Voices of South-South Migrant Workers in Samoa

Masami Tsujita

Labour mobility has been an important livelihood strategy for Samoans for years, with many Samoans migrating abroad to work, either temporarily or permanently. Between 2015 and 2020, about 3,800 Samoans emigrated each year, on average, through various immigration pathways (United Nations 2020). Approximately 135,700 Samoa-born Samoans now live abroad, and they represent one of the largest Pacific diaspora groups in the world (Migration Data Portal 2020a).

Labour mobility schemes commenced in 2007, opening new avenues to work abroad, first in New Zealand and later in Australia. These schemes were directed at unskilled and semi-skilled Samoans, who would otherwise have limited paid employment opportunities at home, but the schemes have also attracted many skilled workers.

A key reason Samoans choose to go abroad is to access higher-paying jobs, which enable them to save money and remit to their families to pay for their families' living expenses, church duties and *fa'alavelave* (traditional ceremonies and events) back home. Working abroad has become especially attractive in recent years as the cost of living has increased in Samoa, which makes it difficult for families to make ends meet. Given that expectations of what constitutes 'a better life' have changed and that jobs with sufficient wages to meet such expectations are few and far between in Samoa, there is a common perception in Samoa that working abroad on temporary contracts or migrating permanently are the only viable means of achieving the desired standard of living.

While more Samoans look outside the country for employment, there is an increasing flow of people moving into Samoa, particularly from the Global South, to fill gaps in the local labour market. From the standpoint of these incoming migrant workers, Samoa is a country of socioeconomic opportunities that are not available in their home countries. Although inward labour migration is not new in Samoa (as discussed in the previous articles in this volume), it is a trend that appears to have strengthened in recent years.

Although South-South labour migration is a growing trend, it is an understudied area, especially in the Pacific Islands region where most migration studies focus on emigration to industrialised countries. This article

presents the voices of three migrant workers in Samoa, examining their reasons for coming to Samoa and their perspectives of Samoa's labour market.[20] This article also examines some controversial issues relating to labour migration into Samoa, including aggressive business practices by some migrants, the growing dependence on migrant domestic workers and the phenomenon of marriage for citizenship.

Migrant workers in Samoa: Who are they and where are they from?

According to the Migration Data Portal (2020a), about 4,000 foreign-born residents lived in Samoa as of 2020, representing almost 2 percent of the total population.[21] A lack of disaggregated migration data makes it impossible to identify how many of these residents are migrant workers.[22] Samoa's population census data indicate the number of foreign residents in the country but does not indicate their ethnicities or nationalities, and also does not distinguish migrant workers from other groups of foreign residents, including the non-citizen spouses of Samoan citizens and non-citizen employees of embassies and international organizations and their families[23] (Tsujita et al. 2021). Similarly, although Samoa's Labour Market Survey (MCIL 2019) indicates that 565 out of 18,296 employees in the private sector in 2019 were non-Samoan citizens, this figure does not clarify if these non-citizens were foreign-born ethnic Samoans or the spouses and family members of Samoan citizens who are not of Samoan descent, or were migrant workers or other foreign workers. Like many other countries in the Pacific region, Samoa

[20] These workers come from China, Fiji and West Africa. The number of Fijian and African migrant workers in Samoa is small relative to the number of Chinese, and their migration paths and experiences in Samoa appear to differ from those of the Chinese in various ways.

[21] Samoa has a total population of around 220,000 (WHO 2022).

[22] The International Labour Organization (ILO) defines a "migrant worker" (or "migrant for employment") as a person who migrates from one country to another with a view to being employed otherwise than on his or her own account (ILO, 1999). In this article, migrant workers are defined both by ethnicity and nationality, referring to people of non-Samoan descent who have moved to Samoa from their country of usual residence for the purpose of employment or business.

[23] These employees are not classified as migrant workers because they were hired abroad by a State or international organisation to perform official functions or to participate in development programmes, and their admission and status are regulated by international law or specific agreements (IOM nd). Moreover, they have the obligation to leave the country of work after completing their contracts, and they do not generally travel with the intention of remaining in the job or in the host country permanently.

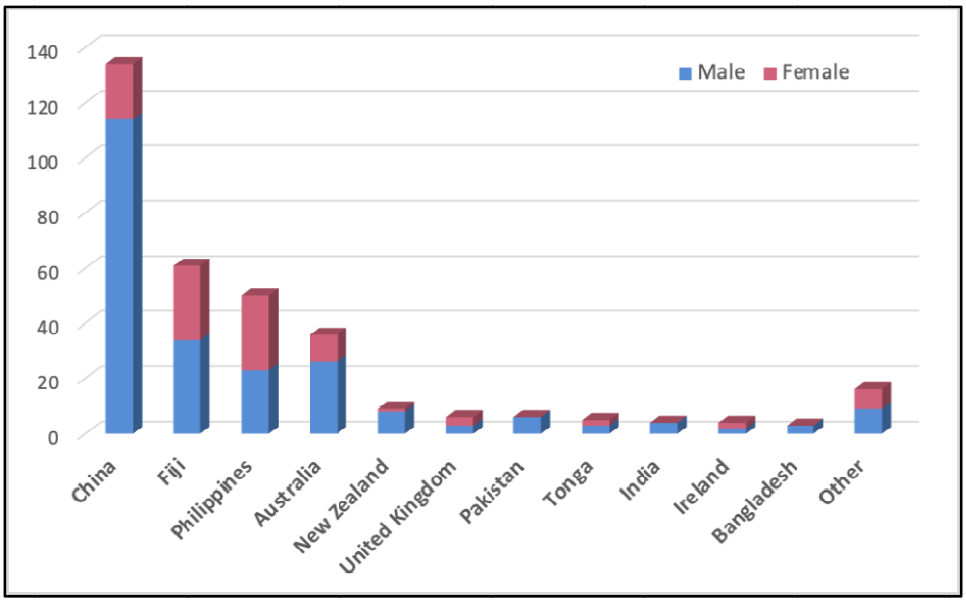
does not currently have the resources required to establish an efficient data collection system and to compile comprehensive migration records (Kagan and Campbell 2015).

To estimate the number of migrant workers in Samoa, one can look at the number of Foreign Employee Employment Permits (FEEPs) issued. Jointly administered by the Ministry of the Prime Minister and Cabinet and the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Labour (MCIL), FEEPs are issued to non-citizens who wish to take up employment or undertake business in Samoa (MCIL 2018). According to the FEEP policy, which came into force in 2018, these work permits are only granted to non-citizens who have skills, qualifications and experience that are lacking in the domestic labour market (MCIL 2020:33). While non-citizens are permitted to work, the ministry's priority is to provide employment and training opportunities for Samoan citizens (MCIL 2018:1).

Every year, the government issues between 300 and 500 FEEPs. Because each FEEP is valid for two years, it can be estimated that there are between 600 and 1,000 migrant workers in Samoa at any given time. However, whether or not FEEP holders remain in Samoa or depart when their permits expire is not recorded. This is because the repatriation of FEEP holders is not regulated by the Labour and Employment Relations Act 2013 (MCIL 2018).

While the number of FEEPs does not represent the exact number of migrant workers in the country, it does offer some basic demographic information on the countries of origin, sex and host industries of these permit-holders. In the fiscal year of 2021/22, the government issued 334 FEEPs (MCIL 2023); most of these FEEP holders were Chinese (134), followed by Fijians (61) and Filipinos (50). The countries of origin and sexes are summarised in Figure 1.

Figure 1. FEEP holders by country of origin and sex, FY2021/22

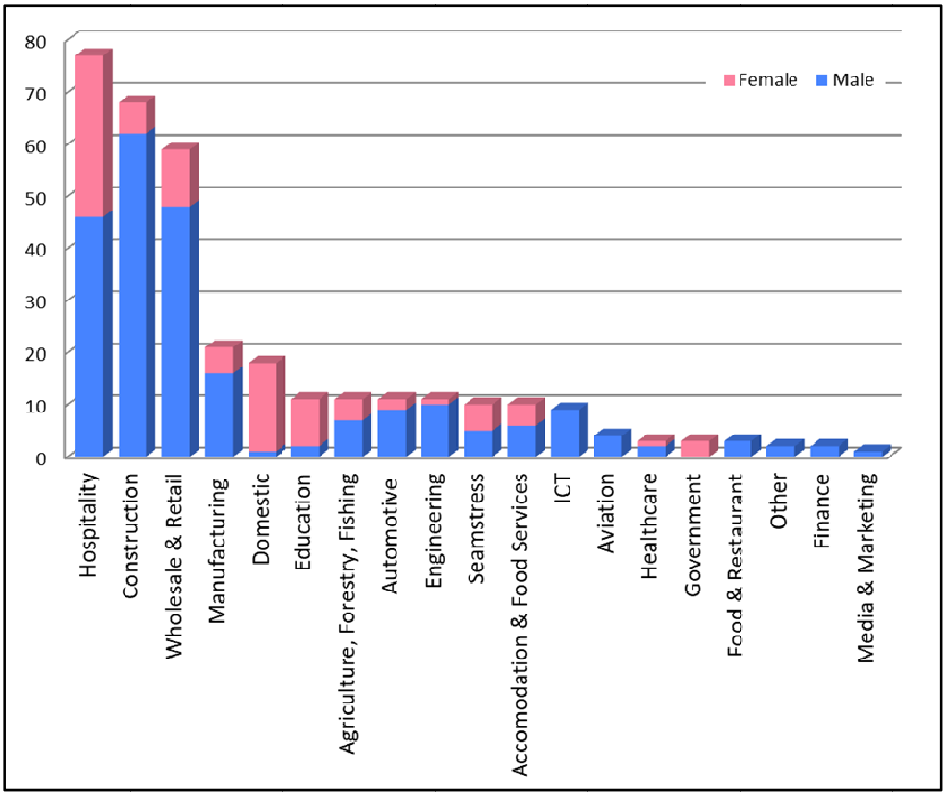


Source: MCIL 2023

Data from the past few years indicate that three countries of origin – People's Republic of China (China), Fiji and the Philippines – are consistently the key sources of labour migration to Samoa and to other Pacific Island countries (Tsujita 2018; MCIL 2020). In Papua New Guinea, for example, Filipinos are often the preferred choice of foreign workers (ILO 2019:26). They have earned a reputation among employers there for their competence, qualifications, hard work and relative affordability compared to similarly skilled workers from other countries. This is the perception of some Samoan employers as well.

Most FEEPs are granted to workers in the hospitality, construction and wholesale and retail industries (MCIL 2023) (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. FEEP holders by industry and sex, FY2021/22



Source: MCIL, 2023

The MCIL annual reports indicate that the number of FEEP-holders engaged in domestic work has declined since 2018. Previously, domestic work ranked among the top three most sought-after industries in Samoa for foreign workers, alongside construction and hospitality (MCIL 2020). But despite the decline, demand for foreign workers in domestic roles, specifically for housekeeping, babysitting and caregiving, still remains high.

Considering Samoa's high unemployment rate, especially among unskilled youth, one may wonder why foreigners are employed for domestic work positions, which do not require specific skills or qualifications, and how these workers get FEEPs, given that these permits are presumably only given to non-citizens who have skills, qualifications and experience that are in short supply or cannot be obtained in the country (MCIL 2018:4). One response to this is

that migrant workers often have 'soft skills' (attitudes and attributes) that are lacking in the local labour market. Indeed, many employers feel that Samoan workers often lack a favourable work ethic and lack long-term commitment, and often have undesirable attitudes and negative traits, including dishonesty (exhibited by lying and theft) (MCIL 2019:12). Given that a good work ethic and positive attitudes and traits are considered competences and qualities that are challenging to find in the local market, FEEPs are therefore granted to candidates with such attributes (MCIL 2018:5).

This question of why foreigners are employed for domestic work when local workers are available might also be partly answered by the fact that, from a Samoan cultural perspective, working for another person's family in a domestic position rather than for your own family is considered somewhat shameful, so such work is avoided by many locals. In addition, the time needed to travel to work by public transport can be quite long and the cost of local public transport in Samoa is fairly high relative to the wages paid for such work. Domestic workers from abroad, who do not have the same cultural perspective and who generally live with their employers, so do not have the constraints of distance, time and transportation costs, are therefore more attracted to this type of work than Samoans.

First-generation Chinese in Samoa

The growing presence of China in the Pacific region, with an associated increase in development assistance from China, has been a topic of debate for some time. Academics and media alike have asked whether Beijing has a "hidden agenda" in providing aid to certain Pacific Island states, often linking it to military interests in the region and the diplomatic competition between China and Taiwan (Atkinson 2010; Firth 2019; Hayward-Jones 2013; Wong 23 April 2010; Yang 2011).

In Samoa, perceptions of China's aid vary. While some welcome this aid, others criticise it because it is "tied" to certain obligations, such as the necessity of importing contractors, materials and workers from China (Noa Siaosi 2022). Likewise, while some Samoans welcome Chinese workers, many others are critical of the rapid increase in the number of Chinese nationals migrating to Samoa because these migrants compete with local business owners, often employing what are seen to be aggressive practices, and they disregard Samoan culture and customs (Noa Siaosi 2020; RNZ 31 March 2011; Samoa Observer 3 August 2018; Tcherkézoff 2017; Leung Wai 2021). For

example, one of my local students in Samoa said she felt offended when she saw her fellow Samoan workers being scolded in public by Chinese shop managers, as this indicated a lack of respect for the worker.

According to a study by Noa Siaosi (2020), the increased flow of Chinese migration to the Pacific can be attributed to the Chinese government's policy of encouraging sojourners and investments abroad. The large number of Chinese migrant workers in Samoa makes this group particularly visible. My direct observation suggests four somewhat overlapping categories among the Chinese people who have arrived in Samoa for employment over the past few decades. The first category is made up primarily of diplomats who work for the Embassy of People's Republic of China in Samoa and Chinese aid-related workers including experts, advisors, medical doctors and volunteers. They are dispatched to Samoa on missions of two to three years.[24]

The second category consists of Chinese contract workers who come to Samoa mainly for infrastructure projects funded by China's aid. These workers, mostly men,work in Samoa for the duration of the specific projects for which they are employed. Between 2012 and 2016, 723 Chinese nationals came to Samoa under this category (Noa Siaosi 2020:45). They are usually granted a FEEP or a special permit for a "purpose approved by the minister".[25]

The third category includes Chinese migrants who have migrated to Samoa because of family ties and came to work for family-run businesses and restaurants in Samoa. Many have become naturalized Samoan citizens. Frankie Cai, the owner of Frankie Company Limited, can be considered an example of this category. He moved to Samoa to assist an uncle with his business, and eventually founded his own wholesale and retail trade businesses. Today those businesses are among the largest private-sector employers in Samoa, with about 2,500 employees in total.

The fourth category is made up of entrepreneurial migrants and their associates, including spouses and dependents, who move to Samoa and either work for Chinese-owned businesses or establish their own businesses, particularly in the wholesale and construction industries. These are first-generation migrants with no familial ties to Samoa, and they make up the majority of Chinese migrants arriving in Samoa today (see the article in this volume by Ming Leung Wai).

[24] Such employees are not categorized as migrant workers (see footnote 4).

[25] Like those in the first category, these employees are also not considered to be migrant workers.

Fijians in Samoa

Fijians are mainly employed in the domestic work sector in Samoa. In the fiscal year 2021/22 (MCIL 2023), fourteen out of the eighteen FEEP-holders working in domestic services were Fijian women, with the remainder being one Chinese woman, one Fijian man and two Filipina women. While the ethnicity is not explicitly indicated in the FEEP data, from my observations it appears that the Fijian citizens employed are all indigenous Fijians, not Indo-Fijians. Workers in this category commonly function as live-in domestic service providers, often referred to as 'housegirls'.[26]

Migrant domestic workers across the world often face overwork and abuse, and they sometimes suffer psychologically, and even physically, in a foreign land. This has also sometimes been the case in Samoa. The issue of foreign domestic workers gained widespread attention in Samoa in 2018 when two housegirls from Fiji without proper work permits escaped from their workplace, and said they had been mistreated by their employer (RNZ 28 March 2018). Their Samoan employer made a counterclaim, alleging that these women were stealing items from the employer's house. After a government investigation, the women were permitted to return to Fiji (Feagaimaali'i-Luamanu 5 May 2018). This incident led to increased scrutiny of foreign housegirls and of the reasons why employers prefer foreign workers over locals (Feagaimaali'i-Luamanu 7 May 2018; Lesa 7 May 2018; Samoa Observer 10 May 2018).

On the sending side, in Fiji, temporary labour migration became popular among Fijians in early 1990s, with skilled workers from various sectors moving abroad for work, including in the peacekeeping forces, and as security personnel, doctors, nurses, teachers, pilots, lawyers, mechanics, electricians and athletes (Mohanty 2006:113; Rokoduru 2006). While some skilled Fijians have taken up employment in Australia, New Zealand and the Middle East, others have migrated to other Pacific Island states. Rokoduru (2006:184) examined the movement of nurses from Fiji to the Marshall Islands and Kiribati and found that the main push factor was inadequate salaries in Fiji. She identified this flow of migration as temporary, undertaken primarily to

[26] The term 'housegirl' is considered by some to be derogatory as it implies a specific gender role and reflects the colonial legacy of master-servant relationships, but the term is commonly used in Samoa as an English translation of the Samoan term '*teine teufale*', which refers to female domestic helpers tasked with responsibilities such as housekeeping, babysitting, care giving and other household duties.

seek better economic opportunities elsewhere. Semi-skilled and unskilled migrant workers from Fiji can be found across the Pacific, including in the Cook Islands and Marshall Islands, particularly in domestic work and in the hospitality industry. These migrant workers primarily aim to generate remittances to send home (Mohanty 2006:114).

Marriage for citizenship and other scams in Samoa

A foreigner, or non-citizen, can acquire Samoan citizenship through various pathways, including by marrying a Samoan citizen and via investment. The Citizenship Investment Programme, instituted in 2017, aims to promote foreign direct investment, allowing the investor the right to citizenship through investment of the minimum amount of WST4 million in Samoa (MCIL nd). According to a MCIL officer, however, this strategy has only attracted a small number of foreign investors (personal communication with a senior MCIL officer 3 May 2023).

'Marriage for citizenship' refers to the process in which a non-citizen marries a citizen solely with the aim of acquiring legal residency and eligibility to apply for citizenship. This kind of scam marriage is a pervasive form of fraud worldwide, and is a prominent theme in movies, reflecting its prevalence and societal implications. In Samoa, there has been a noticeable increase in the number of marriages between non-Samoans and Samoans in recent decades, particularly between recent Chinese male migrants and Samoan women.

Some Samoans believe that such migrants are marrying local girls for citizenship, with the ultimate goal of gaining access to Samoan land. In Samoa, around 80 percent of land is held under customary tenure, owned by extended families. Customary land is protected under the Constitution for use by the people of Samoa, and it cannot be sold. Of the remaining 20 percent of land, 16 percent is public land managed by the government while 4 percent is freehold land, which can be sold but only to Samoan citizens. Non-citizens can only purchase land in Samoa if they become a citizen, or if they buy it through their spouse or a child of theirs who holds Samoan citizenship.

Unions between migrant workers and Samoans may not necessarily be scams, however, or at least might not be a negative thing for Samoa overall. The first Samoan girl from my church who married a Chinese man, for example, now runs the business her husband started, indicating that she has benefited from the union. The second Samoan girl to marry a Chinese man

moved to China with her husband and, as of 2023, was expecting her second child there, indicating a seemingly positive outcome.

Treatment of migrants

Migrant workers globally often face stigmatization and discrimination. This is also the case in Samoa. Generally speaking, foreigners living in Samoa often experience different treatment from Samoans, regardless of their length of residency, especially if they are visibly not ethnically Samoan.[27] As an illustration, I am one of the six non-Samoans among nearly 400 staff members employed at NUS. We, the non-Samoan staff, are usually treated differently from Samoan staff. For instance, one of my non-Samoan colleagues at NUS despairs at the feeling of being excluded and isolated in the workplace, despite her achievements. While most treatment is not inherently racist, the treatment by some individuals, particularly those who have returned from overseas, can be discriminatory – sometimes reflecting an attitude of "What are you doing in my country?". Given such attitudes, Samoa may not be a place where labour migrants can live comfortably and feel fully accepted into society.

Some of the antagonism towards foreigners in Samoa may be related to the activities of some migrant workers. MCIL has reported several issues associated with migrant workers, including cases of workers with illegal working status and cases of non-compliance with regulations by their employers. For example, some migrant workers were found living in retail stores. They said they were in Samoa to "help out" rather than work (MCIL 2020:34).

The study of migration is both sensitive and challenging because some migrants, fearing identification and deportation, are reluctant to participate in research. This challenge is particularly pronounced in small, tightly connected homogeneous societies like Samoa, where non-ethnically-Samoan workers are easily identifiable.

A study by Tsujita et al. (2021) examined how the absence of anonymity and the fear of identification affected the willingness of migrant workers to participate in research, particularly studies of labour migration to Samoa. Along with the lack of funding to compile comprehensive data, this fear could

[27] In Samoa, 98 percent of the population consists of ethnic Samoans, which makes it quite easy to identify foreigners.

be another reason why Samoa and other small island nations in the Pacific have limited useful data on labour migrants. This lack of information often leaves migrant workers voiceless and unknown.

Migrant voices

To learn more about migrant workers in Samoa, I interviewed three people who were willing to share their stories. Two were introduced to me through my community network. I met them prior to the interviews to explain the purpose of the study in detail, establish rapport and confirm their willingness to participate. The interviews with these two were conducted in a meeting space at my office building on a Saturday morning when no other staff members were present. The third participant was a personal acquaintance whom I had known for several years. This interview was conducted at the participant's home. Their stories are presented below.[28]

Sam: Someone who never gives up

Sam was raised in a small village close to Beijing. He excelled academically, consistently ranking first in mathematics at school, and he was one of only two students from his village to be accepted into a university. At university, he pursued a Bachelor of Arts with a triple major in English, marketing and psychology. He intended to seek work for a company engaged in international trade. After graduating, although he passed the examination that would enable him to pursue higher education, he followed the Chinese tradition of finding employment so as to earn sufficient income to support his parents. Sam could have pursued a teaching position in China, but at the time he held the common perception that teaching was "women's work".

He first worked as a trainee with a few companies in his province and then relocated to Guangdong Province, where many companies are engaged in international trade, and where he could use his English skills. Sam secured a job as a salesperson with one of these companies and worked there for some time before deciding to return home to care for his mother, who had been injured in an accident. Several months later, he moved to another coastal province and joined one of the leading plastic-manufacturing companies in the country. He eventually became the manager of the overseas marketing

[28] Their names have been changed and some place names were omitted to protect their privacy.

team at this company, but he resigned when the working conditions changed, opting to join a locksmith company. At this company, Sam took the role of the manager of the overseas marketing team, travelling abroad and attracting overseas customers to China.

His life took a new turn when he married. His wife was a teacher at a school located on the other side of the province, so he relocated to be with her. There, Sam embarked on his own e-commerce venture with an investment of RMB50,000 (about USD7,000). Setting up his company was relatively straightforward, as he already had experience and had an established network of overseas customers in Australia, Europe, New Zealand and the USA. The business thrived for six years.

Sam first visited Samoa with his wife as a tourist in the mid-2010s, seeking a break from their busy life in China. They chose Samoa as their vacation destination because Sam had a regular customer in Samoa who had suggested several times that Sam consider starting a venture there. Although Sam was unfamiliar with Samoa and was unsure about whether he wanted to start a business there, he accepted the invitation to visit. They planned to stay for three months, but he decided to stay longer because his wife fell in love with the country. This prompted Sam to seek work.

At first he attempted an online trading business like the one he had operated in China, but he soon realized that the internet speed in Samoa was insufficient for effective communication with overseas customers. Subsequently, he and his wife applied for teaching positions. They were advised that starting their own tutoring school might be more viable, as teacher's salaries were insufficient and unlikely to cover their living expenses.[29] The local friend who had invited them to Samoa offered them a suitable location for a tutoring school, so Sam opened a business. He registered it under the MCIL and applied for a FEEP. Both Sam and his wife started teaching the Chinese language to school students. Later, Sam also began teaching mathematics, which expanded their student base. Word-of-mouth recommendations, especially from parents whose children improved in mathematics thanks to Sam, helped to grow their tutoring business. However,

[29] For many teachers, salaries are insufficient to cover living expenses, so Samoan teachers only manage to make ends meet through pooling their incomes with their families. Most families in Samoa rely on a range of income sources, including remittances and subsistence agriculture to meet their needs (see the article titled 'The Socioeconomic Context of the New Samoan Exodus: 2007–2023', Journal of Samoan Studies, forthcoming).

the fees they charged were only WST20 per hour and the number of students was insufficient to make ends meet. During their first year in Samoa, Sam also worked as a Chinese-English translator for the local Chinese community, but he had to rely on his savings to supplement their income. His parents in China also provided financial support for his tutoring business. After a year, the business had grown so Sam relocated it to a larger facility in town, but he continued to work as translator to keep the business afloat.

Three years later, in 2019, Sam had to return to China for a family matter and faced a turning point. He had to decide whether to move back to China or return to Samoa after his trip. Sam felt that China offered more business opportunities, but knew that the competition there was fierce. In Samoa, on the other hand, the market was much smaller, and things moved a slower pace, with less competition.

Sam recalled a moment of uncertainty:

> *At that time, I had been running my school business in Samoa for a few years, and China had changed significantly since I left. I wasn't sure if I could still succeed in the e-commerce business, or if it was a good idea. China is a vast country and every year many students graduate from universities, with companies preferring to hire young people. I thought if I returned [to China], I'd have no option but to start my own business. I wasn't sure if my skills were still up to date because China is changing so fast. Also, I'd already established my teaching business here [in Samoa] and was progressing. After teaching here for a few years, I didn't want to waste the time and effort I'd invested. I believed that if I gave up this business here and moved back, I'd always regret it. So, I made the decision to give my best effort to the teaching business.*

When Sam returned to Samoa, he doubled down on his business activities. First, he invested in himself to get teaching qualifications. He enrolled in an online teacher training programme and obtained a Chinese international teacher certificate, and did an online course in teaching mathematics offered by an institution in the United Kingdom, gaining a certificate. Next, he started a new business to supplement the income earned from his tutoring business. During a visit to China, he trained in locksmithing with his former employer, which enabled him to establish a locksmith business in Samoa. He had recognised a gap in the market in Samoa for locksmiths when he had lost a remote car key, which cost him WST1,500 to replace. This new business, along with his translation service, provided him with sufficient income to continue his tutoring business.

Seven years after opening his tutoring business, the business had an accumulated total of more than 100 students and it had finally begun to turn a profit, although it still had a long way to go before it could be considered truly successful. In 2023, he began the process of relocating the tutoring business to a larger facility with more spacious classrooms and additional seating for students. He aims to offer more subjects and hire additional teachers, and he wants to eventually establish a private school accredited by the Samoa Qualifications Association.

Sam said that migrating to Samoa changed the way he perceived the teaching profession. In China, he had considered it to be a profession more suitable for women than for men. However, in Samoa, teaching became the reason why he chose to stay. While he does not have a specific plan for the future, he remains committed to living in Samoa for the long term, primarily because he sees his work in education is an unfinished project:

> *To me, teaching is like a project. It's a big project. A school business is different from other kinds of businesses, like shops or restaurants. These businesses can earn more money every day if you work hard, but education is different. If you're running a school business and always seeking profits, that means you're not good educator. You must put your energy and effort first into teaching. Right? That's why school businesses don't make a lot of money. But I believe it's supposed to be like that. The quality of teaching must be the focus, not profit. The income from school is only enough to support my living here, so I do side businesses like locksmith and translation to further invest in my school. I can't recall how much money I've already invested [laugh]. That's why I have to finish this [laugh]. I need to work on this first before moving onto the next.*

Sam's tutoring business is not yielding significant profits, so persisting with it may not make economic sense, but he has a robust entrepreneurial drive that fuels his determination to persist and not relocate until he is satisfied with his achievement. Sam's enjoyment of teaching – a profession he initially did not want to pursue – also motivates him to continue.

Sam perceives Samoa as not necessarily being a friendly place for foreign business investment, given the unsatisfactory level of basic infrastructure required for smooth businesses operations, including internet speed and road conditions,and unfriendly social aspects for foreigners. He attributes the inadequate business infrastructure and the slow progress in Samoa to the 'brain drain' caused by emigration of the working-age population. If he were looking for a new place to begin a business venture, he probably would not choose Samoa. However, because of the slow pace of development, Samoa's

level of business competition is less intense than elsewhere, providing opportunities for business investors like Sam. Also, Sam found two untapped market niches, tutoring and locksmithing, which he was able to turn to his advantage with his entrepreneurial spirit.

New Chinese migrants to the Pacific are often suspected of harbouring hidden agendas, but if there is any hidden agenda behind the action of Sam, it is his entrepreneur spirit.This propels him forward.

Vā: An indispensible member of the household

Vā is an indigenous Fijian woman from a village near Suva. At home in Fiji, Vā was the primary caretaker of her family: her father and four younger siblings. Her mother did not live with the family because of work commitments. After graduating from high school, Vā enrolled in a university preparatory year at the University of the South Pacific, but had to withdraw to care for a bedridden aunt, who lived alone. Vā devoted five years to her aunt's well-being until her aunt's passing. Subsequently, Vā took part in a six-month caregiving training programme. Armed with a certificate from this programme, she found work as an on-call part-time caregiver at a hospital in times of staff shortages, tending to patients overnight and assisting them with baths. Seeing the success of classmates from her certificate programme who were working in Australia as caregivers, she considered taking another caregiving course to meet Australian standards, but by this time she had become a mother and was also still caring for her father and siblings, which left her with little time for her own pursuits. It was during this phase that she was approached with an offer of a caregiver job in Apia.

The job offer came from "Uncle Jimmy", a close friend of Vā's family. Originally from Samoa, but living in Fiji, he had been asked by a cousin in Samoa to find a diligent Fijian girl to assist his wife with household chores and be a caregiver for him and his wife who were both elderly. The offer was a two-year contract with an attractive salary package. Uncle Jimmy asked Vā to take the job because he was aware of her qualifications and positive attributes.

The elderly couple who asked Uncle Jimmy to help them find a 'housegirl'[30] from Fiji had nine children, all of whom were married and employed. One

[30] The term 'housegirl' is commonly used in Samoa as an English translation of the Samoan term '*teine teufale*', which refers to female domestic helpers.

child resided with them, five lived in Apia and three lived overseas. The couple had once had a live-in Samoan housegirl, but she resigned. One of their children, who employs a Fijian housegirl, suggested that they find a replacement from Fiji.

Initially Vā declined the request. She had heard distressing stories about the mistreatment of Fijian housegirls in Tonga, and one of her aunts had had a bad experience working as a housegirl for a couple from New Zealand in Samoa during the 1970s. Her aunt had been poorly treated but could not leave due to incomplete immigration papers and lack of support as a foreigner in Samoa. Her aunt warned her about the challenges of being alone in a foreign country without family or friends for support, especially for such a long period, and advised Vā to carefully consider.

However, Vā's father encouraged her to take the job. Vā recalled the conversation with her father:

> *Obviously, Uncle Jimmy went to see my dad, so my dad asked me why I said no to Jimmy and why I can't give it a try. "You can't keep living like this and waiting for a miracle to come to you", yeah, that's what he told me. So the push was him. He said, "Go and try. If we hear you're badly treated, we'll pay your airfare to come home". You know, we have to obey what father says, right?*

When asked why she thought her father had pushed her, she responded:

> *Ties of friendship. But dad also wanted me to live fully. He wanted me to live away from the family, because if not, I'd keep spinning around, looking after the family. So he was saying, "Don't waste your time looking after us". You get me? That's a kind of love he has. Mum told me later that dad was really missing me, and I should understand the sacrifice he was making for me.*

Upon arriving at the old Faleolo airport, Vā was taken aback at its small size, which was reminiscent of rural airports in Fiji. Vā arrived late at night and one of her employers' children picked her up from the airport and took her to their house to stay overnight. At their place, Vā was introduced to their Fijian housegirl, Sera. In their shared room that night, Sera asked why Vā had chosen to work in Samoa rather than in Australia or New Zealand. Sera told Vā that coming to Samoa was a waste of time because the wages were low given the amount of work. Sera attempted to convince Vā that she had made the wrong decision, saying that she had nearly reached the end of her two-year contract and she would not renew it. But Vā said that she would give it some time, since she had come to Samoa as a favour for a family friend who was related to her employers.

Vā moved to her employers' residence the next day and met the elderly couple. The couple were approachable, and the household chores assigned to her were manageable, but during the first evening meal Vā began to doubt her decision to come to Samoa. This was because of the Samoan custom in which people eat in the order of their social status and rank. The custom is such that the head of the family, other chiefly title holders, elders and guests, if any, eat first. Next, the heirs of the family and their children eat. In-laws and untitled relatives in the household (including housegirls, if any) prepare the meals, serve the food and eat last. Following this practice, Vā did not eat until everyone else was finished, and she ate alone. She was asked to fan the food of the elders to keep flies away while they were eating. Not invited to eat with the family was a culture shock that hit her hard emotionally.

> *Seeing [the couple] eating on the first day, second day and third day from the side of the table made me homesick because I really missed my family. I cried. The lifestyle here is different. We have . . . our own way of doing things [in Fiji]. Here, they eat first, and I eat later. In Fiji, I'm them, I eat first. Back home . . . we are also a chiefly family, [and] when we have occasions or functions, we hire people to serve us. In Fiji . . . we eat together. Eating together is the lifestyle we live in now. But over here is different; a different standard. This was one of the hardest things I experienced here. They are still living an old lifestyle; we need to serve them. I didn't expect this because Uncle Jimmy told me that [the couple] is his family so I'll be a part of their family. Then, the family eat together, right? But not over here.*

When she shared this experience with her parents in Fiji, they offered to pay for her airfare to return home, but Vā decided to face the challenges, understanding that different places have different lifestyles. To cope with this and other emotional challenges, she called her family in Fiji frequently and also took solace in prayers with her Fijian church friends in Samoa.

At the end of her first two-year contract, she thought about leaving and trying something new. But by this time she had grown close to the couple and their family; her role as a housegirl in Samoa began to mirror, both physically and emotionally, the responsibilities she had undertaken in Fiji for her own family. She decided to renew the contract for another two years, partly because she felt that her employers did not even doubt that she would renew it. At the end of the second contract, her dilemma had become worse because the elderly couple had become even more reliant on her. At the time of the interview, Vā had been working for the couple for five years; she was in the

middle of her third contract, and was again debating whether or not to renew it.

Vā still does not eat with the family, but she has become accustomed to it, and she said that despite this she feels like she is a part of the family. She said that the couple treats her well and gives her financial support, aside from her salary, when she needs to send money home for familial, village and church events. They also offer parental advice and assist her to save money for herself.

Vā said that she is satisfied with her life in Samoa overall. She is particularly fond of the slow pace and laid-back atmosphere that characterizes Samoan life, which is reminiscent of the relaxed lifestyle she enjoyed as a child in her village in Fiji. She perceives life in Fiji today as being too fast-paced for her liking, marked by rapid technological advancements, even in villages.

Vā also said that job hunting is a challenge in Fiji, including in urban centres like Suva, where even individuals with skills face difficulties finding work due to the large population. She felt that Samoa offered more opportunities in the job market, especially for skilled workers. Vā believes that Fijians possess higher skills on average than their Samoan counterparts, making job hunting in Samoa relatively easier for Fijians. This belief is supported by a 2019 ILO report, which attributes Fijian success in securing overseas employment to Fiji's more advanced education and skill-training systems, compared to other countries in the Pacific Islands region.

Vā said she was aware of many instances in which companies in Samoa actively recruit Fijians, offering attractive salary packages that are better than those available in Fiji. So although Samoa has a lower minimum wage than Fiji, Samoa is appealing to skilled Fijians. Another attraction of Samoa for Fijians is that it is easier to obtain work permits and visas in Samoa than in some other destinations, such as the Marshall Islands and Australia, which are popular choices for Fijian migrant workers.

Vā said that many people from her village, including her brother, had worked in Australia under a Pacific labour mobility scheme. Vā would like to apply for the scheme and work as a caregiver in Australia for four years. This plan would enable her to save sufficient funds to start a canteen business she has been thinking about and buy additional cows for the family farm, which was initiated with the funds she sent home from Samoa. To pursue this goal, however, she would have to inform her employer that she would not be renewing her contract. Knowing that the couple relies on her now more than

ever, Vā said she felt guilty about the prospect of leaving them. She has asked her relatives in Fiji if anybody would like to take over her job, but she has yet to find someone.

> *You know, it's hard [to leave], because [my employers] are old and find it difficult to accept new things and new people. People of their age cannot handle changes easily. If I tell them I want to move on, they might get offended, thinking that they did not treat me well, and that's why I don't want to renew the contract. It's not that. I just want to do something new. But it's difficult for them to accept. You know, when I went home [to Fiji] last time for a break, I was supposed to stay there for two months. But after a couple of weeks, [my employer] called me, asking me to come home early because [his wife] needed someone to help her and that someone must be someone she can trust. So I came back early [laugh]. They are getting very old and need me more; that's why it's hard to tell them. I'm praying to God for the right time. God's time.*

Vā's father had pushed her to take a job in Samoa. It was his way of urging her to stop sacrificing herself for the family and live her life fully. Instead, she now sacrifices herself for a Samoan family. She finds herself torn between love for her employers and love and duty to her family.

In May 2023, she learned that her mother was sick, so she really wanted to go home to see her. But when I interviewed Vā in November, she said that although she wanted to go home for Christmas, because she had not spent Christmas with her family since moving to Samoa five years ago, she would not be going home because she knew her employers' children, grandchildren and relatives would be visiting them from overseas for Christmas, and they would need her there to help.

Given Samoa's high employment rate, some people question the recruitment of foreign domestic workers under FEEP. Vā's story illustrates that domestic workers are not only valuable because of their skills and qualifications, but also for their personal attributes. The caregiving skills Vā possesses may not be scarce in Samoa's labour market, but her dedication and family-like love for the employer couple and her caring spirit are not something that employers can easily find locally.

Kevin: Seeking an opportunity for self-improvement

Kevin is a hardworking man with a bachelor's degree in education and a diploma in broadcasting. In his home country in West Africa he worked full time as a mathematics teacher at a middle school for eighteen years while also working as a part-time journalist at a government-owned radio station.

Kevin's journey to Samoa began when he was approached by an acquaintance, a fellow countryman, who asked if he was interested in a job opportunity in Australia. This acquaintance, Ben, was seeking a diligent and skilful person to help set up a new business. Kevin seized the opportunity and borrowed the money (WST2,500) required by Ben to process his travel documents. However, upon receiving the visa Kevin was surprised to find that it indicated Samoa as the country of issue, not Australia. When he questioned Ben about this, Ben said that Samoa was just a transit place en route to Australia.

When Kevin arrived in Samoa four years ago, he discovered that Ben was actually in Samoa, and it was here that he was attempting to set up a business. However, the visa Kevin had received did not permit him to work in Samoa. Reflecting on that time, Kevin recalls:

> *After two days and three days passed, nothing happened. Even when I urged Ben to fix my visa, he only gave me a series of run-arounds. Finally, he told me, "You're not going anywhere, so it's better to marry a local girl to get a work permit". I didn't have money to return home, so I had to start work immediately. I had no choice. Ben advised me to break up with my girlfriend back home, so I did. I even ended up helping Ben set up his business. I met my wife at a nearby café where she worked. Two weeks later, we got married. I went to see her auntie, with whom she was staying, and visited her parents in Savai'i for permission.*

When asked if the Samoan family were supportive of their daughter marrying a foreigner whom she had just met, he explained:

> *Yeah, they were all supportive, probably because they saw me as a hardworking person. So did my wife. At the time of our marriage, there was no affection between us, but the chemistry grew as we spent time together. Whatever it was, I really needed to start working.*

Within two weeks of filing for marriage, Kevin started the process of obtaining a work permit through marriage. He soon found a job as a mathematics teacher at a private school. At the time of the interview in 2023, Kevin had three jobs: working as a full-time mathematics teacher at a secondary school, as a part-time tutor at a privately-owned learning centre on Saturdays and as a hotel receptionist some nights. He and his wife were living separately. He said that she was in Savai'i looking after her sick mother. His wife and 3-year-old child visit him in Apia from time to time. Kevin sends money to his wife for the care of their child. He also provides financial support for her family's *fa'alavelave,* but otherwise he invests his earnings to advance

his qualifications. At the time of the interview he was taking an online master's course in education offered by an American institution.

Kevin sees Samoa as a land of opportunity because salaries are higher here than in his country and jobs are easy to find. He recalled when he received the first fortnight's salary from the school he worked at as a mathematics teacher:

> *I was so surprised to receive a much higher salary [compared to his home country] from just working for two weeks. It was WST900. That's six times higher than what I got as a long-experienced teacher back home. Samoa's living expenses are high, but much better than in my country. The economy is much bigger there, but the minimum wage there is only [the equivalent of] WST1.60. My current salary is WST32,000 per year, but I was told it will be increased to WST60,000 once I complete my MA [master's degree]. My tutoring job is okay; it's WST45 for each session. The hotel job pay is small, WST5 per hour, but I don't mind it because it's a supplement to support my study.*

Asked if he thought finding a job and working in Samoa was easier than what he experienced in his country, he explained:

> *Finding job here is easy. In my country, experience and connections are very important to get a job. But you need a job to get experience. But in Samoa, if you have qualifications, you can get a job easily. If I were Samoan, it would have been much easier to find a job because some jobs, like UN ones, are kept for Samoans only.*

Kevin plans to continue studying (a PhD programme) as he understands the power of qualifications in Samoa. He would like to become an educator at an academic institution in Samoa or somewhere else where the pay is good. He will visit his home country, but does not plan to return to live there due to its unstable political and economic situation.

Kevin was not the only person duped by Ben to come to Samoa. Kevin has met five other African men who also fell for the trick. Like Kevin, they were advised upon their arrival to look for a local woman to marry so that they could work in Samoa legally. They were disappointed and furious with Ben, but also desperate for a job, and none of them had sufficient funds to return home, so they followed Ben's advice and married local women (some had to first divorce their African wives). All of the men now have good jobs and are happily married; some have children. With the support of a local businessman whom they met through a church, Kevin and his African counterparts hired a lawyer to sue Ben for his immigration scam, but Ben fled Samoa before legal action could be taken.

Although he was duped to come to Samoa, Kevin described his experience in Samoa as being positive overall. He has gained supportive friends like the businessman mentioned above, and he has a job that pays higher than similar work back home, enabling him to afford to study for higher qualifications. He said that the best part of life in Samoa was that he met his wife. “She was very supportive when I was going through immigration processes and needed help the most. She was always there.”

Common aspirations

The three migrants I interviewed have had different experiences, but overall they perceive Samoa as a good place to live and work. Sam found Samoa’s lack of heated business competition favourable, as it enables him to embark on entrepreneurial initiatives — an opportunity he would not be able to pursue in more-competitive China. Contrary to the common perception, some of the new Chinese migrants coming to Samoa and the Pacific may not harbour hidden agendas, as shown by Sam’s journey.

For Vā, coming to Samoa was more of a social opportunity than an economic one, allowing her to break away from the status quo and live her life more fully. However, she has found herself on the horns of an emotional dilemma – unable to leave her family-like employer and move on to next phase of her life. Vā’s story sheds light on the controversial issue of giving FEEPs to domestic workers in the context of Samoa’s high unemployment rate. In the case of Vā, it was not her skills or qualifications that the employer could not find in the domestic market, as regulated by FEEP, instead, it was her emotional intelligence and compassion which led to mutual attachment between the employee and employer that made her an irreplaceable housegirl. Vā’s repeated renewal of her contract is a sign of a good employer-employee relationship. This indicates that the FEEP system may need to assess not only the quality of workers, but also the quality of employers.

Kevin’s story and those of other migrant workers indicates that individuals are being duped into labour migration in Samoa and individuals are engaging in deceptive practices, such as marrying locals to obtain a work permit. Despite Kevin’s challenging experiences, he still considers Samoa a good place to work, primarily because the pay is higher than that in his home country. Although his country boasts a larger economy and population than Samoa, Kevin sees Samoa as offering better opportunities to save for investment in his education. He found obtaining a job in Samoa easy when candidates have

qualifications, and he is therefore investing in advancing his academic qualifications so that he can secure a higher-paid position. However, he says the most precious thing he found in Samoa was his wife, who supported him throughout, even though marrying a local woman was initially not his intention. The morality of marriage for citizenship is a complex issue, but Kevin's story illustrates that such marriages can bring skills to the workforce in Samoa.

Sam, Vā and Kevin have each found socioeconomic niches that benefit their situations. These niches might not be perceived as advantageous by local Samoans, who have opportunities to migrate to countries where wages are significantly higher, but the stories of these migrant workers illustrate the common aspirations and experiences of migrants worldwide, transcending ethnicity, nationality and geography.

A destination country for migrant workers

As this article has shown, individuals from Asia, the Pacific and Africa are migrating to Samoa for reasons similar to those of Samoans moving abroad — the pursuit of higher incomes and, ultimately, what is perceived as 'a better life'.

A 2019 report by the ILO anticipates a significant increase in opportunities for labour migration to the Pacific Islands region in the future. This trend has already been observed in several Pacific countries. Papua New Guinea and Fiji already have substantial numbers of incoming labour migrants, and in the Cook Islands and Palau incoming labour migrants constitute about 25 percent of the population (ILO, 2019:7-8). Tonga, which is among the countries sending the most workers abroad via Pacific labour mobility schemes, has recruited numerous workers from Fiji across various industries to fill their domestic labour shortages (ILO, 2019:23).

Although Samoa currently has a relatively small number of foreign-born workers in proportion to its population, it is likely that if emigration flows continue to increase, Samoa will become dependent on foreign workers to fill the local workforce gaps created by Pacific labour mobility schemes. In such a scenario, understanding the experiences of incoming labour migrants and finding ways to ensure that such workers are treated well by employers and are not discriminated against will be crucial for Samoa to become an attractive destination country.

References

Atkinson J (2010) 'China-Taiwan Diplomatic Competition and the Pacific Islands', *The Pacific Review,* 23(4):407-427.

Feagaimaali'i-Luamanu J (5 May 2018) Stop order lifted, Fijian workers reject allegations, *Samoa Observer,* accessed 29 November 2023. https://www.samoaobserver.ws/category/samoa/25937

Feagaimaali'i-Luamanu J (7 May 2018) Recruitment of foreign workers scrutinised, *Samoa Observer,* accessed 29 November 2023.https://www.samoaobs,erver.ws/category/samoa/28215

Feagaimaali'i J (13 June 2019) More allegations against N.U.S. Lecturer surface, *Samoa Observer,* accessed 6 December 2023. https://www.samoaobserver.ws/category/samoa/43584

Firth S (2019) 'The Military and Security in the Pacific Islands Past and Present', in Ratuva S, Compel R and Aguilar S (eds) *Guns & Roses: Comparative Civil-Military Relations in the Changing Security Environment,* Palgrave Macmillan, Singapore.

Firth S (4 June 2018) 'Instability in the Pacific Islands: A Status Report', Lowy Institute, accessed 21 October 2023. https://www.lowyinstitute.org/publications/instability-pacific-islands-status-report

Hayward-Jones J (2013) *Big Enough for All of Us: Geo-strategic Competition in the Pacific Islands,* Lowy Institute, Sydney.

International Labour Organization (ILO) (1999) 'Migrant Workers, Chapter 2', *International Labour Conference Report III (1B),* 87th Session, Geneva, June 1999.

International Labour Organization (ILO) (2019) *Labour Mobility in Pacific Island Countries*, ILO, Suva.

Kagan S and Campbell J (2015) *International Labour Migration Statistics: A Guide for Policymakers and Statistics Organizations in the Pacific*, ILO, Suva.

Lesa MK (7 May 2018) Honesty still the best policy, *Samoa Observer,* accessed 29 November 2023. https://www.samoaobserver.ws/category/editorial/28979

Leung Wai AM (2021) 'Reflections on the Experiences of the Chinese Community in Samoa', *Journal of Samoan Studies,* 11(1):64-76.

Migration Data Portal (2020a) Samoa: Key migration statistics, IOM, Global Migration Data Analysis Centre, accessed 13 June 2023. https://www.migrationdataportal.org/international-data?i=stock_abs_&t=2020&cm49=882

Migration Data Portal (2020b) Migration data in Oceania, IOM, Global Migration Data Analysis Centre, accessed 12 June 2023. https://www.migrationdataportal.org/regional-data-overview/oceania

Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Labour (MCIL) (nd) Investment Promotion, accessed 14 June 2023. https://www.mcil.gov.ws/?page_id=2879
MCIL (2018) *Foreign Employee Employment Permit Policy 2017*, MCIL, Apia.
MCIL (2019) *Samoa Labour Market Survey 2019,* MCIL, Apia, accessed 14 June 2023. https://www.mcil.gov.ws/?page_id=2812
MCIL (2020) *Annual Report 2019-2020,* MCIL, Apia.
MCIL (2023) Personal communication: FEEP unpublished raw data.
Mohanty M (2006) 'Globalisation, New Labour Migration and Development in Fiji', in Firth S (ed) *Globalisation and Governance in the Pacific Islands,* ANU E-Press, Canberra.
Noa Siaosi AS (2020) 'Building on the Past: China's Evolving Presence in Samoa', *Canterbury Law Review*, 27:35-56.
Noa Siaosi AS (2022) *The Pua [Frangipani], Taniwha and Dragon: New Zealand and China's Foreign Aid in the Pacific and Local Stakeholder Perceptions: The Case of Samoa* [unpublished PhD thesis], University of Canterbury.
Radio New Zealand (RNZ) (31 March 2011) Samoa call to probe Chinese migrants' papers, accessed 15 June 2023. https://www.rnz.co.nz/international/pacific-news/196286/samoa-call-to-probe-chinese-migrants%27-papers
RNZ (28 March 2018) Fijian workers felt like slaves in Samoa, accessed 1 June 2023. https://www.rnz.co.nz/international/pacific-news/358412/fijian-workers-felt-like-slaves-in-samoa
Ratha D and Shaw W (2007) *South-South Migration and Remittances,* Working Paper 102, World Bank, Washington DC.
Rokoduru A (2006) Contemporary migration within the Pacific Islands: The case of Fijian skilled workers in Kiribati and Marshall Islands, in Firth S (ed) *Globalisation and Governance in the Pacific Islands,* ANU E-Press, Canberra.
Samoa Observer (10 May 2018) The issue of foreign workers doing domestic work, Letters to the Editor, *Samoa Observer*, accessed 31 May 2023. https://www.samoaobserver.ws/category/letters/147
Samoa Observer (3 August 2018) Chinese influence, dominance in local retail outlets, accessed 15 June 2023, *Samoa Observer*. https://www.samoaobserver.ws/category/street_talk/19245
Sheng F and Smith G (2021) 'The Shifting Fate of China's Pacific Diaspora', in Smith G and Wesley-Smith T (eds) *The China Alternative: Changing Regional Order in the Pacific Islands,* ANU Press, Canberra.
Smith G and Wesley-Smith T (2021) *The China Alternative: Changing Regional Order in the Pacific Islands*, ANU Press, Canberra.
Tcherkézoff S (2017) 'Chinese in Samoa: Recent Threats at the Village Level', in Al Wardi S, Regnault J-M and Sabouret J-F (eds) *L'Océanie convoitée: Historie, geopolitique et societies*, CNRS Éditions, Paris.

Tsujita M (2018) 'Commentary: Labour Migration in and out of Samoa', *Journal of Samoan Studies*, 8:64-68.

Tsujita M, Amaama SA, Boodoosingh R, Tauave SE and Pouono JA (2021) 'Results of a Study of Recent Migration into Samoa', *Journal of Samoan Studies,* 11:98-116.

United Nations (2020) International Migrant Stock 2020, accessed 13 June 2023. https://www.un.org/development/desa/pd/content/international-migrant-stock

United Nations Migration (IOM) (nd) Key Migration Terms, accessed 1 March 2024. https://www.iom.int/key-migration-terms

Wong E (23 April 2010) Chinese Military Seeks to Extend its Naval Power, *New York Times*, accessed 13 June 2023. https://www.nytimes.com/2010/04/24/world/asia/24navy.html

World Health Organization (WHO) (2022) Health data overview for the Independent State of Samoa, accessed 1 March 2024. https://data.who.int/countries/882

Yang J (2011) *The Pacific Islands in China's Grand Strategy: Small States, Big Games,* Palgrave Macmillan, New York.

Zhang J (2015) 'China's Role in the Pacific Islands Region', in Azizian R and Cramer C (eds) *Regionalism, Security and Cooperation in Oceania,* Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies, Honolulu.