

What we Have (and Have not) Learned from Early Research on China's Engagement in the Pacific

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Abstract

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Jian Yang, *The Pacific Islands in China's Grand Strategy: Small States, Big Games*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

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Culling a selective yet representative set of works on China's growing presence in Pacific Island countries (PICs), this essay reviews and critically assesses early contributions to the field. To date, these contributions have been motivated by two primary goals: a) gathering high-quality descriptive data on precisely what China does in individual PICs, in what amounts projects are funded, and by which actors' projects are designed, negotiated, and carried out, and b) attempts to theorise China's motivations for providing such aid and investment. However, we also find that research on the way local actors shape and influence Chinese engagement, and how China adapts to local norms and behaviours, is thin at best, as are appraisals of the impacts of Chinese aid at the local and national levels more broadly. We conclude that these extant gaps comprise an agenda for further empirical research, and that filling them necessitates attention to Pacific experiences of Chinese aid at the micro, meso, and macro levels.

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As attested by a growing body of research, the past decade has witnessed a dramatic expansion of China's diplomatic and aid presence in Pacific Island countries. In this brief review, we contend that the time is now ripe for a stock-take of scholarship on China's Pacific engagement, with a view to assessing what is known, what critical gaps exist, and how this research program might proceed in the near-to-mid range future.

On one hand, the works reviewed here were motivated by a desire to better understand the rationale underpinning China's growing involvement in the Pacific Islands, a task that has produced two tangible, laudable results. First, understanding China's intentionality has necessitated the application of explanatory frameworks to China's Pacific strategy, particularly development aid. Consequently, we have learned much about how and why these policies work the way they do. Second, investigations into the architecture of China's policy toward the Pacific has accumulated much high-quality raw data on precisely where in the region China focuses its efforts, how much it spends, and what types of projects it prioritises; indeed, the Lowy Institute's "Map of Chinese Aid in the Pacific" is the leading source of such data.

This kind of descriptive data is essential to building good theory, and will continue to be important for the study of China's activities in particular Pacific states and territories, and across the region as a whole.

The problem, however, is that by virtue of the focus on Chinese means and motives, we do not yet have a firm grasp on its outcomes. The local, national, and regional impacts of China's aid and investment have, in general, not been well studied, nor have the roles of Pacific Islanders in mediating those impacts. Moreover, the drivers of China's foreign aid and investment system have been well studied in the context of other regions, especially Africa (see Bräutigam (2011); Tan-Mullins et al. (2010); Rotberg, (2008).) Continued emphasis in this direction is unlikely to unearth anything novel without

tapping into the differential results and perspectives at play in the Pacific. We therefore argue for a shift in focus, not away from China, but toward a more interactive approach that captures the nuanced ways in which local institutions and norms affect the way China's Pacific incursions unfold, and indeed, are shaped by their intended recipients.

The works by Wesley-Smith and Porter, Yang, and Zhang undertake two worthy tasks—accounting for China's changing role in the Pacific, and providing details as to precisely how China goes about its Pacific engagement, both in individual PICs and throughout the region as a whole. Delivering what they promise, these books are valuable sources of descriptive raw data and foundational frameworks for understanding Chinese foreign policy. Both functions are essential to knowledge-building, albeit in different ways, and have furnished the wider field of inquiry with logical starting point for what will surely be a decades-long research program.

As a group, these books also lend themselves to grounded speculation as to the intentionality underpinning China's presence in the Pacific, or alternatively, the risk of unintended consequences associated with engaging a powerful, well-financed, and relatively novel regional player. One is tempted, therefore, to speculate also about the likely responses of Pacific Islanders and their governments. However, these are not works about Pacific Island countries or peoples per se, and the authors did not set out explicitly to document Pacific responses to China, though Wesley-Smith and Porter do engage in a kind of preliminary enumeration to this effect. Rather, the books are about explaining China's interests and foreign policy in the Pacific. It seems unreasonable to assess a body of research for failing to reach conclusions it never intended and was not designed to provide, or for failing to answer questions not directly posed.

At the time at which the Wesley-Smith and Porter and Yang books were written (2010 and 2011 respectively), China's introduction to the Pacific as a geopolitical hegemon and provider of development aid was so fresh that scholars were mostly concerned with identifying basic patterns or trends (or their absence) and in amassing reliable descriptive data. Some borrowed from generalised theories of international relations to impose some intellectual order on emergent trends, as in the case of Yang's book. Others drew from knowledge networks steeped in area-studies specialisation and deep contextual understanding, as Wesley-Smith and Porter did. Amid the newness, some well-reasoned guesswork about what China's regional rise might ultimately mean for Pacific Islanders was perhaps inevitable, but simply not enough time had elapsed for hard-nosed empirical assessments of local or national-level impacts to be made.

China in Oceania is notable as the first of the texts on China in the Pacific to include several Pacific Island contributors. In the editor's words, "a central purpose of [the] collection is to give to those from the region who view China's influence from a grounded and local perspective, and whose voices are too often drowned out by external observers with their own axes to grind and ready access to popular and scholarly media" (2). The book stresses that there is no singular view of China's Pacific presence, but serves to highlight intra-regional

variation, incorporating views on China's presence in Fiji (Sandra Tarte), Samoa (Iati Iati), Papua New Guinea (Hank Nelson), The Solomon Islands (Tarcisius Tara Kabutaulaka), Tonga (Palenitina Langa' oi), and Palau (Takashi Mita), and peppered with perspectives from other regional players, such as Japan. Attempts are made to find a loose consensus, however. The editors conclude that, among Pacific countries, there is a general and quite understandable apprehensiveness arising from a lack of experience with China, but an appreciation for China's policy commitments, notably the intent not to intervene in the affairs of other states, and a lack of insistence on the conditionalities characterising traditional aid relationships. Now that a full decade has elapsed, it may well be time to revisit the rhetorical tenets of Chinese foreign policy in the Pacific, and assess how or how well they have been upheld from Pacific points of view.

Despite a concern for representation and voice, Wesley-Smith and Porter are still primarily occupied with Chinese intentions and invite us to view its Pacific engagement in the context of larger geopolitical interests. One gets the sense that the editors envisioned their main audience as lying outside the field of Pacific Studies and much closer to political science or security studies, given the amount of attention that is devoted to understanding just how much a sparsely-populated group of microstates matters to an emergent superpower. Indeed, the central question, "what is China up to?" (p. 2) is posed in light of the perceived irrelevance of the Pacific in terms of national interests in general. This perception is acknowledged directly on p. 12: "Oceania's low profile in global politics owes as much to its tacit status as an 'American lake' as to its marginal importance in the global economy."

Wesley-Smith and Porter make the case that in fact the Pacific holds more importance for China and the world than the smallness of constituent states might lead one to think. Part of the allure derives from Pacific nations' natural resource reserves, including those that may be found in the more than 30 million square kilometres of ocean comprising total area of Pacific states exclusive economic zones, and the belief that harvesting these is likely to become increasingly viable commercially. Strategically, however, the Pacific Islands are a locus of great power competition, having traditionally viewed as "Australia's patch," "New Zealand's neighbour", or the United States' "backyard." China's growing presence in the Pacific could thus be interpreted as an effort to wrest or match influence from these old allies. What is perhaps most interesting about this analysis is the extent to which geopolitical interests are conceptualised from the standpoint of outsiders, rather than Pacific islanders themselves. Because "Chinese interests" are treated as synonymous with "national interests" in general, one cannot help but think that China may simply be another in a long line of foreign entities that view the Pacific at best as a competitive arena and at worst a possession.

Yang paints a similar picture, albeit from a different intellectual standpoint. By positioning the Pacific Islands within the context of grand strategy—i.e. the pursuit of material gains by states and the competition that arises from these pursuits—Yang largely elides the issue of Pacific representation and voice. Instead, Yang takes "regional order" as his dependent variable, a term which by its nature directs focus away from individual Pacific

countries' experiences and view them in unitary terms. The chief explanatory variable is referred to as China's "involvement" or "presence" in the Pacific, which Yang conceptualises as trade, aid, and diplomatic linkage. Key to Yang's analysis is that the regional security order of the Pacific consists of much more than Pacific Island countries, but historically has consisted of a range of other stakeholders, including the US, Australia, New Zealand, France, and Japan, as well as the Republic of China (ROC) on Taiwan. As noted above, the book is a snapshot taken as this involvement was ramping up, and much has changed in the intervening decade. Still, the appendices provide a strong sense of the state of China's Pacific activities as of 2011, meticulously documenting investment figures development projects, and government-to-government visits.

In contrast to the Pacific studies perspective of the Wesley-Smith and Porter volume, Yang draws from his training as a Sinologist to elaborate the specific nature of China's interests, and the way the Pacific Islands may fulfil them. Both internal and external security threats (or perceptions of these) inform Chinese strategizing in the world, and protecting territorial integrity tops the list of priorities. Thus, international recognition and support for the ROC is viewed by Beijing as a major threat to its security (since under the 'One China' principle no foreign entity can recognise or have diplomatic ties to both), and combatting it a vital component of grand strategy. Along with the Caribbean, the Pacific Islands reflect a clustered base of support for the ROC, and are therefore prime targets for Chinese influence, usually spread in the form of economic benefits. By matching or exceeding levels of development aid from the ROC, for example, Beijing hopes to win new allies and squash the global clout of its "challenger" in one fell swoop. The rivalry with Taiwan is as prescient now as when Yang wrote—in late 2019, Kiribati and the Solomon Islands severed ties with Taipei and normalises relations with Beijing, shrinking the total number of states recognising the ROC to fifteen globally, and just four in Oceania (Marshall Islands, Nauru, Palau, and Tuvalu).

Zhang's *A Cautious New Approach* is likewise a book about Chinese foreign policy and how it gets executed. The book includes Timor-Leste and Papua New Guinea along with Cambodia in a purposive sample of trilaterally-delivered aid projects, in which China partners with recipients and a "traditional" third party provider—Australia, in the case of Papua New Guinea's malaria control program, and the United States in Timor-Leste. Trilateralism, Zhang argues, is a new approach to aid to delivery for China, and a puzzling one. What accounts for the emergence of this triangular model when China has principally favoured bilateral aid delivery? Why would China partner for delivery with "western" donor countries? Are motivations for providing aid trilaterally different from China's motivation for giving aid in general?

The book has many excellent qualities, just one of which is its handiness as a thumbnail guide on the current state of Beijing's aid programme. More importantly, however, the book demonstrates that trilateral aid serves China's interests in several ways. In addition to benefitting international aid practice burden-sharing among donors, Zhang argues for trilateralism as a tool of Chinese

interests, driven by a) a concern for its reputation globally, and b) a desire to crowdsource knowledge and experience from the international partner. Theoretically, this claim is both constructivist and strategic. As Zhang puts it, the Chinese government "has strategically used trilateral aid cooperation to build its global image as a responsible rising power since the early 2000s. Technically, China has aimed to learn selectively from traditional donor states and international development organisations so it can improve its aid delivery via trilateral aid cooperation" (p. 22).

By its very definition, trilateral cooperation gives a degree of ownership over aid projects to recipient governments, and therefore is inherently more inclusive of these voices, including those in the Pacific countries specifically enumerated by Zhang. Willing participation in trilateral initiatives lends an air of credibility to Beijing's talk of "South-South cooperation", common identification with the struggles of other colonised peoples, and expressed desire to distance itself from the conditionalities of conventional "western aid", all of which have an understandable appeal for Pacific governments. However, the author is quick to point out that states do trilateralism too—it is not altogether new, but it is new to China. He also notes that those examples explored in the book are one small slice of an already small universe of cases, and that bilateralism is still Beijing's preferred aid modality by far. As with the other works explored here, the emphasis is on the formation and implementation of Chinese interests, rather than the results these produce on the ground.

Notwithstanding the constituent chapters of Wesley-Smith and Porter's book, the absence or marginalisation of Pacific island perspectives and voices is a central theme across Western contemporary scholarship on China's engagement with the Pacific islands. The works by Crocombe and Powles seek to address this in two distinct but equally significant ways that foreground Pacific perspectives and in so doing subvert the conventional hierarchies of knowledge upheld within much of Western scholarship on the Pacific. These books, therefore, serve as critical reflection points – as reminders – to scholars and observers seeking to shape the conversation about China in the Pacific.

Crocombe's *Asia in the Pacific Islands: Replacing the West* is arguably the foundational text for scholarship on Asian engagement with the Pacific. The book's preface states that "a spectacular transition is under way in the Pacific Islands" (i) from 'overwhelmingly' Western sources of external influence, 'whether cultural, economic, political or other', to Asian. As historian Paul D'Arcy wrote, 'Crocombe was on a wave of academic and government interest in Asian influence in the Island Pacific.' This indeed became a defining feature of Crocombe's subsequent work. The book itself viewed the rise of Asian influence in the Pacific as of potential benefit to Pacific Islanders, providing they [Pacific Islanders] "remain flexible and attuned to new circumstances, new players and new opportunities" (D'Arcy, 2014). To that end, the intended audience for Asia in the Pacific Islands are Pacific Islanders, their leaders, and decision-makers. Alongside a meticulously crafted argument, Crocombe weaves story-telling and personal vignettes to reinforce the primary message. Crocombe warns in the preface that

“it will pay Pacific people to understand Asia more deeply” and writes that the balance of influence in the Pacific is shifting towards Asia, a trend he argues is “irreversible”. Crocombe’s bottom-line is that the region fails to recognise this trend at its peril.

The text is encyclopedic in both form and scope and was informed by almost half a century of research (Tuimalaali‘ifano, 2010, p.373). As a result, it reads as part instructive, part cautionary, part stream of consciousness. The volume focuses on four dynamics identified as shaping Pacific-Asia interaction: people; hardware; politics; and software. Crocombe’s underlying concern is the nature of these transactions, how transformational these transactions are, and the implications for the Pacific.

The first section, *people*, charts the waves of migration from Asia to Oceania and what Crocombe refers to as the “counter-current” of. The second section, *hardware*, examines economic transactions - both licit and illicit - from trade and the exchange of raw and processed materials, investment and services, tourism and investment, through to transnational organised crime and corruption. In a later section Crocombe notes that these activities have integrated the Pacific into the Asian trading system. The third section, *politics*, questions why Pacific Islands is increasingly “looking North” and begins by noting the vacuum created by the closure of Western diplomatic missions in the region and the reduction in aid and engagement with regional organisations, considers the evolution of the ‘new’ political economy of the region, the rise of ‘south-south’ regional cooperation including new actors such as Indonesia, and the emergence of cheque book diplomacy between Beijing and Taipei. This section argues that a new strategic paradigm is emerging and it is clear that Crocombe considers that China is a central driver of this new paradigm as he threads together various aspects of growing Chinese engagement with Pacific countries across the security sectors including capacity building and training, uniforms, the exchange of military attaches, and even the offer of an elite commando unit to protect Vanuatu’s government in the event of a coup and the Chinese dominated private sector. Here Crocombe emphasises shifting threat perceptions and the suggestion that geopolitical contests may draw the region into a ‘new Cold War.’ With some foresight in thinking over a decade later, Crocombe outlines two potential strategic outcomes: the shift of Pacific island nations into the increasingly influential Asian (read: Chinese) sphere of influence as allegiances are tested and greater opportunities to support development are offered; or, alternatively, the alignment of Pacific island nations alongside a loose alliance between Western and ASEAN countries to “constrain Chinese expansion.” The fourth section, *software*, is concerned with the transference and transformation of ideas, values and beliefs as well as religion, information, education and research, and sport and culture. The fifth and final section seeks to chart the future of the trends outlined in the previous four sections and carries with it a series of warnings. Crocombe argues that ‘China is laying the foundations for greatly enhanced influence and power’ and that unless Pacific governments and societies, including media and the public, are better prepared to meet this shift in the balance of global forces towards Asia, ‘Pacific peoples will be disadvantaged in the coming directions’ (p.470). Notably, Crocombe

includes four appendices which consist of a who’s who of actors from Asian diplomatic representation in the Pacific Islands to inter-government and non-governmental organisations involving Asia and the Pacific Islands, to journals and videos of the Asia-Pacific region. It would be useful to do a stock-take of these resources now to chart growth and areas of focus.

Published in 2007, Crocombe’s *Asia in the Pacific Islands: Replacing the West* has retained its relevance. For Pacific scholars and students concerned with the shifting geopolitics of the region, revisiting Crocombe’s work serves as a critical reminder that contemporary scholarship on China in the Pacific owes a significant debt to his meticulous documentation of trends and transformations and his own personal lifelong reflections.

Seeking to address the dominance of largely Australian, New Zealand and American views, *China and the Pacific: The View from Oceania*, edited by New Zealand former diplomat, Michael Powles, is the product of a conference convened in February 2015 at the National University of Samoa (NUS), in Apia. Led by the New Zealand Contemporary China Centre (NZCCR) at Victoria University of Wellington, the conference was a partnership between NZCCR, NUS and Sun Yat-sen University of Guangzhou, a model of academic collaboration that is increasingly difficult.

The objectives of the conference were twofold. First, it was in response to increasing interest in Wellington, Canberra and capitals across the Pacific, as well as further afield, about China’s growing role and influence as a diplomatic, development and economic partner to Pacific countries and territories. To that end, the conference drew together ‘more than 40 international academics, diplomats, politicians, experts and officials’ to discuss issues ranging from geopolitics, to regional security, development cooperation, trade and investment, and the Chinese diaspora across the region. Second, and most significantly, the driving objective and ethos of the conference was to provide ‘a platform for Pacific voices to be heard and the opportunity for engagement and discussion between Pacific and other participants’ (10).

The edited volume notes that Pacific Island views on the challenges and opportunities that China’s engagement in the region were ‘paid little heed’ despite Pacific Island governments quietly developing bilateral relations with China, or, in some cases, with Taiwan (15). In that respect, the conference aimed to ‘break new ground’ by prioritising views from the Pacific Islands; holding the conference in the Pacific itself – the first conference of its kind to be held in a Pacific country; and providing opportunities for perspectives to be exchanged between scholars and officials from the Pacific Islands and China.

Given the current climate of heightened US-China tensions and growing dissonance between Western and Chinese governments and universities, this edited volume capturing Pacific perspectives about the challenges and opportunities China presented to the region is especially valuable, including references to ‘the China alternative’ in terms of geopolitics and development cooperation, in particular. This term has since been adopted by Dame Meg Taylor, Secretary-General of the Pacific Islands Forum, who has unequivocally stated that ‘I reject the

terms of the dilemma which presents the Pacific with a choice between a China alternative and our traditional partners. Unfortunately, this framing remains the dominant narrative in the public debate about our region in the context of today's geostrategic competition' (Taylor, 2019).

The publication is a 'comprehensive compilation of presentations analysing the benefits and challenges of accommodating and managing China's presence in Oceania, and identifying areas for further policy development and implementation' (To, 2017). Powles, in the *Introduction*, echoes Crocombe writing 'China is in the Pacific to stay...its influence is likely to increase and...Pacific Island countries need to acknowledge and accommodate that' (16). This message is reinforced throughout the book with strong emphasis on constructive engagement and less attention paid to the increasingly popular 'China threat' discourse although security concerns are not wholly dismissed. Samoan prime minister, the Hon. Tuilaepa Lufesoliai Sailele Malielegaoi, directly addresses 'colliding interests and inevitable rivalry' (26) between China and the US and reinforces the Pacific as an 'ocean of tranquillity'. Others challenged the security implications of the oft-repeated mantra that 'the Pacific is big enough for all us' – directly quoting then US Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, in 2012 (264).

A key theme throughout the book is the agency of both Pacific Island countries and the region itself in relations with China. Prasad suggests that Pacific Island countries 'use their sovereignty...as a resource' to negotiate Chinese participation in various sectors of their economies (178). Moreover, Prasad reflects that growing engagement with China is part of a broader trend of Pacific countries diversifying their foreign relations with a range of countries outside of the traditional donor relationships (178). Dulciana Somare-Brash expands on 'island agency' in the context of Chinese aid to Papua New Guinea, challenging the traditional aid donor approach and arguing 'the onus is on us as Melanesians' to 'enhance achievable governance ideals and standards in the face of increasing interest in our sub-region (180-181) including calling for Melanesian models and knowledge to be adopted (183-184). Peseta Noumea Simi cites the reforms Samoa has undertaken to strengthen how Samoa engages with development partners (184) and explores the challenges Samoa faced in the implementation and delivery of Chinese aid (185-187). To that end, Simi calls for building more durable development partnerships with China through trilateral cooperation with other development partners, a preference for grant assistance rather than concessional loans however greater involvement in the tender processes if concessional loans continue to be China's preferred financing modality (p.188).

Tarcisius Kabutaulaka suggests that because of China's role in resource sectors across the Pacific that it will ultimately impact Pacific Island countries' economies and politics, potentially even influencing regional geopolitics (231). This, Kabutaulaka argues will in turn influence how major powers conduct themselves in Oceania and 'Pacific Islands will therefore need to prepare to deal more with China as an economic and political ally' (231). He posits that the 'challenge for Oceania is to feed and tame the

dragon, and then ride it on the development voyage.' In response, then deputy head of mission of the Chinese Embassy in Suva, Yang Liu, responded by saying "...you do not have to feed or tame the Dragon to live with it. What you need to do is simply to treat the Dragon as a friend rather than a threat or pet, and then you can easily win its heart (21).

The conference, and book, was, after all, a talanoa between academics and officials from the Pacific Islands and China. This review has focused on Pacific perspectives on China's role and influence in the Pacific because these perspectives continue to be marginalised in current debates about regional geopolitics. The perspectives of Chinese officials and scholars captured in the book are similarly nuanced and were notable for the willingness of Chinese officials to engage with Pacific participants even on sensitive aspects of China's involvement in the region (262). Five years after the conference, Powles' *China and the Pacific: The View from Oceania* continues to offer critical insights into Pacific – and Chinese – perspectives on China's role and influence in the Pacific Islands region. For that reason, and because it is unlikely to be replicated in the short-term, it holds a particularly significant position within scholarship on China and the Pacific.

Our intention here is not to call out sins of omission. The works reviewed in the forgoing paragraphs have generated much of value, and indeed, Pacific perspectives and implications do figure in some of them. However, consideration of these has heretofore been uneven. Our principal aim is therefore to prod those exploring China's Pacific presence to think about the extensions of the field, and the central position Pacific voices and views must play in these. Their inclusion needs to be intentional and deliberate. After all, their elision in some of the above works was never driven by any desire to exclude but was a by-product of questions designed to probe the complexity of China's foreign policy-making at its source, as opposed to grappling with the impact of China's engagement on Pacific people and places, and the lessons they alone can teach.

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