



Open Library of Humanities



Part of the Ubiquity
Partner Network



Article

How to Cite: Miller, Char. 2020. Research and the Integration of Asian and Environmental Studies. *ASIANetwork Exchange*, 27(1), pp. 50–53. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16995/ane.358>

Published: 27 July 2020

Peer Review:

This article has been peer reviewed through the double-blind process of *ASIANetwork Exchange*, which is a journal of the *Open Library of Humanities*.

Copyright:

© 2020 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

Open Access:

ASIANetwork Exchange is a peer-reviewed open access journal.

Digital Preservation:

The Open Library of Humanities and all its journals are digitally preserved in the CLOCKSS scholarly archive service.

The Open Library of Humanities is an open access non-profit publisher of scholarly articles and monographs.

ARTICLE

Research and the Integration of Asian and Environmental Studies

Char Miller

Pomona College, US

char.miller@pomona.edu

This is the second of three special issues of ANE devoted to a series of explorations of the generative impact of the Luce Foundation's LIASE initiative. Designed to increase the integration of Asian and Environmental Studies in our classrooms, research, and practice, the LIASE program has had a profound effect in each domain. This issue nicely demonstrates how the grant has enabled colleagues at four institutions to develop innovative research questions that led to new lines of scholarship.

Keywords: Asian Studies; Environmental Studies; Luce Foundation; LIASE Program; Cross-Cultural Collaboration

This is the second of three special issues of ASIANetwork Exchange (ANE) devoted to a series of explorations of the generative impact of the Luce Foundation's LIASE initiative Luce (Foundation) Initiative on Asian Studies and the Environment (LIASE). Designed to increase the integration of Asian and Environmental Studies in our classrooms, research, and practice, the LIASE program has had a profound effect in each domain. This issue (Spring 2020) nicely demonstrates how the grant has enabled colleagues at four institutions to develop innovative research questions that have led to new lines of scholarship. By implication, that engagement has also deeply informed their work with their students and across their campuses, an interplay that is as manifestly a part of the mission of liberal arts colleges and the Luce Foundation itself.

For Hartwick College political scientist Jing Chen, this dynamic helped frame her assessment of the depth of Chinese students' environmental awareness and activism. She was curious whether the Chinese government's mandate for a sharp uptick in environmental education in primary and secondary schools was reflected in undergraduate environmental literacy. In 2015, Chen conducted a survey of 150 students enrolled at Xiamen University. Her data confirmed that despite the relatively short history of environmental curricula in K-12 education, her university subjects were well aware of many of the significant environmental challenges that face their nation and the planet. Not least, for example, they knew about global warming as a concept and of some of its significant outcomes such as coral reef bleaching. Yet their heightened awareness, Chen found, did not correlate with active participation in campus-based environmental organizations. That finding lead Chen to conclude that there is a "gap between knowledge and action," and that this gap may have important implications for China's ability to deliver on its ambition to create an "ecological civilization."

A different kind of aspiration has marked the intriguing research of political scientist Katherine Pak and chemist Paul Jackson. At St. Olaf College, they co-developed and taught a pair of off-campus study courses that located faculty and students within the larger context of Japanese environmentalism. But their central subject was not how the Japanese understand their environmental context

but rather how the study group—uprooted from their known environments and uncritical assumptions—conceived of their place in this new place. Pak and Jackson call their approach “teaching at the margins, or in other words, [teaching] beyond familiar lifestyles and areas of knowledge.” This disruption of norms, they believe, allows—maybe even demands—that we reexamine our assumptions about and perceived resolutions for looming environmental challenges. Their meta-analysis, when combined with the fascinating revelations that emerged from their participant-observer methodology, and from the community-based research in which the St. Olaf group participated, was itself transformative. “The opportunity to design, teach and then reflect upon these two courses,” Pak and Jackson conclude, “has renewed our faith in our students’ ability to ask new questions and seek new answers around environmental sustainability...”

Buddhism, as concept, ethic, and practice, sustains and intertwines the individual and the enveloping world. How this sacred tradition articulates this interconnectedness is one of the subjects that a large and interdisciplinary research team, led by Cheryl Swift and Jason Carbine of Whittier College, explored in “Religious Spaces and Biodiversity in Myanmar.” The tripartite context of Buddhism’s environmental perspectives, which can combine belief, ritual, and spatial dimensions, contains a larger vision—promotion of “the intrinsic value of nature and environmental protection as well as sustainability.” To achieve that end, some monks and laity in Thailand and Tibet have begun to enter the civic arena to protest deforestation, the construction of dams, and other forms of deleterious resource exploitation. Were similar forms of Buddhist activism evident in Myanmar? In the hope of answering that query, the Whittier researchers visited sacred sites throughout the nation, interviewed monks, and sampled levels of local biodiversity. Drawing from the insights of biology and religious studies, their analyses yielded mixed results. In Myanmar, the authors write, there did not appear to be a substantial link between the presence of sacred spaces and conservation of biological diversity.

The final essay in this special issue is as integrative and heuristic. The research, entitled “The Search for Community in China,” took a village to conduct. On the team from Dickinson College were anthropologist Ann Hill, sociologist Susan

Rose, and Jinji Wei, a graduate student at Yunnan University in Kunming, China. Making invaluable contributions as well were the college's farm manager and six undergraduates. They spent three weeks in a Bai community in China. The team's goal was to test scholarly and popular assumptions that the massive rural-to-urban migration in China has had a "hollowing out" impact on the hinterlands. With the aid of the local translators and researchers, they interviewed the "stay behinds," assessed agricultural productivity, and observed cultural celebrations and religious practices. Their immersion in the community, however brief, led the Dickinson researchers to conclude that at least at this one site the environment for building was in good shape, cultural life was strong, and farm operations appeared responsive to shifting social demands and environmental realities. The village's resilience reminds us why such complex phenomena as migration patterns *are* complex.

No less complicated, this special issue makes clear, are the creative outcomes that a healthy combination of imagination, curiosity, and cross-cultural collaboration can engender.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

How to cite this article: Miller, Char. 2020. Research and the Integration of Asian and Environmental Studies. *ASIANetwork Exchange*, 27(1), pp. 50–53. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16995/ane.358>

Published: 27 July 2020

Copyright: © 2020 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.



ASIANetwork Exchange is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by Open Library of Humanities.

OPEN ACCESS The Open Access logo, which is a stylized 'O' with a padlock icon.