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This excellent collection of essays covers numerous facets of the rise of China in the Pacific Islands: not just the response of great powers and small island states but also the reaction of Pacific Islanders to the influx of Chinese as investors, traders and workers. The text deals with issues of identity and security in the contemporary Pacific, and was completed just before the onset of the global pandemic. A valuable update on COVID-19 as at mid-2020 fills some of that gap. The pandemic set the stage for ‘health diplomacy’ by the USA (North Pacific), Australia and New Zealand (South Pacific) and China (the entire region). The authors conclude that “the ultimate result may be to further tilt the economic balance in China’s favour” (p. 26.)

Two contributors, Zhou Fangyin and Nic Maclellan, enter a caveat about just how significant the rise of China is in this region. In his ‘re-evaluation of China’s engagement in the Pacific Islands’, Zhou Fangyin of Sun Yat-sen University endeavours to puncture some of the hyperbole surrounding this subject by pointing to the lack of importance to China of Chinese aid and investment in the Pacific Islands compared with elsewhere, and indeed to its reduction in recent years, which he demonstrates statistically. The Pacific Islands, after all, account for 0.12 per cent of China’s global trade. In similar vein, Nic Maclellan captures the essence of much of what we call the ‘rise of China’ in an excellent chapter on the political economy of China in the French territories: “initiatives in the Pacific are often driven by the commercial interests of private or state-owned corporations rather than overarching government plans. Chinese diplomats are often reliant on the Chinese company for information about progress or the content of deals struck with the host government” (p. 216).

For the most part, however, we are in the familiar territory of China’s rapid rise and the policy response from the West and East Asia. The US Biden administration is encouraging the revival of the ‘Quad’ – the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue of the USA, Japan, India and Australia – as a strategic counterweight to China in the Indo-Pacific. Australia is increasing the flow of resources in the Pacific via a ‘Step-Up’, New Zealand via a ‘Re-set’, and the US via its ‘Pacific Pledge’, as well as in the resumption of talks on the financial dimensions of a renegotiated Compact of Free Association with the Marshall Islands, Federated States of Micronesia and Palau. There are chapters on Australia’s response (Merriden Varrall), New Zealand’s (Iati Iati) and that of the US in the Micronesian Compact states, updated to include the Biden administration (Gerard A. Finin).

Denghua Zhang offers an entirely original perspective. Focusing on the Beijing end of China in the Pacific, he examines the ‘fierce competition between Chinese government agencies’ over official development assistance (p. 278) ever since the foundation in 2018 of China’s stand-alone aid agency, the China International Development Cooperation Agency. Henryk Szadziwski, in a perceptive chapter, sees the Belt and Road Initiative as a case of ‘flexible coherence’ on the part of Chinese policymakers seeking to make Chinese aid, trade and investment comprehensible to themselves and the recipients of China’s attention.

How do Pacific Islanders themselves understand China’s presence? Patrick Matbob charts tensions between Papua New Guineans and Chinese who have moved to Papua New Guinea to engage in trade store and other businesses. Fei Sheng and Graeme Smith examine the history and present situation of Chinese in the Pacific. Tarcisius Kabutaulaka elaborates on the theme of threats to island independence and security by tracing the recent use of the term

‘Blue Pacific’ in regional circles as counter-rhetoric that emphasises the extent to which, in a maritime sense, the small Pacific states are in fact ‘large ocean states’. In a nicely balanced formulation, he sees the Blue Pacific as countering two other rhetorics of the region: the ‘Indo-Pacific’ of the USA and its allies, and the ‘Maritime Silk Road’ of China. In a chapter on China and Fiji, Sandra Tarte argues that the Bainimarama Government is pragmatist, who made the most of China’s approval after the coup of 2006 and who are now capitalising on the return of the traditional friends Australia, New Zealand and the US.

Then, there is the definition of security offered at recent meetings of the Pacific Islands Forum, as exemplified by the PIF’s Boe Declaration of 2018, which affirms ‘that climate change remains the single greatest threat to the livelihoods, security and wellbeing of the peoples of the Pacific’ (p. ix). This point is repeated in the Tuvalu Declaration of 2019, which recognised a ‘climate crisis’ and the phasing out of the mining of coal. In other words, the real security threat from the point of view of Island leaders is not China but climate change.

Jessica Marinaccio has penned the theoretically most arresting chapter, analysing Taiwan’s ‘Austronesian diplomacy’. This politicises the discoveries of linguists and prehistorians in order to claim a special place in the Pacific for Taiwan: the ultimate origin, by most scholarly accounts, of the Austronesian language family to which every Pacific language east of the Solomons belongs. Once grasped by politicians who wish to distinguish Taiwan from the People’s Republic of China, Marinaccio points out, the terms Austronesian, Pacific and indigenous are conflated to suggest that all Pacific Islanders are ‘indigenous’. Asked by a Taiwanese official what their problems were as indigenous people, the Palau ambassador said ‘we’re not indigenous ... we’re just, we’re us, and we rule our country’ (p. 362).

In the most readable chapter in this collection, Transform Aqorau has written a timely account of the switch in recognition policy by Solomon Islands from Taiwan to China in September 2019. He interweaves into this story an analysis of Taiwan and the Rural Constituency Development Fund, which has done so much to corrupt parliamentary politics in Solomon Islands by putting money (in the past, mainly from Taiwan) directly into the pockets of politicians. He does not, however, see the arrival of China on the scene as calculated to diminish the corruption that has become endemic in his country.

With 16 chapters, including one on China in Timor-Leste, and an impressive list of contributors, this collection establishes a new standard of scholarly excellence in its analysis of China in the Pacific Islands; it deserves to be widely read and is highly recommended to students. One minor historical point about the Chinese in the Pacific could have been included because of its long-term consequences: the German authorities in New Guinea, Nauru and Samoa did not grant settlement rights to Chinese labourers on plantations and mines, unlike the British, who granted such rights to the Indian immigrants to Fiji, creating Fiji’s racially diverse society. Had the Germans followed the British, Samoa today would be a much more Chinese country.

I should declare that I am Chair of the Pacific Editorial Board of ANU Press, which approved this collection for publication.

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