

## “CHINESE PACIFICISM?” EXPLORING CHINESE NEWS MEDIA REPRESENTATIONS OF PACIFIC ISLAND COUNTRIES

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China has ramped up its engagement with Pacific Island countries and established itself as a major cooperative partner and assistance provider. However, the Pacific Islands remain a blind spot for many Chinese people, whose perceptions of island countries are inevitably shaped by dominant discourses at home. Although island countries are aware of China's growing presence, they are largely uninformed about their images circulated in China. This article seeks to fill this gap by exploring Chinese news media representations of Pacific Island countries. It argues that Chinese news media paint a broad and superficial portrait of island countries because of the great caution exercised in political news and the intention of promoting China's image and contributions. The representations have not brought “Chinese Pacificism” into being. Instead, from the perspectives of China, geopolitics, or the Pacific, they pivot around the ideas of development and progress and mainly manifest as the projection of Chinese values and interests onto foreign and insular places.

### Introduction

Although China and the Pacific Islands have had a long history of interactions, the first China–Pacific Island Countries Economic Development and Cooperation Forum in Fiji in 2006 marked the beginning of China establishing itself as a major player in the region (Wesley-Smith and Smith 2021, 1). The launch of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2013 and the inclusion of Pacific Island countries in the twenty-first century Maritime Silk Road (MSR) in 2017

were the catalysts for China's all-dimensional engagement in the Pacific. China is now the second-largest trading partner and the second-largest aid donor in the region, as well as an increasingly important source market for Pacific tourism.<sup>1</sup> In 2019, the Solomon Islands established and Kiribati resumed diplomatic relations with China. Ten Pacific Island countries now have diplomatic relations with Beijing, underscoring the value and influence of China for Pacific Islanders. Nonetheless, although Pacific Island countries are aware of China's rising profile and the opportunities that offers, they have little awareness of how China represents Pacific Island nations due to language differences and the prevalence of Western representations of China. How Pacific Island nations are perceived and represented by Chinese authoritative groups like the central news media deserves detailed scrutiny.

Since the sixteenth century, Western powers have imagined, mapped, and represented Oceania in various ways, including as colonial territories that need to be claimed, governed, civilized, modernized, and Christianized (Thomas 1990, 141, quoted in Ballard 2014, 99). They have constantly propagated the belittling view that Pacific Island countries are small, poor, and isolated (Hau'ofa 1994, 150). Consequently, Pacific peoples are some of the world's most misrepresented groups (Teaiwa 2017, 266). For example, the problematic tripartite division of the region into Polynesia, Melanesia, and Micronesia denies the fundamental connections between Pacific peoples. The paradise trope is often used to romanticize and feminize the Pacific and its peoples or represent them as "noble savages" (Alexeyaff and Siobhan 2018, 274). Ideas of progress and civilization brought in by early missionaries presumed the unworthiness of long-established and successful cultures. Deficit discourse that assumes a certain idea of progress and highlights any other developments as defective remains prevalent in the international community. Concepts like "new doomsdayism" (Fry 1997, 305) and "failed states" (Jolly 2007, 528) imposed on the Pacific by Western media and academia are reminiscent of the "ignoble savages" (Kabutaulaka 2015, 111) trope that emphasizes disorder and instability. These representations distract from what the Pacific means for its peoples and focus on what it means to outsiders. Essentially, representations from the West characteristically mirror Western desires and fears (Farbotko 2010, 52) rather than the Pacific Islands per se.

"China's rise to prominence in Oceania is among the most important regional developments since the end of the Cold War" (Wesley-Smith 2013, 352). This significant change has become one of the focal points in geopolitical discussions. In the past decade, an increasing number of scholars have examined the geopolitical competition sparked by this change.<sup>2</sup> Most existing literature is positioned from the outside to look in at China's engagement in the Pacific rather than taking a direct look at the entanglements from inside. Scholars that contribute insider views usually discuss the topic through a traditional lens at

the macro level. This research takes a different path of looking out at China by gauging the internal public sphere of news media.

Despite the long presence of overseas Chinese in Oceania, there is little scholarly examination of how China imagines and represents the Pacific Islands. This article seeks to fill this gap by discussing Chinese representations of Pacific Island countries, with a focus on the news media. Using critical discourse analysis (CDA), this paper analyses Chinese media reports to outline the nature and dynamics of Chinese representations of Pacific Island countries. Although this research and analysis are limited to the news media, they provide insight into how China views and represents the Pacific Islands. This is important because these representations influence diplomatic relations, politics, business, and other engagements between China and Pacific Island countries. They could also provide Pacific Islanders with insight into how China and the Chinese people imagine and represent their nations. This could help in their framing and administration of their relationships with China.

This article argues that Chinese central news media are cautious and strategic in their language, tone, and sources for news covering China's diplomatic and economic engagement with Pacific Island countries. Negative messages have been censored to avoid damaging China's image, offending Pacific states, or harming relations. Ideas of harmony, equality, common development, and mutual benefits have been stressed. As a result, representations of Pacific Island countries are generally broad. When the news involves global powers like China and Western countries or touches on elements of geopolitics, Pacific Island countries are assigned a marginal role and fade into the background. When the news is solely about island nations, description becomes superficial. If the reports address the challenges and problems faced by island countries, words from Pacific leaders, officials, or citizens are preferential sources. Ideas of development and progress consistently frame the narratives on difficulties and challenges faced by Pacific Island countries. In short, Chinese news media promote China's image and contributions as a responsible developer of the region, offering only general representations of Pacific Island countries themselves. I propose that instead of forming "Chinese Pacificism" as a derivative of Orientalism, most Chinese representations of Pacific Island countries manifest as the projection of Chinese values and interests upon foreign and insular places on China's great periphery.

### **Representations in Chinese News Media**

#### *Chinese News Media: Background*

The media play an important role in producing and disseminating information that produces particular representations of events, places, and peoples.

The various types of media are important intermediaries in the process of shaping how people conceptualize the world (Shea, Painter, and Osaka 2020, 90) and key sites of misrepresentations (Johnson and Ensslin 2007, 14). Indeed, representation is a major focus of media discourse analysis (Johnson and Ensslin 2007, 16). The primary goal of media discourse analysis is the accounting of ideology in language or the problematizing of power relations in society (Cotter 2015, 797), which corresponds to the central notion of CDA. As a result, mass media and newspapers in particular have received the attention of many critical discourse analysts (Ahmadian and Farahani 2014, 2115) in several substantial works (O’Keeffe 2012, 442). Consequently, emerging works on representation in the media are greatly informed by such critical traditions (Cotter 2015, 799).

Unlike purported Western watchdog journalism, the nature of Chinese media or journalism is debatable. Luo (2015) points out that Chinese media are coaffected by various forces—the party, government, capital, professional, individuals, and cultures—whose competitive and sometimes collaborative relationships give rise to a self-balancing mechanism inside the media. He thus argues that the philosophy behind Chinese media is a combination of communism, authoritarianism, liberalism, professionalism, democratic-participant ideals, and Chinese culturalism (Luo 2015). Although Chinese central media such as the Xinhua News Agency are usually acknowledged to be government-sponsored and government-monitored vehicles whose role is to represent and disseminate the ideological agenda of Beijing (Zhao and Xiang 2019, 346), research into the financing and organizational structure of the Xinhua Shanghai Bureau has revealed considerable financial autonomy and decentralization of personnel and editorial control as a result of media market forces (Xin 2008).

Although there has not yet been a study on Chinese media coverage of Pacific Island countries, scholars have attempted to make sense of Chinese media representations of Africa compared with their Western counterparts.<sup>3</sup> According to their studies, media are major channels for China to increase its soft power and improve its international image (Madrid-Morales and Gorfinkel 2018, 2) amid the dominance of Western representations of the world. Adopting a non-Western approach, the Chinese government hopes to tell a more balanced story about Africa from a Chinese perspective (Zhang and Matingwina 2016, 93). Chinese journalism has been conceptualized as positive reporting that avoids politically controversial stories and focuses on narratives about friendship and partnership (Gagliardone 2013), constructive journalism that empowers and inspires people to find solutions to social problems (Zhang and Matingwina 2016), journalism that sits between positive reporting and constructive journalism promoted by outward-focused publicity and the political-economic

agenda of the Chinese government (Zhao and Xiang 2019, 359), and a mix of party journalism, watchdog journalism, and paid journalism (Xin 2008, 53). They serve as useful references because African countries and Pacific Island countries share some similarities in terms of colonial history and contemporary issues. Therefore, although Chinese media or journalism is almost indefinable with reference to established forms, scholars have generally agreed that it diverges from the journalistic paths of Western media. By comparison, neither positive reporting nor constructive journalism describes the coverage of the Pacific by Chinese central media. Instead, they publish general and broad news reports from the perspectives of China, geopolitics, or the Pacific.

In this context, Chinese central media<sup>4</sup> differ from other domestic news media in that their stories normally reflect the official stances and positions of the Chinese government, particularly on international relations. Since most Chinese people have little direct relationship with Pacific Island countries, their readings and interpretations of the authoritative news stories can easily lead to the formation of general impressions and understandings of far-flung foreign places. Thus, news articles from Chinese central media are a good research sample to investigate representations of the Pacific.

*Early Representation of the Pacific Islands: An Example from Chinese News*

The Pacific Islands attracted little interest from Chinese writers in ancient times (before the first opium war in 1840). It's even difficult to find representations of the islands before the founding of new China in 1949. However, one historical text contributes to understanding of China's early perceptions of the Pacific. It is excerpted from a news story (Yi 1942) that discussed the situation of the islands in the Southeast Pacific during World War II (WWII) in the *Anhui Daily*:

各岛上资源都很丰富，可称之为资源岛，地上资源和地下资源都占着优越的地位，故为世界所重视，列强所必争。

The islands are rich in resources and thus can be called "Islands of Resources." With advantageous ground and underground resources, they are valued by the world and competed by great powers (June 7, 1942).

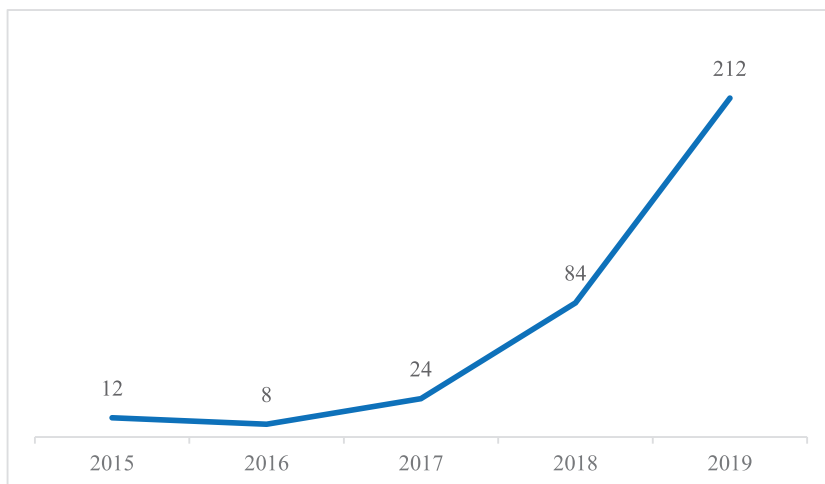
Here, resource richness was highlighted to explain why global powers were interested in and occupying the Pacific Islands. The Pacific Islands were recognized for their bountifulness but simultaneously relegated to a monolithic or generic identity, whereby other countries competed for benefits while island responses and agency went ignored. This example of early Chinese representations of the Pacific Islands is similar to Western views, emphasizing the desirable

resources of islands. However, China was not a colonial power, so discourses justifying invasions and occupations are largely unique to the West. Initially, the Pacific Islands were absent from Chinese media because China at large was unfamiliar with the islands and was not keen to report on them compared with other big powers in the world. Fundamentally, the scarcity of Chinese historical representations is based on a dichotomy between big continental civilization and groups of small distant islands. Do contemporary Chinese representations remain the same or break new ground?

*Overview, 2015–19*

Here, I surveyed online news articles published between 2015 and 2019 by searching on ChinaSo<sup>5</sup> using “Pacific Island countries,” “South Pacific,” and the names of fourteen independent states in the region as keywords. I chose this period because China elevated its relationship with Pacific Island countries in 2017 by including them in the twenty-first century MSR and the China–Oceania–South Pacific blue economic passage.<sup>6</sup> Examining the publications during the two years before 2017 and the two years after it can shed light on the change of representations. After examining the content, I removed irrelevant articles and duplicates, which left me with a total of 340 news pieces. The sources of the news articles included Xinhuanet (sponsored by the Xinhua News Agency), China News (sponsored by the China News Service), *China Daily* (sponsored by the International Communication Office of the Communist Party of China Central Committee), ChinaTaiwan (supervised by the Taiwan Affairs Office of the State Council), China Military Online (sponsored by *PLA Daily*), China Economic Net (sponsored by *Economic Daily*), CNR News (sponsored by China Media Group), CCTV News (sponsored by China Media Group), and *Economic Information Daily* (sponsored and supervised by the Xinhua News Agency). The preponderance of the articles was published on Xinhuanet, with 146 pieces of news.

As shown in Figure 1, the number of online news articles about Pacific Island countries in Chinese central media remained extremely low between 2015 and 2017, with only small fluctuations. However, the number jumped to 84 articles in 2018 and then skyrocketed to 212 articles in 2019, which is an obvious sign of growing attention to and interest in Pacific Island countries from Chinese media. The 2018 Asia–Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) meetings hosted by Papua New Guinea put island nations in the international spotlight. As a result, Pacific Island countries have attracted increasing news coverage from global media, including news agencies in China. Arguably, the APEC meetings mark a watershed in China’s concentration on the Pacific. As the chart shows, the growth momentum of news articles intensified in 2019.



**FIGURE 1. Increase in Online News Articles about Pacific Island Countries, 2015–19.**

I then read through all the articles, identified the perspective they were written from, and categorized them by topic (Table 1). Over the examined period, most news articles were China oriented, whereas others concentrated on geopolitics and critical issues for the Pacific. The topics of online news about Pacific Island countries from Chinese central media diversified, as well as increasing in number, which reflects an expansion of focus areas in Chinese news outlets. From 2015 to 2017, the limited number of news stories centered on China's engagement in the Pacific, including diplomacy, cooperation, rescue operations, and aid. Other news touched on natural disasters and regional and domestic issues. Papua New Guinea's successful hosting of APEC the following year drew international attention and gave rise to more media coverage, especially on diplomacy. APEC also contributed to China's deepening engagement in the Pacific, marked by frequent exchange of high-level visits, increased cooperation under the BRI framework, and development aid in the areas of healthcare and agriculture, all accompanied by corresponding news coverage. More importantly, the meetings set the stage for exponential growth and further diversification of Chinese news on Pacific Island countries the next year. As China established diplomatic relations with the Solomon Islands and resumed its ties with Kiribati in September 2019, the corresponding coverage hit the headlines and accounted for nearly half of the news reports about China's diplomacy in the Pacific. The rest of the articles under this topic were mainly

**TABLE 1. News Topics about Pacific Island Countries, 2015–19.**

Year	Perspective		
	China Oriented	Geopolitics	Pacific Oriented
2015	China's diplomacy (6) Cultural exchange (1)	Western engagement (2)	Natural disasters (1) Accidents (1) Health issues (1)
2016	China's diplomacy (1)	None	Natural disasters (2) Domestic politics (2) Refugee issues (2) Climate change (1) Natural disasters (7)
2017	China–Pacific cooperation (4) China's rescue operations (3) China's diplomacy (2) China's aid (1)	Taiwan's engagement (1)	US weapons testing (3) Domestic politics (1) Political figures (1) WWII legacy (1)
2018	China's diplomacy (27) China–Pacific cooperation (12) China's aid (10) China's rescue operations (9) Cultural exchange (4) Tourism (3) Overseas Chinese (1)	Taiwan's engagement (2) Western engagement (1)	Natural disasters (7) Introduction to countries (4) Climate change (1) Regional politics (1) Political figures (1) Crime (1)
2019	China's diplomacy (63) Cultural exchange (23) China's aid (17) China–Pacific cooperation (15) Tourism (10) Overseas Chinese (1)	Taiwan's engagement (4) US military deployment (1)	Natural disasters (40) Domestic politics (7) US weapons testing (6) Epidemics (6) Accidents (4) Introduction to countries (3) Regional politics (3) Political figures (3) Crime (2) Climate change (1) Refugee issues (1) Ocean life (1)
<p>Note: The number in parentheses after each topic signifies the number of articles under this topic.</p>			



about exchanging high-level visits and comments on China–Pacific relations. Subsequently China’s aid and cooperation projects continued to be major news coverage. Cultural exchanges in the fields of art, education, music, tourism, and sports also occupied an important place in the coverage. Friendship between China and Pacific Island countries became the key paradigm of the exchanges. In addition to current affairs, some historical and contemporary issues in the Pacific begin to emerge in the news, such as US weapons testing and refugee issues. Those news articles represent a positive change in Chinese news media, attempting to deepen the understanding of Pacific Island countries and publish Pacific-oriented news.

The limited media coverage of Pacific Island countries in the first three years of the period examined in this study does not mean there were few events to report. Indeed, the Pacific has never been the primary focus for Chinese news agencies. Stories of Pacific Island countries appeared less newsworthy compared with stories about the West and China’s periphery. Historically, Western countries have received extensive coverage from Chinese media and are established as major actors in China’s international news. Many countries on the periphery of China signed cooperation documents related to the BRI during those three years. Only later were Pacific Island countries included along the southern extension of the MSR in 2017. Second, the Pacific Islands are geographically distant from China, which adds to the difficulty and cost of assigning adequate resources to track news there. The surge of online news in 2018 and 2019 may be attributed to heightened connections between China and Pacific Island countries that signed cooperation agreements on jointly building the BRI.

Chinese central media are more susceptible to politics and embody political concerns from Beijing, so the rising numbers and increasingly diverse topics are direct results of China’s active engagement in the Pacific. Since China is likely to continue and even redouble its efforts to gain partners and allies in the region, Pacific Island countries may be expected to occupy more space in Chinese news.

### **Analysis by News Topic**

More than forty years ago, Edward Said suggested in his groundbreaking work *Orientalism* (1978) that representation is never a true presentation of the original but only an imitation that mostly serves the interest of the dominant group. Falling into this mindset, the United States alone has produced various colonial forms of representations that include exploratory, commercial, military, strategic, developmental, security-related, and tourism ones, which are termed “American Pacificism” by Paul Lyons (Hanlon 2009, 98). In a similar vein, Japan has framed Micronesia as a primordial chaos that needs to be

reclaimed and liberated (quoted in Levy 2015, 580) and produced shifting images of Micronesians as headhunters, primitive societies, noble savages, and hybrid subjects, which is called “Nanyo Orientalism” (Sudo 2010, 5). Now, the “oriental” power—China, although not the one Said referred to—is producing representations of “the others” in Oceania. Has China been affected by the idea of Orientalism and somehow created Chinese Pacificism in the representations of Pacific Island countries? If not, what can we learn from the representations?

To answer these questions, I focused on news articles published in 2019, because the year witnessed the important diplomatic achievement in the Pacific for China. In addition, the larger number of articles, partly as a result of the 2018 APEC meetings, makes it possible to analyze representations under diverse topics. In light of the flexibility (Fairclough 2012, 19) and interdisciplinarity (Wodak 2001:xxii; Fairclough 2012, 12) of CDA as a discourse analytical practice (van Dijk 2015, 466), I interpreted and contextualized news texts by considering both the linguistic and the political functions of words and phrases and then decoded their embedded messages and implications. Under each topic, I perused the headlines, leads, and main bodies of the articles to extract narratives related to Pacific Island countries, pieced them together and reconstructed the resulting images of island states. Sections below are presented in the descending order based on the number of news articles under each topic.

### *China's Diplomacy*

The sixty-three news articles under the diplomatic theme mainly focused on high-level exchanges and visits between China and Pacific Island countries, as well as comments and statements on China–Pacific relations from officials and political leaders. The Solomon Islands and Kiribati received the most coverage, with fifteen and fourteen news reports, respectively, as a result of their decisions to establish or resume diplomatic relations in 2019.

Because the theme is political, most of the news articles used diplomatic language with an informative tone and shied away from explicit negative comments and judgments on Pacific Island countries and relations. News about high-level exchanges and visits were generally concise, with highlights from the talks. The talks usually followed similar patterns of Chinese diplomatic narratives, for example, recognizing the primary concerns of each side, praising actions that enhanced relationships, and calling for closer exchanges and cooperation in the future. Therefore, representations of the Pacific became insignificant and largely absent. Many news articles cited words from Chinese political leaders like President Xi Jinping, who discussed China–Pacific relations during the exchanges. For instance, coverage of Xi's congratulations on

the launch ceremony of the 2019 China–Pacific Tourism Year included the following:

China and Pacific Island countries have a time-honored tradition of friendly exchanges. They are good friends who treat each other with sincerity and mutual respect, good partners who work together to pursue common development and win-win cooperation, and good brothers who understand and learn from each other. They set a model for all countries treating each other as equals regardless of their sizes (Qiu 2019).

This was a typical narrative of deep friendship and close partnership between China and Pacific Island countries based on the principles of equality and mutual benefit, which prevailed in news under this theme. It is a reflection of China’s will to maintain substantial and effective relations with other powers, particularly developing countries. Two other representations that emerged from the news came from a Chinese journalist and an editor, respectively:

1. Climate change. “Solomon Islands are known for its beautiful scenery, but again it’s island country, so one of the global challenges it faces like many other countries is global warming and climate change. How do you see China can help or how can the two countries cooperate to address such challenge?” (Li et al. 2019).
2. Development. “This decision was made based on national and peoples’ interests by the Solomon Islands. The country does not lack resources, but it is on the list of UN’s least developed countries. Development is the absolute principle to get over the difficulty” (Hao 2019c).

The first narrative recognized climate change as a threat to the Pacific Islands and preceded the discussion of actions by China. The second accounts for the decision to switch to Beijing by the Solomon Islands by referring to the United Nation’s (UN’s) criteria for development. Both statements identified existing or perceived challenges in the Solomon Islands and emphasized the benefits of allying with China.

Press agencies were well aware of the danger of only including official and authoritative voices from China, so they also cited the voices from Pacific leaders, who then became sources representing their countries:

1. Smallness. “Even though we are small, we are treated with [the] deep respect that you accord other [larger] countries” (Shi, Wang, and Xie 2019).<sup>7</sup>

2. Need of infrastructure. “The country is in badly need of important infrastructure” (Li et al. 2019).<sup>8</sup>
3. Agency. “Solomon Islands will not allow itself to be used as a tool to satisfy the narrow geopolitical interest of foreign political powers” (Hao 2019c).<sup>9</sup>

Selection of news content remains value laden even when it comes from Pacific leaders. Narratives of smallness become the proof of the principle of equality in China’s diplomacy. Need for infrastructure justifies China’s construction projects across the Pacific. Discourse on agency upholds the decision of Pacific Island countries to seek new allies and thus intensify relations with China. China’s diplomatic engagement in the Pacific is reminiscent of its longstanding engagement in Africa, which is an extension to the third world to build and enhance China’s relationship with other developing countries. Pacific Island countries are positioned as present and potential allies of China, so they are less likely to be represented negatively compared with Western countries that commit to containing China’s rise. In addition, such representations reflect some of the principles of the MSR, such as harmony, inclusiveness, and mutual benefit.<sup>10</sup> In total, news about China’s diplomacy in the Pacific exercises great caution and tends to present a picture of a harmonious relationship between China and Pacific Island countries, which pursue common interests in development and the benefits of close cooperation. On the positive side, an imagined Chinese Pacificism has not emerged. However, representations of the Pacific fail to get deeper but only discuss the primary concerns of island states.

#### *Natural Disasters and Epidemics*

Out of the forty news stories on natural disasters, thirty-seven articles related to earthquakes, whereas the rest concerned a volcanic eruption in Papua New Guinea and Tropical Cyclone Sarai that hit Fiji. Earthquake news was generally short and highlighted earthquake frequency in countries like the Solomon Islands, Tonga, Vanuatu, Papua New Guinea, and Fiji. After introducing basic information on earthquakes, the news would normally end with an additional note that “Earthquakes are common in the country, which sits on the Pacific’s ‘Ring of Fire,’ where continental plates collide producing frequent seismic activity” (Xu 2019). Earthquakes were presented as common in the Pacific but not necessarily destructive. The impacts of volcanic eruptions and cyclones appeared to be more disastrous. For example, more 5,000 people were forced to evacuate after the eruption in Papua New Guinea, and the potential risks of the volcano were mentioned. Tropical Cyclone Sarai swept

Fiji and caused one death, 1,969 people evacuated, and “fallen trees, landslides and damaged roads” (Zhang 2019i). Unlike short news on earthquakes, the more detailed news on cyclones and volcanoes was accompanied by photos of the disasters, which heightened the impression that Pacific Islands are vulnerable.

Given that China falls into the “medium chance of disasters” category, according to World Risk Index, and is regularly exposed to an array of natural disasters, it is reasonable that news media would be sensitive to natural disasters (Dynton 2015). The prevalence of earthquake news may result from large earthquakes that hit and still alert contemporary China, notably the Tangshan Earthquake in 1976 and the Wenchuan Earthquake in 2008. However, when natural disasters are perceived as common and having small-scale impacts in Pacific Island countries, they are more likely to be simplified and downplayed.

Six news articles tracked the measles outbreak in Samoa, and five of these were a series of news reports by Xinhua News Agency. The series began with coverage of the first twenty deaths in the country on November 23, 2019 and closed with the end of the state of emergency on December 28, 2019. The news articles also mentioned cases in neighboring countries like Tonga and Fiji. Like the coverage on natural disasters, Chinese central news agencies are sensitive to epidemics in any region of the world that can cause great losses, not only the Pacific. All news articles adopted an informative tone and provided general descriptions of infections, deaths, and government actions and a brief introduction about the disease, which successfully presented the urgent situation and timely responses from the governments. Therefore, the first step to form Chinese Pacificism has not even been taken, if this is going to happen.

### *Cultural Exchange*

Coverage of cultural exchange between China and Pacific Island countries involved a range of areas, such as art, education, music, tourism, and sports. Of the twenty-three news stories on this topic, sixteen concerned Fiji, which held a series of events initiated by China, including art exhibitions, a tourism symposium, a tourism cultural week and food festival, Chinese educational seminars, online classes, and competitions, as well as fashion events. Fiji’s pivotal role in the region and China’s concentration on the country were clearly in play here. Fijian and Chinese officials were reported as believing in the importance of cultural exchange for mutual understanding, respect, and learning. The news articles were imbued with narratives of warm welcome and great appreciation of Chinese culture on the part of Fijians, accompanied

by deepened mutual understanding and enhanced friendly ties between both sides. By the same token, friendship was consistently emphasized in other news, in which group visits from China met with hospitality from locals. Again, key terms like mutual understanding and friendship reflect the principles of the MSR. Adding weight to the harmonious exchange were representations of island states as clean and tranquil, with simple and happy daily life (Tao 2019b) and unique landscapes and cultures (Zhang 2019b). However, Chinese cultural influence eclipsed the culture of Pacific Island countries in most news stories. For example, news about scholarships offered to Fijian students and training given to Samoan athletes established China as the assistance provider and island countries as the receivers. The news highlighted the appeal of Chinese culture and its role in promoting friendship with Pacific peoples, which in effect indicates the successful implementation of the “Going Global Strategy” of Chinese culture that was first proposed in the early two thousands, but Pacific cultures did not receive the same level of attention. The news was therefore more China oriented than Pacific oriented, which has not led to the formation of Chinese Pacificism.

#### *China's Aid*

News stories about Chinese aid in the form of medical support, agricultural aid projects, infrastructure and construction projects, and loans included Samoa, Papua New Guinea, Cook Islands, Fiji, Niue, and Tonga, of which Samoa received the most coverage, with seven news articles. Preexisting challenges and issues in island societies and new issues identified during the process of providing aid were presented:

1. Reliance on imports. “Agriculture is the pillar industry of Samoa, but crops are limited to a few varieties like coconuts, taros and bananas, so dependency on food imports is high” (Zhang 2019a). “Agriculture is the pillar industry of Samoa, but the country is dependent on imported agricultural goods due to lack of arable land and technology” (Tao 2019a).
2. Backwardness. “Papua New Guinea’s healthcare system is relatively backward. There are only 500 doctors in the country, but they need to serve eight million people. The doctors have limited knowledge of advanced medical technologies like minimally invasive surgery and telehealth” (Hao 2019a). “Due to backward agricultural production and technology, Samoa still needs to import large quantities of agricultural goods” (Zheng, Zhang, and Tai 2019).
3. Health issues. “Samoans generally take breadfruits and taros as staple foods and eat less vegetables, which leads to prevalence of high blood pressure,

diabetes and obesity. This adds difficulty to surgeries performed by the medical team” (Tao 2019a).

Therefore, China’s medical support and agricultural aid were framed in terms of perceived challenges that island countries face. China’s willingness to address issues of development in island nations has been particularly recognized and backed by some Pacific leaders, whose comments were cited in the news to push back against accusations from the West. For instance, comments from Mark Brown, then deputy prime minister of the Cook Islands, in response to a US intelligence report accusing China of currying favor with Pacific island nations through bribery, infrastructure investments, and diplomatic engagement was cited (Zhou 2019):

Much of this development assistance has been the provision of critical economic and social infrastructure that could not be funded or provided by the more traditional development partners prevalent in the Pacific prior to China’s emergence in the early 2000s. Many of our fellow Pacific Island countries are facing rising population with large youth unemployment and few economic prospects and welcome a new development partner less insistent on policy reforms or social engineering as preconditions to aid.

Brown provided a rationale for China’s focus on infrastructure aid projects in the Pacific and referred to its no-strings-attached aid policy compared with traditional partners. In a similar vein, Tuilaepa Sailele Malielegaoi, the former prime minister of Samoa, justified the country’s need for infrastructure development, saying that “he would not allow geopolitical fears to stifle development of much-needed infrastructure, and Samoa would ‘follow our own line of thought,’ not that of the United States and its allies” (Wilson 2019). These two comments from Pacific leaders confirm China’s importance for development in some island nations, even though the idea may challenge the dominance of Western powers in the Pacific.

However, all identified challenges were merely presented to pave the way for discourse on the positive changes that island countries have seen with the help of Chinese healthcare workers, scientists, and engineers. One news article (Zhang 2019a) provided an overview of the China–Samoa Agricultural Technical Aid Project and the China–Fiji Juncao Technology Cooperation Project, stating that China’s aid brought real benefits to Pacific peoples and promoted economic and social development. The projects yielded fruitful results and were welcomed by local governments and people. These achievements were detailed by Chinese experts dispatched to the two countries and were supported by comments from

Samoan and Fijian political leaders, officials, coordinators, and project participants. Similarly, in Papua New Guinea a government official states that the China Juncao and Upland Rice Technology Project would contribute to economic growth, poverty alleviation, and protection of the environment (Hao 2019b). In Fiji, farmers and disabled people who received Juncao technology training from Chinese experts expressed appreciation for enriching their food and increasing their income (Zhang 2019f). Similarly, Samoan farmers thanked Chinese experts for providing seeds and facilities and teaching new technologies and farming skills, which made fresh vegetables and fruits more affordable and increases their income (Zheng, Zhang, and Tai 2019).

In addition, amicable interactions between Chinese and Pacific Islanders at the grassroots level were featured in the news. For example, to finish the construction of a comprehensive school in the Cook Islands as soon as possible, Chinese workers worked twenty-four-hour shifts every day during peak times. Neighboring residents were considerate and supportive and voluntarily sent food to the site (Hao 2019b). Likewise, Chinese staff at Samoa's airport upgrade project appreciated the kindness of locals who sometimes sent bananas to feed the company's employees (Tao 2019a).

Descriptions of tremendous changes and friendly interactions also dominated in the coverage of China's new Pacific allies. After China and the Solomon Islands established diplomatic ties, a news article (Yang and Guo 2019b) reported on a bridge project delivered by the China Harbour Engineering Company, whose infrastructure projects were described as having set the foundation for friendship since 2015. Locals were happy to see the great changes that the bridge brought to the community by making transport of produce easier and creating job opportunities. During construction, the company provided free road repairs, medical services, and promotion of education, and relatives and friends of local employees volunteered to take up positions in the company and send vegetables and fruits to the site. Ideas of change and friendship were consistently woven into the news.

Chinese news coverage of the country's aid in the Pacific mainly focused on development assistance in healthcare, agriculture, and infrastructure. The aid was claimed to fit the development need that China perceived through engagement with island nations, where some political leaders found that Chinese aid projects were in line with national development goals or plans. Project achievements, benefits for local communities, and deep bonds formed between Chinese and Pacific peoples were detailed at the forefront of the news, whereas China's possible benefits from providing aid were not mentioned. The news was intended to inform people at home and overseas of less-known interactions between Chinese aid providers and Pacific aid recipients to establish China as a responsible ally for other developing countries that sticks to the principle



of not interfering in the domestic affairs of other nations. Consequently, news consumers in China may have acquired a clearer knowledge of Chinese contributions to the Pacific in catering to needs of other countries but could hardly have learned anything specific about the Pacific Island countries, whose image remained vague except for the various developmental challenges with which they grappled. Here, the idea of development has emerged as a key word to guide the news story, whereas ideas of Orientalism have not come into play.

### *China–Pacific Cooperation*

China's major cooperation partners in the news included Fiji, the Solomon Islands, Papua New Guinea, the Federated States of Micronesia (FSM), and the South Pacific at large, focusing on trade cooperation under the BRI framework. Officials from both sides present the economies of China and Pacific Island countries as complementary. According to interviews with officials, Pacific Island countries boast abundant marine, forest, mineral, and tourist resources (Zhang 2019g) as well as advantageous locations, whereas China has the advantages of capital, technology, and market (Zhang 2019d), so their cooperation enjoys broad prospects.

Fisheries in particular is an important area of trade cooperation. Two news articles reported on the huge market potential of tuna from island states at the China International Import Expo. According to the head of the South Pacific Islands Union Pavilion, Pacific Island countries are endowed by tuna resources, and Chinese consumers appreciate the nutritional values of the fish, which leads to future cooperation (He and Cheng 2019). Other fresh produce from the Pacific caters to Chinese consumers' love of pure, natural, and organic products and pursuit of quality. Therefore, the Pacific, which is represented as one of the purest and greenest regions in the world, was presented as appealing to curious Chinese consumers. In addition, the article touched on other areas of cooperation, like tourism and fashion design, which provide access for Chinese consumers to learn about Pacific products. Apart from trade cooperation, other news articles involved China's financial cooperation with Papua New Guinea and possible cooperation in marine geology with FSM.

The news promoted the benefits of joining the BRI and cooperating with China under its frameworks for Pacific societies and peoples by presenting interviews with Pacific officials and scholars. Fiji's Minister for Industry, Trade and Tourism Premila Kumar believed that "Fiji can learn from the Chinese government in areas such as setting special industrial/economic zone policies and establishing zones that attract foreign direct investments in specialized areas" and pointed out that "Fiji needed to capitalize on this initiative for the benefit of Fijians, as Fiji plans to attract foreign direct investment from China. This

would in return create employment opportunities and improve the livelihood of all Fijians” (Zhang 2019c). Keshmeer Makun, a lecturer at the University of the South Pacific, acknowledged China’s contribution to Pacific Island countries and other developing countries by providing funds, markets, knowledge, and technology. As for China’s new allies in the Pacific, Bradley Tovosia, the Solomon minister of mines, energy, and rural electrification, spoke with *Xinhua* during an interview (Yang and Guo 2019a) identifying important challenges and opportunities for economic and social development:

1. Economic stagnation. “Solomon Islands is situated central to a lot of other countries in the region but our economy is really not growing...so having bilateral relations with China, it will really boost the economy.”
2. Backwardness. “By attracting big businesses to the country, Tovosia hopes to improve the lives of roughly 85% of the population who live in rural areas, where most people have no access to adequate electricity, water, sanitation and healthcare.”
3. Scatteredness and diversity. “I think the biggest thing we want is for our rural people. We are scattered everywhere on Solomon Islands. We have 11 provinces and people scattered everywhere with different cultures and different ways of doing things.”
4. Resource richness. “The Solomon Islands is abundant in natural resources, with fishery, forestry and mining as its pillar industries, which Tovosia believes present ample opportunities for those willing to invest in the country.”

He then referred to the country’s need for help from reliable partners and regarded cooperation under the BRI as a promising way to achieve growth: “So we are sort of in a way that we need someone that can come and help us in a true way that will really help the Solomons to grow. The Solomon Islands is encouraged to see the great improvements in economic development and people’s livelihood that neighboring countries, including Fiji, Vanuatu, and Papua New Guinea, have achieved through cooperation with China, especially through common projects under the Belt and Road Initiative” (Yang and Guo 2019a). As we can see, the article avoided judgmental comments on the Solomon Islands but represented the country’s development needs through the words of a local government official. At the same time, comprehensive cooperation with China was presented as beneficial based on his remarks, which appeared to be the prime goal of the article.

To summarize, representations of Pacific Island countries under the theme of cooperation frame Chinese and Pacific economies as mutually complementary by presenting the different strengths of both sides as the foundation for

reciprocal cooperation. Although pillar industries and competitive advantages of Pacific nations have been introduced to Chinese readers, the news articles focus on promoting the benefits of China–Pacific cooperation, particularly through projects under the BRI, by including Pacific voices, which ultimately contributes to positive interpretations of China’s image. Representations also echoed with the cooperation priorities in the MSR, such as facilities connectivity and unimpeded trade.

### *Tourism*

Large groups of Chinese tourists visit popular places in the Pacific like Fiji, and their emergent visits to new destinations like the Solomon Islands have been featured in the news. The beauty of the Pacific Islands was briefly mentioned. For example, “Fiji boasts beautiful beaches, pleasant climate and world-class diving activities, and it is attracting increasingly Chinese tourists for sightseeing and holiday” (Wei 2019), and “Like many other South Pacific Island countries, the Solomon Islands enjoys fascinating beaches and magnificent natural scenery” (Guo and Murray 2019). Such narratives did not distinguish the Pacific Islands from other tourist attractions that have similar characteristics, so the uniqueness and diversity of the Pacific were perceived and presented as exclusive appeals for Chinese visitors. For instance, “We welcome Chinese tourists to come to the South Pacific and experience unique tropical glamour and diverse cultures” (Zhang 2019e), and “In addition to clear water and dreamy coral reefs, the Solomon Islands have vast old-growth forest and historic World War II relics. The country consists of nine provinces, with more than 80 dialects and unique folk cultures and traditions” (Guo and Murray 2019). Furthermore, according to the interview with a local resident in the Solomon Islands, people’s unfamiliarity with the country added weight to its appeal: “Solomon Island is still an unexplored place, if you put it with Vanuatu and Fiji, there’s a lot of tourists going to those places” (Guo and Murray 2019).

Chinese tourists were believed to play a vital role in tourism development of the Pacific Islands by department heads of tourism organizations. Chris Cocker, chief executive officer (CEO) of the Suva-based South Pacific Tourism Organization, said in an interview with *Xinhua* that “China now is not only the fastest growing tourism source market for the world, but also for the South Pacific region. We warmly welcome more Chinese tourists and hope they can help us maintain the sustainable development of our region’s tourism industry” (Zhang 2019e). Similarly, Nanise Masau, director of Fiji’s Department of Tourism, told *Xinhua* that “As Pacific Island countries like Fiji, we warmly welcome Chinese tourists as they are contributing to the development of our tourism” (Zhang 2019h). Tourism Solomons CEO Josefa Tuamoto added that the

arrival of Chinese tourists will hopefully “help grow Solomon Islands tourism industry by raising the country’s profile and stirring foreign investment” (Guo and Murray 2019). According to the interviewees, Chinese tourist visits to the Pacific Islands will also further understanding and friendship between peoples through real cultural experiences.

News about tourism cooperation between China and Pacific Island countries touches on popular paradisiacal images of the region that prevail in Western discourse but highlights the unique and diverse cultures as selling points to Chinese tourists, who are welcomed to explore the untapped destinations. Their arrival to the Pacific Islands has been presented as key to sustainable development of local tourism industries. The tourists, according to Chinese and Pacific officials, also play an instrumental role in promoting friendship and mutual understanding between peoples. However, the benefits to Pacific Island countries brought by Chinese visitors are central in the news, although coverage of tourism exchanges should ideally give equal space to both parties. In this sense, the intention of tourism news was similar to the news about other forms of Chinese economic engagement in the Pacific. Therefore, although news articles envisage successful formation of people-to-people bonds through tourism, one of the cooperation priorities in the BRI, the articles also betray a sense of superiority. Narratives around tourism have great potential to lead to Orientalism for an Oceanian context (Lyons 2005), but this has not happened in Chinese news media due to the consistent emphasis of people-to-people bond.

### *Others*

News stories about Western powers in the Pacific mainly uncovered and condemned their historical and contemporary atrocities. The coverage of US nuclear testing in the Marshall Islands presented the island nation as a powerless victim grappling with enduring disasters. Reports on US weapons testing and military deployment directed readers’ attention to the militarization of the Pacific. The article about the refugee issue revealed Australia’s sway and hegemony in the western Pacific. News about regional politics critically presented successes, as well as setbacks, of Pacific Island countries in asserting primary concerns and pushing their agendas. Australia’s arrogance and self-centeredness have been slammed compared with Pacific leaders’ commitments and actions.

News stories solely about the Pacific revealed many important issues in the region and added more elements to the diverse profiles of Pacific Island countries. News about domestic politics demonstrated the opportunities and challenges island states face through a critical lens. News about political figures provided information on these leaders, who remain largely unknown beyond

their constituencies. The visual introductions to island countries drew attention to the uniqueness and vibrancy of Oceania.

Other news topics did not present the multifaceted reality of Pacific Island countries to readers. News about Taiwan's engagement concentrated on Taiwan's diplomatic actions and marginalized the island nations involved. Coverage of a fishing ship accident said little about the island country. News about crimes against Chinese businesspeople focused on social instability and anti-Chinese sentiments in some Pacific societies. The news story of an overseas Chinese business family emphasized the importance and advantages of official ties with the Solomon Islands for Chinese and local communities. It also promoted traditional Chinese virtues and values and a positive profile of overseas Chinese. The story revealed long-lasting social and economic instabilities in the country and conveyed optimistic messages that opportunities and development are anticipated alongside improved diplomatic relations. News about climate change, conveying a sense of the urgency of the threat to the survival of Pacific peoples, successfully presented China as a responsible power, in contrast to Western powers like Australia, on the issue.

### *Summary*

Over the examined five-year time frame, news articles about Pacific Island countries did not have a noticeable presence until 2018, when the amount of coverage ballooned, and further soared in 2019. Similarly, news topics greatly diversified over the five years. Although the subject of China's engagement in the Pacific remained the chief focus, numerous news reports focused on the island states themselves. The expanded coverage was partly born from the successful and influential APEC meetings hosted by Papua New Guinea in 2018 and China's diplomatic achievements in establishing relations with the Solomon Islands and resuming ties with Kiribati in 2019. However, even without these major events to further stir up China's interest in the Pacific, China had already stepped up its interactions with the Blue Continent and an increasing diversity of reports about Pacific Island countries are thus to be expected.

Chinese culture discourages explicit expressions that may cause tensions, particularly on formal occasions. News about China's diplomacy in the Pacific is highly political and formal, so most articles use diplomatic language and an informative tone and exercise great caution to exclude negative comments about Pacific Island countries and their relations with China. Narratives normally revolve around deep friendship and close partnership. This, in turn, makes representations of island nations unnecessary, and such representations are largely absent. Articles identify existing challenges like climate change and underdevelopment in island countries to imply the benefits of engaging with

China, which can work to address these issues. News agencies are strategic and tactical in the way they cite Pacific voices that represent their countries, including discourses on smallness, need for infrastructure, and agency. The selectivity of these discourses contributes to the promotion of the MSR in the Pacific. In short, representations of Pacific Island countries tend to be broad because the articles aim to stress the ideas of harmony, common development, and mutual benefits.

News about China's aid in the Pacific focuses on medical support, agricultural aid, and infrastructure projects, which are justified by preexisting or newly discovered challenges in island societies like reliance on imports, backwardness, and health issues. China's development aid has been acknowledged by Pacific leaders, whose words are cited to refute ill-founded accusations from the West. Beneficial changes brought by Chinese healthcare workers, scientists, and engineers are at the heart of the news, buttressed by comments from locals. Friendly interaction at the grassroots level is highlighted. In brief, project achievements of, benefits for local communities, and deep bonds between Chinese and Pacific peoples are depicted in great details in the news. Because the articles seek to inform the audience about these unknown interactions at the local level and establish China as a responsible power, images of Pacific Island countries are reduced to aid recipients faced with development challenges.

News about China–Pacific cooperation centers on projects under the BRI framework and frames the economies of China and Pacific Island countries as mutually complementary. Although pillar industries like fisheries and the competitive advantages of island states are introduced, most articles intend to publicize the promises and benefits of joining cooperation projects under the BRI. The perceived gains are backed by some Pacific officials and scholars, who have identified hindrances like economic stagnation, backwardness, scatteredness, and diversity, as well as facilitators like resource richness in island nations. Therefore, the articles present certain characteristics of island countries but ultimately contribute mainly to building China's image as a desirable cooperation partner.

By the same token, the influence and role of China and the Chinese people overshadow the role of Pacific Island countries in news about cultural exchange and tourism, which are important forms of engagement. In reports on cultural exchanges, the appeal of Chinese culture and its role in promoting friendship are underscored. Articles about tourism are more empowering, emphasizing the uniqueness and diversity of the Pacific, which is attractive for Chinese tourists. Like Chinese culture, the tourists are regarded as contributors to mutual understanding between peoples while bringing tangible benefits to local tourism industries. The news articles are generally fashioned to emphasize people-to-people bonds prioritized under the BRI. They transcend the popular and

problematic images of the Pacific and touch on the cultural aspects of island countries.

Chinese central news media employ a range of tactics to protect China's image, China–Pacific relations, and images of Pacific Island countries in political and diplomatic news, which emphasize friendship and partnership. News about China's economic engagement, cooperation, aid, and tourism and the opportunities and challenges faced by island nations often includes Pacific voices. News coverage of current affairs in the Pacific tends to be broad and condensed. Chinese news media representations of Pacific Island countries convey considerably less patronizing and disempowering messages compared with Western media. On the flip side, the news does not attempt to present a multidimensional and comprehensive image of island countries but rather centers on particular profiles and singles out the stories it wants to tell.

As a huge continental civilization with a burgeoning economy, China has been striving for material prosperity, so Chinese people are sensitive to the issue of underdevelopment faced by developing countries. China's perception of the challenges faced by island nations is compounded by their supposed insular characteristics, like smallness and remoteness. Although Chinese journalists have projected certain Chinese values and interests onto Pacific Island countries, they have not approached the idea of Orientalism and created Chinese Pacificism that twists the image of Oceania for China's interests. Instead, they are distinguished from Western counterparts by showing more empathy and concern for island states as fellow developing countries with a colonial history.

### Conclusions

China's growing presence and increasing influence in the Pacific are continuations of its historical interactions with the islands and a natural extension of its global engagement with developing countries. Accompanied by China's rising profile in the realms of diplomacy, trade, and aid is its active representation of Pacific Island countries. Historically and contemporarily, island states grapple with misunderstanding and underrepresentation from Western colonial and metropolitan powers, with numerous disastrous consequences. In this sense, Chinese representations have ramifications for island states, which are witnessing and dealing with an influx of Chinese officials, businesspeople, and tourists. Even though the connection between China and the Pacific Islands dates back centuries, the islands were once largely ignored by China. As a result, the Pacific region remains a blind spot for ordinary Chinese people, whose knowledge of the islands and islanders is inevitably shaped by dominant discourses from authoritative sources, including direct effects produced by news media.

Chinese central news agencies are cautious and strategic in the selection of the wording and tone adopted in the coverage of China's diplomatic and economic engagement with Pacific Island countries. The overarching principle is to exclude negativity that may damage China's image, offend Pacific states, or harm bilateral relations and stress the ideas of harmony, equality, common development, and mutual benefits. Specific representations of Pacific Island countries are generally broad, if not absent. When the news involves China and Western countries, Pacific Island countries tend to be marginalized and fade into the background. When the news is only about island nations, descriptions barely scratch the surface. When the reports go beyond the emphasis of friendship or partnership to discuss challenges and problems faced by island countries, Chinese news stories prefer to present them by citing Pacific leaders, officials, or citizens. Perceived challenges include climate change, exposure to natural disasters, and a range of development issues in economy and society. Although climate change is the biggest threat to Pacific communities and the impacts of natural disasters are real, narratives of development challenges are premised on ideas of development and progress that do not necessarily match the values, pursuits, and aspirations of Pacific Islanders. Apart from such challenges, news articles touch on the agency of Pacific leaders in international relations, the leadership of island countries in certain global issues, and the unique and diverse cultures. In addition, critical issues in the Pacific, like US weapons testing, militarization, and the refugee crisis, have been introduced to Chinese readers.

Fundamentally, news media representations of Pacific Island countries promote China's positive image and contributions as a responsible member of the developing countries, whereas stories about the Pacific tend to be nonspecific and only enable readers to have a general sense of island countries. The imagined Chinese Pacificism that derived from Orientalism has not come into being. Instead, Chinese representations of Pacific Island countries manifest as the projection of Chinese values and interests onto foreign and insular places on China's great periphery based on Chinese evaluation criteria.

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## NOTES

1. The China–Pacific Tourism Year launched in 2019 in Samoa was seen as a milestone achievement in China.
2. See *The China alternative: Changing regional order in the Pacific Islands*, edited by Graeme Smith and Terence Wesley-Smith, for relevant research.
3. Domestic Chinese media coverage of Africa is underexplored in the research on Africa–China media and communication engagement, which largely focuses on English-language coverage of Africa by Chinese media, African media responses, and Western perspectives. The research lacuna for domestic Chinese media perspectives should be noted (Wekesa 2017).
4. Central media in China include eighteen key news outlets at the central level. The news sample in this article were published on central news websites, which are online platforms of the outlets or their subsidiaries.
5. The search engine, launched in 2014, covers news from various sources, including those from central media.
6. See *Vision for maritime cooperation under the Belt and Road Initiative*, the official document issued in 2017.
7. Cited from David W. Panuelo, the incumbent president of the FSM.
8. Cited from Manasseh Sogavare, the incumbent prime minister of the Solomon Islands.
9. Cited from Manasseh Sogavare, the incumbent prime minister of the Solomon Islands.
10. See *Vision and actions on jointly building Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st century Maritime Silk Road*, the official document issued in 2015.

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