

ANE Special Section: Asian Environments

Students of Asia come to know the region through diverse disciplinary approaches, grounded in different theoretical foundations, received knowledge, and lived experiences. Some see languages as a key point of entry for engaging with the cultural traditions, people, and histories of different places. Others are drawn by the phenomenon of place itself, the complex and dynamic physical and human geography of Asia, home to roughly two-thirds of the world's population and some of its most fascinating natural and built environments. Social scientists examine the diverse economies, political systems, and other societal structures, while their colleagues in the natural and physical sciences seek to understand the non-human world, a task made ever more challenging due to the expanding footprint of human activities, ranging from deforestation and over-fishing to carbon emissions and the nearly ubiquitous presence of synthetic chemicals from manufacturing processes.

It is precisely this human-environment dynamic that the current special section of *ASIANetwork Exchange* and others to follow seek to explore. The idea for the special section grew partly from the “Half the World: Asia and the Environment” series of symposia founded at Hobart and William Smith Colleges in 2006 and hosted biennially since then, initially through the generous support of the Freeman Foundation. The fourth symposium in March 2012, funded by The Henry Luce Foundation, resulted in the submission of over a dozen manuscripts, all of which have or will soon undergo double-blind peer review in keeping with the standards of *ASIANetwork Exchange*, and all of which showcase the diversity of scholarly approaches that members of ASIANetwork and contributors to *Exchange* regularly undertake. I have had the pleasure of organizing or co-organizing three of the Half the World symposia, and am excited that the series has become an important venue for scholars and practitioners working at the confluence of strong and long-standing traditions of Environmental Studies and Asian Studies programs in undergraduate liberal arts institutions.

A second, more fundamental motivation for a special *ASIANetwork Exchange* focus on human-environment issues in Asia is precisely the interdisciplinarity for which ASIANetwork is already known. That is, the same kind of creative, careful, and contextualized interdisciplinary study of a region as complex and diverse as Asia is what is needed to understand the myriad interconnections between humans, as individuals and societies, and the world that surrounds us. For those of us engaged in Asian Environmental Studies—be we artists, humanists, social scientists, or natural scientists—this is simply what we do; nature and society, humans and environment are co-constitutive and inextricably inter-related. A passage from Brett Walker's socio-natural history of industrial disease in Japan is worth quoting at length:

As William Cronon famously argued, we tend to think that “the place where we are is the place where nature is not.” This perspective weakens significantly, however, if the “place” is between the teeth or in the intestinal tract of a large carnivore. David Quammen, who has studied such carnivores, explains that “alpha predators have kept us acutely aware of our membership within the natural world. They’ve done it by reminding us that to them we’re just another flavor of meat.”¹

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In a world increasingly filled with reductionist, oversimplified, black-and-white explanations of staggeringly complex and nuanced topics such as climate change and cultural change, work that crosses boundaries—not only geopolitical, but also disciplinary, theoretical, and epistemological—is vital for shining light on how we got to where we are today, and how we might move forward in a way that is sustaining of cultures and ecosystems, of human dignity and environmental integrity.

The three articles in this section address various aspects of human-environment interactions in different sociocultural contexts. Empirically rich and theoretically sound, they are resources for Asianists as well as for their (our) students and colleagues who may lack specific regional expertise but for whom the nature-society themes explored here resonate. The first article, by Chris Coggins and a group of intrepid undergraduate researchers cum co-authors, examines *fengshui* forests in southern China as important repositories of floral biodiversity. As products of specific socio-cultural management institutions (temples) that lie outside the state's normal forestry bureaucracy and rely on a set of cosmological priorities vastly different from those that underpin modern scientific forestry, the *fengshui* forests Coggins and his team studied serve a vital role as biological refugia and underscore the importance of understanding the diversity of local institutional approaches to resource management. Interestingly, all of the forests Coggins and his team visited were in predominantly Hakka (*Kejia*) areas, which raises interesting questions about whether these institutions survived only within that minority cultural context or within others as well.

Neal Keating, too, focuses his study on forests, this time in the context of a 10,000-hectare “spirit forest” in Cambodia that has been leased to a Chinese company for development into a rubber plantation. Keating queries the logic and direction of “development” based on such concessions, particularly as that development impacts the country's rural poor, who face forced eviction, loss of (already marginal) livelihoods, and not infrequently, violence. While the story of “disastrous development” for the rural poor, brought about by alliances between national governments and outside corporations, is not new, Keating brings anthropological fieldwork and a critical theoretical eye to how that development is playing out in Cambodia, one of the poorest countries in the world in terms of GDP, yet one of the richest in terms of cultural and historical heritage. He argues that at the heart of the land struggles in Cambodia lie fundamental differences in the “cognized environments” of the rural people (in this case, the Kuy) and what Keating calls the Khmer Riche, that is, Prime Minister Hun Sen and his close associates. For the Kuy, forests are at the center of socio-spiritual traditions that are localized, small-scale, and contribute to maintaining healthy and diverse forests; for the latter, it is not the forests that are sacred, but rather the market, through which forest resources are commoditized as a means of further lining the pockets of the Khmer Riche. Positive change, Keating concludes, requires understanding “the market” as a religious ideal at its core and altering the rituals we as individuals and collectives perform in its service.

In the third and final essay in this issue's special section, Setsuko Matsuzawa takes us back to China, zooming out to examine the work of environmental non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and their role in changing the nature of debates about nature in China. Drawing on important examples ranging from the official founding of China's first registered environmental NGO, Friends of Nature, in 1994 to the case of anti-dam activism on the Nu River in Yunnan that began in earnest a decade later, Matsuzawa argues that environmental activism in China, while still constrained by external forces such as registration requirements and arbitrary state intervention, has played a central role not only in raising the environmental consciousness among Chinese citizens, but also (and more

importantly) in increasing citizens' willingness to speak out against environmental wrongs. Here, she relies on the notion of "rightful resistance,"² which is solidly grounded in the country's existing (but often haphazardly enforced) environmental laws, and more recent scholarship that teases out nuances in how NGOs in China negotiate political waters in which the "non-" of NGO is often understood as nearly synonymous with "anti-".

As I noted above, the fourth Half the World Symposium and call for papers for this issue of *ASIANetwork Exchange* resulted in more than a dozen essays. We expect to continue the special section on Asian environments in future issues for 2012 and 2013 (at least), and are excited about the breadth of perspectives and depth of expertise on human-environment interactions in Asia the authors demonstrate. Future special sections will likely include articles on women's activism in post-Fukushima Japan and reform-era China; the place of ecology is Islam in Southeast Asia; on fires, dams, and toxic algae in China; on the role of business in sustaining cultures, ecosystems, and livelihoods in Asia; on land dispossession and resistance in Indonesia; and on the nexus of snails, organic food, and global capital in Taiwan. All are written and edited with an eye to maintaining high standards for scholarship and for applicability in an undergraduate classroom.

In closing, I would be remiss if I did not extend a special word of gratitude to The Henry Luce Foundation, not only for its long-standing and generous support of ASIANetwork, but also for its more recent commitment to catalyzing scholarship and teaching on Asian environments across the liberal arts community. The Foundation's pilot grant to Hobart and William Smith Colleges, the Luce Initiative on Asian Studies and the Environment (LIASE) grants program, and the years of fruitful conversations between the Foundation and colleges like my own, offer us an invaluable opportunity to think big about how we—as scholars, practitioners, and students ourselves—can draw on the strong interdisciplinary traditions of Asian Studies and Environmental Studies to advance the state of knowledge about human-environment interactions in Asia. I also wish to thank the editors of *ASIANetwork Exchange*, Erin McCarthy and Lisa Trivedi, for the opportunity to serve as guest-editor on such an important theme as this, and for their forbearance as I have slowly trudged upward on the editorial learning curve. With their blessing I will continue my trudge, and I look forward to working with them and the rest of the ASIANetwork community on future issues of *ASIANetwork Exchange*.

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NOTES

1. B.L. Walker, *Toxic Archipelago: A History of Industrial Disease in Japan* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2010), 7-8.
2. Kevin J. O'Brien, "Rightful Resistance," *World Politics*, 49 no. 1: 31-55.