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Mapping PRC Companies in the Pacific

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The role of companies from the People's Republic of China (PRC) in shaping the development and the political economy of Pacific Island countries (PICs) has been the subject of increasing academic and media interest. Reflecting both the infrastructure needs of Pacific Island nations and the domestic politics of the PRC, China's construction companies have come to dominate the construction and real estate sectors of many PICs. Such has been the concentration of investment in the construction sector that as early as 2019 an investment guide published by China's Ministry of Commerce (responsible for regulating and assisting PRC companies abroad) bluntly warned that 'homogenous' construction companies had saturated the market in Papua New Guinea (Smith 2019). Other researchers have noted that in many Pacific markets, PRC companies' main challenge is competition with each other, leading some companies to 'make lowball offers to win the bid and substantially increase the cost afterwards' (Zhang 2023a:96). PRC investments in the region have increased in volume and value, adding up to US$2.72 billion by the end of 2021 (MFA 24/5/2022).

What is missing in the literature is a comprehensive mapping of which PRC construction companies are the dominant players in the Pacific, in terms of both their parent companies and the complex ecosystem of subsidiary companies that have mushroomed across the region since their arrival in the early 1990s. In the absence of more granular detail, the tendency is to stereotype PRC companies as possessing similar traits. The experience of the authors on the ground, and in surveying online and archival data, is that a host of factors shape the experiences of these companies and the likelihood of them succeeding in the Pacific — the funding sources for their projects, the structure of the subsidiaries, the corporate histories of the companies in China and in the Pacific, as well as their relationships with local political elites and the Chinese diasporas.

This Discussion Paper is divided into three sections. The first section maps Chinese construction companies in the Pacific, to determine the geographical spread of PRC construction companies — both parent companies and their subsidiaries — drawing upon the experience of the first author in interviewing PRC construction workers and executives in a range of Pacific settings since 2008. This is followed by two case studies to examine the country-specific factors that influence the operations of PRC construction companies. Fiji and Solomon Islands are selected, with Fiji representing the longest engagement with PRC companies in the region, while Solomon Islands represents a different end of the spectrum, with the Sogavare government facilitating a great intensity of engagement with PRC companies since switching diplomatic recognition away from Taiwan in 2019. The second section surveys PRC construction companies in Fiji, drawing on the doctoral research of Szadziewski to highlight the complexity of corporate arrangements and exploring their interactions with a well-established Chinese diaspora community. The final section explores initial developments in Solomon Islands, drawing on Kabutaulaka's decades of research to provide historical context on China's newest Pacific partner; a country where businessmen of Chinese ethnicity held political influence long before Solomon Islands switched allegiance from Taiwan in 2019.

Mapping PRC companies in the Pacific

The data in this section are based on project-level data compiled by the first two authors from publicly available sources, including local media reports, company reports, MOFCOM (Ministry of Commerce of PRC) investment reports, PRC Embassy pages, the Hong Kong company registry, as well as the Lowy Institute's Pacific Aid Map and AidData figures. We do not claim that the database is exhaustive, as levels of government transparency and media scrutiny vary greatly across the region. Data were collected from 2006 until 2022. We define projects in a broad sense, and taking our lead from the companies themselves, we are agnostic about the funding source. Many of the projects are small-scale, but we have not set a cap on the value of projects. The US$100 million investment threshold set by the American Enterprise Institute's China Global Investment Tracker means that only three Pacific countries — Papua New Guinea, Fiji and Samoa — are captured by their database. We merely require that the project has been undertaken. Troubled projects, such as Guangdong Rising Asset Management's US$1.8 billion Freida River Project in Papua New Guinea, are not included in the dataset.

Table 1: Leading PRC construction companies in the Pacific by parent company

Parent company	Name in Chinese	Headquarters (foundation year)	Country (year of entry)	Fortune 500 rank
China Railway Engineering	中国铁路工程总公司	Beijing (1948)	PNG (1996)	34
China Railway Construction	中国铁道建筑有限公司	Beijing (1948)	Fiji (2007)	39
China Communications Construction Company (CCCC)	中国交通建设公司	Beijing (2005)	PNG (2011)	60
China State Construction Engineering Corporation (CSCEC)	中国建筑集团有限公司	Beijing (1982)	PNG (2016)	9
Shanghai Construction Group (SCG)	上海建工（集团）总公司	Shanghai (1994)	Samoa (1995)	321
Guangdong Foreign Construction (GDFC)	广东建工对外建设有限公司	Guangdong (2005)	PNG (2010)	-
China Minmetals Corporation	中国五矿集团公司	Beijing (1948)	PNG (2005)	58

Source: Authors.

At the parent company level, a paradox is apparent — while provincial diplomacy is dominated by Guangdong, and many of China's Pacific migrants hail from Fujian, the parent companies of the dominant PRC firms in the Pacific are headquartered in Beijing. Similarly, despite the Chinese state's preference for Fiji as a regional hub, and PNG's reputation as a challenging business environment, most of China's construction companies in the Pacific got their start in PNG, often through China Aid projects. PNG is also home to the largest number of PRC companies. At the subsidiary level, a great deal of complexity is evident, with companies rapidly adapting to local business environments. A great deal of subcontracting is evident, with larger companies winning bids for projects and passing the work on to smaller subsidiaries (not necessarily linked to their own company), after taking a percentage as 'management fees'. This was common practice regardless of the source of fundings.

Some companies noted that they preferred funding from the Asian Development Bank (ADB), as they were less wise to this practice than China Exim Bank. One construction company complained that China Exim Bank demanded acquittals every month. This is not to say that China Exim Bank's money is never misdirected. During the high tide of China Exim Bank funding to the region in 2009, companies such as the China Civil Engineering Construction Corporation (CCECC) would regularly pass their projects on to non-Chinese companies, notably diverting China Aid concessional loans earmarked for the reconstruction of Nuku'alofa to the construction of Vuna Wharf and the extension of Tonga's royal palace (Brown Pulu 2011). In PNG, for example, while there is little prospect of railway track ever being laid, more than 30 variants of 'China Railway' are found.

Development banks have also been essential to the survival and spread of PRC construction companies in the Pacific. A 2015 run on China's foreign reserves to defend the yuan meant that funding available from China Exim Bank in the form of concessional loans gradually dried up from 2016 onwards (James 22/7/2020). This is clear from the Lowy Institute's Pacific Aid Map, which found that PRC aid to the region peaked in 2018 (Pryke and Dayant 30/9/2021), and this is also clear in our dataset, which indicated many PRC construction contractors were increasingly reliant upon multilateral finance institutions and host government funding to keep their Pacific subsidiaries in work. This was complicated by the steady rise in the number of similar PRC construction companies registered in the Pacific.[1] Anecdotal reports suggest this has driven down bids to the point where PRC companies are either losing money or renegotiating contracts halfway through projects, a practice sufficiently common that Australia's minister for the Pacific, Pat Conroy, recently accused the ADB of 'choosing the lowest bid regardless of quality, regardless of whether that price is realistic' (Hurst 28/8/2023).

The geographic spread of subsidiary companies varies greatly, with CCECC and CHEC standing out as companies with projects in a wide range of Pacific countries, including some of Taiwan's most vocal allies in the region. CCECC can lay claim to being the only PRC company to win projects in Tuvalu (a 2017 ADB-funded project to improve outer island maritime facilities), while CHEC recently landed two ADB-backed projects in Nauru, the Solar Power Development Project (Seetao 8/7/2020) and the Port Development Project (ADB 2023), despite Nauru's record of criticising China for trying to 'dominate' the region (RNZ 15/1/2019).

Table 2: Leading PRC construction company subsidiaries in the Pacific by project number

Company	Name in Chinese	Regional headquarters/ main bureau	Year of entry	Main funding sources
China Civil Engineering Construction Corporation (CCECC)	中国土木工程集团南太平洋有限公司	Port Vila, Vanuatu	2012	China Exim Bank World Bank/ADB Pacific governments (various)
China Harbor (CHEC)	中国港湾工程有限责任公司	Port Moresby, PNG	2011	China Exim Bank ADB
China Railway First Group	中国中铁一局集团有限公司	Suva, Fuji	2007	China Exim Bank Government of Fiji
COVEC PNG	中国海外工程巴新公司	Port Moresby, PNG	1996	ADB Government of PNG
Shanghai Construction Group Samoa	上海建工（萨摩亚）有限公司	Apia, Samoa	1995	China Exim Bank Private contracting
Guangdong Foreign Construction	广东建工对外建设有限公司	Port Moresby, PNG	2010	Government of PNG China Exim Bank
China Metallurgical Group (MCC)	中国冶金科工集团有限公司	Port Moresby, PNG	2008	China Exim Bank Other PRC companies

Source: Authors.

Other companies specialise in individual countries, with Shanghai Construction Group dominating in Samoa, China Railway First Group prominent in Fiji (see first section) and China National Overseas Engineering Corporation (COVEC) establishing a long-term presence in PNG and being the Asian Development Bank's leading contractor in that country for many years.[2] Guangdong Foreign Construction is a provincial state-owned enterprise (SOE) that has proved to be a highly effective operator in PNG, despite its first project in the country — student dormitories at Vudal University in Rabaul — being notorious for the low quality of the build. The parent company in Guangdong responded by sacking the entire project team. All these leading companies face greater pressure to act in the interest of the PRC party-state than they did during the Hu Jintao era,[3] something that does not always sit well with their project managers on the ground who are often from a civil engineering background and have little interest in geopolitics.

There is also considerable variation in corporate culture between companies, both in terms of the 'corporate DNA' of the parent company, and the degree of localisation of Pacific subsidiaries. In one of the first projects examined by our research team, China Metallurgical Group's Ramu Nickel Project in PNG, even the middle managers demonstrated a high degree of political awareness, reflecting the traditional state-owned worldview of its Beijing management. Even minor decisions went back to Beijing. By contrast, other construction companies are set up in the Pacific with a simple brief: make money, don't cause problems, and headquarters won't ask questions. As one mining engineer from Zhengzhou explained to the first author:

> headquarters contract this work out and rely on a core of engineers in their 40s and 50s to hold the project together … the subcontracted workers are useless … They put all the responsibility in the hands of the project manager, and as long as the project turns a profit, they ask no questions.[4]

This second approach is coming under greater pressure in Xi's new era.

This is not unique to the Pacific, or even the developing world, with a recent study of PRC oil company subsidiaries noting a weakening of the commercial orientation of PRC overseas subsidiaries due to the preference given to party loyalty in recruitment and promotion (Makarchev et al. 2022). Clear examples of PRC construction companies carrying water for the party-state in the region include CCECC sending a delegation from their regional headquarters in Port Vila to Honiara in 2019 to lobby Prime Minister Sogavare and his advisers to switch diplomatic allegiance from Taiwan to the PRC (Smith 12/9/2019). CCECC, as a wholly state-owned company, has less room to move than private or listed firms. Yet their foray into geopolitics had its benefits. Before the switch, the project manager in Honiara — one of eight offices CCECC had across the Pacific — complained 'there just aren't that many projects around. And Taiwan certainly won't give us any work'.[5] After the switch, CCECC was well placed to secure a host of projects from Chinese, local and multilateral sources, as will be discussed in the final section. The following section will provide more granular analysis of PRC construction companies in Fiji, the first Pacific state to recognise the People's Republic.

PRC companies in Fiji

Companies

The following section examines leading Chinese construction companies operating in Fiji. The companies highlighted have different ownership structures, including varied state and private arrangements, with many registering Fijian subsidiaries of Chinese parent firms, which may in themselves be corporate subsidiaries. Chinese state financing for projects undertaken by private companies is a variable for inclusion here. The most successful construction companies in Fiji are China Railway First Group, China Railway No.5 Engineering Group, China Railway 14th Bureau Group, and Yanjian Group. A list of projects that these four companies have worked on in Fiji is presented in the appendix below.

China Railway First Group (CRFG) (中铁一集团) is a Xi'an headquartered state-owned civil engineering entity, whose parent company, China Railway Group Limited (中国中铁股份有限公司), also known by the acronym CREC, is listed on the Hong Kong and Shanghai stock exchanges. The majority shareholder of CREC is the state-owned China Railway Engineering Corporation (CRECG) (中国铁路工程总公司). CRFG has operated in Fiji since 2008 under a local subsidiary. By October 2021, CRFG had completed 28 projects with two in progress at the time (Xinhua 15/10/2020). A notable CRFG project is the upgrade of the Nabouwalu–Dreketi Road on Vanua Levu, which was funded with a US$135 million concessional loan from China.

China Railway No.5 Engineering Group (CR5) (中国中铁五局集团有限公司), a second subsidiary of CREC, is registered in Guizhou Province. The company has bid on and won several contracts in Fiji, some Chinese state funded, including construction of the Kiuva Seawall, the bridges at Rakiraki, Naqia and Wainiboa, and the Nausori Airport Road.

China Railway 14th Bureau Group (CRCC14) (中铁十四局集团) is a subsidiary of the China Railway Construction Corporation Limited (CRCC) (中国铁建股份有限公司), a company listed on the Shanghai and Hong Kong stock exchanges. The state-owned Assets Supervision and Administration Commission of the State Council (SASAC) (国务院国有资产监督管理委员会) oversees the management of CRCC. CRCC14 undertook the construction of the Stinson Parade and Vatuwaqa bridges in Suva, completed in 2018. Financing came from a Chinese aid grant of FJ$30 million with additional funding of FJ$4.5 million from the Fijian government. In 2020, CRCC14 announced the award of the Waidra Bridge Project contract, its sixth since entering Fiji in 2015.

The Yanjian Group (烟建集团), founded in 1952, is a former state-owned enterprise that was restructured into a private entity in 2004. The company is listed on the Shanghai stock exchange. Its local subsidiary has worked on projects such as the construction of Navua Hospital, a Chinese state financed construction, a hospital in Ba, the Vodafone Arena in Suva, as well as Flagstaff Plaza in Suva built with private capital.

State interests and competition

Under the Bainimarama administration of 2006–22, the Fijian state encouraged the activities of Chinese construction companies. At the 2017 Belt and Road Forum, then Prime Minister Bainimarama told Chinese state media:

> We have a few Chinese companies here; they have brought a lot of infrastructure to Fiji, building our roads, our bridges and ports. So it has helped us in developing our infrastructure in Fiji. Fiji is open for business ... And so we welcome everyone who wants to come to create business here in Fiji, especially in investment. (Zhang 12/5/2017)

The Chinese embassy in Suva has also voiced encouragement for Chinese construction companies in Fiji. In 2021, the embassy's economic and commercial counsellor, Li Zhi, noted how Chinese companies' 'active participation in Fiji's modernization process will better promote the development of trade between the two countries' (Seetao 26/2/2021).

Although state officials have publicly stated the advantages of Chinese companies' involvement in the Fijian economy, Tarcisius Kabutaulaka (26/5/2021), a political scientist at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa and co-author of this paper, writes, Chinese firms 'are central to China's geo-economic, geopolitical and geo-strategic influence'. Interviews with middle managers of the companies listed above indicate these entities not only concentrate on the bottom line, but also advance Chinese state policies, particularly the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The interviews, conducted by Szadziewski in 2021, reveal that by working on BRI branded and Chinese state financed construction projects, companies boosted China's economic engagements in Fiji. Corporate structure appeared irrelevant in these cases as the source of capital, whether a Chinese state loan or grant, tied the company to increasing visibility of the BRI in Fiji. In return, companies receive Chinese state support in establishing a presence in Fiji through the award of BRI-financed projects, often going on to bid on tenders with other sources of financing. As such, Chinese state-linked companies exist in an interstice, neither fully independent, nor dependent on the Chinese state.

Middle managers were keen to stress that the BRI was not a geostrategic policy designed to strengthen Chinese influence in the region, stating the policy is more an expression of the government's development and cooperation outreach with other countries. The companies' involvement in civil engineering projects, including public works such as hospitals, illustrated China's good intentions. As Su Huisong, a representative of CRCC14 in Fiji, told Xinhua, '... we are proud of doing something like building the bridges to help promote the friendship between the two peoples and make contributions to the Belt and Road Initiative' (Xinhua 11/1/2018).

Nevertheless, middle managers were open about the value of connections with Fijian officials. As one noted, 'We build relationships with government officials, of course. Do you know why? It's because that's what everyone else is doing. If we want to compete with Australians and New Zealanders for contracts, we have to get cozy with the right people'. Interviews with Fiji Chinese small business owners in Suva and Nadi, also in 2021, disclosed resentment at the Chinese embassy's strong support for large construction companies. The sentiment shared was that because these companies were state-tied and could advance policies such as the BRI, local Fiji Chinese commercial interests were of secondary importance, echoing a recent survey which found the Chinese diasporas in Fiji and Tonga were indifferent to both the BRI and China–Pacific relations (Zhang 2023b), with one respondent noting: 'The Chinese government won't listen to [ordinary] Chinese people' (ibid.:53).

Competition between construction companies from China and elsewhere is strong in Fiji. In August 2016, the Fiji Roads Authority announced CR5 as the winner of the Suva Arterial Roads Upgrade Project (SARUP 1) contract, an Asian Development Bank and World Bank funded construction. There were four other bids, three from Aotearoa New Zealand and one from Australia. At approximately US$11 million, CR5's bid undercut others by US$4.9 million. Chinese company representatives are open about the need to compete not only with Aotearoa New Zealand and Australian companies, but also each other. Despite the current scarcity of Chinese state funded work, companies have become established in Fiji and are active in seeking contracts supported by multilateral agencies, the Fijian government, and private capital. The ability of Chinese construction companies to undercut competitors in material and labour costs led to Fulton Hogan, an Aotearoa New Zealand contractor, announcing in 2018 that it would reconsider its future in Fiji (Dreaver 26/2/2019).

Fiji Chinese and Guangdong links

The role of Chinese community associations in protecting local economic and social interests is critical. Associations with influence inside the Fijian government, most notably the Chinese Association of Fiji, are a site of contestation among Fiji Chinese. The disagreement centres on the protection of interests multigenerational Fiji Chinese have consolidated over several decades against the interests of new Fiji Chinese to lessen vulnerabilities of new commercial enterprises and to establish social safety nets (Szadziewski 2023). Despite the presence of United Front–affiliated Chinese associations, the Chinese Association of Fiji acts as the default community interlocutor for the Fijian and Chinese states. However, Fiji Chinese are increasingly enlisted as brokers between Chinese companies and the Fijian state. In Suva, a small industry has emerged among some Fiji Chinese in advising Chinese companies on how to navigate the regulatory, relational and linguistic aspects of conducting business in Fiji. One of the authors spoke to two of these brokers, who explained that their local knowledge and connections could not only avoid mistakes in filing paperwork, such as permits, but also get documents into the right hands so that decisions could be expedited. The role entailed helping companies overcome an unfamiliar environment, as well as moving projects along to circumvent potentially costly delays.

Early Chinese settlers came from locations on the Pearl River, or Zhu Jiang (珠江), in southern Guangdong. These places included three cities in Siyi (四邑), Enping (恩平), Kaiping (开平), and Taishan (台山), as well as Dongguan (东莞) and Zhongshan (中山). Until 2006, Guangdong was the province of origin for the majority of Fiji Chinese. Since 2006, new settlers have varied places of origin in China with significant numbers arriving from the north-eastern province of Liaoning. In addition to the Chinese Association of Fiji, Fiji Chinese have established several other groups, often with place of origin in China as a basis of organisation. Associations with links to Guangdong predominate and include the Guangzhou Commerce Association of Fiji, Dongguan Association of Fiji, Fiji Enping Friendship Association, Fiji Kaiping Fellows Association, Fiji Taishan Fellows Association, and Fiji Zhongshan Association.

Reinforcing these historical ties, as well as Guangdong's leadership in establishing economic and cultural links in Oceania, the province has headlined several events in Fiji, such as the Roadshow of Guangdong Premium Products in 2016 and 2017 and the China (Guangzhou)-Fiji Business Seminar in 2019. In May 2017, the Guangdong branch of the China Council for the Promotion of International Trade exhibited in Suva over 30 companies specialising in manufacturing, tourism and real estate, framing the event as a Belt and Road opportunity. Further, Fijians have taken their products to Guangdong by attending the China Guangdong 21st Century Maritime Silk Road International Expo and Canton Fair in recent years. The US$9.5 million redevelopment of the Suva Civic Centre, under an agreement between Guangdong Province and Suva City Council, was completed by the Guangdong-headquartered Nan Yue Group (南粤集团).

Future questions

In December 2022, Sitiveni Rabuka was confirmed as Fijian prime minister. His administration ended 16 years of rule by Josaia Voreqe 'Frank' Bainimarama. Bainimarama came to power in a 2006 military coup, toppling the elected Qarase government. Fiji faced international isolation through diplomatic and economic sanctions. Into this space, engagement with the Chinese state increased, and the 2006 to 2014 period was marked with the movement of Chinese labour, materials, and construction companies attached to Chinese-financed infrastructure projects. In 2014, Fiji held elections, the first since 2006, and Fiji's isolation from traditional partners ended. From 2014 to 2022, relations with China were balanced with the re-engagement of Australia and the United States. To signal an alternative platform, in the lead up to the 2022 elections, Rabuka outlined a realignment with traditional regional powers, particularly in security affairs. Rabuka has nonetheless, at least publicly, reaffirmed the importance of relations with China, notably in economic ties. China was without an ambassador during the election campaign, with Zhou Jian (周剑) arriving in January 2023 to take over from the outspoken Qian Bo (钱波), who was subsequently appointed China's special envoy to the Pacific Islands. Future economic ties with China predominately lie in Fiji's ability to secure an ongoing pipeline of private investment, particularly in the tourism sector.

Large Chinese construction companies remain well-positioned in the Fijian market; however, the critical question is for how long the status quo will continue under Rabuka. Rabuka's People's Alliance Party governs in coalition with the National Federation Party and the Social Democratic Liberal Party, which have been more critical of China and have raised concerns about PRC business leaders who align themselves closely with FijiFirst. As such, domestic politics will have an impact on the limits of Chinese commercial presence, even if Rabuka views China as a development rather than a security partner. Rabuka has given mixed messages on the renewal of a policing agreement with China, as well as on the 'one China Principle', that reflect the precarity of balancing internal and external forces. Furthermore, the future of the coalition government is not guaranteed given the slim majority of their rule.

An additional question centres on the ability of Fiji Chinese to resolve intra-community cleavages. At present, the leadership of the Chinese Association of Fiji is predominately formed from multigenerational Fiji Chinese. Although not explicitly stated, new Fiji Chinese founded the New Chinese (Fiji) Association as a response to their sense of denial from access to Fijian officials. So far, the Chinese embassy has maintained its approach to favour relations with the Chinese Association of Fiji. As such, resentment among new Fiji Chinese persists and the need for accord is pressing for all parties. Despite the relatively recent influx of PRC construction companies in Solomon Islands, similar tensions exist between the new arrivals and existing Chinese business interests.

PRC companies in Solomon Islands

Chinese state-owned enterprises (SOEs) and private companies are vital to the Solomon Islands economy, have 'greased' the relationship between Beijing and Honiara, and influenced Solomon Islands' domestic politics. They have also featured prominently in debates about the diplomatic relationship between China and Solomon Islands, which was established in September 2019.

Chinese companies existed and operated in Solomon Islands decades prior to the establishment of diplomatic relations between the two countries. However, the number of companies and the value of investments have increased since 2019. Initially, private Chinese entrepreneurs registered companies in Solomon Islands and operated mostly as contractors in the logging industry. In the 1980s and 1990s, this industry was dominated by Malaysian and Korean producers and Japanese buyers (Bennett 2000; Kabutaulaka 2001). By the 2000s, Chinese companies had taken over as the largest producers, and about 90 per cent of log exports went to China. This is important because for two decades, log exports made up about 50 per cent of Solomon Islands' foreign exchange revenue, making it the largest export commodity. Also, it has been alleged that the logging industry has had a profound impact on domestic politics as logging operators are perceived to have disproportionate influence over political decisions, processes and outcomes (Allen 2011). The logging industry, and the Chinese-owned companies involved in it, are therefore economically important and politically influential.

The new arrivals

The other industry in which there has been an increase in the involvement of Chinese companies is infrastructure development. The two SOEs that dominate this industry are China Civil Engineering Construction Corporation (CCECC) and China Harbor Engineering Company (CHEC). They operate largely as contractors for projects funded by the Chinese government, the Asian Development Bank (ADB), the World Bank and the Solomon Islands government. Each of these projects tends to be worth more than individual logging operations, have higher visibility and therefore have more impact in terms of China's presence in Solomon Islands. It is what Eyck Freymann (2020) refers to as SOE's role in branding Chinese power and expanding global influence.

CHEC's first project in Solomon Islands was in 2015. This was a project funded by the ADB to build the Mbalasuna and Mbarande bridges on north-east Guadalcanal. It was part of the National Transport Flood Recovery Programme in partnership with the Solomon Islands government following the devastating floods of 2014 that destroyed infrastructure on the island. The bridges were opened in August 2017. In addition, CHEC has won the bid to build the University of the South Pacific's Solomon Islands campus, also funded by the ADB, and the Solomon Islands National Broadband Infrastructure Project to build 161 telecom towers in partnership with Huawei, funded by a US$66 million loan from China. CCECC has been engaged in six projects: (i) the Solomon Islands National University Panatina office and classroom complex funded by the Solomon Islands government (US$14 million); (ii) the National Stadium & Facilities for the 2023 Pacific Games funded by a US$50 million Chinese government grant; (iii) the Land and Maritime Connectivity Project funded by a loan and grant from ADB; (iv) the Munda International Terminal in the Western Province funded by the World Bank; (v) the Mongga Bridge in north-east Guadalcanal, funded by ADB; and, (vi) the upgrade of the international port in Honiara and the construction of two wharves in the Makira and Renbel provinces, valued at US$170 million and funded by the ADB. Other companies such as Shanghai Construction Group and COVEC have also competed for projects but have been outbid by CHEC and CCECC who have a longer experience in the country, know how the bidding process works, and know Solomon Islands government officials as well as how to navigate funding agencies such as ADB and the World Bank.

Adapting to existing political cultures

Given their presence in Solomon Islands prior to the establishment of diplomatic relations, Chinese SOE officials had built relationships with — or at least knew — Solomon Islands government officials, the network of Chinese diaspora businesspeople in Solomon Islands, processes of doing business, and the political cultures associated with it. They would have been more familiar with these than the Chinese foreign affairs officials tasked to establish diplomatic relations. This would have been expected and viewed by Beijing as SOEs playing their part in the expansion of the Belt and Road Initiative and in advancing Chinese interests and relationships (Freymann 2020). Consequently, it was not surprising that when the Guadalcanal Provincial Government Executive met with Yao Ming (姚明), the Chinese chargé d'affaires to Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu, on 3 September 2019, the Chinese delegation included representatives of China Railway International Group Co. Ltd, CHEC PNG Ltd and two representatives of subsidiary companies. The purpose of that meeting was to persuade the Guadalcanal provincial government of the potential benefits in switching diplomatic relations from Taipei to Beijing. This further strengthens the argument that these companies were the ones who built 'the foundation for friendship' between China and Solomon Islands (Global Times 13/10/2019).

Chinese SOEs often find themselves at the intersection of geopolitics and highly localised political debates. A recent example was the controversy over the construction of the Fiu Bridge and the Auki Township Road on Malaita. The project was part of the World Bank-funded Solomon Islands Road Aviation Project (SIRAP) and the contract was awarded to CHEC. The then Daniel Suidani-led Malaita provincial government was opposed to the switch of diplomatic relations from Taiwan to the PRC and therefore refused to allow a 'Chinese company' to operate in the province (Saeni 23/5/2021). It subsequently requested the Solomon Islands Ministry of Infrastructure Development (MID) to re-tender the project. However, the deputy secretary of MID, Jimi Nuake, said that even if the project was re-tendered, no other international companies would have submitted a bid because of COVID-19 restrictions at the time, and only companies already operating in the country would bid, adding that most of those companies, other than CHEC, would not meet World Bank criteria (Osifelo 25/5/2021). The only other company in the country was Kitano from Japan, but it was busy with other projects and unlikely to bid. The project was eventually halted. The permanent secretary to MID, Moses Virivolomo, blamed the failure of this project on 'geopolitics' (Osifelo 25/8/2022).

Chinese SOEs have also built ties with the local Chinese diaspora business communities in order to use their local knowledge and networks and to create business partnerships that would ensure the success of their projects. Central to this is the Solomon Islands Chinese Business Council (SCBC), an organisation established in 2021 and made up of 'old' and 'new' Chinese residents in Solomon Islands, which has a lot of influence in the business sector as well as in politics. The organisation's vision is to:

> promote unity among Chinese to contribute towards development of Solomon Islands; be the bridge between Chinese and the people of Solomon Islands; promote harmony and mutual respect between Chinese and Solomon Islanders for better development environment; improve dialogue and communication between Chinese and Solomon Islands; assist practical skills and opportunity for employment enhancement; promote job creation for Solomon Islanders; and, assist in relevant areas that will have mutual benefit for Chinese and Solomon Islands. (*Solomon Star* 3/11/2021)

At the time of writing, the SCBC executive includes Antonio Lee (chairman), John Aba (vice-chairman), Zachary Lau (secretary), and Duan Liangzheng (treasurer), and members are Dan Shi, David Leong, Michael Leong and Dudley Wu (*Solomon Star* 3/11/2021). Many local Chinese businessmen have political clout and influence at the highest levels of government in Solomon Islands. They are also keen to associate with Chinese SOEs and other investors because they benefit from subcontracting and a potential pipeline of future work. For example, with the Solomon Islands National University Panatina Campus complex, CCECC was the contractor, but gravel for the project was sourced locally from Solomon Sheet Steel Ltd, owned by Antonio and Jason Lee. They are well-known and influential Solomon Islander Chinese brothers who also own Lee Kwok Kuen & Company Ltd and Solfish Ltd. They are both ardent supporters of Solomon Islands' relationship with the PRC. Antonio Lee, as mentioned above, is the chairman of SCBC.

In January 2023, SCBC signed a memorandum of understanding with the Guadalcanal provincial government aimed at 'strengthening economic activities and investments between the Provincial Government and Guangdong Province of China, through SCBC' (Kukutu 30/1/2023). Guadalcanal Province had established a sister relationship with Guangdong Province in the 1980s. Over the years, efforts have been made to strengthen that relationship with Chairman Antonio Lee describing the SCBC as a 'bridge for both parties' (Podokolo 1/2/2023). At the behest of the central government, Guangdong Province is leading China's provincial diplomacy with the Pacific (Zhang 2020:2).

Conclusion

PRC construction companies are vital to infrastructure development in a region the ADB estimates needs US$30 billion in infrastructure spending by 2030 (Austrade 29/8/2023). Concurrently, these state-linked companies are gaining economic influence in the region. While traditional analyses of China's engagement with the region focus on PRC state actors and aid, PRC construction companies have sufficient political influence within China and economic skin in the Pacific to shift geopolitics in the region. With a complex network of subsidiary companies across the region, companies such as CCECC and China Harbor have greater resources to affect change in Pacific communities than PRC embassies, which often only have one or two staff in charge of consular matters. The case of the Solomon Islands, where a PRC construction company was central to engineering a switch away from Taiwan, is likely to be repeated in Taiwan's four remaining allies in the region. For existing Chinese communities in the Pacific, the arrival of these massive companies from mainland China provides opportunities for well-connected business elites, but also brings disruption and competition for ordinary PRC migrants. As these companies have driven out most local and international competition through both pricing and political connections, the ongoing presence of PRC companies in the saturated construction market may come down not only to cost but to what they can deliver for political elites.

Mapping the presence of PRC corporate actors in the region, their influence on China's Pacific diasporas, and their relations with Pacific political elites is a challenging frontier for future study. Nevertheless, it is critical work if analysts want to go beyond bilateral statements of intention between governments to focus on how China's presence in the Pacific actually works on the ground. The significance lies in understanding to what extent China can project power into the region. A better understanding of these companies — who have resources on the ground and reputations to build — should contribute to a more nuanced and effective understanding of PRC influence in Canberra and Washington.

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Endnotes

1. At times this rise is not gradual. Connolly (2020) noted that the number of PRC companies registered in PNG nearly doubled in the year around the 2018 APEC summit, held in Port Moresby.
2. COVEC PNG has been active since 1991 when it commenced construction of the ring road on Karkar Island. It stands out from other PRC companies in recruiting a high percentage of local workers, and making a point of hiring laborers who are local to the areas where they are building roads. First author's interviews (2010–23).
3. First author's nterviews (2009–23).
4. First author interview with mining engineer, Kone, New Caledonia, April 2013.
5. First author interview with CCECC project manager, Honiara, Solomon Islands, July 2019.

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Appendix: Selected Chinese state-linked companies and projects in Fiji

Company	Project	Select sources
China Railway First Group	Ba River Dredging Project	*Dredging Today*, Fiji: Ba River Dredging Underway, 13 December 2012. K. Naidu, Ba River Dredging Brings Relief, *Fiji Sun*, 16 January 2013. A. Talei, Ba River Dredging Project Nears Completion, *FBC*, 25 March 2014. AidData, Chinese Government Provides Grant — via Trust Fund — for Dredging Works on Ba River and Nadi River, Undated.
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	Buca Bay/Moto Roads Improvement Project	Xinhua, China Helps Fiji Build Roads in Rural Areas, China Daily, 7 May 2011. AidData, China Eximbank Provides RMB 365.9 Million Government Concessional Loan for Buca Bay and Moto Road Upgrade Project, Undated.
	Nabouwalu/Dreketi Road Upgrading Project	Xinhua, China Helps Fiji Build Roads in Rural Areas, China Daily, 7 May 2011. S. Naidu, Successful Completion of Nabouwalu-Dreketi Highway, *Fiji Sun*, 31 December 2015. Zhang Yongxing, Feature: China Helps Build Roads in Fiji to Common Development, New China, 10 May 2011. AidData, China Eximbank Provides RMB 642.4 Million Government Concessional Loan for Nabouwalu-Dreketi Road Upgrading Project, Undated. Fiji Government, New Development for Northern Roads, Undated.
	Naqali Bridge	AidData, Chinese Government Provides USD 3.8 Million Grant for Naqali Bridge Project, Undated.
	Public Rental Board (PRB) Housing	Sun Fiji Newsroom, Board Signs Contract, *Fiji Sun*, 17 June 2010. M. Bolatiki, Raiwai Housing Project Stopped, *Fiji Sun*, 4 January 2013. A. Coka, Dispute Puts Raiwai Project Construction on Hold, *FBC*, 17 January 2013. M. Loga, Chinese Contractor Reveal on Construction of Raiwai PRB Flats, *FBC*, 10 May 2013. Fiji Government, Work on Raiwai PRB Flats to Resume Soon, 30 September 2013. Fiji Government, First Phase of PRB Raiwai Project Completed, 13 May 2014. AidData, China Eximbank Provides RMB 36 Million Government Concessional Loan for Raiwai Public Rental Housing Project, Undated. AidData, Chinese Government Provides FJD 9.3 Million Grant for Raiwai Public Rental Housing Project, Undated.
	Rewa Bridge	GCR Staff, Chinese Road Builder Fired in Fiji over Delays, *Global Construction Review*, 15 October 2018.
	Rewa River Dredging Project	Fiji Government, Rewa River Dredging on Target, 14 November 2010. M. Seru, Dredge Saves Shop from Collapse, *Fiji Sun*, 31 August 2013.
	Sigatoka River Dredging Project	Deptfo News, China Railway First Group Gets Sigatoka River Dredging Project, *Fiji Sun,* 21 January 2017. F. Chaudhary, Differing Views on Sigatoka Dredging, *The Fiji Times*, 22 January 2017. N. Volau, China Railway Rejects Compensation, *Islands Business*, 30 July 2018. Radio New Zealand, Fiji Village Calls for Compo from Chinese Company, 1 August 2018.

Company	Project	Select sources
China Railway First Group (cont.)	(a) Natewa coastal road from Nagigi to Bagasau junction (b) Sawani–Serea Road from Naqali to Vunidawa (c) Sigatoka Valley Road to Keyasi government station (d) Moto road in Ba	S. Deo, Fiji Signs with Chinese Govt to Assist with Rural Development Works, fijivillage, 23 December 2010. Fiji Government, Sealing Works on Sawani Serea Road, 1 June 2011.
China Railway No.5 Engineering Group	Asphalt Mixing Plant	P. Mala, Lami Residents Voice Objections toward Building New Asphalt Mixing Plant by China Railway No.5, fijivillage, 24 November 2019. P. Mala, Various Types of Waste to be Expected by Lami Residents from the Proposed Asphalt Mixing Plant, fijivillage, 24 November 2019. A. Vakasukawaqa, Most Workers 'Fijian', *The Fiji Times*, 12 December 2019
	Government House and Thurston Garden Fencing Project	Fijian Government, Handling Over of the Chinese Funded Government House and Thurston Garden Fencing Project, 3 April 2011. AidData, Chinese Government Provides RMB 8 Million Grant — via ETCA — for Government House and Thurston Garden Fencing Project, Undated.
	Kiuva Seawall Project	M. Loga, Kiuva Village Seawall Handed Over to Government, *FBC*, 17 May 2013. Source: Ministry of Information, New Seawall for Coastal Tailevu Village, *Fiji Sun*, 17 July 2013. Xinhua, China Donates Sea Wall to Fiji, english.people.cn, 17 July 2013. AidData, Chinese Government Provides RMB 8.35 Million Grant for Kiuva Sea Wall Construction Project, Undated.
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	Naqia and Wainiboa Bridges	Fijian Government, More Road Upgrading Works to be Implemented, 27 July 2010.
	Nausori International Airport runway upgrade and extension	A. Talei, Building Quality Infrastructure Will Benefit the Country: Faiz Khan, *FBC*, 19 September 2018.
	Navuso Bridge	Embassy of The People's Republic of China in The Republic of Fiji, Chinese Ambassador to Fiji Cai Jinbiao and Fiji Minister for Works and Transport Inspected the China-aided Navuso Bridge Project, 25 June 2008. AidData, Chinese Government Provides RMB 16 Million Grant for Navuso Bridge Construction Project, Undated.
	Queen Elizabeth Drive Road Improvement	Fiji Roads Authority, Queen Elizabeth Drive Road Upgrading Work, 2 August 2017. R. Deo, Road Widening Works Scheduled for Queen Elizabeth Drive, *The Fiji Times*, 13 September 2019. S. Chand, My Suva Park Visitors Can Expect Inconvenience from Road Works, *Fiji Sun*, 2 October 2019. A. Waqairadovu, Work on Q.E Drive in Suva Commences, *FBC*, 7 October 2019. S. Chand, Tree Cutting Part of $15m Queen Elizabeth Drive Road Expansion Project, *Fiji Sun*, 4 February 2020. L. Nacei, New Roads, Infrastructure Plan for Capital, *The Fiji Times*, 6 March 2020.

Company	Project	Select sources
China Railway No.5 Engineering Group (cont.)	Rakiraki Bridge	Fijian Government, New Bridge for the People of Rakiraki, 10 October 2015. E. Turagaiviu, $13.9 Million Rakiraki Bridge Opens, *FBC*, 13 October 2015.
	Rotuma Runway Extension Project	Source: Airports Fiji Limited, Rotuma Runway Extension Project Commences, *Fiji Sun*, 2 June 2017.
	Suva Arterial Road Upgrading Project (SARUP 1)	China Railway No.5 Engineering Group, Contractor's Social and Environmental Management Plan for SARUP 1, December 2016. I. Danford, Suva Arterial Road Upgrading Project 1 Completed, fijivillage, 25 September 2018. Fiji Roads Authority, 7 Roads Completed Under SARUP 1, Undated.
	Suva–Nausori Water Supply and Sewerage Project	ADB, Fiji : Suva Nausori Water Supply and Sewerage Project, September 2016.
	University of the South Pacific Entrance from Queen Elizabeth Drive	*Fiji Sun*, $4.4m Road Project for USP, 23 June 2018.
China Railway 14th Bureau Group	Stinson Parade and Vatuwaqa Bridges	Facebook, New Vatuwaqa Bridge, fijivillage, 9 January 2018. Zhang Yongxing, Feature: China-Aided Bridges Open in Fijian Capital, Cementing Bilateral Friendship, Xinhua, 11 January 2018. AidData, Chinese Government Provides RMB 91 Million Grant for Stinson Parade Bridge and Vatuwaqa Bridge Reconstruction Project, Undated.
	Waidra Bridge	Seetao, China Railway 14th Bureau Won the Bid for the Waidra Bridge Project in Fiji, 21 December 2021.
Yanjian Group	Ba Hospital	D. Deo and F. Naikaso, Yanjian Group (Fiji) Awarded Tender to Construct Ba Hospital, fijivillage, 9 June 2015. *The Fiji Times*, Yanjian Group (Fiji) Company to Build Ba Hospital, 9 June 2015. Fiji Roads Authority, FRA Engineers and representatives of the Yanjian Group at the New Ba Hospital Road, Undated.
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	Navua Hospital	AidData, Chinese Government Provides RMB 12.5 million grant — via ETCA — for New Navua Hospital Relocation and Construction Project, Undated.
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