

## Chinese Merchant Networks, Migration and Environmental Transformation in the Southern Pacific, 1790s-1920s

*James Beattie*

**Overview:** Over the nineteenth century, several million Chinese exploited resource frontiers opening up around the Pacific thanks to European imperialism and American westward expansion. As goldminers, plantation laborers, railway navvies, market gardeners, and merchants, Chinese people – as well as China’s demand for raw materials – contributed to a great acceleration of environmental change in the seas and countries of the nineteenth-century Pacific.

In exploring a new dimension of what Henry Yu has called the development of the “Cantonese Pacific,” this book first surveys how China’s market demand created environmental transformation in the Pacific, before addressing the role of Cantonese as agents of environmental change in the Pacific, and how Chinese investments in places like New Zealand and Australia contributed to broader environmental change in the Pacific and in South China itself.

**Framework:** The book frames Pacific resource demand, and later Chinese enterprises like market gardening and agricultural investment, as examples of ecocultural networks – interlinked labor flows, migrant connections, and capital systems that transformed Pacific environments and made nature into commodities. It considers translocal connections, rather than transnational ones, to signal that only particular localities in China, the Pacific Islands, and New Zealand were connected through Cantonese migration and business networks.

**Significance:** This book addresses a major lacuna in the environmental historiography of imperialism, especially of Britain’s settler colonies. While historians of Britain’s tropical colonies have studied the role of Chinese in such activities as tin mining or tropical agriculture, environmental historians of British settler societies have largely ignored the role of Chinese in environmental change. Instead, they have focused on how European settlers, military power, state making, and gentlemanly capitalism transformed colonial environments and developed economies. This book dramatically complicates that picture, by stressing the contribution, alongside European capital and labor, of Chinese finance and workers to environmental transformation in the southern Pacific.

*Chinese Merchant Networks and Environmental Transformation in the Southern Pacific* also expands China’s environmental history – the writing of which has largely ignored Chinese living beyond China’s (modern) state boundaries. The book underlines the importance of Pacific hinterlands to the environmental history of China’s Guangdong Province by demonstrating some of the environmental impacts of investment by returning Chinese and by the establishment of New Zealand-based missions in South China.

**Sources:** Research relies on a variety of unpublished missionary diaries, newspaper reports, images, archaeological reports, and state and provincial documents.