
REVIEW

Ron Crocombe. *Asia in the Pacific Islands: Replacing the West*. Suva, Fiji: University of the South Pacific IPS Publications, 2007. Pp. 644. ISBN 9789820203884. US\$49.00 paper, B/W illustrations.

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“East Asia’s economic miracle” ushered in an economic and political transformation in the Pacific Islands. For much of the twentieth century, Euro-American influence and imperialism in the Pacific remained unchecked. This changed in the last decades of the twentieth century with the flood of people, goods, money, and political influence from Asian nations. World historians have been careful to contextualize the rise of East Asia in the global economy within a larger narrative of Asian influence in the world. Andre Gunder Frank’s *ReOrient* and Kenneth Pomeranz’s *The Great Divergence* both show that European global hegemony was recent and likely ephemeral because it was contingent on specific historical and ecological factors. Ron Crocombe’s ambitious book describes the recent transfer of influence from Euro-Americans to Asians in the Pacific Islands. Although what emerges from the book is a picture of the Pacific Islands as largely at the mercy of global transfer of power, Crocombe desires Pacific Islanders to be better prepared to face, and perhaps profit from, this challenge.

Crocombe describes four major ways that this transfer of influence has been manifest: human migration, commercial infrastructure, political influence, and culture. All of these vectors had long histories but have been particularly acute in recent decades. The migration of workers, tourists, and business people from Asia is familiar to the Pacific Islanders. Not only were the islands initially settled by people from Asia, but Euro-American and

Japanese imperial systems—and imperial economies—brought in thousands of Asian workers. The recent “third wave” has been unique in bringing in more skilled workers and professionals. The success of these immigrants poses a challenge to Pacific Islanders, who risk becoming economically marginalized. Along with people have come institutions of economic exchange such as Asian-run banks and insurance companies.

The arrival of Asian elite professionals accompanied by the infrastructure of commercial exchange resulted in a turn toward the “North,” the nations of East Asia. The colonial relationships familiar to Pacific Islanders through their status in the Euro-American empires have not fundamentally changed. The islands still provide raw materials, vacation destinations, financial havens, and dumpsites for much larger economies. The unequal economic relationship with Asia and the migration of thousands of Asians to the islands, along with the lack of formal structures of imperial police power, have led to a proliferation of corrupt businesses, drug smuggling, human trafficking, labor exploitation, prostitution, and fraud schemes. Indeed, one of the most striking elements of the contemporary Pacific Islands is the separation of commerce from imperial control, reflected in the rise of criminal activity.

In part because of economic interest, in part because of strategic concerns, and in large part because of the vacuum left by the declining interest of the West in the Pacific Islands, Asian nations have invested significant diplomatic resources in the region, creating a true “Asia-Pacific” political system. Pacific Islanders also have turned toward Asia in response to the sins of the colonial era (e.g., nuclear testing). In addition to direct aid in the form of grants, usually offered in exchange for international political support or markets for goods, Asians offered support for the 1.6 million ethnic Asians living in the Pacific Islands. Many Asian nations also have ideological, strategic, or outright colonial ambitions in the Pacific Islands. This is seen most clearly in the case of the China-Taiwan dispute and Indonesian imperialism. Crocombe takes a careful look at both of these examples. With political resources and military and economic power, China is capable of punishing island nations that deal directly with Taiwan. Nevertheless, Taiwan has been effective in gaining political influence, even recognition, in the Pacific Islands. Maintaining this support proved difficult because of Chinese pressure. Crocombe is right to compare the zero-sum to the competition of nineteenth-century colonial powers. More ominous is Indonesia’s imperial ambitions toward East Timor and West Papua.

Intellectual traditions, education systems, and mental outlook have remained more Euro-American despite the larger geopolitical and economic changes taking place in the Pacific Islands. Even in this “software” Asia is

more significant than ever before. Newspapers now commonly report stories about Asia. Chinese newspapers are growing in circulation as Western newspapers falter. Schools have taken steps to teach Asian languages and Islanders take advantage of scholarships allowing them to study in Asia. Immigrants from Asia have brought their religions, most significantly Islam and Buddhism, which promise to challenge the dominance of Christianity in the Islands.

Asia in the Pacific Islands is rich in details and almost encyclopedic in coverage. Crocombe takes pains to include information on all significant Asian nations and all Pacific Island nations in the text or in the in-depth appendices, which provide references on hundreds of noncommercial organizations active in the Pacific Islands and details on the official diplomatic representation by country. Thanks to these appendices, a rich bibliography, and the broad coverage in the text, researchers will find this book a useful reference guide on many subjects relating to the economic and political situation in the Pacific Islands. Students of globalization will also benefit from this book because it contextualizes a common subject (the rise of Asian economies) in a fresh way.

However, a broad coverage like this is likely to have its own downside. Readers may be commonly disappointed by many sections that lack depth of analysis. For example, a section on Islander women's migration to Asia as spouses is enticing and by itself introduces many fascinating questions about the nature of migration in the Asia-Pacific region but is treated little more than an afterthought of four sentences. Sections lacking depth or analysis will nevertheless challenge researchers to action.

Crocombe's interest is in the future. He hopes to awaken Islanders to the challenge, threat, and opportunity of shifting regional influence. Therefore, he is not particularly interested in either presenting the long history of Asian involvement in the region or in Euro-American colonialism. I am skeptical of the bold claim that Asia is "replacing the West" in the islands because the political, economic, and cultural tools Asia is using in the Pacific Islands are products of what Arif Dirlik calls "global modernity." When the global ruling class is transnational, is the distinction between Euro-American masters and Asian masters merely academic? This analytical quibble aside, the book remains required reading for anyone interested in the contemporary Pacific, globalization, and Asian economies.

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