Conference Report on

*Environmental Justice and Sustainable Citizenship in Asia,*

DKU, May 22-24, 2017

ERIC symposium Tuesday Oct. 24, 12-2:30 pm
Rubenstein Library, 1st Floor, Holsti-Anderson Room
What is Environmental Humanities?

• One of the first international environmental humanities conference held in Asia; 30 papers were presented, particularly on China and India. Covered by Xinhua News Agency on May 27, 2017. ([http://us.xinhuanet.com/2017-05/27/c_129620386.htm](http://us.xinhuanet.com/2017-05/27/c_129620386.htm)).

• Concern with the environmental crisis marks a new turn among humanists. Included in the humanities and humanistic social sciences are history, anthropology, sociology, philosophy, ethics, religion, political ecology, law, international studies, citizen science, the arts, cultural studies, etc.

• Until a few decades ago, the study of nature had been separated from the study of society, and until still much more recently, in the humanities.

• While science and economics can offer technical diagnostics and formal solutions, the human condition in the era of rapid climate change is marked by increasing uncertainty and conflict.

• Religion, culture, narrative, politics and historical memory form the meaning-making framework through which humans act and seek to manage uncertainty and conflict.

• The last mile delivery of technical and market solutions depends upon these conditions.
Plenary Session: What can Humanities and Interpretive Social Sciences do for Environmental Studies?

• Two prominent Chinese environmental humanities scholars, Prof Zeng Fanren (former President of Shandong University) and Prof Lu Shuyuan, reflected on philosophical and religious ideas of ecological civilization—idea of shengsheng (flourishing life).

• Prof Lu spoke on revival of enviro culture on Mt. Fanjing through historical religious ideas.

• Prof Lin Yih-ren from Taiwan spoke about indigenous peoples’ conceptions of space and belonging and how Taiwan govt is trying to adjust notions of citizenship in relation to these concepts.

• Dr Dan Guttman (NYU Shanghai) discussed the problems and possibilities of translating vernacular terms related to global and local environmental challenges, like “rule of law,” “sustainability,” “NGOs/civil society,” “rights,” “rights and duties,” for mutual understanding and co-operation.
Mt Fanjing
Discussion Topic I: Urbanization and Sustainable Citizenship

• Meaning of sustainable citizenship for among the most, and often environmentally, disadvantaged among the most essential service providers and workers in Asia

• Migrant labor in both China and India, miners exposed to the slow violence of black lung disease, Dalit communities frequently denied equal access to the commons in rural areas and others

• Social attitudes and political negligence, the role of civil society and their own protective organizations as well as state regulation were the focus of discussion.

• Participants sought to relate issues of poverty and inequality to ecological and environmental problems across the rural-urban continuum.
Discussion Topics II: History and conditions of rivers and coasts in Asia.

- Differences among large Asian rivers. Brahmaputra could never be tamed by human engineering and shaped and reshaped the ecology of human livelihood.
- Yellow and Yangzi rivers were the subject of massive human intervention but these rivers always flowed back into the ‘memory spaces’ of the drainage basins generating an unending battle with communities and state in the quest for livelihood.
- Modern capitalist economy built on new modes of flow measurement (cusecs), new species and distant markets produced an order of change where any kind of (embattled) equilibrium becomes almost impossible to sustain.
- Local ecologies of riverine and coastal communities are affected and changed by global trade and markets as well as by environmental factors.
- A discussion of the humble, but invasive crayfish and its effects on agriculture and fisheries in the Yangzi valley revealed how local ecological change might be studied in relation to wider questions of fishery, foreign policy and international conflicts.
Himalayan Rivers & Hydro-power/dam building in China-SE Asia.

More than 1 billion people rely on the circum-Himalayan rivers originating around the Tibetan Plateau. Glacial melting, river diversions and dam building are endangering the sources of livelihoods of hundreds of millions. Inter-governmental cooperation is imperative to address these problems.
Discussion Topic II: History and conditions of forests, deforestation and reforestation

• Pre-colonial, colonial and modern understandings of value of forest and woods were discussed.

• Scientific German understandings of forest development become transplanted into Asian soils by colonial authorities (especially for plantation development), loss of bio-diversity and alien species.

• How are these measures sought to be reversed in India and China? Re-wilding and restoration methods are different.

• Why do modern ideas of gas stoves not catch on in some areas? Need to look at different uses of wood for forms of gendered sociality and community

• Look at efforts being made in China to ‘translate’ fengshui ideals and remains of traditional forest conservation into sustainable forestry;

• Also efforts to preserve sacred groves in India among different communities.
Grave by fengshui forest
Fengshui forests in Fujian
Discussion Topic III: Ethics and Values

- What were the historical conditions under which human flourishing came to be measured by GDP and related measures?
- How can we think our way out of a human-centered cosmology to account for a more sustainable relationship with nature?
- Different proposals were suggested including a revised pragmatist perspective, land ethics, animal rights, and different historical Asian and indigenous cosmologies and ways in which they can be integrated into our view of human flourishing.
- Religious and spiritual traditions and innovations, make a difference to sustainable goals particularly when alliances or convergence were sought between religious and secular civil society groups and marginal communities.
- How have newly urbanized groups in the Chinese countryside coped with rapid urbanization which led to the loss of forms of life embedded in the landscape and ecosystem?
- We saw how the Akha community combined spiritual culture and collective landownership rights to preserve their sacred forests against market and social forces in Yunnan.
Duke GAI-UNSW Workshop on ‘Ecological Spirituality in Cambodia: Exploring Environmental Justice and Sustainable Citizenship’ Phnom Penh, 31 July-1 August 2017
Discussion Topic IV: Heightening environmental awareness and activism in Asia

• The role of art, literature, photography were analyzed as new modes of expressing environmental concerns while cinema and other popular forms have already developed a considerable repertoire.

• Discussion centered on the need to develop methods of understanding the reception of such modes of expression among the wider public.

• In particular the theme of visuality or the visible/invisible dimensions of environmental degradation was seen as an important capacity of the arts to bring to the fore.

• Visuality is important also for narratives – whether constructed for fictional or documentary purposes—to cathect the self with environment concerns.
I know sooner or later, she will ask me: “Mom, what's that thing outside? Why do you keep me indoors? Will that thing hurt me?”
Discussion Topic IV: ‘citizen science’ as a form of civic activism

• Several expressions of civic activism brought together scientists and technical professionals with grass-roots organizations.
• This enabled them to gain a better awareness of environmental implications of large projects such as dams or potentially polluting industries.
• Watchdog journalism is gaining ground across Asia even where there are considerable risks involved.
• ‘Policy entrepreneurship’ has been especially important in changing or halting large scale dams in Southeast Asia.
• Differences of opinion among scientists, often at the highest levels, also find their way into these movements and politicians, a subject which needs more urgent attention.