

10

Conclusion: Imagining a Chinese future in PNG

Michael Wood, Anna Hayes
and Rosita Henry

Our initial intentions for this collection were ambitious. We thought of chapters that would contribute to making the Chinese more central to the history of PNG, and that would enable reflection on what this history might mean for a Chinese future in PNG. The chapter by Hayes effectively concludes our collection because she poses epochal questions about this future amid the backdrop of intensifying geo-political competition within the region and an unfolding New Cold War. Interest in this subject matter has also intensified since our initial workshop in 2020.

In combination, the chapters in this volume reveal that the Chinese in PNG have never been a homogenous assemblage, but are a succession of distinct groups with different origins, languages, aspirations and political histories. By emphasising the internal diversity of the Chinese who have resided in PNG, we seek to provide impetus for further systematic exploration of this topic.

We have highlighted the diversity of the Chinese inter-cultural interactions in workplaces, markets, economic and political spheres, and in other contexts and across different time periods in PNG. In their chapters, the authors view the topic through different disciplinary lenses, but in combination the

volume provides a valuable multidisciplinary perspective on the Chinese past, present and future in PNG. Some contributors emphasised the multi-lingual practices of the Chinese in PNG. Others emphasised how the Chinese experience in PNG was a multi-state phenomenon and highlighted the importance of the circulation of the Chinese between different nation-states as much their circulation within PNG. Such diasporic histories point to different forms of citizenship and claims to sovereignty that external states have at various times claimed over the Chinese in PNG.

While both Hayes and Chin suggest that the Chinese state is a significant and increasingly dominant actor in PNG politics, it is never an autonomous solitary actor, but is modulated by various entanglements with the other states, international norms and actors that in various ways co-occupy with China the field that constitutes the state and sovereignty of PNG. In other chapters, the Chinese state appears as significantly absent. This suggests that the Chinese state in PNG is perhaps a bit like the PNG state—in some contexts it is present and growing in influence, but in other contexts it is an absent presence (Bainton & Skrzypek, 2021) and in yet other contexts it may be a weakening presence. Clearly, accounts of China's increasing dominance in PNG need to be supplemented by detailed descriptions of the interactions of Chinese state agents in different contexts within PNG. Such research might reveal that both the PNG and the Chinese nation-states are not as much discrete manifestations of national power as composite and dynamic entanglements of competing powers, structures of sovereignty and channels of interaction.

Our collective aim was to present Chinese-centric narratives that could displace dualistic accounts of PNG history centred on PNG and European interactions and social categories of difference. Such stories, we suggest, enable some forms of PNG politics and sociality to be conceptualised as a three-body problem (Liu, 2016), rather than just repeat dualisms concerning black and white bodies. At the same time, we are aware that others have already attempted something similar even if they deployed different approaches to the material and analysis (Bashkow, 2006; Smith, 2013; Wolfers, 1975; Wood, 1995). However, the Chinese and the Papua New Guineans are often placed jointly in a colonial waiting room of history where both come too late to an already partially developed European modernity (Fanon, 1967, p. 92; Chakrabarty, 2008).

In this volume, we have not presumed to define something like a distinct Chinese temporality or historicity (Ballard, 2014). Nor have we attempted in our selection of stories to head towards a unified pre-determined conclusion. The idea of increasing Chinese influence, power and control in PNG is variously assumed, qualified and rejected by different contributors. Chinese domination in PNG's future is treated in some chapters as conditional or even indefinite, as not an inevitable but a contingent product of future political debate and conflict. On pragmatic political grounds of opening a future for PNG, it is perhaps important to disrupt the pessimistic idea that PNG is running towards an inevitable future even if that future turns out to have contingently emerged. It is not inevitable that PNG will be dominated or threatened by China or by an Australian–US alliance.

This ambivalence about the future of PNG also motivates us now, in the current political context defined by various understandings of Chinese expansionism, to present the narratives as both extensions of existing accounts of the Chinese in PNG and as openings to developing new narratives and chronologies of the Chinese experience of living in PNG. This will involve actively facilitating further Chinese accounts of these experiences. It should also involve creating and narrating other pasts and futures for the Chinese in PNG to those outlined here. We hope that others, with different interests, positions and qualifications to us, will continue to demonstrate the multiplicity and creativity of Chinese engagements in PNG's past, present and future.

References

- Bainton, N., & Skrzypek, E. (Eds). (2021). *The Absent Presence of the State in Large-Scale Resource Extraction Projects*. ANU Press. doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1zcm2sp
- Ballard, C. (2014). Oceanic Historicities. *The Contemporary Pacific*, 26(1), 96–124. doi.org/10.1353/cp.2014.0009
- Bashkow, I. (2006). *The Meaning of the Whiteman: Race and Modernity in the Orokaiva Cultural World*. University of Chicago Press. doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226530062.001.0001
- Charkrabarty, D. (2008). *Provincialising Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*. (New Edition). Princeton University Press.
- Fanon, F. (1967). *Black Skin White Masks*. Pluto Press.

Liu, C. (2016). *The Three-Body Problem*. Tor Books.

Smith, G. (2013). Beijing's Orphans? New Chinese Investors in Papua New Guinea. *Pacific Affairs*, 86(2), 327–49. doi.org/10.5509/2013862327

Wolfers, E. P. (1975). *Race Relations and Colonial Rule in Papua New Guinea*. Australia and New Zealand Book Company.

Wood, M. (1995). 'White Skins', 'Real People' and 'Chinese' in some Spatial Transformations of the Western Province, PNG. *Oceania*, 66(1), 23–50. doi.org/10.1002/j.1834-4461.1995.tb02529.x

This text is taken from *The Chinese in Papua New Guinea: Past, Present and Future*, edited by Anna Hayes, Rosita Henry and Michael Wood, published 2024 by ANU Press, The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.

doi.org/10.22459/CPNG.2024.10