

**THE FRONTIERS OF HISTORY:
CHINA DISCOVERS
THE PACIFIC'S DARK
COLONIAL LEGACY**

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On a scorching hot afternoon in July 2023, the Prime Minister of Solomon Islands, Manasesh Sogavare, met with President Xi Jinping in the Great Hall of the People for the mandatory grip and grin for the cameras. China's official media had made much of Sogavare's visit, and he did not disappoint, remarking upon his arrival in China, 'I am back home' in a clip posted to Twitter by CGTN,¹ and later giving a fulsome interview on the same network in which he pronounced Xi a 'great man' and urged everyone to read all four volumes of *The Governance of China* 习近平谈治国理政, a collection of Xi's speeches and writings.²

Less noticed was what Sogavare—and the Pacific more broadly—received in return. A host of memorandums of agreement (MOAs) was signed, including the controversial security agreement, which was first leaked online by a provincial government adviser in 2022, but the final text, which covers military and police cooperation, has never been made public. China–Pacific relations also got their first policy slogan: the Four Fully Respects 四个充分尊重.³ Much of it was boilerplate doggerel around 'win–win results' and 'shared benefits', but it also touched on 'cultural traditions of Pacific Island nations' and the need to support the 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent—a regional strategy agreed on by Pacific Island Forum nations in 2019 to tackle climate change against the background of geostrategic competition.⁴

Unpromising beginnings

Less than a decade ago, China's knowledge of and interest in the Pacific was rudimentary at best. Back in 2013, I worked with a team of researchers from the Chinese Academy of International Trade and Economic Cooperation (CAITEC), a think tank affiliated with China's Ministry of Commerce (MOFCOM). One of their team was tasked with coming up with China's five-year plan for its relations with the Kingdom of Tonga, which would map out China's strategies for aid, investment and trade with the one Pacific nation never to have been colonised. It looked to be a sensitive mission.

Tonga already figured large in fears about China's intent in the region, with some analysts arguing that the kingdom might 'fall' to China as a result of debts owed to Export-Import Bank of China dating back to 2006.⁵



Beowa National Park, formerly Ben Boyd National Park

Source: Michael Dawes, Flickr

I had expected the researcher, fresh from a posting in Pakistan, to be familiar with the history of China's engagement with the kingdom, which switched its diplomatic allegiance from Taiwan in November 1998 as part of its confusingly named 'Look East' policy.⁶ There was no shortage of entertaining detail for him to become familiar with: a 1996 deal brokered by the Tongan princess Pilolevu to lease Tonga's satellite spots to China after the kingdom—with the help of a colourful American businessman—had acquired the world's last 16 unoccupied orbital slots. Another deal that should have caught his attention was the origin story of China's 'debt trap diplomacy' in the Pacific, where the construction company China Civil Engineering Construction Corporation (CCECC) brokered a Export-Import Bank of China

loan to rebuild Tonga's capital, Nuku'alofa, following anti-Chinese riots in 2006, breezily promising (never in writing) that the debt would be forgiven one day. China still holds nearly two-thirds of the kingdom's external debt.

To my disappointment, the researcher, flown out on the tab of the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) China to write his country report and assess sectors where Australia and China might team up on aid projects,⁷ was not fully familiar with his brief. A week before heading to Shougang Airport for the long trip via Australia and New Zealand, he expressed surprise that he was not heading to Africa. He had assumed that he was off to Togo (*duoge* 多哥) rather than Tonga (*tangjia* 汤加).

Ten years since this unpromising start, a transformation has taken place. The Chinese government has invested in the teaching of Pacific languages—at Beijing Foreign Studies University, it is possible to study all the languages of China's Pacific diplomatic partners, even Cook Islands Maori. The field of Pacific studies is still relatively small,⁸ although there are already six main research centres, led by the early mover: Sun Yat-sen University's Center for Oceania Studies, and the heavily funded Research Centre for Pacific Island Countries at Liaocheng University. The last benefits from a whole-of-university approach—even the vice chancellor at Liaocheng is engaged in Pacific studies—and institutional links to both the Shandong Provincial Government and the International Liaison Department, a Party agency charged with managing relations between the Communist Party of China (CPC) and foreign political parties.⁹

The quality of historical and political research coming out of China on the Pacific is still mixed. At one end, there are serious scholars equipped to engage in extended archival and field research in the Pacific and to conduct sophisticated analysis of how the Pacific is portrayed in China.¹⁰ At the other end, I can recall an international conference in 2015 where participants sitting in the shade of the Great Hall Fale at the National University of Samoa silently exchanged incredulous glances as a senior academic from Liaocheng University shared her knowledge of an alleged secret plan by Banimarama's Fijian military to invade New Zealand.

Weaponising Pacific history

Despite such misfires, Chinese research on the Pacific has laid the foundations for strengthening ties with Pacific Island countries.

The Chinese state—and particularly its propaganda organs—is beginning to apply Mao’s famous aphorism ‘using the past past to serve the present’ (*gu wei jin yong* 古为今用) to the Pacific. Alternatively, and more specifically, since the Chinese state had very little to do with the Pacific before the 1970s, it is using the West’s Pacific colonial past to serve the present.

Although the Pacific was once relatively neglected, PRC academics with knowledge of it are in high demand to provide comment for outlets like the *Global Times*, China’s influential nationalist tabloid. Such researchers as Yu Lei 于镭, from Shandong University, provide critical commentary about Western colonialism in the Pacific. In 2023 Australia agreed to resettle the entire population of Tuvalu under the Australia–Tuvalu Falepili Union treaty,¹¹ which had neocolonial overtones,¹² particularly Article 4, which stated: ‘Tuvalu shall mutually agree with Australia any partnership, arrangement or engagement with any other State or entity on security and defence-related matters. Such matters include but are not limited to defence, policing, border protection, cyber security and critical infrastructure, including ports, telecommunications and energy infrastructure.’ Commenting in the *Global Times*, Yu Lei argued the treaty demonstrated that ‘former colonial powers’ wanted these countries to remain ‘politically subservient ... and economically reliant’ on them through ‘instructions and manipulation’.¹³

Although in its early stages, the popular deployment of historical narratives is likely to provide focus to China’s discovery of Pacific colonial histories, as China—which has no historical baggage in the Pacific—looks to ‘tell its story well’ 讲好中国故事 in the Pacific. Part of that story is that unlike three of the other permanent members of the UN Security Council (the United States, the United Kingdom and France), China has not conducted any nuclear tests in the Pacific.

Chen Hong 陈弘, another prominent academic at East China Normal University and who gained the distinction in Australia of having his visa cancelled for allegedly trying to influence a NSW government backbencher,¹⁴ was among the first to examine the deplorable nuclear legacy of the United States. His work has highlighted Operation Castle Bravo, the first of a series of tests on Bikini Atoll in the Marshall Islands, the first fusion nuclear bomb tested anywhere and still the most powerful nuclear device ever detonated by the United States.¹⁵ The United States, the United Kingdom and France detonated 315 nuclear devices in the Pacific over three decades, including twelve in Australia.¹⁶

There are entire swathes of colonial history that China's commentariat have yet to exploit, presumably because they have yet to come across them. The practice of blackbirding, whereby Pacific islanders were often taken either by force or under false pretenses to provide slave labour for Queensland's sugar plantations, has yet to feature in the *Global Times*.

The frontiers of China's narrative competition

Future Chinese criticism of blackbirding, which began in the 1840s and was banned by law only in 1904, might not cause many current Australian politicians to lose sleep. But it would not hurt our standing in the region to make an official apology for the practice. The renaming of New South Wales's Ben Boyd National Park—named for Australia's first blackbirder—as Beowa National Park in 2022 was a good first step. But apologising for running a slave trade that tore tens of thousands of Pacific islanders from their families should not be a hard sell in Australia's parliament.

Australia's relations with Pacific Island countries have begun to evolve. If there is a moment we can look back on as a shift in Australia's relationship with the region, it might well be 18 October 2023, when the Pacific Engagement Visa (PEV) finally passed the Australian Senate with the support of the Greens and the crossbench. Bipartisan support for the PEV once looked likely, but the Coalition walked away from an initiative they once

championed, objecting to the use of a lottery system.¹⁷ The lottery element is why New Zealand's Samoa Quota and Pacific Access Visa (which the PEV is modelled on) are so popular—everyone can agree a random lottery is fair.

The significance of the PEV lies in its potential to transform Australia into a nation that looks more like the Pacific. When politicians turn their minds to the needs of Pacific constituents, as we see in New Zealand, the game will change. That is some way down the track, but the PEV is a start. Reams of research show that access to permanent migration is more effective than development assistance for Pacific islanders—and the gains to Pacific families are almost immediate. As Fiji's Deputy Prime Minister Biman Prasad argued, 'This is part of a broader strategy to integrate the region in the long term. And given the geopolitics as well, uniting the region in this way will benefit the whole of the region.'¹⁸ Welcoming Pacific migrants is something that China cannot and will not do.

Despite the easy win represented by the PEV, bilateral competition in defence, economic ties and aid will continue to frame China and Australia's relations in the Pacific, with Australian governments of both stripes vying to be the 'partner of choice' for Pacific nations. Yet all three fields of contestation come with historical complications. Military needs—be they an airfield, a naval base or semi-automatic weapons—can be acted on much more quickly than economic or developmental needs. Nonetheless, Australia's military spending in the region continues to be shaped by historical concerns about the presence of a hostile power in its immediate vicinity, raised by political leaders as far back as 1883, and the need for Papua New Guinea to be a 'shield' against Asia, be it imperial Japan or newly independent Indonesia.¹⁹ This reinforces a longstanding perception that Australia is more interested in securing the region's territory for its own safety than contributing to the well-being of Pacific peoples.

The American public might romanticise the United States' defining Pacific conflict, the battle of Guadalcanal, but it reminds Solomon Islanders of the problem of unexploded ordinance—a danger that remains to this

day. This critique was made by a Solomon Islander who, as reported in the *Global Times*,²⁰ responded to US Ambassador to Australia Caroline Kennedy's declaration, 'We're coming back' with the words, 'But for what?'

Despite the tendency of the Australian and American publics to view our World War II engagement in the region positively—with Australian tales of the Kokoda Trail or the US focus on the battle of Guadalcanal—the conflicts of the past provide ammunition for China's anti-colonialist barbs.

Unlike China, Australian and US governments cannot direct their companies to invest in the region, even though this is what Pacific leaders from Rabuka to Sogavare are most keen on (Telstra's purchase of Digicel Pacific is the lonely exception²¹). While much ink has been spilt on the leverage provided by China's 'sky high debts',²² the source of Beijing's sway over Pacific leaders is past and present investment and the promise of future projects. Qian Bo, China's abrasive special envoy to the Pacific, is known to regale his Pacific counterparts with derisory observations about Australia's economy and its inability to meet the Pacific's needs, either as a destination for Pacific exports or as a source of investment.

Although China's Pacific aid has plateaued since 2016,²³ China grounds its critique of other powers competing for influence in the region in its self-image as a developing nation, the provider of 'South-South cooperation' rather than 'aid'. On this front, Australia has a history of jumping at shadows. In 2021 the then foreign minister Marise Payne flew to Daru in Papua New Guinea in response to a (highly unlikely) proposed Chinese state-backed investment in a fish-processing plant on Australia's northern border. After this, China's representatives in Papua New Guinea suddenly started to mention the project in their talking points, having previously said nothing about it. With some glee, the *Global Times* cited a Facebook post by local governor Taboi Awi Yoto in the wake of her visit, claiming Australia wants 'us to be subsistence farmers and fishermen and maintain the status quo',²⁴ With a bit of due diligence, the fuss could have been avoided. There was a reason MOFCOM had said nothing about the project. The company, which consisted of a couple of guys from Fujian kicking around Port Moresby, had no capacity to get the project off the ground.



Manasseh Sogavare, Prime Minister of Solomon Islands

Source: 總統府, Flickr

The uptick in Australia's diplomatic relations with China might offer some protection from China's envoys snarking about Australia's colonial history, but China's political winds can change quickly (see 'Caution and Compromise in Australia's China Strategy, page 209). The best way to brace for a future narrative assault on Australia's Pacific history is to deal with it honestly, make reparations where appropriate, and encourage the United States, the United Kingdom and France to do the same. More importantly, Australia should continue on the path of becoming a nation that looks more like the Pacific. When Australian history becomes Pacific history, doing right by the region will not seem such a big ask.



This text is taken from *China Story Yearbook: China's New Era*, edited by
Annie Luman Ren and Ben Hillman, published 2024 by ANU Press,
The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.

doi.org/10.22459/CSY.2024.07B