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Chinese in Samoa:

recent threats at the village level

Serge TCHERKEZOFF

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Samoan and China established official diplomatic relations in 1976. Since then, Samoa has consistently recognised PCR (vs Taiwan).

When I was visiting in Samoa, from time to time since 1981, China was no mentioned at all as an important foreign donor. It was mainly USA and USSR. The "*game*" for the government was to alternatively address demands to the former and the latter, and to play on the competition. Another donor mentioned was Japan. But when Samoa was to host the 7th South Pacific Games, in 1983, a stadium needed to be built. It was done with China's help, with a large grandstand. Every one was mentioning it, everyone knew it, as the stadium was also the field where all local major sport events were held. It was the first major visible input from China in Samoa. Not long after, in the early 1990s, China built a massive new government building that replaced the old wooden house that was the seat of the Government since independence (1962). Samoa never had such a high building. It became famous throughout the Pacific with its specific feature: the Prime Minister' office was built on the roof, following the model of a traditional Samoan house, with its round or oval roof.

But everyone noticed how Chinese were working: they brought their own workers, had them housed in specially built quarters. These workers were not free to roam around and mix with the population.

China made a speciality of building stadium for regional sports games: PNG 1992, Fiji 2003, Pohnpei 2002.

Recently, in 2013, China built a large hospital in Samoa:

Samoa's national government headquarters towers over the harbour and the capital of Apia. It was built by Chinese workers as part of China's aid to Samoa. (Photo courtesy Pacific Islands Monthly)

The first hospital was built in 1912 during the German era on the exact spot where the new hospital is now located.

With New Zealand assistance a substitute hospital was built in 1975 further uphill from the location.

Funds to build the new hospital include a $128m loan from Exim Bank of the People's Republic of China with construction done by the Shanghai Construction Group from China.

Also showcased at today's opening were $12m worth of new medical equipment funded by our Government and New Zealand.

Invited guests including delegates for the 10th Minister of Health Pacific conference in front of the

Regularly, newspapers would mention the various Chinese aid developments projects, even on smaller scale, usually with a picture of a Chinese official launching the project. In September 2016, a nearly full page of the Samoan Observer (p. 3) showed the Chinese ambassador handing over large water tanks for a village that had water supply problems (see image). I would not have paid much attention if it did not happen that the same issue had, few pages further (p. 16) another nearly full page about Chinese development with a very new tone. It was entirely about villagers' anger at Chinese presence, and the title of the page was of a sensationalist style: "*Foreigners taking over Samoa*" (see image*]*

VILLAGE DEVELOPMENT: The Chinese Ambassador, Wang Xuefeng at the handover of water tanks to the Speaker of the House, Toleafoa Aiono Fa'afisi.

Water tanks for Fasito'o-uta from China

SARAFINA SANERIVI

For the village of Fasito'o-uta, it was reason to celebrate last week with the provision of storage for one of life's basic necessities.

On Friday, the Ambassador of the Chinese Embassy to Samoa, Mr. Wang Xuefeng presented 28 water tanks worth WST$28,275 donated by the Government of the People's Republic of China to the village.

The Speaker of the House, Tole'afoa Aiono Fa'afisi, high chiefs and orators of the village and the women's committee,+ were present at the handover ceremony.

Ambassador Wang said that he was delighted to be able to help the people of the village of Fasito'o-Uta through the donation of the tanks.

"It's my pleasure to donate the water tanks, to my dear friends from this village," said Mr Wang.

"The Honorable Speaker is my good friend and like an older brother. Several months ago, when I met Toleafoa in his office, he told me that in his village, there are many families who need water and he wanted to help these families.

"So he made the request to the Embassy on behalf of the village. So after that, we started working together, and this morning, I am very happy to see that the water tanks have already arrived here."

Ambassador Wang highlighted how vital water is in life.

"Water is life, and without water, there is no life.

"I am very happy to be able to help out the people of this village. The tanks represent the love and friendship of the Chinese people towards Samoa."

In accepting the water tanks, Toleafoa spoke on behalf of the village and the government of Samoa to thank the Ambassador for fulfilling their request.

"Ambassador Wang, I am honored and very grateful to express our sincere thanks on behalf of the chiefs and orators of the village of Fasito'o-Uta as well as the government of Samoa for your ongoing support and help.

"Your government and the people of China have done a lot for the people of Samoa in all different areas. I believe that without your support, we could not afford to fulfill our needs especially with the development of Samoa.

"This will be a great benefit for us and our families. And I believe that we will take good care of these tanks."

Philipa Tole'afoa was given the honor of cutting the ribbon and Reverend Uta Musulu of the Congregational Christian Church of Samoa at Fasito'o-Uta blessed the new water tanks.

This time, it was not about national development or direct aid. It was about Chinese investment into village shops. Samoa is a country of over three hundred villages, scattered along the coast of the two main islands, thus all of them quite far from the capital Apia and its supermarkets. For their everyday supply, villagers depend, and have always been depending, on local shops. In each village, one family at least, but usually several, would have a small shop. That was the usual avenue for a village family

Foreigners taking over Samoa

KATAPULA MEAUNA & SARAFINA SANERIVI

There's no denying it. If you drive for an island in Samoa, you will be sure to pass by at least one foreign-owned store.

For Tino Tuaoai, from the village of Saleaga, this has become a growing problem in Samoa. He claims a foreigner now owns the second to foreigners.

Aged 23, he says he has his mother and family to care for. He is married and has to take care of his family.

When the Village Voice approached, Tino said then that our people have to other option but make money through small-scale business foreigners have taken over the businesses in Samoa.

"The reason we do work like this is because foreigners have taken the business section of Samoa."

"An example would be China, they come and take business from our people and they open up and then dominate the market by forcing us to go down small-scale business.

"Don't get me wrong though, we are still doing well with our sales and what not. We can really do well by selling meat or cooked taro, banana and other things.

"But it is tough life in Samoa is good right now having too many Chinese business people is a problem.

"Life in Samoa is good in general," he said.

"The only problem is that we are having a hard time with the Chinese have taken over the market. There are good sides and bad sides to having foreigners here.

"Their business causes a lot of competition taking the weight off our shoulders. I don't blame them for wanting to come to this island.

"On the other hand, the government should start limiting the number of foreign businesses here because they are coming and taking the land that belongs to our people.

"Our small businesses cannot by Samoans also can't compete against these Chinese people."

According to Tino, there will always be strings attached with social media that China is now over populated and they control it in their own country. Maybe that's why they are coming here.

"They come offering help with schools, they offer Samoans also donations but we don't know what will follow. That's what our government needs to really look into.

"There will always be strings attached. If they take over we then our country will remain."

THE CHINESE ALREADY RULE THE MARKETS: Tino Tuaoai, 23, from the village of Saleaga

to enhance their assets. First of all, with funding earned through work in emigration, a car or a small truck was bought, which enabled to transport the supplies from the capital. Then the family would open a shop. Each village had and has a shop. In large villages, one could be sure to find a shop within walking distance in every subpart of the village. But in that narrative issued on that page of the Samoan observer, in the section of the journal entitled "*Village voice*" and devoted to local news, one villager was bitterly complaining about a large shop set in his village by Chinese [apparently not local members of the community]. That shop was selling the same products than the traditional local shops, but managed to have them at a much lower price. Apparently, through schemes of direct import from overseas, in large quantity, instead of going through intermediaries in town, the management was able to offer those prices. As a result, customers rapidly deserted local shops, which closed down one after the other.

One young villager, aged 25, explained that, now that the idea of opening a shop has to be discarded, the only other option to make a living is to sell the plantation production on a stall:

> … our people have no other option but make money through small stalls because foreigners have taken over the businesses in Samoa. An example would be China, they come and take business opportunities meant for our people and then dominate the market forcing us to run these small stall businesses […] I don't blame them for wanting to come to live in Samoa. On the other hand, the government should start limiting the number of foreign businesses here because they are coming and taking the land that belongs to our people. Our small businesses owned by Samoans also can't compete against these Chines people. […] We don't know what the future will hold; may be China will own Samoa soon. They own so much here in Samoa. Our businesses, our lands and so on.

Of course I was also quite struck to read the complaint about Chinese "*taking the land that belongs to our people*", but quickly understood when discussing with Samoan friends about the issue. They told me similar stories about their own villages: the large Chinese shop, the closing down of locally owned shops. I asked them:

> *—"why the village community did not forbid those newcomers to open the shop, why do they not order to close the shop and ask the new comers to leave?*
>
> *—We can't. We did try, but it appeared that this piece of land was regularly leased to these Chines by one matai [chief clan].*

We are suddenly transported onto another ground. In the 1980-1990s, I was quite used to hear stories where the village community, through the council [the grouping of the village clan chiefs], was the supreme authority on everything within the village, including the right to banish an individual or a whole group if the majority of the council were to consider that they were incompatible with the life of the village community. But now, here are cases when a legal transaction by one individual can contradict the voice of the whole community. Indeed, since 2008, a legal possibility was opened to register customary lands under a kind of Torrens system where the recognised clan chief's name was to become the legal "*owner*" of the authority on the land. This opens the wide discussion of the "*Land reforms*" topic, in Samoa and else where in the Pacific, and the reader can look at the chapter by Iati Iati in this publication for further clarification.

La présence chinoise aux Samoa :

Menaces récentes au niveau des villages

RÉSUMÉ

L'importance prise aujourd'hui à Samoa par l'aide chinoise estrelativement récente. L'établissement des relations diplomatiques date de 1976. Au tout début des années qautre-vingt, durant nos séjours à Samoa, nous n'entendions pas parler de la Chine parmi les puissances extérieures à qui des demandes d'aide au développement pouvaient être adressées. C'était surtout les États-Unis et l'URSS qui étaient mentionnés. De fait, le « *jeu* » en la matière pour le Gouvernement était de s'adresser alternativement aux deux ambassades, pour faire monter les enchères. On parlait aussi de la possibilité de s'adresser à l'aide japonaise. Très peu de temps après, Samoa ayant accepté d'accueillir les Jeux du Pacifique Sud en 1983, mais ne disposant pas d'un stade avec des gradins modernes reçut l'aide de la Chine. Tout Samoa se mit à parler de l'aide chinoise, dans la mesure où ce stade national servait aussi à toutes les rencontres sportives nationales. Au début des années qautre-vingt dix, la Chine offrit de construire un nouvel immeuble pour abriter les bureaux du gouvernement et de nombreux Ministères, afin de remplacer l'ancienne installation qui était encore une maison de bois de style colonial. Le résultat fut impressionnant : un immeuble aux nombreux étages, plus haut que tout ce qu'on connaissait dans le pays, avec la construction au sommet du bureau du Premier ministre, en béton mais reproduisant fidèlement une maison cérémonielle de style samoan traditionnel. Les images firent le tour de tout le Pacifique.

Sautons quelques années pour parvenir aux années récentes : en 2013, la Chine construisit un nouvel hôpital, de taille immense, au style encore une fois impressionnant (voir image). La liste pourrait être largement allongée, sans oublier un immeuble supplémentaire pour des services gouvernementaux, là encore d'une taille jusque-là inconnue. Elle inclut aussi les nombreux « *dons* » d'infrastructures plus légères, qui font régulièrement la une des journaux. Par exemple, le don de réservoirs d'eau potable pour un village de grande taille et qui était mal desservi. Dans le journal local qui en fit une pleine page en septembre 2016, une autre page donnait la parole à des villageois samoans, et soudain c'était un tout autre son de cloche. Ces villageois exprimaient leur colère et leur amertume. Ils parlaient de l'apparition récente, dans plusieurs villages, d'un grand magasin chinois qui vendait l'ensemble des produits de première nécessité, lesquels étaient habituellement vendus par les boutiques traditionnelles qu'on trouvait dans chaque village et qui appartenaient à des familles locales, mais ces produits du magasin chinois étaient vendus à un tarif bien moindre que ceux des boutiques traditionnelles. Le résultat fut rapidement une désaffection des boutiques traditionnelles familiales, et une grande perte pour ces familles. La menace était palpable d'un horizon où les investisseurs chinois mettraient sur la paille le commerce local et même « *possèderaient tout Samoa* ».

À notre question sur l'inaction de la communauté villageoise — pourquoi n'avoir pas interdit l'ouverture de ce nouveau magasin ? Pourquoi ne pas retirer l'autorisation (puisque ces nouveaux commerçants n'avaient pas acheté le terrain, ce qui est impossible dans le système de tenure foncière samoane, mais l'avaient simplement loué) — la réponse fut la suivante. Le chef de clan avait enregistré cette terre clanique sous le nouveau système qui, depuis 2008, permet de déclarer une terre coutumière sous le nom d'une seule personne, en général le chef de clan. Nous sommes alors ramenés au problème général de la transformation subreptice mais accélérée de la tenure foncière à Samoa (et ailleurs en Océanie) qui fait l'objet de la présentation de notre collègue Iati Iati (voir la partie intitulée « *Ne pas oublier les Océaniens* ») : le passage d'un système de propriété coutumière « *clanique* » à celui de l'enregistrement d'un titre sous un seul nom (« *Torrens system* »).