

## BOOK REVIEW

**Environmental Movements and Politics of the Asian Anthropocene.** Paul Jobin, Ming-sho Ho and Hsin-Huang Michael Hsiao (eds). Singapore: ISEAS – Yosof Ishak Institute, 2021.

This collection of nine country chapters, complemented by a substantial Introduction and useful Conclusion, begins by acknowledging its debt to *Asia's Environmental Movements: Comparative Perspectives* (Lee and So 1999). This new volume, with some of the same authors, seeks to update the fates and fortunes of environmental activism in the region. In addition, it also accounts for some theoretical developments, including grappling with the contested notion of the Anthropocene, and reconsidering the relationship between environmentalism and democracy.

The Anthropocene is critically assessed, with some chapter authors finding it a useful descriptive term, while others reject it. In the theoretical Introduction, while Jobin, Ho and Hsiao detail some of the debates over the term and its conceptualisation, they decide to use it for Asia to describe just the past 20 years. This determination is limiting of the concept but allows them to focus on the extent of human-induced change across the whole region over these past two decades. The data presented are, not unexpectedly, bleak and alarming. Their limits on the use of Anthropocene means that the authors of the case studies are focused on developments in each country over this period, with each chapter including cases of particular struggles and an account of recent environmental movement development. With chapters on Cambodia, Hong Kong, Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, Taiwan, Thailand, and Vietnam, the volume brings readers up to date on recent developments, while reading across the chapters reveals the great variety of responses to environmental challenges. For this reader, this close analysis and the diversity across the region reflects the greatest strength of areas studies approaches: the deep understanding provided by country experts as they engage in qualitative research and assessment.

The link between environmental and democracy movements is uneven across the cases examined. The clearest expressions of positive links are seen in chapters on Hong Kong – now torn asunder – and Taiwan. Jobin's chapter on Taiwan is explicitly focused on the connections between environmental movements and democratic politics, seeing the two as mutually reinforcing. Jobin also takes this theme up again in the book's Conclusion, being especially keen to challenge assessments that promote a notion that strong and authoritarian states "manage" environmental challenges well. Such assessments frequently trumpet China's environmental successes, praising technocratic managerialism, while ignoring that country's massive environmental problems at home and the damage it does abroad. This narrow perspective on authoritarian environmentalism is rightly rejected and Taiwan is presented as an alternative, democratic "model," encompassing environmental justice (62–66).

At the same time, it is acknowledged that electoral regimes in the region, such as Malaysia, Indonesia, and the Philippines, have not seen broadly successful environmental movements or successful technocratic solutions for their daunting environmental challenges. This is especially clear in Francisco A. Magno's chapter on the Philippines, where a number of environmental activists have been murdered, with environmental activists challenged by the collusion of rapacious oligarchs and supine and/or acquisitive



state officials. That collusion and corruption underpins several of the case studies, especially on issues around land rights, suggests that political systems matter less than who controls the economy. Indeed, while capitalism is not an entry in the book's index, the cases studies make it clear that capitalism and capitalists might well have been a more useful organising theme for the collection than the Anthropocene.

In this collection, the two chapters that get closest to dealing with authoritarian forms of environmentalism are those on Singapore by Harvey Neo and some sections of the Hong Kong study by James K. Wong and Alvin Y. So. The latter is interesting for the historical account of how the "managerial environmentalism" of the colonial era was challenged by a more radical environmentalism that emerged along with struggles for local democratisation. Now that the push for democratisation is being erased, it might be supposed that a Chinese-style environmental authoritarianism will prevail in Hong Kong. Singapore, while described by Neo as "post-political," is anything but that. Politics and ideology matter for the ruling party. In the environmental arena, according to this chapter, it appears that the government does as it wishes, and environmentalists are limited to pleading, often on relatively minor issues. That said, the book's cover reproduces photos of sand mining in Cambodia and its export to Singapore; these photos are also included in Neo's chapter as Figures 4.3 and 4.4. Oddly, this potentially interesting area of transnational environmental exploitation is not discussed in the chapter. An examination of this case would have enhanced the chapter and the collection. Unaccountably, Neo also neglects a range of earlier and important literature that covers much of his discussion. For example, while not using the term "post politics," long ago Chan Heng Chee (1975) raised the question of the end of politics in Singapore's "administrative state." More glaringly missing is the work of Garry Rodan, including his important piece that included an earlier examination of some of the same topics discussed by Neo (Rodan 1996).


Across several of the book's chapters, there is a sense of pessimism regarding the roles and futures of environmental movements, with the bleakest assessment being Jakkrit Sangkhamanee's chapter on Thailand. Once considered a leading light in the region, Thailand's environmental movement has degraded and fallen silent under military dominated regimes. Jakkrit explains that part of this decline has to do with the failure of several environmental non-governmental organisations to ally with grassroots struggles over environment *and* politics. This failure even prompted one observer to ask whether by 2017 middle class-led social movements had "become an extension of the [military] dictatorship" and predicted "the end of environmental movements in Thailand" (253). Jakkrit is also gloomy, but not to this extent, pointing to a trend towards "knowledge contestation," meaning legal and administrative actions, a direction also identified and criticised by Elinoff and Lamb (2022) in a recent article in this journal.

Even if engendering a sense of gloom – at least in this reader – *Environmental Movements and Politics of the Asian Anthropocene* is a fitting update and extension of Lee and So (1999). The chapters provide clearly written, classroom-ready accounts of the trials and tribulations of environmental movements in the region, along with some insightful case study material. While never an easy task, the editors have done an excellent job of bringing coherence to the collection. That coherence, however, does not oversimplify a very complex and diverse set of issues and challenges for the environment, for politics, and for environmental movements in the region.



## References

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