Five minutes with Dr Sophie Chao

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Social anthropologist Dr Sophie Chao's research has taken her to Indonesia, the United Nations, Oxford University, West Papua and beyond. We catch up with her to find out what she's learned along the way.

What is your background and how did you come to join the University?

I am of French and Chinese background and have lived, studied and worked in Hong Kong, France, the United Kingdom, Indonesia, and most recently, Australia. As a social anthropologist by training, I am interested in the role of culture in shaping human life, behaviour and relations across time and space.

Prior to my doctoral studies in Australia, I worked for the international Indigenous rights organisation Forest Peoples Programme, supporting Indigenous communities to protect their rights to land and livelihoods in the face of large-scale oil palm developments across Southeast Asia and Africa. I joined the University in March 2019 as a Postdoctoral Research Associate at the School of Philosophical and Historical Inquiry upon completing my PhD at Macquarie University.

Ceremonies that celebrate the nourishment provided by the forest, rivers and landscape are widespread among indigenous Marind. In this photo, participants don sago fibre skirts and mud face paints in preparation for the ritual. Credit: Sophie Chao (pictured left).

You've spent much of your professional and academic life working on the ground in West Papua and Indonesia. You also speak fluent Bahasa Indonesia I'm told. What sparked your interest and drew you to this area of the world?

I first visited Indonesia at the age of 11 with my parents and brother and was struck at the time by the country's remarkable cultural diversity. Indonesia is home to over 1,100 Indigenous groups and over 700 living languages that are spread out across around 6,000 islands. It is also ranked the third most biodiverse country in the world and boasts an incredible range of ecosystems – from rainforests to mountain ranges, savannah to swamplands, and more. I've always felt like learning the local language was the best way to immerse myself into local culture and create relations of trust and friendship on the ground. That's why I decided to learn Bahasa Indonesia – first at a language school in Yogyakarta and then through the patience and generosity of my colleagues and friends in Jakarta.

My later work in Indonesia was motivated by the rampant ecological destruction happening across the country as a result of monocrop oil palm expansion. In particular, I wanted to help communities that were being displaced or dispossessed to make way for oil palm, get their voices and grievances heard at the national and international level. For instance, by supporting communities to undertake participatory mapping, offering training in human rights, and submitting complaints to United Nations human rights bodies.

> *“ Collaboration to me is about creating or finding connections across fields about a world that is, after all, composed entirely of connections – between theory and method, knowledge and practice, people and planet. ”*

What is one of the most surprising things you've learned through your research?

A lot of my research explores how Indigenous communities conceptualise and engage with the non-human world – for instance, plants, animals, landscapes and elements. One of the most surprising things I learned from the Indigenous communities I work with in West Papua is that humans do not exist separate from, or above, nature. Rather, humans come into meaningful being through their relations to plants, animals and the elements. Each of these entities are endowed with agency, volition and personhood.

Coming to terms with this worldview required that I radically rethink my own daily relationship to non-human life – the plants and animals from whom I obtain food, the elements that surround and nourish us and the landscapes integral to human and non-human wellbeing. In this regard, my research has had implications far beyond academia – it has encouraged me to resituate what it means to be human along a much broader spectrum of life and meaning, both human and non-human.

Sophie with participants in a land reclaiming ritual in Merauke, West Papua.

You're a member of the Charles Perkins Centre, Sydney Environment Institute, Sydney Southeast Asia Centre and the China Studies Centre, four of the University's multidisciplinary initiatives. What's the value of collaborating with researchers in other fields?

I strongly believe that collaboration across disciplines is central to holistic research of both intellectual and applied value. Collaboration teaches you that the way you think about knowledge is profoundly shaped by your disciplinary training – the forms of knowing you take for granted, the kinds of questions you think matter, and the kinds of answers you deem valid.

More importantly, collaboration teaches you to translate your knowledge in ways that are intelligible beyond your own discipline, so that it can help answer questions that other scholars may be asking themselves. Collaboration to me is also a practice of respect. By that I mean that it requires being open to new ideas, premises, and ways of knowing, and finding ways to integrate them or harness them to inform your own research. Collaboration is valuable because it fosters a flexibility of mind that generates innovation, creativity, and thinking outside the box(es). Finally, collaboration to me is about creating or finding

connections across fields about a world that is, after all, composed entirely of connections – between theory and method, knowledge and practice, and people and planet.

What made you want to come to Sydney to pursue academia after working for the United Nations and the Forest Peoples Programme?

I always knew I wanted to do a PhD – I just hadn't found a research question that I knew I would be passionate about for three, maybe four or more years! It was working for Forest Peoples Programme that made me discover West Papua, meet the Indigenous communities among whom I eventually undertook fieldwork, and brought me to identify the themes and questions I wanted to investigate.

I wanted to do a PhD because it would allow me to take a step back from advocacy and reflect more critically on the implications of human rights activism, the opportunities and challenges posed by human rights frameworks for Indigenous communities, and the ethical dimensions of speaking for, or on behalf of, marginalised peoples who often hold very different aspirations for themselves and for future generations.

I came to Sydney because I found three wonderful supervisors at Macquarie University and Deakin University who were willing to host my research in West Papua – a region that is notoriously difficult for foreign researchers to access. After five years studying at Oxford University, I was also curious to discover how anthropology was taught and practised in a different cultural and geographic setting – Australia – in more interdisciplinary ways.

> *"...Leadership for good requires collective participation and decision-making. The more voices that are heard and listened to, the more inclusive and therefore legitimate leadership can be."*

Do you have a mentor at the University, and what have they taught you?

My mentor, Professor Warwick Anderson, has been an invaluable source of advice, guidance, and support since I started this postdoc. Warwick has taught me to find my bearings within the University as an early-career researcher, both in terms of networking and in terms of professional and academic development. He has helped connect me with scholars across a range of disciplines of relevance to my research, both within and beyond Australia. Importantly, Warwick has taught me that a good mentor is one that takes the time to sit down over lunch, chat about work and life, while at the same time checking in on their mentee's personal and intellectual wellbeing and engaging in thought-provoking discussions about the questions that matter in my research.

What does leadership for good mean to you?

Leadership for good means several things. First, it requires generosity of self and knowledge. By this, I mean a willingness to share ideas, provocations and critical reflections in ways that are respectful of, and even embrace, difference. Second would be personal connection. By this, I mean an interest and care for others both as colleagues, friends, and individuals. Third, leadership for good to me points to an ethos of responsibility for one's actions and their consequences – both for oneself and for others. Finally, I think leadership for good requires collective participation and decision-making. The more voices that are heard and listened to, the more inclusive and therefore legitimate leadership can be.

What is your favourite book and your favourite song of all time?

I can't say I have a favourite 'anything' of all time but right at the moment, I'm captivated by Ernst Haeckel's Kunstformen der Natur ("Art Forms of Nature"), a compilation of multicolour illustrations of animals and sea creatures. Haeckel was a zoologist, naturalist, philosopher, physician, professor, marine biologist and artist who discovered, described and named thousands of new species, mapped a genealogical tree relating all life forms, who coined the term "ecology" back in the 1960s. I'm particularly drawn to his illustrations of marine creatures because they are incredibly vivid and detailed, and because they capture in remarkable ways the complexity and aesthetics of non-human lifeforms.

In musical terms, the soundtrack to my commute to and from the University at the moment is the album Ninalik Ndawi ("Freedom Song") by The Lani Singers, produced by a West Papuan activist and friend, Benny Wenda, and his wife, Maria

Wenda. Benny and Maria come from the Baliem Valley in the West Papuan highlands and their songs are a moving fusion of Indigenous Lani spirituality and human rights activism in support of cultural and political self-determination in West Papua.

Last week's Five Minutes With participant David Le Couteur wanted to ask, "Do you want to live to 100 and if so, why?"

I think the answer to this question would really depend on the quality of the life I would lead, and the kind of world I would live it in. In an age of radical ecological destruction largely provoked by human activity, I would want to think about how liveable the world is for the many other entities with whom we share it with - plants, animals, fungi, microbes and more. A long life, for me, would only be desirable if it is also a more-than-human life, lived together with the species that inhabit it. Life, to me, becomes meaningful through the relations we forge and sustain throughout it. The degree to which we are able to continue doing that sustainably and ethically would determine how long I'd want to be around for!

Please pose a question for next week's particpant:

How do you understand the term "interdisciplinary" and why do you think it matters as a mode of academic research?

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