

The Shape of Things to Come? Chinese Engagement with the Pacific Region

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This paper surveys the long and complex history of Chinese relations with the Pacific Islands. The ancestors of today's Pacific Islanders came from southern China, but links subsequently declined and were only renewed in the 19th century. Chinese engagement with the Pacific Islands has increased dramatically since the reform period initiated by Deng Xiaoping in the late 1970s to the point where China is now on the verge of being the dominant external influence in Pacific Island nations. While many Pacific Islander and western commentators voice concerns that Chinese influence will disrupt the region, past experiences argue against this, particularly if China studies and ensures it does not make the same mistakes previous external influences like Australia have made. The paper concludes with some suggestions on how China can better advance its own regional and global interests by increasing cooperation with South Pacific nations for the benefit of all parties concerned. Positioned between Asia and the Americas, the Pacific Islands are more important to China than their size and population suggest as they are a crucial theatre in which the new era of Chinese-US relations with each other and with developing nations will be developed and worked out.