

New developments in Chinese and Asian environmental history

China's developing industry and economic growth across much of Asia over the last quarter century have fueled concerns over the environment. Public debate has focused on projects like the Three Gorges Dam in China and hydroelectric projects along the Mekong in Laos, while anxieties have risen over air pollution, water quality, and other adverse effects of industrial expansion.

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As with any subject, understanding developments in the present requires insight into how things came to be the way they are, and how the past may frame and condition the ways in which governments and peoples perceive and respond to the environmental challenges they face.

The field of Asian environmental history is relatively new; the study of the history of environments and of the interactions between human societies and their ecological settings emerged in the United States as part of the larger environmental movement of the 1960s and 70s. Its extension to Asian history has been slow, but a number of significant works have appeared over the last decades. Two major books have recently been published, taking the field to a new level of comprehensiveness, and should form the baseline for future scholarly inquiry.

In 1987 Peter Perdue published *Exhausting the Earth: State and Peasant in Hunan, 1500-1850*. While the term 'environment' does not appear in the title or subtitle, it was in many ways the foundational book in the field. Perdue traces the complex interaction of human economic activity, population growth, and state intervention (or lack thereof) in the history of Hunan province in central China over three and a half centuries, showing that the area's overt political history can be better understood if placed in its ecological context.

Just over a decade later Robert B. Marks brought out his study *Tigers, Rice, Silk, & Silt: Environment and Economy in Late Imperial South China*. This was an avowedly environmental history which looks in great detail at how human activities reshaped their environmental setting, as well as how ecological forces such as climate change impact human affairs. Like Perdue, Marks' work examines the environmental history of a spe-

cific place, providing a case study of particular problems and patterns.

Chinese scholars have also been producing local case studies. Feng Xianliang's 明清江南地区的环境变动与社会控制 (*Environmental Change and Social Control in Ming-Qing Jiangnan*), an extensively documented study of how agricultural and commercial development affected the Jiangnan region, China's wealthiest area, under the last two imperial dynasties, serves as a good example. Feng highlights the differential impact of environmental stress on social classes and the environmental effects which elites and ordinary farming communities had on their surroundings.

While these works provide critical insights into particular environmental histories, two books published in the past two years have expanded the vision of environmental history across space and time. In *The Unending Frontier: An*

Environmental History of the Early Modern World, John Richards builds upon a wealth of local data to perceive underlying patterns around the globe from 1500 to 1800. The book goes beyond Asian environmental history, yet gives Asia extensive treatment. Environmental history is global history, while global history cannot be Eurocentric if we want to understand the mechanisms of historical development and the ecological orders in which they are embedded.

The Retreat of the Elephants: An Environmental History of China does not seek to present Chinese environmental history in a global context, but focuses on the expansion of Chinese agricultural society as the basic narrative for understanding ecological change in East Asia over the last 5,000 years. Elvin's work is challenging in scope, and will no doubt be subject to revision and expansion. It adds greatly to the field of Chinese environmental history and sets the stage for further research.

These works point the way to new areas of inquiry in the field, and to the need for historians of China and Asia to

incorporate the insights and interpretations of environmental history in studying Asia's past. ◀

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