

## Reviews

**Ole Bruun and Arne Kalland, eds:** *Asian Perceptions of Nature*. Copenhagen: Nordic Institute of Asian Studies, 1992 (Nordic Proceedings in Asian Studies, No. 3). 261 pp.

This book is the product of a recent interdisciplinary research project on "Asian perceptions of nature" initiated by the Nordic Institute of Asian Studies, Copenhagen. The book is based on 14 papers presented at the first workshop held by the project.

J. Kathirithamby-Wells, "Socio-political Structures and the Southeast Asian Ecosystem - A Historical Perspective up to the Mid-Nineteenth Century," is a thematic survey, consisting mainly of historical facts concerning the importance of the water-ways, and the use of natural resources in the region. It is based on secondary sources and contains few new insights or observations.

Peter Boomgaard, "Sacred Trees and Haunted Forests - Indonesia, Particularly Java, in the 19th and 20th Centuries," addresses the relationship between traditional beliefs and the decrease of the forest. The author shows that the Indonesians were quite capable of destroying their own natural environment without any help from Western powers. Boomgaard also discusses how the shift in responsibility of offending the spirits was shifted from the individual to the leaders at the same time as the cutting down of the sacred forest and trees took place. One may add that despite religious taboos and beliefs, a general increase in population and the degree of urbanization are major factors contributing to the destruction of the natural environment not only in Asia, but all over the world.

Klas Sandell, "Nature as the Virgin Forest - Farmers' Perspectives on Water, Nutrients, and Sustainability in Low-Resource Agriculture in the Dry Zone of Sri Lanka," deals with agriculture in present day Sri Lanka with particular emphasis on how the use of industrial chemicals conflicts with traditional agriculture.

Jørgen Østergård Andersen, "Sinhalese Buddhist Cosmology and Nature," seeks to account for the position of nature within the

general context of Buddhist beliefs in modern Sri Lanka. The author discusses topics such as *karma*, causality and time, the Buddhist *sangha*, cosmology, and nature and culture. Despite the attempt to concentrate on the present situation of Sinhalese Buddhism it is evident that Andersen "bites over more than he can chew". Thus the article contains too many formal misunderstandings with regard to Buddhist doctrine and philosophy to be discussed here. However, a few of the more serious mistakes need commenting. First of all, the author commits the rather grave mistake of confusing the absolute and relative levels in Buddhist thought. The author's idea of Buddhist causality expressed as "Forms arise because they are caused, and they pass away without any external cause" (p. 80), seems to reflect a total lack of knowledge of basic *abhidharma*. A concept such as *nirvana* definitely signals permanence and is not relative, whereas the natural environment, which is a part of the universal illusion, *maya*, is impermanent and therefore relative. Nature in the meaning of objective world, is a causal construction, i.e. a by-product of man's karma. In discussing the coming into being, the author contests that it takes place suddenly, followed by disappearance (p. 80). In the opinion of the present reviewer this is not the case. The process of becoming in Theravada Buddhism is three-fold: becoming, remaining, and ceasing. Furthermore, Andersen maintains that "It is claimed by Buddhist philosophy that reality is final and finite, and whatever is claimed to be infinite and infinal is claimed not to be real; but an illusion, a phantasm and a conceptual distortion of reality" (p. 80). However, there is no such thing as 'reality' in Theravada Buddhism, and secondly if, as Andersen holds, reality is finite, then it follows that reality is unreal! In general, Andersen's basic problem is insufficient knowledge of Buddhist doctrines, and especially the canonical literature. This can only be remedied by hard study of the primary material.

Are J. Knudsen, "Nature Conservation in Northern Pakistan - Case Studies from Hunza with Special Reference to the Khunjerab National Park," gives a highly detailed description of the laws and problems connected with the preservation of natural preserves in northern Pakistan and provides insights into the connection between local religious and tribal issues and the related political questions. It appears that the Pakistan government has little or no concern for

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natural resources as such, and that there is no basis or direction in the way they administer environmental problems. If so this would be a case of the lack of "Asian perceptions on nature".

Birgitte Glavind Sperber, "Nature in the Kalasha Perception of Life and Ecological Problems," presents first-hand information on the religious beliefs and practices of the Kalasha people living in the northeastern part of Pakistan. Sperber's presentation is seen from two rather incongruous perspectives: her own scientific, cultural geographical view, and the semi-mythic world of the Kalasha, which she succeeds in describing in a highly interesting way. As such, Sperber's material is of great interest for an understanding of the relationship between cultural self-understanding and the natural environment in which these people live. But somehow the author does not succeed in making a connection between her scholarly observations on the one hand, and the mythical world of the Kalasha on the other hand.

Damrong Tayanin, "Environment and Nature Change in Northern Laos," is a description of the relationship between the Kammu people and nature in relation to the seasonal changes. Except from being an interesting description, there are no scholarly perspectives in this presentation.

Poul Pedersen, "The Study of Perception of Nature - Towards a Sociology of Knowledge about Nature," is a well-written essay, in which the author makes various reflections on ecology. In a short section on religion and nature, Pedersen observes that the popular assertion that Buddhists and Hindus should have a particularly ecological consciousness does not appear to hold. None of the examples provided in this presentation bear directly on Asia, and the notion "Asian perceptions on nature" only figures as an abstract factor. Hence, the paper, besides being interesting reading, seems somewhat out of place in the context of the present publication.

Anders Hjort af Ornäs and Uno Svedin's essay, "Earth-Man-Heaven - Cultural Variations in Concepts of Nature," is based on various secondary and highly general works on Asian culture. For this reason it abounds with generalizations and sets forth many outdated and ethnocentric views, such as those marketed in the late 1960s and mid-1970s by Nakamura, Pandeya, and Duan Yifu. A comparison between a Japanese and a Chinese Zen Buddhist poem,

which are mistakenly read as nature poems, is particularly misplaced. The authors claim that the poem by Dogen, the founder of Japanese Soto Zen (thirteenth century), shows greater sensitivity for nature than a similar one by the Chinese Chan master Wumen Huikai (twelfth century). In fact, both poems talk about the same thing, namely the universal Buddha-nature, a strictly transcendental concept, and not the natural world of trees, wind, and birds! Clearly, the authors would have benefitted by reading Arne Kalland's contribution elsewhere in this book.

Roald Anrup, "A Cultural Story of Nature or a Natural Story of Culture?" is mainly concerned with a presentation of the theories of the structuralist Lévi-Strauss in regard to his views on nature. The paper demonstrates a high degree of perceptiveness on the part of the author, who obviously knows his subject very well. Unfortunately, the paper does not address the issue of "Asian perceptions on nature" and seems strangely out of context.

Brian Moeran, "Japanese Advertising Nature - Ecology, Women, Fashion and Art," focuses on artificial nature. Through several examples the author demonstrates how nature, in its aculturized and "tamed" aspect, is used to market various products mainly with women as their target-group. Moeran's essay indicates that nature is mainly a commercial gadget in modern Japanese society without any apparent interest in advertising ecology. There is no final conclusion to the information presented, and one is left with a feeling of incompleteness.

Arne Kalland, "Culture in Japanese Nature," is a refreshing review and criticism of popular notions held by Westerners on the Japanese attitude(s) to nature. With a strong basis in his own field studies Kalland shows how the West has consistently misunderstood the complexities of traditional Japanese views on nature, and how we moreover have been misled by so-called authorities on Japanese culture. The Japanese have a highly ambivalent attitude to nature, and only appreciate it in its "cooked" and "civilized" form. Wild nature is something the Japanese traditionally fear, because it is beyond their control. As such they share the same awe of untamed nature as most other societies in the world. This paper is clearly the best contribution to the present compilation, not only because Kalland's arguments are well-founded, but because they bear fully

on the central issue of the book.

Ole Bruun, "Feng-shui and the Chinese Perception of Nature," is written as a general study of *fengshui* practice with special emphasis on nature. The author makes several curious remarks in regard to the Chinese attitude of *fengshui* and claims, without providing any further proof, that there is a discrepancy between the textual tradition and the actual practice of *fengshui* (p. 235). Now, *fengshui* is based on a relatively fixed set of rules set out in the classical manuals, and despite the various regional differences does not deviate much in practice. Furthermore *fengshui* manuals, both traditional and modern editions, are available on almost every street corner in the large cities of the PRC. *Fengshui* is certainly one of the traditional practices, which is still carried out in close conformity to the written word. Bruun sees a distinction between cosmic *qi*, which he understands as "weather, air, gas, invisible forces", on the one hand, and human *qi*, "breath, energy, aura, life-force and manner", on the other (p. 237). However, in my opinion *qi* is *qi*, a natural force which simply manifests itself in different ways.

In dealing with a topic such as *fengshui*, which has deep roots the Chinese culture and history, it would seem necessary to account for the traditional position before attempting to see how it functions in modern Chinese society. It would have been proper to refer to at least a few of the most popular *fengshui* manuals in current use, as well as to the almanacs, which certainly enjoy a wide popularity in China. Finally, the article betrays a certain inconsistency with regard to the transcription of the Chinese terms.

The last article is a contribution by Wang Qingyu and Yang Jinwei entitled "A Comparative Study on Du Fu's and Beethoven's Views of Nature". The reviewer wonders what could possibly justify a comparison between these two men, who, except for the fact that they were both luminaries in their respective time and culture, have nothing whatsoever in common. It is both logical and useful to compare artists from various cultures, provided they share things in common, such as social status, artistic expression, cultural context, or views of nature! But to make a comparison just for the sake of comparing can hardly be justified.

The general focus and approach in most of the articles of *Asian Perceptions of Nature* is anthropological, which may account for the

rather weak use of primary sources. Furthermore, a greater balance and inner coherence of this compilation could have been achieved if there had been a broader inter-disciplinary approach to the topic. All in all the level of the articles is very uneven, not only in quality, but also from the point of view of relevance to the general topic. In the opinion of the reviewer the editors should have been more critical in the selection of the contributions to be included. It is hoped that future publications from the project will be of a higher quality.

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**Ole Bruun, Søren Poulsen and Hatla Thelle, eds.:** *Modern China Research: Danish Experiences*. Center for East and Southeast Asian Studies, Copenhagen Discussion Paper, Special Issue, University of Copenhagen, 1991. 148 pp.

The contributions to this small volume were originally presented at the seminar "Problems and Methods in Modern China Research" at the University of Copenhagen, November 1-2, 1990. The articles cover a wide variety of topics such as the compilation and research value of the new local gazetteers (Clausen), art research in China (Primdahl), anthropological fieldwork (Bruun), or the compilation of an exhaustive Danish bibliography on China (Hinrup).

As is often the case with conference volumes, the individual contributions vary greatly in quality and cover only little common ground. Several of the papers (Thøgersen, Odgaard, Madsbjerg & Poulsen, Sharma) point out the problems and possibilities of what is often called fieldwork in China studies: conducting interviews, carrying out observations, or collecting documentary evidence oneself while travelling or residing in China. These papers describe different practical approaches to collect data and can usefully be read by students or scholars preparing to go to China themselves.

Three other papers in the volume, namely those written by Clausen, Poulsen and Bruun, are connected to these. They, too, address the issue of data collection in China itself, yet at the same

time they are different in nature. Clausen's article on local historical sources gives a very interesting description of the way science is carried out on an everyday basis in the context of China's politicized bureaucracy. Knowledge of this is important to foreign fieldworkers who want to know where to go in order to get information or documents which are only locally available. Even more important, from this we can get some clues in what ways we can judge the value and reliability of such information.

Poulsen's article on the China specialist as a consultant deals with the China specialist's role as an intermediary and a cultural broker. Working for private commercial enterprises or national and international development agencies has its own specific pitfalls. At the same time, the China consultant has to face many of the same problems independent China fieldworkers grapple with.

Unfortunately, the contributions by Primdahl, Wedell-Wedellsborg, Thelle, and Hinrup stand largely on their own. The only thing each of them has in common with the other articles in the book is that they, in one way or the other, are about China research.

This cuts much deeper than just a lack of editorial work. In my opinion, the lack of coherence displayed by the book raises the question whether modern China studies still have sufficient in common to be thought of as a single academic specialization. The articles in this book only share the assumption that one of the things all modern China researchers have to do is to collect data in China itself. However, no unifying set of research questions or methodology exist.

This fundamental question is mentioned briefly in the article by Madsberg and Poulsen, but the anthropologist Ole Bruun is the only author who dwells at some length on this question. As Bruun points out, what anthropologists and modern China researchers call "fieldwork" are actually two quite different things.

For modern China scholars fieldwork is simply a way to gather information. For anthropologists, however, fieldwork is a full-fledged methodology speaking to the nature of the knowledge produced. Anthropological fieldwork therefore implies a long-term intellectual enterprise (admittedly only in the most general of terms) going beyond an individual research project or even the study of one specific culture.

I fully agree with Bruun on this point. Yet this should not be read as a fatalistic call to abandon modern China studies as an academic enterprise. It is, however, very important that all of us who share a research interest in modern China put this problem more explicitly on our intellectual agenda. Does the "Chineseness", as Bruun calls it, of what we study, require a common methodology (which should not be confused with the practical issues concerning data collection in China)? Does a long-term research agenda exist which provides at least some common ground for China scholars working in different disciplines? These questions have been avoided for much too long. At the same time, modern China research has grown immensely in both quantitative and qualitative terms. The fact that the editors of the book have been unable to weave their papers together shows that there is a genuine problem here. It is high time that we face it.

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