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## Chapter 7

# Encountering Chinese development in the Maldives: Gifts, hospitality, and rumours

Luke Heslop and Laura Jeffery

### **Key words:**

**Maldives; encounter; geopolitics; rumour; gifts; link road**

### **Abstract**

This chapter examines the longest and most developed road in the Maldives archipelago, a fifteen-kilometre-long link road connecting four islands of the Laamu (or Haddummati) Atoll. In the planning phase, there were tensions between those who argued that the road should connect houses to the school and the mosque and those who argued that the road should connect the harbour to the market. Such appeals, bifurcated along gender lines, reflect local mobility concerns and were tied to existing political rifts between the four islands that were intensified by the appearance of a new infrastructural asset. The built road facilitates a multitude of local encounters as people travel further and more regularly, but it is also through the road that islanders encounter the global forces of capital and construction that shape their islands. The Laamu link road was a ‘gift’ from the Chinese government, constructed by the Jiangsu Transportation Engineering Group (JTEG), and amidst local mobility concerns and inter-island politics swirl rumours and hearsay of land grabs and international power struggles between China, India, the US, and Saudi Arabia. This chapter, as well as being an ethnographic exposition of Chinese infrastructure development in a South Asian archipelago, explores the road as a social experience as it crosscuts competing visions of modernity, global connectivity, and anxiety about material change on remote coral atolls in the Indian Ocean.

### **Foreign encounters and changing infrastructure**

Approximately 67 million years ago, the tectonic plate of what is now the Indian subcontinent drifted northward over a particularly hot part of the Earth’s mantle, stretching from Reunion to the Deccan Traps of India, and sprouted a row of volcanoes, which later cooled and subsided. For millennia, coral has grown atop this sunken oceanic plateau, the Chagos-Lakshadvip (formerly Laccadive) volcanic ridge, which stretches from the Chagos Archipelago to the Lakshadvip Sea off the coast of Kerala.<sup>1</sup> As the volcanoes subsided, they left upwardly growing fringing coral that had formed around the peaks where they touched the surface of the water (Darwin 1842). Fringing coral and calcified sediment became sandbanks in the ocean, which eventually bore vegetation and became habitable.<sup>2</sup> The outlines of these sunken volcanoes form the distinctive crescent shapes of the 26 coralline atolls that comprise the Maldives archipelago today.<sup>3</sup> Currently the Maldives national

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<sup>1</sup> Today, the ridge lies at a depth of 1000 m below sea level, bounded by waters which drop to an oceanic floor of 2500 m on the east side and 4000 m on the west (see Forbes 1980; Rufin-Soler et al. 2014).

<sup>2</sup> The current layer of Maldives reefs began forming at the top of this coral platform about 7500 years ago (Kench et al. 2009).

<sup>3</sup> Fuvahmula is the archipelago’s only single island atoll without a lagoon.

territory covers an area of 90,000 km<sup>2</sup>, but only 300 km<sup>2</sup> qualifies as land (Bremner 2016: 289). The National Bureau of Statistics (2015) reported that the 2014 census had enumerated a total resident population of 402,071, of whom 157,693 (around 38%) lived in the capital island, Malé, which has the fastest-growing population out of any island in the Maldives, and is one of the most densely populated cities in the world at 65,201 people per km<sup>2</sup> (Maldives National Bureau of Statistics 2015: 13, 20, 21). The rest of the population is dispersed across 20 administrative atolls (encompassing 118 inhabited administrative islands) and non-administrative islands (109 tourist resorts and 128 industrial islands and islands used for other purposes) (ibid.: 15). Historically the Maldives has been somewhat enclaved from the surrounding world by its perilous reefs; islands are dispersed across the atolls, which in places are separated by large deep-water channels. One such channel is the 'Equatorial Channel', which separates the country's southernmost atolls (Addu and Fuvahmulla) from the rest of the archipelago to the north. The largest deep-water channel is called the one-and-a-half-degree channel because it cuts laterally through the atoll one-and-a-half-degrees north of the equator. This channel is 50 miles wide and lies south of Laamu atoll. We will later return to this channel, but for now, this is the fragmented geophysical environment that has come to shape the political terrain on which infrastructural encounters take place.

This chapter focuses on a more recent infrastructural encounter on the Maldivian atoll of Laamu, where the Chinese government developed a fifteen-kilometre-long link road connecting four islands on a north/south axis. The Laamu link road, completed in 2016, is the longest road in the Maldives, and is an instantiation, for people in the Maldives generally as well as in Laamu specifically, of a new modernity: a concrete symbol of development and a sign of things to come. The common Divehi word for 'development' (*thara'gee*) is a relatively new word, with *thara* said by some to derive from the English word 'tarmac'. *Thara'gee* is thus explicitly linked with concrete or asphaltic manifestations of change on the islands. The root word for 'progress' (*kuri*) by contrast, is borrowed from the word for the bud of a plant, forming a distinct linguistic split between conceptualizing ecological growth as progress and development as tar.

As a 'gift' from the Chinese government, the Laamu link road also represents for Maldivians a seemingly axiomatic connection to global power networks and to struggles between China, India, the US, and Saudi Arabia. The danger of 'the gift', as anthropologists following Marcel Mauss have illustrated, is that it is never pure, but rather embroiled in wider circuits of power, reciprocity, and 'total systems of exchange' (Mauss 1954; cf. Gregory 1982; Parry 1986). Gifts are loaded with risk, carrying a moral peril of indebtedness and injurious patronage: reciprocation of some sort is always expected and rarely unproblematic. Anthropological literature on 'gifts' in the context of development, whether philanthropic benevolence (Osella et al. 2015), or couched in terms of disinterested Christian charitable giving of 'pure gifts' (Stirrat and Henkel 1997: 77), or corporate social responsibility programmes that seek to do well by doing good (Dolan and Rajak 2016), similarly suggest that 'gifts' come with strings. Much of this literature draws on the Trojan Horse of Homeric myth by way of an explanatory metaphor. The Chinese state explicitly conceptualizes Chinese development projects as 'gifts' (Yeh 2013: 14), and analysts have pointed to the implications for recipients across South Asia not only in terms of 'indebtedness' (e.g. for Tibet Autonomous Region, see Yeh and Wharton 2016: 296), 'surveillance' (e.g. over Tibetans in Nepal, see Murton et al. 2016: 414), and 'influence' (e.g. for Kazakhstan, see Koch 2013; for Mongolia, see Jackson and Dear 2016: 357, 367). While infrastructure development funded by wealthy global powers such as China has the potential to transform the Maldives, it simultaneously gives rise to concerns about land grabs and lagoon colonization.

Suspicion of gift-laden strangers, foreign encounters, the arrival of distant seafarers and would-be colonizers, generosity, and the perils of changing island infrastructure (both physical and social), are pervasive themes of everyday life in the Maldives and popular tropes within Maldivian folk lore. Moreover, new arrivals to the islands, changing island infrastructure, and a threat to the sociopolitical order go hand in hand. This is perhaps most neatly encapsulated in ‘The Sandbank of the Seabirds’, a folk tale from the southernmost Addu Atoll. To paraphrase the version recorded by Xavier Romero-Frias (1999: 60-61): Seabirds fed, rested, and bred on an isolated sandbank surrounded by fish. One day the sandbank was visited by a Maldivian cuckoo called a *dīkoi*. The seabirds allowed the land bird to stay overnight, but the oldest seabird warned the others that this visit would be devastating for them. The following morning, when the cuckoo left, it had left its droppings in the sand. The seeds in the droppings began to germinate and eventually the island was covered in lush green bushes. The old seabird warned that the growth of bushes would mean that the seabirds would have to move away, but the other seabirds still dismissed him, enjoying the shade offered by the new vegetation. Soon, however, the lush vegetation attracted a passing fisherman, who then sought and was granted permission by the atoll chief to plant and harvest coconuts on the island. Seeing that the trees grew well, the fisherman built a hut and brought his children, who chased the seabirds and ate their eggs. The fisherman periodically caught seabirds, which he took home with their legs tied and wingtips cut, and eventually only a few seabirds remained. The wise seabird gathered the survivors and together they left the sandbank that had been their home for so long.

Read as an allegorical tale of warning, this folk story from Addu Atoll alludes to a long-standing wariness of outsiders and the fear of contamination. Here, the arrival of a seemingly harmless outsider contaminates the sand and encourages an infrastructural change that catastrophically destabilises the existing political and social order.<sup>4</sup> The story speaks to a pervasive xenophobia in contemporary Maldivian social life born from an inherited fear of *beyru miniha* (outsiders/outside people) that has been largely encouraged by the state (Colton 1999: 94). At the level of the household, *beyru* can refer to people from beyond the boundary wall of the compound (*beyru faaru*), notably those who enter the household through service or marriage.<sup>5</sup> At the level of the nation, this is bound up in a powerful historically produced sense of duty to protect Islam – the one and only permitted religion – from contamination by the invading *kaffir* (a pejorative term for non-Muslim). While marriage can decontaminate outsiders entering the household, conversion to Islam decontaminates entrance to the nation and is a *sine qua non* for being Maldivian.<sup>6</sup> The idiom of contamination is particularly apt in the context of climate and environmental change: as the reefs become contaminated, the low-lying coralline islands become less resilient to sea-level rise (Baer and Singer 2014; Orlove et al. 2014: 259-260). One of the major contaminators in this regard is sediment produced from dredging and dumping sand on the reef flats, which is currently common practice in island infrastructural development in the Maldives.

As the islands sink beneath the surface of the ocean, much like the volcanoes that preceded them and gave the atolls their shape, the islands are resurfaced not with foliage, as

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<sup>4</sup> The enclosure and isolation of the tourist industry to discrete islands for the first decades evinces wariness of integration on inhabited islands.

<sup>5</sup> This has been documented by Elizabeth Colton among elite families of Malé. Outside of Malé phrases such as ‘*keyo kewvaru engeynee bithu fangi negeema*’ (‘we’ll know how many bananas were eaten when the [thatched] walls are taken down’), suggests that creating partitions shielding homespaces is more problematic than protecting the home from outsiders. This phrase has been taken up more recently as a reference to institutions and the importance of transparency to limit corruption.

<sup>6</sup> The 1997 constitution designates Islam as the official state religion. The government interprets this provision to impose a requirement that citizens be Muslims (see also Maloney 1980: 175).

in the folk tale, but with asphalt and concrete born from the seeds of Chinese foreign direct investment that have germinated within a changing economy. As some seabirds enjoyed respite from the sun under the foliage, unaware of what this lush greenery would mean for their future on the sandbank, people across the atoll today ride up and down on imported mopeds playing out a mobile and fast-moving vision of ‘modernity’ (*zamaanee*), on the asphalt roads, perhaps unaware, or unconcerned, with what this may mean for the future of the islands.

Like the anthropological literature on the gift, anthropological approaches to hospitality draw attention to the asymmetric relationships, expectations of eventual reciprocation, and potential dangers for hosts and guests alike (Herzfeld 1987; Marsden 2012: 119, 124; Delaplace 2012: 140-141; Kelly 2012: 150). In this literature, the (giving) hosts have power over their (receiving) guests. By contrast, both ‘The Sandbank of the Seabirds’ and our case study of the Laamu link road exemplify the opposite power relation to the hospitality literature: the danger is in offering hospitality to a guest whose powers may not be fully known from the start. Moreover, studies of hospitality tend to start with the host giving and the guest receiving (e.g. Delaplace 2012: 141). By contrast, the case of the Laamu link road presents the opposite process: the Chinese government (guest) first ‘gives’ development to the Maldives (host), with a view – perhaps, if the rumours are true – to ‘taking’ something else later.

Historically, built infrastructure on the Maldives has been shaped around harnessing or protecting against the wind and the ocean as it impacts on the islands. Houses were constructed at angles to channel the cooling wind as it comes off the sea. Routes commonly run east-west from the central point of habitation to the shore so that boats can dock and get their goods onto the island in rough seas during both the south-west and north-east monsoon seasons.<sup>7</sup> By contrast the fifteen-kilometre-long Laamu link road runs north to south. Infrastructure has been designed and built in response to the forces acting upon the islands themselves. If the link road stands as an infrastructural response to (and a product of) a different set of forces that impact the atoll, what are those forces? The rough seas of late capitalism, or the ‘capitaloscene’ (Tsing et al. 2017; Haraway 2015)? The changing winds of global power? How is the link road perceived to ready the islands, and for what kind of imagined future? What are the problems for which the link road is imagined as a desirable solution? This chapter explores the Laamu link road as a social experience, as it intersects competing visions of modernity, global connectivity, and anxiety about material change on a small island in the Indian Ocean. The chapter discusses the development of the Laamu link road, Chinese construction and Maldivian maintenance, the process by which projects beget projects, and associated rumours about geopolitical power struggles in the Indian Ocean.

### **Conceptualization of the Laamu link road**

Laamu is the largest atoll in the Maldives and is an administrative division consisting of twelve inhabited islands with a total population of around 15,000 people.<sup>8</sup> Most of Laamu’s islands are small and isolated farming islands used to grow cash crop vegetables or dedicated to industrial work such as fish packing, and are mainly occupied by Bangladeshi, Sri Lankan, and Nepalese labourers. The Laamu link road goes through four elongated islands running north to south on the eastern rim of the atoll: Gan, Maandhoo, Kadhdhoo, and Fonadhoo. Of these, the two islands that are significantly populated are those at either end: the northernmost and larger island of Gan and the southernmost and smaller island of Fonadhoo. At the time the research was conducted (2016-2017), Gan was dominated by supporters of the opposition

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<sup>7</sup> South-west monsoon: June to September; north-east monsoon: October to April.

<sup>8</sup> Not including expatriate workers.

Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP), while Fonadhoo was dominated by supporters of the government Progressive Party of Maldives (PPM). Perhaps unsurprisingly, government largesse seemed to fall on Fonadhoo, as evinced by complaints that those from Gan have to travel to Fonadhoo for the cash machine and the petrol station. On the other hand, however, people from Fonadhoo have to travel to Gan for the atoll hospital and the college. As is common elsewhere on the archipelago's inhabited islands, the split between the two political parties' supporters is well broadcasted by the colour they paint their homes and compound walls: bright pink for the government party; yellow for the main opposition, MDP.

The two central islands, Maandhoo and Kadhdhoo, host a large fisheries company and a military airport, respectively. The fisheries company in Maandhoo is a gated industrial complex with a private harbour and accommodation for the 500 Bangladeshi, Sri Lankan, and Nepalese labourers that reportedly work there. The scale of the harbour is only evident when flying over the island; it is only from the air that one can see the harbour large enough to dock more than fifteen large trawlers, hidden behind a stretch of reclaimed land. Across the road from the factory, a coconut tree plantation spreads out towards the sea. Tucked away in some of the thicker scrub is an old Buddhist stupa, a relic of the pre-Islamic past of the Maldives.<sup>9</sup>

The excavation for the Iskandhar Military Airport in Kadhdhoo began in the early 1980s and was completed in 1986. It was one of the early projects of former President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom and went against the grain of his otherwise centralist national development policies, which focused heavily on Malé and the Malé region throughout his 30-year presidency (1978-2008). Kadhdhoo Airport also receives several flights a week from the domestic carrier Maldives Aero.<sup>10</sup> Tourists disembark, cross the highway to a small harbour, and are promptly taken to a nearby luxury resort. The development of the central islands is geared towards export processing and tourism, representing a privatized model of economic development. The transport networks that emerged from this industry and cater for it are waterways and air travel. Public mobility concerns per se were not a priority in the infrastructural development of the atoll.

Historically, islanders had to take a small boat (*bokra*) from island to island across the reef flat.<sup>11</sup> By the 1990s, causeways linked Fonadhoo to Kadhdhoo, Maandhoo to Gan, and finally Maandhoo to Kadhdhoo. In the 1990s, the first petition for road development was put to the government in Malé through an island chief (*katheebu*), who could speak to the atoll chief (*atholhu verin*), who could speak to the president. Anything pertaining to infrastructure development and public planning was decided by President Gayoom and a close circle of national planners. Nothing happened, and it wasn't until 2005 that any major road work seemed possible. Somebody from the Ministry of Atolls Development visited Laamu to announce that the deputy minister for the then Construction Ministry had said that there was an offer of foreign aid to build a road. However, the amount on offer was rumoured to be only half as much as would be required to successfully develop the road. According to the atoll president, in light of this rumoured funding shortfall there were discussions of building

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<sup>9</sup> According to H.C.P. Bell, who documented Buddhist relics in Laamu in 1922, Buddhism spread from northern India to Sri Lanka around the third century BC and from Sri Lanka to the Maldives in the first century BC (Bell 1940), although Buddhism in Maldives was not thought to have taken root until the first or second century AD (see Forbes 1980: 44). In addition to the stupa mentioned, Bell also documented a *sanghārāma* (Buddhist monastery) on Gan.

<sup>10</sup> The airport development was supervised by a member of Gayoom's parliament called Ilyas Ibrahim, who is a bit of a local hero, despite not originating from the island, or even the atoll itself: he is from Malé, is former President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom's brother-in-law (wife's brother), and was in President Gayoom's cabinet.

<sup>11</sup> These boat trips are within living memory of people on the islands currently over 30 years old.

either a two-lane road that went half the distance, or a single lane that could run the full distance of the atoll. At this time, nobody on the island really knew what could be done or who would do it. In the years that followed, nothing seemed to happen about this offer of foreign aid. Nevertheless, according to many Laamu inhabitants, discussions had started about how to build a road with only half the required money and where a connecting road should go. As a public good, who should the road serve? This question sparked conversations about contiguous land-based mobility, connectivity, how the islands should progress and develop, and what sort of political channels exist to participate in decisions concerning where such a road may run.

### **Chinese construction and Maldivian management**

In 2008 the political landscape shifted significantly. Following the MDP's electoral success, petitions proceeded from a bureaucratic infrastructure of councils and community groups to MPs and cabinet ministers. The political and economic conditions for the link road in Laamu seem to have been the perfect storm of a government that had become more open to foreign direct investment and grant-aid development projects combined with a programme of decentralization that saw larger infrastructure development on islands beyond greater Malé. Two influential MPs in the MDP government had also developed guest houses in Gan and wanted easy transportation for people and materials. This was perhaps the first time that the people of Laamu successfully petitioned through a political channel other than directly through the island chief.

In 2009, during MDP President Nasheed's term in office, the idea of the road was reinvigorated with community discussions and a survey. This was the early days of community-engaged participatory development and stakeholder consultation in the Maldives, when the development industry promoted 'partnerships' and 'dialogue' as opposed to top-down strategies (Linnell 2003): a step change in development practice very much on-message with the values of electoral democracy being pumped into the political bloodstream of every island during the MDP era. Before electoral politics and a multiparty governance system, islands would generally get what they were given by national presidents and their close circle of national planners, and before this by the sultan. At the island level, resources such as houses would be allocated to island inhabitants by the island chief, who had control over land disputes and could exile people from the island entirely under the authority of the sultanate (Maloney 1980). The atoll and island councils formed under President Nasheed supplanted the island chiefs to become the new administrative channel through which development would flow from the capital to the islands. However, many in Laamu felt that the islands councils were involved in the consultation and road discussion process at a very superficial level; as soon as the project began everything was reportedly deferred to the ministry level. It was made clear by an official on the island that formal discussions with island inhabitants regarding where the road should go was thought to be merely a performance of participatory practice on the part of the project proponent. According to officials who participated in these meetings and those who claimed to have attended them, there did not need to be a carefully selected and willing 'public' for 'public consultation'. To hold the consultation was enough. It was still the early days of the Maldives's foray with multiparty democratic processes, cooperation did not really need to be established, it was enough simply hold the consultation. It was still expected that the national government – referred to in such instances as the 'Malé government' – and the company would have the final say.

In 2012, towards the abrupt end of Nasheed's term in office, a Chinese company, China Communication Construction Company (CCCC) Ltd., the same company constructing the China-Maldives Friendship Bridge connecting Malé to Hulhulé, completed the road design and released some 'final drawings'. There was evidently a marked disparity between the

specification for the link road that developed through the survey and the finished design for the road that finally emerged, with the effect that islanders became sceptical about public consultation processes. In 2014, following an agreement that China would build the road, the Maldivian government signed a contract with a Chinese subsidiary developer, Jiangsu Transportation Engineering Group (JTEG). Construction work was completed in two years as promised. Towards the end of the construction process islanders petitioned for additional new roads that would connect residential areas to local facilities: schools (reportedly favoured by women), mosques (reportedly favoured by men), and health facilities. However, members of the Gan Island Council, including the island president, who had access to municipal vehicles and needed to travel between islands, resisted such requests on the grounds that a link road was supposed to be an uninterrupted highway on which one could travel without worrying about slower vehicles attempting to merge onto the highway. Though the window for consultation had long since closed, island inhabitants also petitioned for pedestrian paths and cycle routes that were protected and shaded, but these requests seemingly came too late in the process to be realized within the scope of the construction project.

One aspect of the road that people seemed keen to change was on the southern cusp of Gan, where a sharp bend follows a long straight on which riders have built up speed. During fieldwork, discussion focused on a fatal accident that had already claimed the life of one young man. Whilst people were upset about the accident, criticism centred on the Maldives Road Development Corporation (MRDC), implying that there was confusion about who was responsible for such repairs before the official opening of the road had begun and while there was still a presence of Chinese workers on the island, diminished though it was.

In 2016, management of the Laamu link road was transferred from the Chinese contractors JTEG to the MRDC, a relatively young state corporation (see Heslop and Jeffery 2020). This marks an important transition in the life of a road from construction to maintenance. Maintenance of the road is the responsibility of the MRDC via its government budget allowance. Neither Gan nor Fonadhoo generate any kind of revenue that would allow them to service the roads or contract any specific work. Island residents fear that this has the potential to reopen the door for politically driven imbalances within budgetary allocations: that is, the concern that the government would prioritize road maintenance for islands that support the government. There is a history to this concern: in Addu Atoll, the southernmost atoll in the Maldives archipelago, the British military connected another island – also called Gan – to three neighbouring islands by building a ten-mile-long causeway, which was at that time the longest road in the Maldives (Maloney 1980: 203), the local council claim to have no way to pay the commercial rates of the MRDC to maintain the roads, and municipal councillors and islanders alike attribute the lack of budgetary support for road maintenance to the fact that Addu is a majority MDP atoll.

What comes to the fore in this section, is not only how the road is engaged with in the physical production process, but how new local political channels are explored, albeit with little success, as a means to participate in the road-construction process. Moreover, it shows that maintenance of the road is highly political and a key site to engage in politics. It also shows that public consultations and what comes out of them in respect to the actual road are two different things. Despite the changing political climate for participatory decision making and talk of a democratized and a locally enfranchised polity, once the road management became a gift and taken under the auspices of the ministry at the national level, newly established political channels became somewhat ineffectual locally. Dealing with the Chinese firm directly was near impossible, channels to make contact were ineffective, and the company itself operated behind gated compounds.

**How (Chinese) projects beget (Chinese) projects**

The Laamu link road was offered as a gift from the Chinese government to the Maldives government. Through contractual agreements and memorandums of understanding between China and the Maldives, a Chinese firm, JTEG, was contracted to undertake the construction. Other similar agreements include: a housing project funded through concessional loan financing by the government of China, and implemented by the China Machinery Engineering Corporation (CMEC); the expansion and upgrading of Ibrahim Nasir International Airport, contracted to the Overseas Business Department of the Beijing Urban Construction Group Company Limited; and the Malé-Hulhulé Bridge Project, contracted to CCCC. Gifting in this way gives Chinese infrastructure development firms an opportunity to expand beyond domestic markets and opens avenues for other projects and investment in overseas businesses.

The gift of the Laamu link road and the subsequent contracts awarded is a recognizable element of China's expansion into foreign markets, known officially as China's 'Going Out' (*zou chuqu*) strategy. By 2014, the Chinese Export-Import Bank and the China Development Bank had become a larger lender than the World Bank (Zhou and Leung 2015), with over US\$100 billion of outward overseas foreign direct investment (OFDI) on the books (Yeh 2016: 275). As part of this outward-looking strategy, Chinese state-owned enterprises, like CCCC and CMEC mentioned above, were encouraged to open up new markets for its firms and facilitate access to credit (Yeh and Wharton 2016: 287). China doesn't simply create markets for its own infrastructure contracts and expertise in South Asia: it also creates new export markets for raw materials, notably steel and concrete.

Opposition MDP party members, interviewed in Colombo in 2016, pointed out that the company contracted to build the Malé-Hulhulé Bridge had been blacklisted by the World Bank Group: in 2009, CCCC was debarred for engaging in fraudulent practices during a national road project in the Philippines (World Bank 2011). The MDP questioned the transparency processes underpinning such large infrastructure gifts, and argued that the government politicians were pursuing their own financial interests. The MDP also explained that the flooding of the Maldivian economy by China's Export-Import Bank would tie up the country's GDP in servicing the debt, such has been thought to be the *modus operandi* in many other countries. Furthermore, they warned that China would take land as collateral and ensure the Maldivian government supplies contracts to Chinese firms.

MDP opposition politicians were vocal about the dangers of the Chinese debt trap, but the response this appeal evoked locally was not entirely coherent. Islanders often presented themselves as being reluctant to incur the resultant punishing levels of national debt, yet simultaneously unsure about what this might mean or how that might play out in real terms. Maldivians don't pay tax and have only since the construction of Hulhumalé (1997-2002) had the right to own and sell property; treasury accounts have historically been restricted to a select few at the centre of power. Those on the islands therefore focused on a few key concerns during construction work undertaken by foreign companies. Firstly, the work should be done to an acceptable standard (that is, the standard that would be appropriate for the capital, Malé, or better). Secondly, foreign companies should be bound by the dual imperatives not to take away anything that belongs to the island and to leave whatever is necessary to maintain the road. Thirdly, foreign companies should not attempt to turn Maldivian citizens away from the national religion of Islam. For many across the political spectrum, the environmental impact was perceived to be a more axiomatic and pressing issue than the inability to meet future debt obligations.

For the most part, what was expected from the Chinese workers on the islands was pretty much what was received. The road workers lived in a self-sustaining gated compound on Fonadhoo, built out of the shipping containers the equipment arrived in. They had a basketball court, a salt-water treatment facility, facilities to keep livestock, and a vegetable

garden. The only time they left the compound was to work. There was very little opportunity for them to mix with island residents. Only very senior management could be seen taking a stroll up the link road at sunset. In the eyes of one young Maldivian employee of the MRDC, the discipline of the Chinese workers and the control that management had over them was one of the most admired attributes of the company.

In terms of everyday interactions on the Island, the presence of the Chinese workers, and what could broadly be referred to as China's impact on the island, appears almost minimal to non-existent. Life for the Chinese labourers on the island was contained within the compound and work outside the compound was confined to the link-road. Chinese workers were not seen hanging around at the coffee stalls on the beach or the restaurants along the roadside. While Chinese absorption into Maldivian social and economic life was not readily observable through day-to-day activities on the island, Chinese companies were expanding beyond road infrastructure in Laamu by developing links with other local sectors, such as the fisheries industry. Maandhoo is home to Horizon Fisheries, which has limited interest in road development since produce and labour enter and leave the factory by sea via an enormous private harbour. Horizon Fisheries is a Maldivian company owned by a conglomerate called Villa Group, which belongs to an entrepreneur and politician called Qasim Ibrahim.<sup>12</sup> Qasim founded a political party called Jumhoori in 2013 and ran in the presidential campaign. At the end of his unsuccessful campaign he found himself out of favour with the victorious President Yameen's PPM. According to the Maldives Prison Authority, Qasim is now a fugitive of the state (Maldives Independent 2017). Villa Group owns Horizon Fisheries, but half of the capital investments, and therefore half of the profits, go to a Chinese investment company that partnered with Villa Group shortly after the road project began. The company is a Chinese private investment outfit called Zhoushanshi Putuo Dongnani Import and Export Limited (ZPD). ZPD is, on the surface, a small investment firm with a single page of info online (all in Mandarin). It has no registered capital in China, and a single point of contact in Beijing with a Yahoo.com email address.<sup>13</sup> The involvement of ZPD is significant, insofar as it evinces the range of interests in the Maldives, the flow between different sectors (private and state, as well as infrastructure and commercial export), and the scales at which this is taking place; for the Chinese government, for state owned enterprises such as CCCC, associated subsidiaries such as JTEG, and for private investment companies such as ZPD. 'Going Out', as has been argued by Emily Yeh, is 'a process through which the Chinese state itself is being made entrepreneurial, reterritorialized, and rescaled' (Yeh 2016: 280). This process is readily observable in the Maldives, where these actors not only have interests in road-development contracts, but have capitalized on bilateral infrastructure projects to gain a foothold in the local fisheries industry, land ownership, and the development of ports in the area.

The Indian press has reported feverishly on China's increasing influence in the Maldives specifically, and the Indian Ocean region generally. While the headlines point to a challenge to India's historical dominance in South Asia, they simultaneously emphasize it. Headlines such as, 'Asian Giants China and India Flex Muscles over Tiny Maldives' (Sanjeev and Aneez 2018) and international conferences polarizingly entitled, 'China in South Asia: Friend of Foe?' set the tone of India's concerns. The contract termination of GMR India for the construction of the Maldives international airport in 2012, and the handing over of sixteen geostrategically located islands to the Chinese, are among the most commonly cited grievances leading to ostensibly strained relations between India and the

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<sup>12</sup> Qasim started off as a clerk in a hospital and now has a net worth in the hundreds of millions.

<sup>13</sup> In China, company law stipulates that all enterprises must register a fixed level of operational capital (see Yao et al. 2014).

Maldives (Guruswami 2018). One such geo-strategically important node in this scene is an island called Gaadhoo, to which we will now turn our attention.

Back in Laamu, it was rumoured that the Maldivian government – read, President Yameen – had gifted Gaadhoo to the Chinese government in return for the development of the Laamu link road. While there seems to be no official documentation or record of this exchange, certainly not that is available for residents on Laamu, it is presented locally, nationally, and even internationally as a social fact. Local rumour also has it that the Chinese will build an airport and a transshipment port. Such rumours were made all the more believable for residents on Laamu by the arrival of other structures on the island built by the Chinese government. In particular, the housing in Fonadhoo for all who had previously lived in Gaadhoo. Underlying the Chinese housing provision is the assumption that for these structures something is sought in return. Here, we return to the 50-mile-wide one-and-a-half-degree deep water channel to the south of Laamu mentioned at the start of this chapter, to say something of its purported geopolitical/economic importance. Gaadhoo is strategically important because it lies on this deepwater channel, through which the east-west sea traffic passes through the archipelago.<sup>14</sup> A transshipment port on this channel would apparently be advantageous for whoever established control. In the run up to the presidential election in 2018 the rumour of the transshipment hub in Gaadhoo has become a publicly discussed issue for the opposition MDP campaigning from exile and Indian think tanks alike. The port at Gaadhoo is thought to be a maritime node of connectivity in the Chinese government's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

Concerns about China's increasing investment and influence in the Maldives, as well as the acquisition of national territory, mirrored in some ways the rumours of land grabs in Sri Lanka in the development of the Hambantota Port during the post-2010 Mahinda Rajapaksa regime. These rumours have become a public conversation regarding China's political influence in South Asia, national security, indebtedness, and dispossession, with renewed vigour following a recent exposé in the *New York Times* (Abi Habib 2018). Informed by high-level government officials and anonymous Chinese economic policy makers, the article has been discussed on prime-time national news and used vociferously by Sri Lanka's leftist party (Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna, JVP) to highlight corruption under the Rajapaksa regime and threats to sovereignty. The article carves out a narrative of events recognizable to Maldivians; the Chinese government lends large sums of money to build a piece of infrastructure, that money is then used to contract Chinese state-owned enterprises to carry out the work. When fresh funding is required, which it almost inevitably will be, the initial fixed rates are renegotiated and are subsequently much higher. Unable to service the growing debt on the books, Sri Lanka is forced to handover a dominant equity-share of the port back to the lender (China), land around the Hambantota Port has also been given as a means of debt servicing (Abi Habib 2018). Sri Lanka now remains heavily indebted to China and no longer has a controlling stake in the infrastructure it borrowed to develop initially.

In the Maldives, Chinese investment evinced a stark political split between PPM and MDP supporters: the former were generally supportive of decisions made by President Yameen vis-à-vis infrastructure-financing schemes, while the latter were generally opposed to giving away islands for infrastructure. What complicated the picture a little more, at least during frequent arguments in the run up to the island council elections, was that it was the MDP that began the practice of giving islands to investors to subsidize the development of state infrastructure, such as the Vermillion inter-island/inter-atoll ferry system.

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<sup>14</sup> As well as being a conversation in Laamu couched in terms of rumour and hearsay, it is at the same time discussed in the Indian research centres and international press. It is also something being talked about by opposition politicians. So this is not *just* local rumour.

## **Rumours of geopolitical power struggles**

Conversations about development and infrastructural change in the Maldives were awash with stories of espionage and international schemes of geopolitical empire building. Chinese equipment is kept in a casting yard in Fonadhoo, next to which is an American sea cucumber farm called Blue Ridge. According to a very public secret, confirmed by a senior Maldivian politician, Blue Ridge is thought to be a front for an American CIA outpost. The location was declared hopeless for a sea cucumber farm – the water was too warm and the site was where all of the garbage in Fonadhoo eventually washes up – and the farm has apparently yet to produce a single sea cucumber for sale. The rumour amongst Maldivians in Fonadhoo was that the CIA was there to spy on the Chinese contractors. The CIA was thought not to have an interest in the link road *per se*, but was thought to be positioned on the northern cusp of the island in order to monitor activities at the Iskandhar Air Base in Kadhdhoo.

While the Chinese were building a link road, taking over an island and planning to construct a transshipment port on the one-and-a-half-degree deep water channel, and the Americans were pretending to cultivate sea cucumbers while (not so) secretly watching planes land, the Indian government was also thought to have people on the island keeping an eye on the developments unfolding. The Indian government gifted the Maldivian government an impressive helicopter, based at the Iskandhar Air Base. However, with no Maldivian pilot trained to fly the helicopter, the Indian government also provided Indian pilots. The rumour here is that the Indians, while claiming to use the helicopter to take aerial photos for ‘island development’, are also using it to spy on the Chinese developments on Gaadhoo.

An article in *The Market Mogul* (since removed) suggested that the Maldives is ‘set to become centre stage in world politics’: the Maldives is being courted by Saudi Arabia, as Riyadh hopes to ‘cosy up’ to Beijing in a strategic move against Tehran. Meanwhile on the islands, people go to school, go to the mosque, drink coffee, sleep when it gets too hot, and ride up and down the road on mopeds when the heat of the day has dropped, taking a *fini buru*, a ‘cool ride’. The rhythm of daily life in Laamu is incongruent with the world of hyper-politics, espionage, and global infrastructure domination considered to be going on around it. Though anthropologists tend to lose their grip on a situation when it scales up to the level of international conspiracy theory, what was particularly interesting about these rumours, however, was how they were retold as such a matter-of-fact way. It did not seem remarkable to island inhabitants that they were, by their own reckoning, surrounded by spies and embroiled in an international geopolitical power struggle.

## **Conclusion**

The Laamu link road can at one level be understood as securing a node in the maritime expansion of the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). By gifting the link road construction, many people across the atoll believed China has gained the island of Gaadhoo and access to the one-and-a-half-degree deep water channel. Whether this is true or not we do not know, but following the construction of the link road there has been evidence of Chinese expansion into additional sectors of local industry: house building, transshipment, and fisheries. This is a good example of the type of economic possibility that can be facilitated through an infrastructure project. Who this will benefit also remains to be seen.

Maldivian folk stories such as ‘The Sandbank of the Seabirds’ evinces a wariness of the potential power of outsiders to wreak unexpected changes on the existing social and political order. Our case study of the Laamu link road enables us to bring together the anthropological literatures on the gift and on hospitality to explore the opportunities and potential risks in accepting a gift from and offering hospitality to outsiders whose powers and intentions may not be fully known from the start. The Chinese gift of a link road heralded not only much-

desired infrastructural development but also the destabilization of existing social and political orders at the local and national level. The construction of the link road exacerbated existing political tensions between and within the four island beneficiaries. Moreover, rumours of espionage and lagoon colonization demonstrates that this tiny remote Maldivian atoll is utterly embroiled in international geopolitical struggles, but crucially it also reveals how the political and economic interests of the Maldivian hosts are absolutely sidelined by more powerful gift-giving guests from abroad.

With the construction of one piece of connective infrastructure on the island we have also presented a series of disconnected and closed-off communities, notably, the fisheries harbour in Maandhoo, the compound of the Chinese workers, the Blue Ridge CIA base in Fonadhoo, the transshipment port of Gaadhoo – none of which rely on the link road for connectivity. While the construction of the link road introduced a language of consultation and participation, the new enclaved sites and the encompassment of the project within the state architecture at a ministry level redirected the management of the road at a local level away from island inhabitants. The enclaved sites are part of an ecosystem of differently closed-off circuits of capital, political, and social relations.

In this chapter, we have explored the road as a social experience as it crosscuts competing visions of modernity, global connectivity, and anxiety about material change on remote coral atolls in the Indian Ocean. The arrival of the link road has brought with it the need to conceptualize and (re)imagine the meaning of development in the Maldives; not just in terms of *thara'gee*, *kuri*, connectivity, and mobility along the atoll, but also about the risks of debt, corruption, and public interest in national territory. To this end, the chapter has also documented how the anticipation, arrival, and consideration of the link road opened up a new space in which to consider what is to be expected of a public good in the Maldives – and how 'public' this is. The road represents a resurfacing of the political landscape as much as the physical. As an experience of an infrastructural encounter with the global forces of capital and construction, the road has brought with it a consideration of the efficacy of political channels domestically, and the potential fate of Maldives in the global contemporary present. Undoubtedly the road connects, but what it connects people to goes well beyond the shores of the atoll.

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