sasha Davis, “Practicing Decolonial Political Geography: Island Perspectives on Neocolonialism and the China Threat Discourse,” *Political Geography* 85 (2021): 102330.

²⁵ Eduardo Restrepo and Arturo Escobar, “‘Other Anthropologies and Anthropology Otherwise’ Steps to a World Anthropologies Framework,” *Critique of Anthropology* 25, no. 2 (2005): 99–129; Arturo Escobar and Eduardo Restrepo, “Anthropologies hégémoniques et colonialité,” *Cahiers des Amériques Latines* 62 (2009): 83–95.

²⁶ Sonita Sarker, “Subalternity In and Out of Time, In and Out of History,” in *Gramsci and Foucault: A Reassessment*, ed. David Kreps (London: Routledge, 2016): 91–110.

The current phase should therefore not be spent absorbing the ever-increasing corpus of journalistic and popular materials about who is winning or losing the Pacific to whom. Rather, the challenge for scholars interested in comprehending the current situation would be to question the epistemic position from which we look at the places where relatable knowledge is produced.²⁷ They should be genuinely interested in explaining why and how such knowledge is situated and how it is used normatively to orient our thinking and discredit alternative viewpoints. The possibility itself of anthropological knowledge production processes depends on the willingness of scholars to question the conditions of their own knowing.

Scholars acknowledging the importance of questioning their own epistemic position in the “Chinese Pacific” might turn the challenges of the pandemic into an opportunity for developing such a reflexive effort in a methodologically explicit way. Arguably, such an effort can only rest on a refusal of the dichotomic, and rather unsophisticated, separation between being “pro-China” and “anti-China.” Although there is no need for this refusal to be explicit, it is necessary to illustrate how our methodology operates in such a way as to prevent the superimposition of patterns of colonial dominance on the knowledge production process. If ethnographic fieldwork was an option, one way to do that would be to open the analytical process up to the incorporation of a plurality of Pacific voices. However, currently, the extent to which such voices can be collected and convincingly tagged as “indigenous” without ethnographic fieldwork is very limited. Hence, while the ethnographic exploration of Pacific perspectives on the Chinese presence has to be postponed, the opportunity might be sought to bring the project of decolonizing knowledge further, which has never ceased to be a necessity and arguably will never do.

Author Bio

Rodolfo Maggio teaches anthropology at the University of Turin, Italy. He has been a Special Foreign Researcher at the Waseda University (2019–20), Tokyo and Wellcome Postdoctoral Fellow at the University of Oxford (2015–18). He is the author of journal articles and book chapters on religion, morality, economy, and the anthropology of Solomon Islands. He published three monographs about, respectively, the works of Pierre Bourdieu, Karen Ho and Jared Diamond. His book *The Kwara’ae of Honiara: Migration and ‘Good Life’ in Solomon Islands* was published in 2019 (Milan: Meltemi).

Bibliography

Andrews-Speed, Philip, and Sufang Zhang. *China as a Global Clean Energy Champion: Lifting the Veil*. Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019.

²⁷ Hourya Bentouhami, “Audre Lorde, la poésie n’est pas un luxe,” *Ballast* 1 (2017): 90–103; Ramón Grosfoguel, “The Epistemic Turn: Beyond Political-Economy Paradigms,” *Cultural Studies* 21, no. 2–3 (2007): 211–223.

- Barreto Soares, Laurentina 'Mica'. "Overseas Chinese, Soft Power and China's People-to-People Diplomacy in Timor-Leste." In *The China Alternative: Changing Regional Order in the Pacific Islands*, edited by Graeme Smith and Terence Wesley-Smith, 473-498. Acton, Australia: The Australian National University, 2021.
- Barnard, Patrick L., Andrew D. Short, Mitchell D. Harley, Kristen D. Splinter, Sean Vitousek, Ian L. Turner, Jonathan Allan et al. "Coastal Vulnerability Across the Pacific Dominated by El Nino/Southern Oscillation." *Nature Geoscience* 8, no. 10 (2015): 801-807.
- Bentouhami, Hourya. "Audre Lorde, la poésie n'est pas un luxe." *Ballast* 1 (2017): 90-103.
- Bronen, Robin, and F. Stuart Chapin. "Adaptive Governance and Institutional Strategies for Climate-Induced Community Relocations in Alaska." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 110, no. 23 (2013): 9320-9325.
- Crocombe, Ronald G. *Asia in the Pacific Islands: Replacing the West*. Suva: University of South Pacific, 2007.
- Crocombe, Ronald G. "The Fourth Wave: Chinese in the Pacific Islands in the Twenty-First Century." CSCSD, Occasional Paper 1, 2007.
- D'Arcy, Paul. "The Chinese Pacifics: A Brief Historical Review." *The Journal of Pacific History* 49, no. 4 (2014): 396-420.
- D'Arcy, Paul, Patrick Matbob, and Linda Crowl, eds. *Pacific-Asia Partnerships in Resource Development*. Madang, Papua New Guinea: DWU Press, 2014.
- Dreaver, Barbara. "China's Influence and Climate Change: Pacific Leaders Forum in Tuvalu Shaping Up to be Fiery." Accessed October 8, 2019. <https://www.tvnz.co.nz/one-news/new-zealand/chinas-influence-and-climate-change-pacific-leaders-forum-in-tuvalu-shaping-up-fiery>.
- Escobar, Arturo, and Eduardo Restrepo. "Anthropologies hégémoniques et colonialité." *Cahiers des Amériques Latines* 62 (2009): 83-95.
- Hughes, Helen. "Aid Has Failed the Pacific," *Pacific Economic Bulletin* 25 no. 3. Canberra: The Australian National University, 2010.

Grosfoguel, Ramón. "The Epistemic Turn. Beyond Political-Economy Paradigms." *Cultural Studies* 21, no. 2-3 (2007): 211-223.

Grydehøj, Adam, Michael Lujan Bevacqua, Megumi Chibana, Yaso Nadarajah, Aká Simonsen, Ping Su, Renee Wright, and Sasha Davis. "Practicing Decolonial Political Geography: Island Perspectives on Neocolonialism and the China Threat Discourse." *Political Geography* 85 (2021): 102330.

Gualberti, Giorgio, Morgan Bazilian, and Todd Moss. "Energy Investments in Africa by the US, Europe and China." *International Association for Energy Economics* (2014): 31-35.

Lee, Yimou. "Taiwan Warns Solomon Islands of China 'Debt Trap' in Diplomatic Switch." Accessed June 14, 2021. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-pacific-china-solomonislands-idUSKCN1VR09W>.

Lum, Thomas, Hannah Fischer, Julissa Gomez-Granger, and Anne Leland. *China's Foreign Aid Activities in Africa, Latin America, and Southeast Asia*. Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service Report, 2009.

Mattingly, Cheryl. *Moral Laboratories: Family Peril and the Struggle for a Good Life*. Oakland: University of California Press, 2014.

Mendes, Carmen Amado, ed. *China's New Silk Road: An Emerging World Order*. Oxon and New York: Routledge, 2018.

Moore, Clive. "No More Walkabout Long Chinatown: As an Involvement in the Economic and Political Process." In *Politics and State Building in Solomon Islands*, edited by Sinclair Dinnen and Stewart Firth, 64-95. Canberra: ANU E Press, 2008.

Mosse, David. *Cultivating Development: An Ethnography of Aid Policy and Practice*. London: Pluto Press, 2004.

Mosse, David. "The Anthropology of International Development." *Annual Review of Anthropology* 42 (2013): 227-246.

New York Times. "Why Did a Chinese Diplomat Walk All Over People on a Pacific Island?" Accessed August 19, 2021. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/19/world/asia/kiribati-china.html>.

- Parker, Rita. *Unregulated Population Migration and Other Future Drivers of Instability in the Pacific*. Lowy Institute for International Policy, 2018.
- Reid, Anthony. *The Chinese Diaspora in the Pacific*. London: Routledge, 2017.
- Restrepo, Eduardo, and Arturo Escobar. "'Other Anthropologies and Anthropology Otherwise' Steps to a World Anthropologies Framework." *Critique of Anthropology* 25, no. 2 (2005): 99-129.
- Sarker, Sonita. "Subalternity In and Out of Time, In and Out of History." In *Gramsci and Foucault: A Reassessment*, edited by David Kreps, 91-110. London: Routledge, 2016.
- Seib, Roland. *China in the South Pacific: No New Hegemon on the Horizon*. Peace Research Institute, 2009.
- Shearer, Christine. "The Political Ecology of Climate Adaptation Assistance: Alaska Natives, Displacement, and Relocation." *Journal of Political Ecology* 19, no. 1 (2012): 174-183.
- Smith, Graeme. "Beijing's Orphans? New Chinese Investors in Papua New Guinea." *Pacific Affairs* 86, no. 2 (2013): 327-49.
- Smith, Graeme. "Nupela Masta? Local and Expatriate Labour in a Chinese-Run Nickel Mine in Papua New Guinea." *Asian Studies Review* 37, no. 2 (2013): 178-195.
- Smith, Graeme, and Terence Wesley-Smith, eds. *The China Alternative: Changing Regional Order in the Pacific Islands*. Acton: Australia: The Australian National University, 2021.
- Szadziwski, Henryk. "A Search for Coherence: The Belt and Road Initiative in the Pacific Islands." In *The China Alternative: Changing Regional Order in the Pacific Islands*, edited by Graeme Smith and Terence Wesley-Smith, 283-318. Acton, Australia: The Australian National University, 2021.
- Temple, Jonathan. "Aid and Conditionality." In *Handbook of Development Economics*, vol. 5, edited by Dani Rodrik, Mark Rosenzweig, 4415-4523. Amsterdam: Elsevier, 2010.
- Toito'ona, Ronald, "China Eyes Solomons Tuna." *FFA's Tuna Pacific: Fisheries news and views*. Accessed June 14, 2021. <https://www.tunapacific.org/2020/02/17/china-eyes-solomons-tuna/>.

Trémon, Anne-Christine. "Flexible Kinship: Shaping Transnational Families Among the Chinese in Tahiti." *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 23, no. 1 (2017): 42-60.

Trémon, Anne-Christine. "Cosmopolitanization and Localization: Ethnicity, Class and Citizenship among the Chinese of French Polynesia." *Anthropological Theory* 9, no. 1 (2009): 103-126.

Vanderhill, Rachel. *Promoting Authoritarianism Abroad*. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2013.

Van Grieken, Bob Jurriaan, and Jaroslaw Kantorowicz. "Debunking Myths about China: The Determinants of China's Official Financing to the Pacific." *Geopolitics* 26, no.3 (2019): 861-888.

Wesley-Smith, Terence, and Edgar A. Porter, eds. *China in Oceania: Reshaping the Pacific*, New York: Berghahn Books, 2010.

Willmott, William. "Origins of the Chinese in the South Pacific." In *Histories of the Chinese in Australasia and the South Pacific*, edited by Paul Mcgregor, 129-40. Melbourne: Museum of Chinese Australian History, 1995.

Willmott, William. "The Overseas Chinese Experience in the Pacific." In *China in Oceania*, edited by Terence Wesley-Smith and Edgar A. Porter, 93-103, New York: Berghahn Books, 2010.

Wolf Jr, Charles, Xiao Wang, and Eric Warner. *China's Foreign Aid and Government-Sponsored Investment Activities: Scale, Content, Destinations, and Implications*. Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2013.