

‘We’re Not Indigenous. We’re Just, We’re Us’: Pacific Perspectives on Taiwan’s Austronesian Diplomacy

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Introduction

In the 1970s, when the People’s Republic of China (PRC) initially established diplomatic relations in the Pacific, it was motivated mainly by competition with Taiwan (the Republic of China) (Yang 2011:51–52). This was because, until the late 1980s, both Taiwan and the PRC claimed to exclusively represent the Chinese Government and accumulating diplomatic allies was seen as bolstering this assertion (Hu 2015; Wesley-Smith 2016). Overt competition for allies slowed in 2008 with Taiwan’s election of then president Ma Ying-jeou, who was friendly to the PRC. However, since the 2016 inauguration of President Tsai Ing-wen, who represents an independence-leaning party, the PRC has again moved to openly forge ties with Taiwan’s allies, this time to mute Taiwan’s sovereignty claims.

As Taiwan has sought to cultivate alliances in this fraught context, it has adopted numerous discourses to differentiate itself from the PRC and highlight its status as the superior ally. Early on, Taiwan’s anti-communist stance was undoubtedly persuasive diplomatic rhetoric (see Aqorau, Chapter 10, this volume; Government of Tuvalu 1979). However, given

economic reforms in the PRC, Taiwan now emphasises its democratic government and strong human rights record to distinguish itself and encourage and reinforce ties with like-minded nations. These discourses are clearly compelling, even to Taiwan's unofficial partners like the US (Hu 2015; Office of the President, ROC [Taiwan] 2002, 2013, 2017a; van der Wees 2018).

In addition, Taiwan has established a special discourse for relationship-building with the Pacific: Austronesian diplomacy. Because the languages of Taiwan's indigenous populations and numerous Pacific peoples all belong to the Austronesian language group, these linguistic similarities are used to strengthen diplomatic ties while simultaneously asserting Taiwan's innate difference from the PRC (Blundell 2011; Ciwidian 2018; Guo 2017). This strategy is akin to the anticipatory geographies and mapping exercises described by Henryk Szadziewski in Chapter 9 and Tarcisius Kabutaulaka in Chapter 1.

Unfortunately, however, the term 'Austronesia(n)' is understood differently from the perspectives of both Taiwan and the Pacific nations represented in Taiwan as of August 2019. These nations include Taiwan's Pacific allies: Tuvalu, Palau, the Marshall Islands and Nauru; two allies that broke relations in September 2019: Solomon Islands and Kiribati; and one non-ally: Papua New Guinea (PNG), which has a trade office in Taipei. These multiple understandings of Austronesia(n) lead to conflicting perspectives on how Austronesian diplomacy should be implemented and whether it is a persuasive diplomatic tool. This suggests that, although Taiwan pursues creative strategies to maintain alliances in the independent Pacific, the effectiveness of these strategies in deflecting PRC encroachment is debatable.

From the perspective of previous work with Tuvaluan diplomatic communities in Taiwan and doctoral research on Tuvaluan–Pacific diplomacy, in this chapter, I explore the effectiveness of Taiwan's Austronesian diplomacy from Tuvaluan and other Pacific perspectives.¹ The first section discusses the background of Taiwan's Austronesian diplomacy, positing Taiwan's focus on diplomacy with the Pacific as

1 Information for this chapter is derived from semi-structured interviews conducted in Taiwan and Tuvalu between 2017 and 2018. Interviewees included Taiwanese diplomats, officials and indigenous and non-indigenous participants in cultural diplomacy projects; Tuvaluan diplomats, officials and students/trainees with experience in Taiwan; and diplomats from all other Pacific nations with embassies/representative offices in Taiwan at the time, except the Nauru embassy.

partially embodied in the rise of Austronesian discourse and indigenous rights movements. It also examines confluences of the terminology involved in Taiwan's official promotion of Austronesian diplomacy, specifically the conflation of the terms Austronesian, Pacific and indigenous. This merging of terminology demonstrates the complexities of Austronesian diplomacy and suggests that Taiwan maintains greater conceptual affinity with non-allied Pacific settler colonies than with its Pacific allies (or other independent Pacific nations represented in Taiwan). The second section considers how Austronesian diplomacy links Pacific allies to Taiwan's indigenous peoples, sometimes leading to demeaning views of these allies in Taiwan's mainstream Han Chinese society rather than empowering Pacific relations in Taiwan. These trends indicate how Taiwan's settler colony status colours its imaginings of the Pacific and suggest that, even domestically, Austronesian diplomacy is far from convincing.

The second half of the chapter outlines how Pacific diplomats in Taiwan, as well as Tuvaluan diplomats, officials, students and trainees, interact with Taiwan's Austronesian diplomacy. It focuses on the seven Pacific nations represented in Taiwan in 2017–18, before Solomon Islands and Kiribati severed ties in September 2019. Consequently, the third section considers interviews with Pacific diplomats, outlining their understandings of Austronesian diplomacy and their opinions on whether this discourse has fortified Pacific–Taiwan relations. It argues that Pacific ideas of the term Austronesia(n) do not align with those forwarded by Taiwan and that Pacific diplomats are divided as to whether Austronesian diplomacy is effective. The fourth section uses Tuvalu as a case study to explore how a range of Tuvaluan citizens engage with Taiwan's indigenous/Austronesian discourse. Generally, the Tuvaluan case dovetails with that of Pacific diplomats. However, it also shows how Austronesian diplomacy affects numerous Tuvaluans beyond diplomats and has even been appropriated in Tuvalu's official government discourse.

Finally, the conclusion argues that Taiwan's conflation of terms such as Austronesia(n), Pacific and indigenous is misinformed and insufficient to preserve diplomatic ties in the face of PRC pressure, except when Pacific allies use Taiwan's discourse to assert the cultural/ethnic legitimacy of relations. It also addresses Austronesian diplomacy as it relates to the decisions by Solomon Islands and Kiribati to break relations with Taiwan in September 2019 and discusses the role Taiwan's indigenous peoples play in Austronesian diplomacy, as well as their agency in Pacific–Taiwan relations.

‘This person isn’t Austronesian, but [her artwork is] extremely Pacific, extremely ocean’: Austronesian diplomacy and understandings of the term Austronesia(n) in Taiwan

This section outlines what the term Austronesia(n) entails from an academic perspective before examining how its meanings have both expanded and contracted in Taiwan. While the term Austronesia(n) refers to a linguistic group encompassing languages from Madagascar to Rapa Nui, including the languages of Taiwan’s indigenous peoples, discourse of Austronesian diplomacy in Taiwan has expanded the meaning of the term so that it refers to linguistic, cultural and ethnic ties. However, this expansion has emphasised links between Taiwan and countries in the Pacific rather than the entire Austronesian region. Thus, as the similarities shared by Austronesian peoples expand to the ethnic level, the Austronesian language group contracts to include only the Pacific and Taiwan. This phenomenon also creates connotations where the sociocultural situations of Taiwan’s indigenous populations, which are most like those of Pacific settler colonies such as New Zealand and Hawai‘i, are taken to represent those of all Pacific nations.

The Austronesian language group was first identified in the 19th century, but the ‘overarching term ... Austronesian [was applied to the] language family’ only in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Austronesian ‘languages number about 1,200 [and] are spoken by 270 million to 300 million people’ in a region extending from Rapa Nui in the east to Madagascar in the west and from Taiwan in the north to New Zealand in the south (Blundell 2011:77–79). Due to work by linguist Robert Blust and archaeologist Peter Bellwood in the 1980s and 1990s, Taiwan’s indigenous languages have been promoted as the possible origin of all Austronesian languages (Blundell 2011:77; Everington 2017; Munsterhjelm 2014:28).

Because Taiwan’s indigenous languages are included in and the potential source of the Austronesian language group, in the 1990s, the term Austronesia(n) was adopted in Taiwan. Austronesian linguistic connections were first mobilised by indigenous peoples to contest the erasure of their languages and cultures by the Kuomintang (KMT), a ruling party that moved from mainland China to Taiwan in the 1940s, imposed martial

law and saw Taiwan as the legitimate seat of the Chinese Government and nothing more (see Dvorak and Tanji 2015; Munsterhjelm 2014:28). When martial law ended in 1987, official opposition parties emerged to challenge the KMT, and groups like the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) that champion Taiwanese independence (but not necessarily indigenous sovereignty) have co-opted the Austronesian concept to highlight Taiwan's innate difference from the PRC and develop connections with the Pacific (Dvorak and Tanji 2015; Munsterhjelm 2014; Wang 2013).² Taiwan's participation in Festival of Pacific Arts, which is an important indicator of the unique status of Taiwan's indigenous peoples but which was also initially facilitated by a DPP government, is demonstrative of this discursive confluence/appropriation.³

In 2007, indigenous scholar Awi Mona termed Taiwan's use of Austronesian discourse 台灣的南島民族外交 (Taiwan's Austronesian ethnicity diplomacy), and, as of 2017 and 2018, the Taiwan Government and Taiwanese scholars have referred to this practice as 南島外交 (Austronesian diplomacy) (Ciwidian 2018; Guo 2017; Office of the President, ROC [Taiwan] 2017b). Yet, Mona's use of the phrase Austronesian ethnicity diplomacy suggests tension in how the term Austronesia(n) has been adopted to conceptualise relations with the Pacific. As numerous Taiwanese interviewees noted, although the term Austronesia(n) is consistently used in Taiwan Government and media discourse, its original academic meaning is not necessarily apparent to the public or even the government.⁴ Consequently, though Blundell cautions that Austronesia(n) refers to a language family not a group of people (2011:81), the term is used flexibly in Taiwan to suggest that linguistic similarities necessarily imply cultural and ethnic ties. Thus, while Mona referred to 'Austronesian *ethnicity* diplomacy' in 2007, in

2 Staff at Taiwan's National Museum of Prehistory, 30 September 2017. Taitung. Interview with author; Former Mayor of Taitung City, 23 October 2017. Taipei. Interview with author; Head of the Amis Kakeng Musical Group, 16 November 2017. Taitung. Interview with author; Anonymous, 22 November 2017. Kaohsiung. Interview with author; Officials from Taiwan's Council of Indigenous Peoples, 29 November 2017. New Taipei City. Interview with author; Ambassador for Taiwan Embassy in Tuvalu, 25 April 2018. Funafuti. Interview with author.

3 Former Mayor of Taitung City, 23 October 2017. Taipei. Interview with author; Head of the Amis Kakeng Musical Group, 16 November 2017. Taitung. Interview with author; Officials from Taiwan's Council of Indigenous Peoples, 29 November 2017. New Taipei City. Interview with author; Indigenous Amis singer-songwriter, 19 December 2017. Taipei. Interview with author.

4 Chairman of the Formosa Indigenous Song and Dance Troupe, 10 November 2017. Taipei. Interview with author; Head of Amis Kakeng Musical Group, 16 November 2017. Taitung. Interview with author; Anonymous, 22 November 2017. Kaohsiung. Interview with author; Officials from Taiwan's Council of Indigenous Peoples, 29 November 2017. New Taipei City. Interview with author.

2017, Taiwan's vice president urged that 'Austronesian *culture* [be used] to explore the present and future prospects of indigenous peoples' (Office of the President, ROC [Taiwan] 2017c) (emphasis added). This flexible linking of the term Austronesia(n) to language, culture and ethnicity alters the power of the term, as a shared Austronesian culture/ethnicity indicates affinities that linguistic similarities may not. An indigenous choreographer contested the level of rapport the term Austronesia(n) now implies between indigenous Taiwan and other Austronesian language-speaking nations, explaining that '[other countries in the language group] are different from us. Only some words are [the same]'.⁵

However, while the term Austronesia(n) has been expanded within Austronesian diplomacy to suggest cultural and ethnic connections, it has also been contracted, so that instead of indicating all countries in the language group, it often only refers to Pacific nations and Taiwan. For example, a 2007 *Taiwan Today* article referred to 'Austronesian communities' as 'the indigenous peoples of the Pacific region' (Tsai 2007). Furthermore, the Kaohsiung Museum of Fine Arts, a major exhibitor of contemporary Pacific art in Taiwan, has hosted exhibitions featuring Pacific artists and indigenous artists from Taiwan for which the Mandarin exhibition title includes the term 南島 (Austronesian), but translates it into English as 'Pacific' (KMFA 2017). A researcher involved in these exhibitions explained that she knows the Austronesian language group and the Pacific region are different, and 'Pacific' was only used in the English translations because the term Austronesian is unfamiliar to native English speakers. However, later in the interview, she directly conflated Austronesian and Pacific by describing a Caucasian artist as follows:

This person isn't Austronesian, but [at] that time, I was collaborating with another colleague. He thought [that artist's] works were extremely Pacific, extremely ocean, so, no matter what, he definitely wanted to include her.⁶

Thus, in Taiwan, the Austronesian language group is removed from its original academic contexts, and the shape this removal takes suggests that fostering ideas of Austronesian culture and ethnicity focuses more on ties between Taiwan and the Pacific than with other countries in the

5 Member of Tai Body Theatre, 24 November 2017. Hualien. Interview with author.

6 Anonymous, 22 November 2017. Kaohsiung. Interview with author; Former mayor of Taitung City, 23 October 2017. Taipei. Interview with author; Head of Amis Kakeng Musical Group, 16 November 2017. Taitung. Interview with author.

Austronesian group. However, compared to previous administrations, President Tsai Ing-wen's Government (2016–present) has promoted the economically oriented 'New Southbound Policy', which sometimes highlights Taiwan's Austronesian connections with Southeast Asia at the expense of Pacific ties;⁷ Taiwan's Austronesian links with the Pacific are still strongly emphasised throughout the government (Office of the President, ROC [Taiwan] 2017b).⁸

Finally, conflation of the Austronesian language group and the Pacific region (plus Taiwan) has led to a second phenomenon that is particularly troublesome for Taiwan's Pacific allies (and other independent Pacific nations represented in Taiwan). That is, in Taiwan, the peoples of all countries included in Taiwan's Austronesian conception are considered indigenous peoples who see themselves as indigenous and encounter problems similar to indigenous peoples in settler colony Taiwan. In an interview with Taiwan's Council of Indigenous Peoples (CIP), three officials explained that because indigenous peoples constitute the majority of the populations in Taiwan's Pacific allies, 'they don't have a concept of "indigeneity"' and 'we don't specifically emphasise that they also have indigenous peoples'. However, during the same interview, the officials referred to Pacific allies as 南島原住民族的國家 (Austronesian indigenous countries). Additionally, CIP representatives explained that it was not until 2016, during a workshop for indigenous students and students from Pacific nations studying in Taiwan, that they even realised that the problems of indigenous students in Taiwan differed from those of Pacific students in their home countries.⁹

In Taiwan, this conflation of Austronesian language, culture and ethnicity, as well as the terms Austronesia(n), Pacific and indigenous, emerges from a realisation that locations such as New Zealand, Guam and Hawai'i, all settler colonies like Taiwan where 'there is articulation of ...

7 Deputy Chief of Mission for Marshall Islands embassy in Taiwan, 4 December 2017. Taipei. Interview with author; Ambassador for Palau embassy in Taiwan, 1 March 2018. Taipei. Interview with author.

8 Though Austronesian languages are spoken in Madagascar, Taiwan rarely extends its Austronesian diplomacy into the Indian Ocean. This may be because Madagascar is neither an ally nor a settler colony, and because Taiwan has no representation in the country (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, ROC [Taiwan] 2000), but it also seems that, in Taiwan, Madagascar is less intelligible as an Austronesian space than other countries in the language group (Anonymous, 22 November 2017. Kaohsiung. Interview with author).

9 Officials from Taiwan's Council of Indigenous Peoples, 29 November 2017. New Taipei City. Interview with author.

Pacificness and indigeneity' (Te Punga Somerville 2018:102), possess similar institutions to Taiwan; similar concepts of indigeneity;¹⁰ and even shared ancestral ties (CIP 2016:37; Sissons 2005:11–25).¹¹ Thus, Taiwan's Austronesian diplomacy, though broadly applied to all Pacific countries, is most relevant to non-allied Pacific settler colonies. This suggests that even for diplomatic strategies ostensibly targeted at Pacific allies, these allies are only a secondary focus, which raises questions regarding the efficacy of Austronesian diplomacy in strengthening diplomatic ties.

'They lead lazier lives ... [Maybe] that's just the nature of the Austronesian people': Marginalisation of Pacific peoples through Austronesian diplomacy

Besides revealing Taiwan's conceptual affinity with Pacific settler colonies, Austronesian diplomacy has also had negative domestic consequences where portions of the Taiwanese population have disparaged Pacific peoples. This phenomenon demonstrates the domestic tension in which Austronesian diplomacy and, by extension, Taiwan's Pacific partners are implicated in Taiwan and further suggests questions regarding the potency of Austronesian discourse.

Rather than cultivating affinity for Pacific partners, Austronesian diplomacy has sometimes promoted negative ideas of Pacific peoples among Taiwan's Han majority. This is because, though some people in Taiwan now claim to embrace indigenous cultures/concepts (e.g. Dvorak and Tanji 2015; Lai 2017), indigenous populations in Taiwan are still marginalised (Munsterhjelm 2014:1–30)¹² and comparisons between

10 Though conceptualisations of indigeneity are more prevalent in Pacific settler colonies than independent nations, acceptance, use and definitions of indigeneity are not identical within either category. These diverging ideas undoubtedly influence different Pacific framings of identity vis-à-vis indigeneity in Taiwan.

11 ANZTEC, a 2013 free trade agreement signed by Taiwan and New Zealand that includes a chapter on indigenous issues, is demonstrative of this trend (New Zealand Commerce and Industry Office Taipei 2019). Staff at Taiwan's National Museum of Prehistory, 30 September 2017. Taitung. Interview with author; Chairman of the Formosa Indigenous Song and Dance Troupe, 10 November 2017. Taipei. Interview with author; Member of Tai Body Theatre, 24 November 2017. Hualien. Interview with author.

12 Indigenous Taiwanese activist, 6 December 2017. Taipei. Interview with author.

indigenous and Pacific peoples under the umbrella term Austronesia(n) allow for a similar marginalisation of Pacific partners.¹³ For example, when discussing Tuvalu, a Taiwanese medical volunteer said:

Now, about the people ... [they] lead lazier lives. For example, you don't see many people fishing ... If you said—a hypothetical, if *Taiwanese people* lived here, they would definitely always be fishing, but you don't see the people here fishing. Instead, they sell their EEZ to other people. So, maybe that's just the nature of the *Austronesian people* (emphasis added).¹⁴

Here, the interviewee separates the industrious Taiwanese from the lazy Austronesians, marginalising Taiwan's indigenous peoples by intimating that they are not Taiwanese. The quote also demonstrates how the term Austronesia(n) is used to simultaneously stereotype indigenous and Pacific peoples.

Furthermore, the Taiwan Government's international application of Austronesian diplomacy has led to backlash from conservative portions of Taiwan's Han population. For example, during President Tsai Ing-wen's 2017 visit to the Marshall Islands, Tuvalu and Solomon Islands (which was an ally at the time), official references to the trip as a 尋親之旅 (search for relatives) (Cui 2017) generated intense debate regarding Tsai's attempt to de-Sinicise Taiwan. An editorial from the time captures the major concerns of the debate:

What relatives are we searching for? ... [Whether] from the perspective of race, blood, language, culture, or other aspects, Taiwan's majority [population] moved from mainland China to Taiwan and has been Han Chinese for generations ... Tsai Ing-wen can say this is [a trip] to search for the relatives and roots of Taiwan's indigenous peoples but cannot purposefully expand and mislead so that it becomes a search for the relatives of all people in Taiwan ... If, to achieve the political goal of shaping a 'new Taiwan ethnicity' and the 'historical perspective of an independent Taiwan', only ... Austronesian culture is presented, how can we look the twenty-three million people of Taiwan in the face? ... That [Tsai Ing-wen] has ... traveled far across the ocean to find a disproportionate and distant relative ... sends the wrong signal (China Times 2017).

13 In Taiwan, there are also negative feelings toward Pacific allies separate from Austronesian diplomacy (Huang 2017). Nevertheless, Austronesian diplomacy may compound these feelings or create new negativity or ambivalence.

14 Taiwanese medical volunteer, 14 April 2018. Funafuti. Interview with author.

More inflammatory reactions to Tsai's 'search for relatives' trip included that by a Taiwanese actor/singer who proclaimed that Tsai, who is a quarter indigenous, 'is perhaps an aborigine of the South Seas and wants to go [there] to search for relatives, but this has nothing to do with us! We are Chinese!' (Liberty Times 2017).

Consequently, Austronesian diplomacy sometimes incites negative feelings toward Pacific partners because ambivalent or adverse views of Taiwan's indigenous populations are linked to Pacific peoples when both groups are categorised as Austronesian. Additionally, when Austronesian diplomacy is seen by certain portions of Taiwan's Han population as reconfiguring Taiwanese culture and ethnicity, indigenous and Pacific peoples are further ostracised.

Austronesian diplomacy indicates that Taiwan's settler colony status affects its relations with the Pacific in two ways: (1) it shows that Taiwan imagines all Austronesian-language speakers as Pacific peoples who are similar to Taiwan's indigenous peoples, regardless of whether indigenous peoples are viewed positively or negatively; and (2) it demonstrates that portions of Taiwan's settler population are uncomfortable with diplomacy that might privilege indigenous peoples or increase their international visibility by connecting them to broader networks. Thus, even domestically, the efficacy of Austronesian diplomacy is debatable both because it is not adequately structured to promote ties with Pacific allies (and other independent Pacific nations) and because it involves divisive issues regarding Taiwan's ongoing colonisation.

Yet, as complex as Austronesian diplomacy is from a domestic perspective, Taiwan's Pacific allies/Pacific nations represented in Taiwan have also developed their own extremely varied perceptions of this diplomatic discourse. The next section explores how Pacific diplomats in Taiwan understand Austronesian diplomacy.

'They say "Austronesian" and "indigenous", and it's all foreign concepts to me': Pacific diplomats and their understandings of Austronesian diplomacy

Austronesian diplomacy is also open to interpretation by Pacific diplomats stationed in Taiwan, at whom this diplomatic discourse is most regularly targeted. However, Pacific diplomats typically engage with Austronesian diplomacy differently than the government and people of Taiwan do. Rather than immediately accepting Austronesian ties between the Pacific and indigenous Taiwan, Pacific diplomats focus on ascertaining the meaning of Austronesia(n) (a term not widely used in the Pacific), determining whether there are ties between Taiwan's indigenous peoples and Pacific peoples and examining Taiwan's application of the term indigenous to Pacific contexts.

During interviews conducted in 2017 and 2018, many Pacific diplomats noted that they were unfamiliar with the term Austronesia(n) before travelling to Taiwan. For example, the Palau ambassador and PNG trade representative explained that:

Palau ambassador: I first heard about ... the term when I came here before I became ambassador. So, then I went back and I searched for it, and there's really a term used, you know, but it's not really familiar.¹⁵

PNG trade representative: Yeah, so, [Austronesian] may have come out of some terms, but I heard it here, because I'm more used to like Melanesia, Polynesia, Micronesia.¹⁶

Furthermore, when Pacific diplomats were familiar with the term Austronesia(n), they often developed meanings for it that did not overlap completely with either academic or Taiwanese conceptions. The Marshall Islands deputy chief of mission (DCM) posited that, within Taiwan's population, indigenous and Austronesia(n) did not necessarily refer to the same groups of people:

15 Ambassador for Palau Embassy in Taiwan, 1 March 2018. Taipei. Interview with author.

16 Representative for the PNG Trade Office in Taiwan, 21 November 2017. Taipei. Interview with author.

[Sometimes] I forget that there's the indigenous and the Austronesian and then the Taiwanese. [To] play it safe, I just say Austronesians—or indigenous, I like to use indigenous, because [it's a] better way to say it, because I don't know who classifies themselves as Austronesian.¹⁷

In contrast, a Solomon Islands student¹⁸ noted that Austronesia(n) referred only to Pacific Islanders and excluded indigenous Taiwanese:

That [television] program that they ask all the Pacific Islanders to go and dance and to showcase the traditional food is just us Austronesians. That's what we were called. I recall that program. So, it was only the Pacific Islanders ... So, there wasn't any aboriginal Taiwanese.¹⁹

Clearly, because it is unfamiliar, the word Austronesia(n) is subject to interpretations from Pacific Islanders that reshape the term, and this process often involves definitions different from those posed by Taiwan.

Even when Pacific diplomats did understand Taiwan's conception of Austronesia(n), only some were persuaded by Austronesian diplomacy. Those who were persuaded had typically attended events (often in unofficial contexts) that involved Taiwan's indigenous peoples and confirmed to them the validity of their mutual connections. Thus, the Solomon Islands ambassador and the PNG trade representative used personal experiences to advocate for Austronesian diplomacy and the value of Pacific–indigenous links:

Solomon Islands ambassador: [This is] a bamboo raft ... that belongs to the Fara'ngau tribe in [Taitung, Taiwan] ... [A] couple of years ago, they decide to revive [the raft] as part of the ... Austronesian Studies program ... but they had problems with the sail [of their raft] ... [Then], they heard about this group from Duff Islands in Solomons: the Taumako Group ... [So,] end of this July this year, I took my holiday, went home to Solomons. I didn't realise, in my absence, they were already communicating, and, lo and behold, by the time I got back here ... they've gone to Taitung ... [So, we] took [the boat] to this artificial lake and

17 Deputy Chief of Mission for Marshall Islands embassy in Taiwan, 4 December 2017. Taipei. Interview with author.

18 Though this quote is from a Pacific student and not a diplomat, it is cited here to demonstrate conflicting views on the term Austronesia(n) that emerge among Pacific peoples in Taiwan.

19 Solomon Islands student who formerly studied on scholarship in Taiwan, 27 August 2017. Skype. Interview with author.

launched [it], and, then, they took the—oh, there was a ceremony. They did a ceremony and we also did our ceremony—and launched, took the sail, hoist it on. Then, everybody stood quiet, and there was no wind ... This elder—from Taiwan, he just said something, he talked in their language, and the next thing is I heard everybody whistling ... It's like they were chanting—it's unbelievable, but, you know, my hairs actually grew ... and the breeze came ... So, that to me was the expression of this is culture at its liveliest form ... So, suddenly, this tend to be the binding over everything else, the politics, the economic dialogue, the trade (Everington 2017).²⁰

PNG trade representative: I mean, the difference between Chinese and Taiwanese is the Taiwanese aborigines. I think we have a better connection in terms—culturally, that's what I see because looking at some of their dances and even dressings, they are more related to some of our Islanders ... [There] was another [indigenous] Amis Festival [in 2016], and my first secretary and the driver actually attended ... [So], my first secretary came back and then said, 'Oh, well, it's like our dance. So, it was comfortable for me to join in!' ... So, coming here was a big eye opener, you know. You could see that, no, these people are totally different. They're not Chinese, you know, they are Pacific.²¹

However, other Pacific diplomats found Taiwan's Austronesian diplomacy far from compelling. For example, the Kiribati ambassador saw Taiwan's claims of Pacific–indigenous links as highly unconvincing:

I don't feel that connection because ... [Taiwan's Council of Indigenous Peoples (CIP)], they are more focused on New Zealand, you know, the Māoris and probably the ones in American territories and they don't really go out of their way to—so, they don't know our islands, they don't know. They know more about the Māoris and Guam ... [Because], for us, there's really no other race to say that we are the indigenous people, you know? So, our experiences are very different.²²

20 Former ambassador for Solomon Islands embassy in Taiwan, 20 October 2017. Taipei. Interview with author.

21 Representative for the PNG Trade Office in Taiwan, 21 November 2017. Taipei. Interview with author.

22 Former ambassador for Kiribati Embassy in Taiwan, 12 October 2017. Taipei. Interview with author.

This quote highlights a concern raised by several Pacific diplomats and discussed in previous sections: while linking terms like Austronesia(n), Pacific and indigenous might be effective for Pacific settler colonies like Taiwan, Pacific allies/independent Pacific nations often have different concepts of indigeneity.

Taiwan's Austronesian diplomacy reveals tension between Taiwan and its Pacific partners over ideas of indigeneity and whether using indigeneity to strengthen relations is appropriate. Both the Marshall Islands DCM and the Palau ambassador discussed how their national or ethnic identity was challenged within Austronesian diplomacy:

Marshall Islands DCM: [The Taiwan Government says] 'Austronesian' and 'indigenous', and it's all foreign concepts to me because we're Marshallese. I mean, there's not a certain ... group of Marshallese that are not considered ... Yeah ... we have some similarities, and I think we value the same things, but we don't have the same challenges.²³

Palau ambassador: [Taiwan's CIP] wanted to know about our issues as indigenous people. I'm like, 'You know, we're not indigenous. We're just, we're us, and we rule our country'. [So,] our issues—we don't have issues like you ... I just want to speak on what is the culture, and ... what our youth are going through ... but issues fighting with the government and that—you know, no. It's so different.²⁴

Austronesian diplomacy is a unique layer in Taiwan's Pacific relations and highlights conflict not only within Taiwan's domestic population but also in Pacific–Taiwan relations. Domestically, Austronesian diplomacy incites discord over the identity and place of indigenous peoples in foreign affairs, revealing how Taiwan's settler colony status influences its imaginings of and interactions with the Pacific. Multilaterally, Pacific understandings of Austronesian diplomacy and diverging opinions of its efficacy indicate that this diplomatic discourse clashes with how some Pacific diplomats identify themselves.

23 Deputy Chief of Mission for Marshall Islands embassy in Taiwan, 4 December 2017. Taipei. Interview with author.

24 Ambassador for Palau embassy in Taiwan, 1 March 2018. Taipei. Interview with author.

The next section explores how various Tuvaluan citizens have engaged with Taiwan's discourse on Pacific–indigenous links, as well as their views on Austronesian diplomacy. This discussion dovetails with the current section but also shows how widely Taiwan has promoted Austronesian diplomacy and how different Tuvaluan citizens interact with this discourse.

‘[People] ask us why Tuvalu still sticks with ROC ... I mean ... we have some ... ethnic connections’: Tuvaluan engagement with Austronesian diplomacy

This section outlines how Tuvaluan diplomats, officials, students and trainees engage with Austronesian diplomacy. It first discusses how the Taiwan Government and other Taiwanese institutions have successfully inserted ideas of similarity between Tuvalu and indigenous Taiwan into interactions with various Tuvaluan citizens. Subsequently, it demonstrates that this ‘success’ does not indicate the ultimate triumph of Austronesian diplomacy. Because the potential for ancestral links between Tuvalu and Taiwan's indigenous populations is not clearly explained to all Tuvaluans who engage with indigenous Taiwanese peoples, Tuvaluans define Austronesia(n) in multiple ways, and Taiwanese claims of indigenous/Austronesian ties are not entirely persuasive. However, the end of the section examines how the Tuvalu Government now appropriates Austronesian diplomacy when dealing with Taiwan and even uses this discourse to assert cultural or ethnic links that naturalise its choice of Taiwan as an ally. Thus, though Austronesian diplomacy is contested, both the Tuvalu and Taiwan governments recognise it as beneficial to official diplomatic rhetoric.

In interviews, not all Tuvaluan citizens discussed similarities between Tuvalu and indigenous Taiwan. However, relevant concepts had been introduced to diplomats, officials, students and trainees by the Taiwan Government, Taiwanese universities, Mandarin-language training centres and indigenous and non-indigenous Taiwanese citizens. For example, in 2017, the Tuvalu ambassador to Taiwan explained her knowledge of the term Austronesia(n) as coming directly from the Taiwan Government.²⁵

25 Ambassador for Tuvalu embassy in Taiwan, 10 November 2017. Taipei. Interview with author.

Similarly, during short visits to Taiwan, Tuvaluan officials and their spouses were introduced to Tuvalu–indigenous commonalities by the Taiwan Government, and some officials who had not visited Taiwan were informed of these connections by the Taiwan embassy in Tuvalu or even by other Tuvaluan officials:

I was privileged to be part of the prime minister's delegation to the state visit to Taiwan. We visited the ... eastern part of Taiwan ... [We] were welcomed by the traditional—there was a tribe ... [And] I was surprised too because we [both] said 'lima': 'lima' for figure five and 'lima' for hand ... I've heard of Tuvaluns, maybe our ancestors came from Taiwan. So, I was thinking, maybe we are part of that.²⁶

[The] first time I knew about that we had ties [with Taiwan's indigenous peoples] was because my mom [another official's spouse] said it ... Because they had a visit, and she was telling me how the dance was similar to fatele [a Tuvaluan performative/dance form] ... [So], I heard first from my parents because they had [a] foreign-service background ... Yes [Taiwan's embassy in Tuvalu also brings up indigenous ties].²⁷

Tuvaluan students who were studying or had previously studied for tertiary degrees under Taiwan Government scholarships were also aware of similarities between Tuvalu and indigenous Taiwan. However, their information was derived from more diverse sources that included the Taiwan Government, their educational institutions and indigenous and non-indigenous friends or acquaintances:

I just had a meeting ... with the big boss for the indigenous people in the government ... Because of my [academic] advisor ... [The indigenous official] told me he wanted me to ... tell him one, two, three in my language, so I told him 'tahi,' 'lua'—and, then, he also told me the similar thing in—up to ten. And, then, he said, 'Oh. We are the same'. 'Cause the counting, it's very similar.²⁸

26 Anonymous, 30 May 2018. Funafuti. Interview with author.

27 Foreign affairs official for the Tuvalu Government, 20 April 2018. Funafuti. Interview with author.

28 Former scholarship student in Taiwan from Tuvalu, 30 October 2017. Taipei. Interview with author.

I mean, some of [the indigenous] performances are similar ... Yeah. I saw them in the mountain ... And, I mean, the costumes are different, but the way they move their body is the ... same with us. It's a school trip. Yeah. For Ming Chuan [University].²⁹

I was playing for the university's volleyball team, and, then ... a teammate, he's actually indigenous. So, we went up to where he lives. Surprisingly, you know, some of the words they are using, like the fish, 'ika', you know, the nose, you know ... I got surprised because it's very similar to ... Tuvaluan.³⁰

Even Tuvaluans involved in short-term leadership or vocational training programs in Taiwan developed similar ideas based on trips arranged by the Taiwan Government or their training institutions:

Well, it was really nice my experience in Taiwan [during the leadership program] 'cause I get to see that, in Taiwan, the villages that we visited, they were similar with our Tuvaluan culture, and even their language ... [The] counting is similar with us, and even with [a] few words[:] your ear, for us is 'taliga' and for them is 'taliga'. So, it's really similar.³¹

We went to Sun Moon Lake [with our vocational training program] ... Yeah, yeah. [I saw aboriginal dancing there] ... Yeah. It's good. I asked my friends—nearly the same as ours, eh?³²

Consequently, Taiwan's discourse on Pacific-indigenous similarities is not only being successfully disseminated to various Tuvaluans in Taiwan, but even to Tuvaluans, especially officials, who have not visited Taiwan. This suggests that the Taiwan Government sees Austronesian diplomacy as a powerful tool in fortifying Pacific-Taiwan relations while also showing how, in Taiwan, ideas of Austronesian diplomacy reach beyond the government and structure how other institutions and citizens engage with Tuvaluans.

However, Taiwan's success in promoting Pacific-indigenous similarities among Tuvaluans is not indicative of the ultimate effectiveness of Austronesian diplomatic discourse. For example, interviewees who identified commonalities between Tuvalu and indigenous Taiwan were

29 Former scholarship student in Taiwan from Tuvalu, 15 April 2018. Funafuti. Interview with author.

30 Former scholarship student in Taiwan from Tuvalu, 24 May 2018. Funafuti. Interview with author.

31 Former scholarship student in Taiwan from Tuvalu, 21 May 2018. Funafuti. Interview with author.

32 Former vocational trainee in Taiwan from Tuvalu, 3 May 2018. Vaitupu. Interview with author.

not always provided enough information to fully contextualise indigenous peoples in Taiwan's multicultural society (see Damm 2012). Thus, some interviewees mistakenly referred to one of Taiwan's Han minorities, the Hakka, as an indigenous group (see Leo 2015).³³ Additionally, several Tuvaluan students who had been exposed to Taiwan's indigenous cultures during school field trips explained that it was not until their interviews that they learned the Tuvaluan language may have originated in Taiwan.³⁴ Finally, though the Tuvaluan citizens interviewed detected similarities between Tuvaluan language and culture and the languages and cultures of Taiwan's indigenous peoples, none used the term Austronesia(n) to discuss these similarities. Thus, Taiwan's promotion of Pacific–indigenous commonalities does not elicit well-formed Tuvaluan understandings of these ties and Austronesian discourse is not a prevalent talking point among Tuvaluans.

Furthermore, like Pacific diplomats, when Tuvaluan citizens did address the term Austronesia(n), they often adopted definitions different from those used in Taiwanese discourse. They also frequently focused on linking Austronesia(n) to more common (if not equally problematic) terms used to delineate the Pacific, such as Polynesia(n), Micronesia(n), and Melanesia(n). The former Tuvalu ambassador to Taiwan described Austronesia(n) as mainly meaning Polynesia(n):

[Taiwan is] trying to prove the fact that we have a trace from Taiwan or from the Philippines to come this way ... [But] the trace here is more or less to do with Polynesian, not the Melanesian and the Micronesian.³⁵

In contrast, a Tuvaluan student explained that he thought Austronesia(n) referred only to Melanesia(n):

[When] I hear 'Austronesian', I don't take into consideration Polynesia or Micronesia. I just think Melanesia and Australia, like—Aboriginal, like the Solomons, Vanuatu. I wouldn't think Taiwan.³⁶

33 Former scholarship student in Taiwan from Tuvalu, 14 October 2017. Hualien. Interview with author; Former scholarship student in Taiwan from Tuvalu, 24 May 2018. Funafuti. Interview with author.

34 E.g. former scholarship student in Taiwan from Tuvalu, 15 April 2018. Funafuti. Interview with author.

35 Former ambassador for Tuvalu embassy in Taiwan, 20 May 2018. Funafuti. Interview with author.

36 Scholarship student in Taiwan from Tuvalu, 19 October 2017. Taipei. Interview with author.

Even when Tuvaluan citizens engaged with Taiwanese understandings of Austronesia(n), they were not necessarily persuaded by Austronesian diplomacy, especially its reliance on concepts of mutual indigeneity. This is again consistent with the perspectives of Pacific diplomats. For instance, three Tuvaluan students expressed doubt regarding arguments that intimate ties existed between Tuvaluans and Taiwan's indigenous peoples and were concerned by Taiwan's attempts to classify Tuvaluans as indigenous/aboriginal:

[This] is what [the Taiwanese volunteers in Tuvalu] said, 'We also have aborigines in our country'. They're like super excited to tell me. 'Ok'. I didn't understand what that meant at the time because I'd never been to Taiwan ... I think someone just asked me that. Yeah, someone just asked me that a couple days ago. 'Do you guys have aborigines in Tuvalu?' ... We wouldn't think of [being aborigines]. We think of things like, 'Oh. Now we have Chinese in Tuvalu' ... It's not really a thing for us. I don't know. 'Do you guys have aborigines there?' 'What?'.³⁷

When I was in Taiwan—yes, I attended that indigenous workshop thing [hosted by the government] ... [The language] was written up on—so, 'taliga', 'lima', some words—the counting even [was similar] ... [But] there are questions they give us. [They] put us in these groups, and I forgot what our topic was, but mainly our topic referred to [the] losing of our mother tongue. [What] can they [indigenous students in Taiwan] do in order not to lose the language and all? And us [Pacific students] sitting there were like, 'There are many ways, and how can these people lose their language when everyone's still here and all?' ... You should have asked [another Tuvaluan student]. She thought that thing was a waste of time.³⁸

We [the Pacific Island Students Association (PISA) in Taiwan] are trying to also reflect members of the Forum ... [so] that we don't ... give a wrong perception of what the Pacific Islands is like ... So, we did invite them [the indigenous Taiwanese] to come. It's not a problem. [Interviewer: But just maybe not as, like, a full—] A full member, yeah. Because we know very well that if we invite them, I think we might as well just change [our name to] Pacific Indigenous Students Association (PISA Facebook Post 2009).³⁹

37 Scholarship student in Taiwan from Tuvalu, 19 October 2017. Taipei. Interview with author.

38 Former scholarship student in Taiwan from Tuvalu, 11 May 2018. Funafuti. Interview with author.

39 Former scholarship student in Taiwan from Tuvalu, 24 May 2018. Funafuti. Interview with author.

Obviously, the Taiwan Government and other Taiwanese institutions have successfully introduced indigenous languages and cultures to Tuvaluan citizens and indicated their relevant similarities. However, Austronesian diplomacy is not ultimately effective, both because this diplomatic discourse is not clearly explicated and because Taiwan's conflation of Austronesia(n), Pacific and indigenous unravels when Taiwan imagines Tuvaluan citizens as identical to Taiwan's indigenous peoples. Rather than supporting Austronesian diplomacy, Tuvaluan citizens who have interacted with Taiwan's indigenous peoples and conceptions of indigeneity actually undermine this diplomacy, asserting that Tuvaluans are not indigenous, that indigenous concerns are different from their own and that indigenous Taiwan is not part of the Pacific.

Yet, it is critical to note that despite contested Tuvaluan views of Austronesian diplomacy, at the official level, the Tuvalu Government clearly sees Austronesian diplomacy as a powerful tool for communicating/negotiating with the Taiwan Government. In 2013, then Tuvalu prime minister Willy Telavi highlighted Austronesian ties when he opened the Tuvalu embassy in Taiwan (Telavi 2013:2). Furthermore, the Tuvalu Government now uses Austronesian diplomacy as a cultural/ethnic rationale to explain why it maintains relations with Taiwan and undercut analysis attributing the country's diplomatic decisions to greed or corruption (see Hu 2015; Langa'oi 2010). A Tuvaluan foreign affairs official used Austronesian discourse to justify Tuvalu–Taiwan relations as follows:

Yes [Taiwan's Embassy in Tuvalu brings up indigenous ties.] [And] we also bring it up because when President Tsai Ing-wen came, she brought a minister of indigenous who was actually also indigenous, and the president is also—they made a comment that she's actually ... [a] quarter Polynesian ... So, yeah, they really tried to reinforce that, that connection, which is good in any diplomatic relationship ... 'Cause people ask us why Tuvalu still sticks with ROC and not with mainland China. I mean, we've been with them since independence, and we have the same principles, and same—we have some cultural, you know, ethnic connections.⁴⁰

40 Foreign affairs official for the Tuvalu Government, 20 April 2018. Funafuti. Interview with author.

This discursive strategy is by no means isolated to Tuvalu. Other Pacific diplomats similarly asserted the advantages of using Austronesian discourse when communicating/negotiating with Taiwan,⁴¹ or when delineating cultural/ethnic links that justify maintaining separate relationships with Taiwan and the PRC.⁴²

Conclusion

Since DPP President Tsai Ing-wen's inauguration in 2016, the PRC has exerted increased pressure on Taiwan, and between 2016 and 2018, a number of Taiwan's allies in Africa and Central America severed relations, forging ties instead with the PRC. Taiwan's Pacific allies appeared secure in their commitment to Taiwan until September 2019, when Solomon Islands and Kiribati broke relations in the same week. Though Austronesian diplomacy is one aspect of Taiwan's official diplomacy unique to the Pacific, I contend that Taiwan's use of Austronesian diplomacy does not explain why Taiwan's Pacific allies began severing ties later than other allies. Furthermore, this form of diplomacy has clearly not dissuaded Pacific allies from switching to the PRC. From a domestic Taiwanese perspective, the term Austronesia(n) is not clearly defined and even elicits backlash from conservative portions of the population. From a Pacific perspective, contested understandings of Austronesia(n) exist among Pacific diplomats and citizens, and they often feel that Taiwan's categorisation of them as indigenous requires that they demonstrate differences from (rather than similarities to) indigenous Taiwan.

Though the Taiwan Government is now cultivating more nuanced understandings of divisions in the Pacific, especially between settler colonies and independent nations,⁴³ the implementation of Austronesian diplomacy has been disorganised and inconsistent. For Taiwan, enhanced success of this discourse requires recognition that simply including the term Austronesia(n) in speeches and event titles does not immediately inspire Pacific affinity for Taiwan. It also requires the commitment of greater human and financial resources to understanding, coordinating

41 Deputy Chief of Mission for Marshall Islands embassy in Taiwan, 4 December 2017. Taipei. Interview with author.

42 Representative for the PNG Trade Office in Taiwan, 21 November 2017. Taipei. Interview with author.

43 Officials from Taiwan's Council of Indigenous Peoples, 29 November 2017. New Taipei City. Interview with author.

and developing Pacific–indigenous ties with and in the Pacific. Moves in 2018 and 2019 to (re)open an Austronesian Forum headquarters in Palau, a plan forwarded by Taiwan, Taiwan’s Pacific allies and the Philippines in 2007 but abandoned shortly thereafter, signal new possibilities for Pacific–Taiwanese co-constructions of Austronesian discourse (Ciwidian 2018; Formosa News 2019; Liberty Times 2018). Additionally, I would argue that, as of 2019, the advantage of Austronesian diplomacy lies not in how the Taiwan Government implements it but rather in how Pacific governments and officials appropriate it to negotiate queries regarding their decisions to ally themselves with Taiwan and how long their alliances will last. As seen in the Tuvaluan case, Taiwan’s Austronesian discourse acts much like Taiwan’s democratic government or human rights record, allowing Pacific officials to assert the legitimacy of relations with Taiwan and discursively bypass arguments that their foreign policy is motivated by avarice or malfeasance.

Finally, another group that must be mentioned vis-à-vis Austronesian diplomacy is the indigenous population in Taiwan, which does not necessarily share the same views as the Taiwan Government on whether or how Austronesian diplomacy should be implemented. Based on interviews with indigenous Taiwanese people who have participated in official and unofficial cultural exchange in the Pacific, it is clear that the settler colony bent of official Austronesian diplomacy is shared by the general indigenous population of Taiwan, which highlights close ties with New Zealand, Guam, Hawai‘i, Tahiti and New Caledonia. What also emerges from these interviews, however, is that indigenous populations in Pacific settler colonies tend to reciprocate ideas of shared identity and kinship with Taiwan.⁴⁴ This suggests that while Austronesian diplomacy is not highly effective for Pacific allies, it is more compelling to non-allied settler colonies. Though not beneficial to maintaining official diplomatic ties, this phenomenon can allow Taiwan and its indigenous peoples to strengthen unofficial links in ways that increase visibility and empathy throughout the Pacific.

44 Staff at Taiwan’s National Museum of Prehistory, 30 September 2017. Taitung. Interview with author; Indigenous Taiwanese participant in a Taiwan Government cultural diplomacy program, 9 November 2017. Taipei. Interview with author; Head of Amis Kakeng Musical Group, 16 November 2017. Taitung. Interview with author; Member of Tai Body Theatre, 24 November 2017. Hualien. Interview with author; Indigenous Amis singer-songwriter, 19 December 2017. Taipei. Interview with author.

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