

## Fang Di: The Cold Palace of the Equator | ARTFORUM Topic

By: Fang Di

### Contact Zone



In 2017, the oil painting called *Lavara* was bought at the Papua New Guinea's capital of Papua New Guinea, Port Moresby Art and Crafts Temporary Stall Market.

This spring when I was shopping in the street, I saw this painting, which is very interesting. I asked the seller whether a man was fighting a crocodile? He told me a vivid love story: in Gulf province, a place which is not far from the Central Province of Papua New Guinea, in a village lived a bad woman whose name is Lavara. She met and fell in love with a crocodile in the river when taking a shower, then she cheated on her husband Kurua. They held together with the crocodile and played all day beside the river bed. One day, a gossip parrot in the tree saw their “action movie”, and told her husband. What this picture depicts was when her husband caught her cheating on him with a crocodile.

The painter who sold this painting noticed that I liked this weird story so much, and told me that the original price should be 150 kina (the local currency unit), but since I liked it so much he can offer me a price of 100 kina. I thought for a while and told him that it was a little expensive, if he could make it 50 kina. Without any hesitation, he agreed and we made the deal. Later I asked him whether did he make up the story? He told me that was what really happened in reality in Gulf Island. When he was telling me all these, there was no change on his emotion. After we separated, I was too curious to Google, finding nothing about the story between the crocodile and human being. But I think it worth spending 50 kina on hearing such a story.

I did not expect that at the age of 30, I would have had such a fate with a country. Before locating in Papua New Guinea (hereinafter referred to as "PNG"), The first time I heard that this country was because of cannibals. The indigenous people living in primitive tribes depend on cannibalism to increase the prestige of their tribes.. For me, this has always been a mysterious and dangerous country. Because of coincidence and personal choice, in the southern hemisphere during the winter in 2017, I officially started to work and live in Papua New Guinea's capital, Moresby Port, becoming an overseas enterprise project manager from an artist. For myself, the job is more like a two-year plan of art practice, for example, I participated in an art residency project, which means after work I still had to accumulate materials for my documentary. My friends joked that I was a "business artist" who wore shirts and leather shoes to work during the daytime and talk about art at dinner after work.

Our construction project here was that, on behalf of the government, donates a school and a batch of bus stops and booths. Our works were basically external communication and integrated project management. Before introducing the top-level national strategy " The Belt and Road Initiative ", most of the early overseas projects were led by the central government. Plans and tasks are now devolved to provinces and cities, which connect with different countries and regions, so as to expand their influence. Due to the geographical advantage near the South China Sea, Guangdong Province is strategically arranged by the country to connect with the South Pacific region. Among them, Moresby Port, the capital of Papua New Guinea, signed a friend-city agreement and carried out all-round exchanges with Shenzhen. Even before that, there were many Chinese projects in Papua New Guinea. Driving through the streets, you could see many signs of state-owned enterprises or local provincial enterprises starting with China. The "Brexit" in The UK and the "Trump storm" in the US in 2016 seem to indicate that the two most core regions of global capitalism-- the US and Europe, have set off a wave of "anti-globalization". While the global investment and trade activities in China, especially those seemingly abandoned by Europe and the United States, are flourishing. Most Chinese people I met here followed enterprises to Papua New Guinea, engaging in various engineering-related industries, such as road construction, architecture and investment in hydropower stations and so on. In addition, there are also people who do jobs related to taxes, running KTVs, Chinese people who open restaurants, and prostitutes. And as usual, Fujian people mainly operate small supermarkets... A lot of people think that it is very easy to make a big score here. Indeed, in the early days, it happened that a small shop could earn millions of dollars a year, but now the competition is getting fiercer. Moreover, it is not easy to get a work visa in Papua New Guinea, and it is often necessary to bribe the visa officer privately.

Early Chinese immigrants had different stories. I found out that many of these people came to this country because of strange experiences, such as debt evasion, cheating, looking for gold. Looking back, their stories are very interesting. Zhang, 45years old, came to Papua New Guinea from Wuyi, Guangdong province, because in the 1990s he had a chance to raise pigs. At that time, the salary of Lao Zhang was only a few hundred yuan in China, but he was offered more than 8,000 yuan to go to Papua New Guinea when kina was more expensive than American dollars. He spent his youth on the pig farm, and then he gradually adapted to the local life, and became a local citizen, speaking fluent Pidgin. Car-robing is a very serious thing there, and he taught me how to get out of a car. He told me it is necessary to keep a certain distance between you and the passengers, and the space

reserved is the way to get out of the car if the gunman tries to rob you. After 28 years he accumulated such experience. He says he was free to move around when he first came to Papua and has witnessed how security deteriorated over the years. Mr Zhang, a 55-year-old prospector, is staying with Mr Zhang for the time being. He had been working in the national publicity department for ten years when a Hong Kong man introduced him to PNG to look for gold. They dig through all the river bed and repaired a few tens of kilometers of the road (PNG has complex terrain, and the miners usually did not estimate the cost on the road and unpredictable complex changes, including China Metallurgical Group exploring nickel mine in Papua New Guinea). But there was a huge difference between the actual placer gold and gold in one of the earliest research reports, and residents thought they were being cheated. Zhang, who does not speak English, was once arrested in the mountains because he failed to divide the gold for the residents due to the small amount of gold.

I have also met the Chinese underworld boss in Pashin, a dark, strong man whose outline can be seen clearly that one of his hands has no fingers -- all of which were cut off with a knife during a chase. The legend of him spread all over the streets. He was cheated to go to Papua New Guinea for the first time, and smuggled to Papua New Guinea as an illegal worker. After getting off the boat, he almost starved to death so he went to the street begging for food. Later, he met a Chinese who gave him two WWII grenades. He ran into an underground casino with a grenade, and with the grip hook on his fingers, he asked whether the casino owner wants to buy it or not. Without saying a word, the owner took two thousand kina from the drawer and gave it to him, which had become his first basket of gold in Papua.

Because of my work, I got to know a retired former Hong Kong royal police officer Alan L, who had been resident in Moresby Port for three years. Because he has quality language ability, and he is familiar with the Commonwealth Law, so he set up a fire company in the capital. That was a new retirement life that he was determined to try. It was not a coincidence that he moved here. In the 1990s, Alan visited Papua, and because he was not satisfied with his job as a police officer, so he wanted to start his own business. In 1993, a friend of him wanted to invest in a gold mining project in Papua New Guinea and met with the minister of Mines during the investigation. Alan says that the minister goes to work barefoot, and puts on his shoes at the office, takes off his shoes after work, and walks home barefoot, which is the portrayal of the nature of people in PNG. In the early times, westerners used their weakness to make many unequal deals with the government. Although the political environment of Papua New Guinea is a democratic and liberal system -- a constitutional monarchy in the UK, Council of One Institution Governs the Country and a sound judiciary system -- a large part of the living environment is almost primitive.



In the evening, you can often see smoke everywhere. There are several causes, ranging from burning discarded rubbish, burning weeds to ward off a particularly venomous and deadly snake called the *Pseudechis papuanus*. It is a kind of super venomous, once people got bite by it, will die immediately. That is why professional mountaineers keep a medical serum with them in case of being bitten by them. Eating is the most important thing for me. Pashinese cook without lampblack, but like a smoke bomb. The whole style of cooking is very down to earth, which means really cooking on the ground. They have a tribal food called Mumi, which is not hard to make, and the fun and patience of cooking can kill time in a day. Firstly, we have to dig a hole, light wood and put them inside, then put stones in it. After the stone be heated slowly, cover them with several layers of banana leaves, and some people also use guava leaf to increase smoke fog to reach the effect of smoke. Then put the prepared foods, such as corn, taro, sweet banana, pork and fish on it, add salt and water, cover them with banana leaves and seal them four hours. With smoke going around everywhere, the food will be cooked very well and authentic.

Although the original cooking methods have been preserved, the social environment has been disturbed. The entire classic trilogy of Western colonization has been performed in Papua New Guinea: First hit the backward countries with armies, making the local people feel the privilege of them. After the war they invited anthropologists to study their behaviour-- at the beginning of the 20th century, the famous Bronislaw Kasper Malinowski got funding to Papua New Guinea. The objective ethnographic research can be less neutral, but they were important for the colonists to know the national weakness. After Anthropologists left, the priest came, and brainwashed those people, so today in Papua New Guinea more than 93% of residents are Christ and Roman Catholic.



Many colonized countries have yacht clubs, most of which are the clubs of the early colonial rulers. There was an old but beautiful photo—a soldier looking at a sunken ship on the cashier counter of a yacht club in Moresby Port. Out of curiosity, I asked the yacht club staff where the photos came from. He told me it was taken on June 18, 1942. During World War II, the ship, called MV Macdhui, was sunk by a Japanese air raid at Port Moresby when transferring armies to PNG to defeat enemies. The ship, which was loaded with aircraft fuel, soon burned to the ground. The wreckage of the boat sank in the sea was not far from the boat. Later, The Australian soldiers cut down a 10-meter high pole and installed it in the gate of the yacht club. The bronze medal on the ground reads "Lest We Forget", which is somewhat ironic, and it is the shame that they should not forget as the colonial master. Now, we can see many second-hand yachts beside the wharf, which were purchased from Australia, among which one of them belongs to Tom Cruise. Many retired Australians, who pay high landing fees and live on their boats, are tan and look like long-term seafarers. Only a few locals have entered the yacht club, where mainly white people social and gather together, and you can meet the country's top politicians easily.

After the war, Japan also left its mark on PNG, and today it continues to expand its soft power in neighbouring countries through the Japan international cooperation agency and with the government's budget. While there are some differences between projects set up by Japan and China. As to China's aiding programs, mainly are material objects, like a meeting centre, a school or a road. The education in PNG is lagging, in recent years JICA has helped PNG to revise its textbooks and build a radio station, in exchange for broadcasting Japanese programs and songs for some time.

Not far from the yacht club you can see the Dockyard wharf, which is built by Micheal Curtain,

who is a local celebrity. He came to Papua New Guinea in 1966, later founded the company Curtain Bros, and began to undertake various kinds of infrastructure construction. He negotiated with the government because he wanted to build terminals, but the government find out all the land belongs to tribes, and it will be difficult to acquire land from them. But sea area belongs to the government, Curtain thinks if he can fill the sea he can create new land, this is how the early Dockyard wharf formed. But the story also reflects the problems of local land ownership - about 97% of land in Papua New Guinea belongs to the ethnic tribe, where there were maternal inheritances. They respect land left by their grandparents very much, and often argue with each other, resulting in tribal conflicts. There was a local saying, men in PNG are born to fancy alcohol and fights, and often lose life because of these, so land with the matriarchal inheritance has certain reasons.

The security situation in Papua is worrying, and in recent years Moresby Port has been ranked as one of the worst cities in the world for human habitation. If you've ever been here, you rarely see foreigners walking on the streets. Wealthy foreigners usually stay in hotels or cars, otherwise, they will face robbery or threats. More than half of the Chinese people I know in the capital have been robbed or even threatened by gunmen. The Chinese consul in Papua New Guinea receives calls every day from robbed Chinese for help. The local people know that Chinese like carrying cash with them, made them become common targets. The security fee contributed to 10% of the GDP in PNG, many of the large security companies have politicians' private shares. If you drive through various yards on the street, you will see brands of various security companies. Which means this courtyard is protected by the according to the security company, even your car will be pasted with a security company sticker. After paying a certain fee, the security companies will try to locate and recover your car if it is robbed.

Unemployment across the country reached 95%, and the local prices are also ridiculously high, which is the case in most resource-based countries. These natural resources attracted a large number of foreign companies to develop business here, in recent years, like Exxon Mobil--the world's largest oil multinational listed company invested the development of liquefied natural gas (LNG) project in Papua New Guinea, whose initial construction investment is expected to reach \$15 billion. Various countries have more power in PNG, which indicates a resource contention war (relatively speaking, China's investment in South Pacific region is not too much. And the famous international consulting firms and certified public accountants can provide according to services to support the development of the entire energy industry). The high price was also driven by foreigners, at the same time, they are the same group of people who consume those goods and services at high prices. For example, in Moresby Port, an hour fee in KTV is about 1000 kina, while the monthly salary of hiring local drivers in our company was only 500 kina. This is a clear gap between the rich and the poor.

In Papua New Guinea there is a fortnightly wage system, and at the time of paycheck, Chinese employers who are accustomed to hard work, are frustrated by the inability of local workers to return to work until they have been spent all their money. If you've ever lived in a busy city like New York or Shenzhen, it can be difficult at the very beginning. But this strange shift also taught me a new (or even older) set of values -- that get drunk while walking through the jungle, when being hungry just pick a fruit, and catching a wild boar when especially hungry, this is life.

## Editing notes

When I spoke to Fang di on the phone for the first time I vaguely thought he was in Africa. Either the person who introduced us to each other didn't convey the right messages, or the tropical landscapes and skin tones in the photos posted in his WeChat moments are too misleading. It took me some time to correct my psychological distance—the time difference between Papua New Zealand and China is only two hours, and the round-trip air ticket is about 8000 RMB. He warned before the call that the quality of the calls would be bad. The local network needs to be improved, but in the current environment, the moment we heard about it we immediately associated it with business opportunities. The company's business in Papua New Guinea is a tiny part in the Chinese "One Belt and One Road" project. It is hard not to be curious about his identity as an artist and employee of state-owned enterprises. But we disagreed on the local impact of One Belt and One Road - his optimism was not what I had expected. Age and education, if not because of outright criticism, he should be almost as hesitant as I am. Of course, this alone shows my own bias.

But in any case, I'm certain that the topic of "One Belt and One Road" arouse interest among people, as I'm sure the differences between the two of us are extremely typical and inconclusive. Is China's trade activities in Africa were to help reconstruct Africa pure economic activities or a new round of colonial expansion? You can hear a variety of ideas through a variety of channels, but they are broadly distributed within a predictable spectrum. Over the past month, I have read "How China's Second Continent—How a Million Immigrants are Building a New Empire in Africa" by former New York Times senior reporter Howard French. He also mentioned in his foreword the paucity of such debates: "People either defend China in an introspective manner, or they cheer the value of western powers loudly, and they laugh at every single failure in China. He believes that one of the most important and most unpredictable factors in the relationship between China and Africa is the millions of Chinese migrants he writes about in Africa. "An era is always shaped by a significant number of a few people, step by step, who, with unknown motives and purposes, indirectly create the so-called reality." I agree with that. The same is true of my communication with Fang Di -- deciding not to evaluate a policy and its aftereffect which is too macro. I said I would love to see more faces in his story.

The story of Old Zhang, Elder Zhang, and underworld boss's overlaps with some of the early immigrant stories I read in "The Second Mainland of China." You can find that the early Chinese settlers went to these "undeveloped" areas almost by way of hearsay. For example, how to imagine the story of a Hebei ex-soldier who decided to go to Namibia to do business on his own in 1996? These cases have the feeling of survival literature in the early adventure stories, which are legends in retrospect. But I also find that individual stories are still not the end of the story. What's more suspicious is the shifting distance between the individuals in these stories and the larger concept of the state (or not just the concept, but sometimes the very specific act of the state. It was also in 1996 that Chinese leaders launched the Initiative of the China-Africa Economic Cooperation Forum during their visit to Africa. In this context, individuals are in considerable sync with the state, but at the same time they seem to completely disconnect with the actions being taken by the other side: in the individual storyline, domestic survival pressures force people to leave their homes and they are

repeatedly expelled for overstaying visas; On the national agenda, the 1996 initiative was implemented in 2000 for the first ministerial meeting of the China-Africa Economic Cooperation Forum to be held in Beijing. But it is at a "mysterious" moment (I fail to find the right answers in the book), that the two narrative threads begin to overlap again -- in the description of the author, for any place in the midst of a tidal wave of immigration, "Mr Zhang and other Chinese businessmen are building the new China. And Africa is only the backdrop for prosperity. These "plot" puzzles also brought me back to the original disagreement -- not only between me and Fang Di but also the repeating disputes over The Belt and Road Initiative in my recent life—whether to support or against it, be hopeful or worried? How far between the position with a strong feeling of substitution and "the reality"? If it doesn't even have to be based on reality, what does the debate point to? In these windy debates, what is the distance between individual positions and national trends?

- Guo Juan