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## <Book Review>

Chyatat Supachalasai

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undoubtedly deserves a fresh look.

Overall, *Irregular Migrants and the Sea at the Borders of Sabah, Malaysia: Pelagic Alliance* is a compelling volume from start to finish. Rarely has the border migration situation in Sabah been seen through the eyes of migrant communities, at least not so far in a book-length examination. By bringing to the fore the powerful and evocative images of her informants, Somiah offers valuable insights into the cry of migrants to belong amid the heavy culture of surveillance, and compels readers to sympathize with irregular migrants, to see them as humans with children and families and not merely as governmental statistics. As such, Somiah does not stick to the traditional approach of treating each subject matter—the land, the sea, and migrant people—separately or chronologically. Her focus on weaving the unique experiences of her informants into the narrative deserves much credit. So too does her care with language: richly described, with much emphasis on nuances expressed in the local vernacular and written in a narrative that is wholly accessible, this book is a delight for the anthropologist reader. It is also versatile enough to be used as a how-to in ethnographic study to train university students keen on exploring societal issues involving migration and belonging.

In the end, the migrant story in Sabah may always be tainted by the illegality of undocumented entry and re-entry; but perhaps one of the most important contributions of this book is how it discusses the various forms of under-documentation that plague migrants. Through no fault of their own, Philippine descendants of undocumented migrants who are born in Sabah do not own any form of identification as proof of citizenship that is acceptable by either the Malaysian state or the Philippine government. While Somiah does not claim to have solutions for the problem, this book could be a meaningful place to start a conversation on what it means to truly belong in Sabah in the present time.

Trixie M. Tangit

*Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Universiti Malaysia Sabah*

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2431-4798>

### ***Environmental Movements and Politics of the Asian Anthropocene***

PAUL JOBIN, MING-SHO HO, and HSIN-HUANG MICHAEL HSIAO, eds.

Singapore: ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, 2021.

With ecological crises on a planetary scale threatening the mass destruction of human and non-human species, the book *Environmental Movements and Politics of the Asian Anthropocene*, edited by Paul Jobin, Ming-sho Ho, and Hsin-Huang Michael Hsiao, is timely in noting the multiple dimensions in East and Southeast Asian environmental practices and movements for democratization

and democratic consolidation. Given the diversity of sociopolitical contexts and governance systems across the region, such as democracy, flawed democracy, and authoritarianism, this book raises two fundamental questions: (i) How have different sociopolitical contexts contributed to spreading organizations, practices, principles, and challenges of the environmental movement in various parts of the region? (ii) How have environmental movements shaped domestic politics and environmental policies in the countries of East and Southeast Asia and vice versa? Each contributor provides a qualitative assessment and theoretical discussion involving one of nine countries: Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore, the Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, Vietnam, and Cambodia.

Environmental movements in East and Southeast Asia consider the ecological crisis as an integral aspect of democratization. In other words, democratization cannot be expected to move forward without environmental measures. From this viewpoint, this book is theoretically driven by the concept of the Anthropocene, introduced at the beginning of the twenty-first century by the Western scholars Paul Crutzen and Eugene Stoermer. The Anthropocene designates the end of the Holocene while signaling that Earth is entering a new epoch with the unabated proliferation of destructive man-made activities. This neologism does not represent an ambition to celebrate human supremacy. Instead, humans must be made aware of environment-related issues and activities that are harmful to their lives. Examples are global warming, the rapid loss of biodiversity, and mass extinction of earthly species. Worthy of note is this book's dialectical synthesis representing the Anthropocene as a concept whose original significance is not limited to Western territories alone but extensively incorporates other newly industrialized regions such as countries in Africa, Asia, and Southeast Asia. This conceptual expansion enables the volume's editors to legitimize the claim in the introductory chapter that the Anthropocene is a non-Eurocentric idea (p. 7). Entwined with the escalation in the loss of biological diversity of indigenous peoples and nonhuman species, environmentally harmful scenarios motivate the sociopolitical mobilizations responsible for anthropic activities in some parts of Asia. Two points are worth noting. First, "Asian Anthropocene" represents neither the invention of the Asian-style Anthropocene nor the Anthropocene in the Asian Way. Second, the Asian Anthropocene cannot be studied in isolation from other two quintessential theoretical accounts developed in the 1970s in the fields of social movement and political sociology, namely, Environmental Justice (EJ) and Political Opportunity Theory (POT) (p. 13).

Yet, while making their arguments on the concerned issues, contributors often endeavor to conflate EJ and POT with the Anthropocene. This book proceeds with nine case studies based on differing awarenesses of spatial historiographies and temporalities. Illuminating the Asian Anthropocene through selected case studies, each contributor's approach is associated with the frameworks of EJ, POT, and eco-authoritarianism.

EJ represents a radical movement—a sociocultural campaign pioneered by environmental

activists, universally extending justice to nonhuman beings. Its essence of thought in promoting justice from below corresponds well with the nature of environmental activists. Paul Jobin, the author of Chapter 2 on Taiwan, shows that EJ is explicit in the scenario where Taiwan's environmental movement continues its political practice of promoting and defending democracy (pp. 14, 22). Jobin has coined the term "eco-nationalism," designating "a civic form of ecological nationalism" (p. 39), expressing the view that environmental activists are privileged to stimulate and fulfill this principle. In Taiwan, the indigenous peoples' movement for the recognition of land rights and the community of farmers suffering from Formosa Steel are noted as exemplifying the ecological nationalism associated with EJ (pp. 66–67).

Francisco Magno also addresses this dimension of EJ in Chapter 5 on the Philippines (p. 140). Incorporating matters of equity and justice into an environmental issue as a condition for democratization in the Philippines is dangerous. Magno notes how environmental activists, faced with the alliance between pro-neoliberalism state officials and avaricious oligarchs, have dealt with pollution protection, local ecology, and livelihood systems.

In Chapter 7 Fadzilah Majid Cooke and Adnan A. Hezri view EJ as a distinct concept for understanding environmental activism in Malaysia (p. 225). For Cooke and Hezri, if EJ is promoted as a mutual framework involving state officials, civil society, and environmental activists, it will mitigate the issues of poverty and social inequality while enhancing the rights of indigenous people such as the inhabitants of Lun Bawang in north-central Borneo.

POT is another theoretical framework connected to the Asian Anthropocene. Although not entirely separate from EJ, POT is primarily considered a political movement that strives to release itself from the shackles of state-centric political repression to ignite the possible pathways or opportunities for politico-sociological change. However, POT also estimates the constraints and setbacks—not only in relation to state repression but also in relation to democratic movements unconcerned with environmental issues—that may hamper such social change. Such constraints can be viewed either as setbacks to anthropocentric activities or as active participation in creating windows of opportunity to reverse the existing human practices detrimental to Earth. The POT framework is indirectly discussed in Chapter 3 on Hong Kong. China's political influence since 1978 has driven Hong Kong to undertake a nonaggressive stance that enables political institutions to implement orders for environmental problem-solving. Such nonconfrontational yet institutionalized behavior is a feature of "managerial environmentalism" (p. 83). However, James Wong and Alvin So suggest an anti-authoritarian civic stance and introduce the alternative approach of "radical environmentalism," a concept that ushers a new pathway to rearticulate the environment and democracy in the non-state-based political agenda enunciated by local groups (pp. 83, 102).

Chapter 6 on Indonesia by Suharko Suharko discusses "Post-New Order" Indonesia through the performance of environmental nongovernmental organizations tasked with alerting the public on issues related to deforestation and climate emergencies (p. 172). Post-New Order Indonesia

reflects environmental activists' attempt to expand their political scope on the principles of civic and political rights for vulnerable groups (pp. 175, 192). To some extent, Post-New Order Indonesia enables a vision of democratization constituted in the environmental movement because activists are looking for a window of opportunity while assessing the threats and barriers imposed by the government to the movement and certainly eco-social change (p. 175).

Chapter 8 on Thailand by Jakkrit Sangkhamanee scrutinizes the enthusiastic activities of environmental movements in the country, dating back to the permission for civic participation stipulated in the 1997 constitution. Local NGOs and villagers once formed a close alliance to tackle environmental issues. However, such a cooperative stance has given way to ambivalence and a lack of trust because Thai populism and autocratic systems tend to interfere in cohesive partnerships (p. 254). The loss of legitimacy of NGOs and the Thai government's refusal to redirect environmental problem-solving are tremendous forces impeding the efforts of the environmental movement. Also, the recent democratization of Thai youths has allowed many liberal agendas to reshape Thailand's sociopolitical system; but environmental issues are outside the scope of the reforms. Youths' preoccupation with matters such as sexual freedom, fashion, hairstyles, feminism, and so on suggests a lack of concern with environmental matters. This leads Sangkhamanee to observe the nihilism of the environmental movement in Thailand while simultaneously encouraging ecological concerns as a part of Thailand's democratization process in the long run (p. 255).

Eco-authoritarianism is detailed by Jobin in the concluding chapter (pp. 334–339). The eco-authoritarianism paradigm represents the government's rigid control over climate change and environmental policies. According to the principles of eco-authoritarianism, the neoliberal market agenda, which seems to ignore the human rights of individuals, causes damage to the environment. Problem-solving is achieved only by resorting to state centrism while vanquishing the role of non-state actors in matters such as civil society and environmental policies. Xi Jinping's China's "environmental governance" in dealing with global warming is an example of eco-authoritarianism. But China's Belt and Road Initiative endangers the ecosystem in Laos, Thailand, Vietnam, and Cambodia. Imperative to this discussion is Chapter 10 on Cambodia. According to James Wang, civil society barely succeeds in Cambodia's neopatrimonial state, a regime that is politically engaged with the influence of China, and this represents a predicament that worsens the condition of local inhabitants (p. 320).

Chapter 9 by Stephan Ortmann examines Vietnam's environmental activism under the one-party system, in which the party seems dominant in fostering solutions to environmental problems. Vietnam's civil society must avoid a confrontational approach like the managerial system institutionalized in Hong Kong and presented by Wong and So in this volume. Despite the government's tolerance of activism, its fear that activism will challenge the status quo remains unabated; thus, the government has decided to reclaim its authority in dealing with environmental issues (pp. 262–263).

Chapter 4 on Singapore by Harvey Neo highlights a case study in which the environmental movement has been rolled back because of the country's emulation of China's eco-authoritarianism model (p. 133). As the government of Singapore can manage environmental activism effectively, this practice may be described as “post-politics”—where despite the dissidence of citizens, the ruling political power predominates. Given people's presumed ignorance, politics is managed by experts, technocrats, and the state. Neo seems to focus on this streamlined way of thinking, with any rebellious citizens being subtly managed by the post-political government of Singapore (p. 133).

In summary, this well-written book with nine convincing qualitative case studies offers a round-up of the relationships between governance systems, environmental movements, state policy, human rights, and democratization in different parts of Asia. The volume succeeds in stimulating a fruitful empirical and theoretical discussion on the Anthropocene in Asia by offering in-depth analyses on the impacts of the environmental movement on state administration and how all stakeholders have been expected to move forward for ecological advancement. This book is useful for anyone interested in understanding the Anthropocene debate in general, as well as the relations between environmentalism, domestic politics, and democracy in East and Southeast Asia. The book can also be seen as a starting point for further debate on the Asian Anthropocene in areas that are not limited to countries or sovereign states. The significance of the Asian Anthropocene can be extended to the phenomenon taking place in islands, borders, and stateless areas, including uncharted territories in the Asian region.

Chyatat Supachalasai ชญานัตต์ สุขชลาสัย

*Faculty of Political Science, Ramkhamhaeng University*

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3571-951X>

### ***Dear China: Emigrant Letters and Remittances, 1820–1980***

GREGOR BENTON and HONG LIU

Oakland: University of California Press, 2018.

Despite repeated attention being given to the significance of overseas Chinese communities as the world's largest diaspora, its historiography has not yet reached a level comparable with the scholarship of Western migration histories. One reason is the lack of written historical sources; in particular, relevant information about ordinary emigrants' lives at home and abroad is inadequate to elaborate on the historical evolution of overseas Chinese socioeconomic activities. To bridge this gap, Chinese scholars have primarily sought to collect private incoming letters—*qiaopi* (僑批)—sent by Chinese emigrants from their sojourning regions and analyze them to derive historical features and transformations of overseas Chinese businesses and societies. Additionally, after