

BOOK REVIEW

The Chinese in Papua New Guinea: Past, Present and Future

Edited by Anna Hayes, Rosita Henry and Michael Wood. Canberra: ANU Press, 2024. xvi + 242 pp. AU\$60.00 (also available Open Access). ISBN 9781760466398

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This edited volume, with a focus on the Chinese in Papua New Guinea (PNG), provides a new lens for readers to understand the PNG history and its relations with China. It dispels the misperceptions of Chinese in PNG as “a single homogenous group” and “the PNG’s colonial history as just a black [Papua New Guinean] and white [Australian] experience” (pp. 19, 2). Instead, it demonstrates clearly the multifaceted involvement and experience of Chinese in PNG’s social relations, economic development and local politics across different time periods.

Building on the authors’ expertise in areas such as anthropology, international relations and linguistics, much of the research in the book is pioneering, whether it be about the history of Chinese in the Sepik region, political activism of New Guinea Chinese and the impact on Australia’s immigration policy changes, Chinese dominance of the beche-de-mer market in PNG, or Chinese–local work relations at Basamuk nickel refinery and the workplace pidgins. In this sense, the book can be a useful reference for researchers from universities, government agencies, think-tanks, international and regional organizations and the general public who are interested in learning more about China and the Pacific region.

In addition to filling a gap in the literature about the Chinese in PNG’s history, the book sheds light on the contemporary PNG–China relationship. This is significant as PNG is caught in the geostrategic rivalry between China and traditional powers such as Australia and the United States.

First, China has made headway in bolstering its relations with PNG, but challenges are growing. Beijing has worked hard to mobilize its diaspora to support China’s diplomacy. James Chin (chapter four) argues that “the mainland Chinese has become a dominant economic and political force in PNG” after Australia (p. 87), predicting that China will be PNG’s closer political partner while Australia remains more influential culturally. Anna Hayes (chapter nine) analyses the challenges to the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in PNG, such as the customary landownership, local perceptions of Chinese “sub-optimal aid” and lack of transparency. She cautions that China via BRI is drawing PNG “into its attempts to displace the US, the liberal world order, and to greatly disrupt the balance of the Pacific” (p. 227) and “it is still uncertain how [PNG’s] non-alignment could work or if it is possible” (p. 228). PNG’s agency and ability to balance its relations with major powers will be further tested as the geostrategic competition intensifies.

Second, negative perceptions about the Chinese community and China are notable among some groups in the Pacific. Shaun Gessler (chapter seven) reveals the clash of values between local female fish and vegetable sellers and male Chinese expatriate workers at a local market near the Basamuk nickel refinery. The Chinese buyers’ haggling and bartering are disliked by the sellers on the ground that such practices “subvert local PNG market customs and conventions” that highlight relationship-building between buyer and seller and that PNG sellers are unable to behave similarly at Chinese shops in the town (p. 171). These experiences construct local sellers’ “stereotypes and

perceptions around what it means to be Chinese or *Sainaman*" (p. 173). During my 2021 research, surveyed university students from PNG and Fiji complained about the proliferation of Chinese-owned businesses in their countries, and most of them said there could be more anti-Chinese riots in the future ("China's influence and local perceptions: the case of Pacific island countries," *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 76[5]: 575–595).

Third, the "new" Chinese's practices are worrying and could damage China's image in the region. The distinction between "old" and "new" Chinese is clear in some Pacific Island countries (and other regions). As Kulasumb Kalinoe notes in chapter two, the "old" Chinese "have made PNG their home" and are seen by locals as "part of us" (p. 51), while the "new" Chinese are resented for organized crime and misconduct, such as corruption, illegal activities and appropriation of PNG local designs. My recent research on "China's diplomacy and diaspora perceptions: Evidence from the Pacific region" (*Asia & the Pacific Policy Studies*, 10[1–3], 2023, pp. 46–62) shows the substantial differences between these two Chinese groups are affirmed by themselves, such as "the new Chinese have less engagement with local communities" and "the new Chinese are mainly interested in making money and don't intent to stay in Tonga for long." As James Chin points out, the biggest concern of PNG-born Chinese and Southeast Asian Chinese regarding the mainland Chinese is that the latter are "destroying the long established friendly 'PNG Chinese national' social networks and relationships" (p. 89). This could have long-term negative impact on the whole Chinese community.

Similar to this book's central argument that the Chinese population in PNG is not homogenous, neither is "China" a homogenous entity in PNG. While China has stepped up its presence in PNG and the other Pacific Island countries in the past two decades, it has been represented by a large number of different actors, such as the Chinese embassy, state-owned enterprises, private companies, diaspora, media, agricultural experts, medical teams and language teachers, just to name a few. Their engagement with PNG actors and the impact on the bilateral relations deserve more research.