



FEDERAL REPUBLIC OF WEST PAPUA

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MEDIA RELEASE: BOOK LAUNCH: Sophie Chao's *In the shadow of the palms: More-than-human becomings in West Papua* (Duke University Press, 2022)

The West Papua Women's Office is proud to launch Sophie Chao's *In the shadow of the palms: More-than-human becomings in West Papua* at 838 Collins St, Docklands on 11 September 2022.

The stories recounted by this award-winning anthropologist about oil palm and sago palm in Merauke (West Papua) are mesmerizing; her interpretation of them is clear and powerful.

The flour that the Indigenous Marind People of Merauke produce from their sago palms has been a staple for as long as any of them can remember; they use it, every day, in a variety of recipes. It was only about a decade ago that the Indonesian government started sponsoring agri-businesses to start razing Marind's customary forests, including their ancient sago groves, to plant oil palms. Such large-scale deforestation has rendered Marind's ancient kin-family—of people, plants, and animals—homeless. Environmentalists call the process 'ecocide'.

Australians should be well versed with the Marind People and their homeland. In 1942, along with our American and Dutch allies, we transformed Merauke, then a small village, into a huge military base, which housed at peak about 7,000 soldiers, sailors and airmen (including a young Gough Whitlam). Numerous photos in the Australian War Memorial attest to our soldiers' industry in Merauke and their relations with the Marind: building landing strips, wharves, radar towers, roads, enjoying Melbourne Cup day Timor-pony races, looking out over bomb-shredded coconut trees, the glorious Chapel of St John built with local materials in the traditional style.

Chao spent eighteen months among the Marind, eating, living, hunting, and journeying across the forests and plantations with them. Her on-ground experience shows in her clear interpretation of a complex cosmology, where, for example, animals like crocodiles, kangaroos, and cassowaries are recognised and revered as 'kin'. This Indigenous worldview offers a vital counterpoint to western traditions stretching back to biblical times that command us to 'steward' the environment and all therein, rather than treat it and them as 'family'.

Sophie Chao's *In the shadow of the palms* was awarded the 2019 Australian Anthropological Society Best PhD Thesis prize and the 2020 Asian Studies Association of Australia John Legge Prize. Her book further received the Inaugural Duke University Press Scholars of Color First Book Award in 2021.

Read the Introduction at https://www.dukeupress.edu/Assets/PubMaterials/978-1-4780-1824-7_601.pdf
Watch the trailer at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U0n1dbxUa1k>

Inquiries about the West Papua Women's Office launch on Sunday 11 September should be directed to Louise Byrne on 0424745155, or frwpwomensoffice@gmail.com, or <https://dfait.federalrepublicofwestpapua.org/book-launch-open-day-sunday-11-sept-2022/>