



Book reviews

Living Landscapes Connected Communities: Culture, Environment and Change across Asia *Justine Vaz and Narumol Aphinives (eds)*. Areca Books, George Town, 2014, pp. xxviii + 344 (ISBN 967-571-911-7).

This ambitious book is derived from a multiyear project titled 'Community-based Initiatives toward Human–Ecological Balance', which was initiated by the Asia Pacific Intellectuals (API) Foundation and centred upon five diverse sites across Asia. This captivating volume examines the lives and environments of each community visited and asks how the residents in each place have adapted and responded to various forms of environmental and social transformation. Following a brief introduction by the editors, the book is divided into five main sections focused around each case study site, namely: Batanes, Philippines; Tasik Chini, Malaysia; Kali Code, Indonesia; Khiriwong, Thailand; and Biwako, Japan. These detailed empirical sections are then followed by another large section ('Rethinking human–ecological balance') that discusses various themes connecting the different communities, and a final concluding section by Justine Vaz. Together, the essays in each section of *Living Landscapes* convey how rural or agrarian environments in the region are experienced differently along (often intersecting) lines of spirituality, identity, belonging and well-being. Moreover, they articulate stories of resilience, perseverance and collective action, which contrast sharply with fatalistic views of environmental degradation in the region.

Grounded, ethnographic engagement with a range of people, places and ways of life within the different case studies means that *Living Landscapes* provides a unique perspective on the multifaceted ways in which communities across Southeast Asia and East Asia are coping and coming to terms with economic change and globalization processes in the region. The highly interdisciplinary scope, with contributors ranging from academics, artists and activists (or combinations thereof), gives the book and its scholarly approach a very unique feel. This difference comes through as contributors interweave an array of narrative strategies including photography, poetry, musical notation and personal reflections, which transport the reader to the lived realities of the communities visited. For instance, Motohide Taguchi's chapter 'Traditional music as a medium of collective memories' in the penultimate section of the book uses music as a vehicle to investigate how collective memories can allow for an understanding of the ways in which local communities relate to their natural and sociocultural environments over time.

Though the book makes some reference to current academic concepts and debates, most contributions forego heavy theorizing in favour of capturing the voices of key stakeholders in more marginalized communities. Yet, this type of ethnographic engagement is not the only methodology used by the book's contributors. For example, Trias Aditya's chapter describes how participatory approaches to GIS (geographic information systems) and remote sensing technologies can be used effectively in order to improve disaster mitigation and risk management. *Living Landscapes* also provides insights on alternative ways of knowing, such as through community rituals and the supernatural. Dicky Sofjan's chapter 'Asian ecology and knowledge of the sacred' is the primary contribution in this regard, which examines how community rituals and festivals can

foster cultural meaning and inventiveness in overcoming local ecological challenges. This chapter, like others in the section, expertly weaves together an overview of the academic concepts and debates being addressed, with more specific context about the topics and communities at hand.

While *Living Landscapes* primarily focuses on bottom-up community strategies for confronting environmental challenges, some contributions also consider the (inter)national governance and policy implications raised from the case studies. This form of analysis is taken up most directly by Yonariza and Justine Vaz in their chapter, 'The rights of indigenous people and environmental governance in Peninsular Malaysia'. Here, the authors examine the significant social justice concerns and the state's seeming disregard for the rights of the Jokun indigenous people to inhabit their ancestral lands in and around Tasik Chini. For me, this particular chapter contains the broadest international significance of all in the book, as it adeptly demonstrates how ill-informed environmental governance and policy decisions can directly influence the well-being of ecosystems and their ability to support life.

One aspect of the book that I found most frustrating is the structural organization of the chapters. Although the introduction nicely establishes the context, origins and aims of the book, I found that it lacks a systematic overview of the book's themes. Conversely, the penultimate section, which consists of the more analytical contributions, contains much repetitive descriptive information about the individual cases, which we already learned in the previous chapters (sometimes verbatim). As such, I would recommend that readers begin with Section VI, before (re)turning to the case studies in sections I–V.

This book will be of interest to an interdisciplinary readership united by an interest in the dynamic relations between societal, cultural and environmental change in modernizing Asia. It should also be required reading for anyone embarking on or currently involved in a large, multiyear research project, as it candidly discusses various challenges faced by the diverse group of scholars as they worked together on completing the objectives of the API project. In fact an entire chapter is devoted to this topic: 'The challenges of building a community' by Danilo Francisco M. Reyes and Yeoh Seng Guan, which reflexively recounts the origins, aims, successes and failures of the project and its development.

Finally, as mentioned above, *Living Landscapes* is very ambitious in scope, which is both a strength and a weakness. Because of the range of topics covered, the book achieves breadth by necessarily sacrificing depth. The book thus serves as a good introduction to various themes ranging from cultural landscapes to natural hazards and risk management, which could make it a useful text for upper-level undergraduate or postgraduate courses. Yet scholars hoping to engage with only one of these themes will find it wanting. This limitation is in fact acknowledged by Tatsuya Tanami in the foreword and is to a large extent redeemed by the book's considerable insights on mobilizing various stakeholders in tackling local environmental problems. As such, the volume nonetheless makes a very useful companion for those seeking more engaged forms of scholarship and activism.

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