

**SOPHIE CHAO.** *IN THE SHADOW OF THE PALMS: MORE-THAN-HUMAN BECOMINGS IN WEST PAPUA.* DURHAM: DUKE UNIVERSITY PRESS 2022, 336 P. ISBN: 9781478018247

SEBASTIAN ANTOINE<sup>1</sup>

Based at the University of Sydney, Sophie Chao is an environmental anthropologist interested in more-than-human worlds. *In the shadow of the palms: more-than-human becomings in West Papua* (published in June 2022) describes the multispecies entanglements generated by expanding palm oil plantations in West Papua. She focuses on Indigenous Marind people's understanding of the plant and how it is negotiated in terms of political, social, and environmental changes. *In the shadow of the palms* is Chao's first book-length ethnography, and it is ethnographically rich, analytically incisive, and politically engaged. The book comes at an important time. The expansion of palm oil in West Papua continues apace and political upheaval in the region remains a constant force. In the Global North, campaigns have steadily increased public awareness of the social and environmental costs of palm oil. This book demonstrates the value of an anthropological perspective on these complex dynamics by centring Marind perspectives and experiences. The stories that Chao relates add a richness of detail and complexity to other studies that foreground region-wide dynamics at the expense of local specificity, or that centre environmental change at the expense of understanding human and more-than-human entanglements. Instead, Chao brings people, plants, and animals into a muddled assemblage to explore relationships, interdependencies, oppression, and generation with great effect.

The book begins with a lengthy introduction incorporating Chao's conceptual frame and methodological approach, a discussion of the geo-political and social history of palm oil and West Papua, and Chao's positionality. As there is much to discuss on each of these points, dividing the introduction into several, more distinct parts might have allowed Chao to explore each of them in more depth. For example, Chao gives a tantalising peek at the process of co-production with her Marind interlocutors (p. 27). As an anthropology student, I wished to read more about the mechanics, politics, and complexities of this activity and I hope that Chao explores this process in further publications. Following the introduction, the book comprises eight concise chapters arranged in four pairs. Each pairing places two concepts in productive dialogue: socio-political challenges followed by mapping; skin and wetness followed by the relationship between a domesticated rescue cassowary called Ruben and Marind villagers; their encounters with sago followed by their encounters with oil palm; and, finally, time stopping due to palm oil expansion followed by Marind dreams of being eaten by palm oil.

The central themes of the text are Marind conceptualisations of more-than-human worlds and relationships between humans, animals, and plants. Chao explores these

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<sup>1</sup> MSc candidate in Social Anthropology, School of Anthropology and Museum Ethnography, University of Oxford. Email: [sebastian.antoine@anthro.ox.ac.uk](mailto:sebastian.antoine@anthro.ox.ac.uk)

conceptualisations by following a range of practices and events including Marind relationships with sago, a biography of the rescued cassowary and stories of Marind who can shapeshift into animals. By tracing these practices and ontologies, Chao crafts a rich, complex description of the more-than-human world and makes a substantial contribution to the growing body of literature on this topic. Chao demonstrates the real value of broadening the scope of anthropological enquiry and, following Marind, seeing plants and animals as truly social actors. Aside from her contribution to research on more-than-human worlds, the most exciting analytical tool in the book is the emic concept of *abu-abu*. Translated from Bahasa Indonesia as grey, *abu-abu* is used more broadly by Marind to describe abstract greyness and uncertainty. The concept is applied liberally, to a range of issues, and comprises a sub-theme of the text. Thinking with *abu-abu* proves particularly interesting in relation to the political, social, and environmental transformations that Marind negotiate. Chao charts an increasingly *abu-abu* world and Marind attempts to negotiate and understand these developments. True to form, the concept of *abu-abu* remains somewhat amorphous, allowing for its application to a broad range of issues without diminishing its analytical precision. *Abu-abu* as an analytical tool could easily travel to future ethnographies in Indonesia and, perhaps, beyond.

Chao's prose is clear and precise. She revels in wielding complex words to craft dense and vivid sentences. Her clever employment of play-on-words that are sprinkled throughout the text is not only enjoyable to read but analytically revelatory. It takes great skill to balance poetic prose with analytical incisiveness, and, in doing so, Chao demonstrates her grasp of the craft. Her proposed concept of 'multispecies skinship' (p. 82) and her comparison of 'multi-sited' and 'multi-sighted' maps (p. 66) are brilliant and, I expect, will be analytically useful beyond the Marind. Chao appears to enjoy pushing the linguistic boundaries of the ethnographic form to create something a bit unexpected, like separating the pairings by raw, unanalysed descriptions of dreams about palm oil eating people. These playful moments contrast with the content of the stories she tells. One reaction to this disjuncture might be discomfort, but I consider these moments important to the telling of the story itself. They emphasise a sense of complexity and create an ethnographic *abu-abu*. Importantly, given the content of the stories Chao tells, her prose is sensitive to the political and social dynamics. Chao recognises the limits of the written word to convey the sensorially rich experience of being with Marind in villages and in forests. To address this, she describes sonic textures and includes some illuminating photographs she took in the field. Chao has uploaded some great footage to YouTube which provides another way of understanding Marind practices and entanglements with both palm oil and sago (see Chao 2018).

Chao's commitment to doing 'political engaged anthropology' (p. 25) is present throughout the book and is a welcome position on a complex topic. It is not only the stories that she tells of Marind negotiation of capitalist-driven palm oil expansion, but the theoretical debates she furthers, such as multi-species entanglements, that are critically rich and politically radical. This book will appeal greatly to scholars of more-than-human worlds and global capitalism, especially because of its radical centring of Indigenous Marind conceptualisations of the political and social entanglements of human, animals, and plants. The location of the field site in the murky space between Southeast Asia and Melanesia means scholars of either region would appreciate the ethnographic detail. *In the shadow of the palms* is an excellent debut ethnography and I am excited to read more from Chao, especially as she adds texture and depth to the ideas captured here.

## Bibliography

Chao, Sophie 2018. *Declaration of land as our spiritual mother*.  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=74Zo-cNY8U8>.

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