

# Why are Chinese companies in the Pacific so quiet?

by Huiyuan Liu

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*Photo Credit: Huiyuan Liu*

During my research on Chinese companies' engagement in the Pacific Island countries, I have met many people living in Australia or the Pacific who have shown a strong interest in this area, including students, academics, businesspeople, media reporters, government officials, and even taxi drivers. The topic attracts their interest for various reasons: some are curious about how Chinese companies operate; some want to explore dialogue and cooperation with Chinese companies; and some question the quality of Chinese companies' works (while admitting that most companies operating in the Pacific face similar issues and challenges).

The conversations we have had reveal a deep and serious issue. Those who are not directly involved in Chinese companies' operations, no matter where they live, do not have contact with those Chinese companies or even with Chinese people living in the Pacific. Although many Chinese companies have operated in the Pacific market for almost a decade – and their activities often attract significant media attention – their voices have become fewer and weaker, and outsiders' perceptions of them are increasingly based on inference and even speculation.

Many Western and local media friends in the Pacific have complained to me that Chinese companies do not respond to requests for media interviews. During my research, I became increasingly aware how this lack of communication can blur the truth. Chinese companies would rather risk being misunderstood and remain silent than explain something and attract attention and perhaps potential problems. It is a kind of self-protection out of distrust of external parties.

What makes Chinese companies in the Pacific so wary of dialogue with the outside world?

Western media reporting cannot be absolved of blame. A study found that since 2018, there has been a substantial increase in Australian media reports and comments **framing China as a threat** to the Pacific region. Most Australian media insist on journalistic objectivity, but some distort facts and use misleading information to create eye-catching content, leading to the phenomenon of 'bad money drives out good'. The rising popularity of low-quality and false news has

caused Chinese companies to resist non-Chinese media, including those that have been writing fair reports.

Some Chinese companies have tried to rely on local governments to clarify the facts and communicate with the media, but this has not worked. One Chinese company told me that they reported the facts of a disputed matter to a local government and expected that government to help clarify misunderstandings. It didn't. Such incidents lead to the perception among Chinese companies that the outside world does not care about the truth about them, which in turn leads to the negative attitude of Chinese companies in managing public relations.

What annoys Chinese companies even more is that the media focuses on their 'faults', while ignoring their achievements and other positive aspects of what they do. For example, the medical teams sent by China to the Pacific receive little publicity. An Australian medical company told me that they have little contact with Chinese medical teams, but only because those Chinese doctors work in remote villages – which is a very positive and welcomed practice locally.

Led by the Chinese government's message to "tell China's stories well", many Chinese companies in the Pacific have launched community engagement programs to improve their image. Yet as Fikayo Akeredolu observes, many of China's development commitments are **not getting the attention they deserve**.

Another reason for the reluctance of Chinese companies to front the media is that they know they will be asked questions related to China's Pacific policy and influence. A Chinese friend in Fiji told me his story of rebuking a reporter during an interview. He found the reporter did not try to understand him, which made him feel that he was "playing the harp to a cow". The reporter asked him questions as if he was a Chinese diplomat, rather than just a small business owner from China.

In Australia, even when there is tension between the Australian and Chinese governments, communication at the society level remains open. For example, Australian and Chinese youth can sit side by side at the **Australia-China Emerging Leaders Summit** to discuss the relationship between the two countries. But this is difficult to achieve in the Pacific. There is no big group of Chinese overseas students in the Pacific, and many of the Chinese who work in the Chinese companies have limited English.

The language barrier is a big challenge for effective communication, but it can be overcome with technology. The root cause of Chinese companies' silence, however, is the long-term distrust of the outside world accumulated from their experience of being targeted and misunderstood. This sense of distrust makes Chinese

companies choose to pass their messages to the Chinese government, and let the Chinese government communicate to outsiders. This only exacerbates the outsiders' distrust of Chinese companies, causing a vicious circle.

At present, how to rebuild mutual trust between Chinese companies and external parties remains a mystery, and will perhaps require official intervention and engagement. Still, we – people from Australia, China, and the Pacific – can help build a social environment that fosters open dialogue. This will require, on the part of the media, respecting cultural differences and practising objective reporting, and, on the part of the Chinese companies, being open to media requests and interaction.

Since everyone's starting point is to promote the long-term development of the Pacific and sustain companies' operations in the local markets, why don't we sit down and talk about how to achieve it?

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Link: <https://devpolicy.org/why-are-chinese-companies-in-the-pacific-so-quiet-20220823/>