

Yoshinori Yasuda, Mark J. Hudson *Multidisciplinary Studies of the Environment and Civilization: Japanese Perspectives*

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Since a group of geologists recommended to adopt 'Anthropocene' as the name of a new geological era in 2016, an academic debate on the impact that human activities have had on the environment since at least the mid-20th century has gained momentum and has involved large sections of the public opinion. Area studies are not an exception.

The book *Multidisciplinary of the Environment and Civilization: Japanese Perspectives*, co-edited by Yoshinori Yasuda and Mark Hudson, is a rare attempt to offer a multidisciplinary perspective on the study of Japan. Focusing on Japan, the title is the first in a series dedicated to the studies of Anthropocene in the Asian context and from an Asian perspective.

The book aims at offering a truly multi-faceted perspective on the interactions between humans and the natural environment: each chapter is devoted to a specific case-study aiming at offering insights in geology, palaeogeography, archaeology, ichthyology, literature, art history and historiography. On top of this, apart from the chapters by Hudson, the book gathers a number of essays and studies by mainly Japanese scholars which otherwise would be hardly accessible for the English-speaking world.



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The book is ambitious and definitely provocative. As Yasuda admits in the “Preface” to the volume, the aim of the series is

to pursue, from an Asian perspective, the lifestyles and feasibility of a new civilization for the latter half of the twenty-first century that will enable humans to coexist with nature. (ix)

These words provides the opportunity for the editor to stress a few guiding concepts at the foundation of the book project. First, the importance of thinking of the modern age in terms of geocosmos, a concept developed in association with Tokyo University professor Takafumi Matsui, Heita Kawakatsu and Kazuhiro Ishii, which helps to better understand and acknowledge the unity and complementarity of the human and the natural spheres. Therefore, cooperation between natural and human scientists is desirable as the humankind has adapted to, clashed with, used and transformed the environment it lived in, though only limitedly until the 18th century Industrial Revolution, since its very appearance on Earth. Second, the need for reconsidering ‘Western’ (mis)conceptions on developing a civilization through unilateral nature domination and (in)finite exploitation.

In the “Introduction”, Mark Hudson further stresses the first of Yasuda’s points. The arrival of the Anthropocene asks for a general reconsideration of our relation with nature. Citing Shwägerl, he affirms that

There is no “environment” any longer that surrounds our civilization. We are living in an “invironment”, a new nature that is strongly shaped by human needs and that has no outside. (2)

Thus, “civilization can no longer be seen as an ‘insulation from nature’” (2). However, partially correcting Yasuda’s second point, Hudson maintains that, since the Anthropocene is a global phenomenon, debates on differences between Western and Asian civilizations seem irrelevant, but, at the same time, he recognizes the need to integrate Asian voices in an already flourishing debate that, however, has so far been dominated by Western scholars. After presenting the contents of the following chapters, Hudson reflects on the power of the Anthropocene to ‘naturalize’ artificial objects. A case in point is the crippled Fukushima Daiichi, nuclear power plant, which is now ‘a natural object’, or, a hyperobject which transcends time and geographical boundaries for it ‘sticks’ to our water, bodies, clothes and gene, more representative of not just Japan but the global anthropogenic nature than any natural beauty that has been immortalized in literature and art.

The book is structured into three parts, each dealing with a broad topic. Part I, which is in turn divided into six chapters, focuses on Japan’s natural environment. The chapters are very diverse in scope

ranging from the analysis of sediments to poetry. Despite their thematic and methodological variety, half of the brief essays collected in this section have a strong geographical component associated with Shizuoka prefecture, and more generally, Eastern Japan.

Chapter 2, by Kōichi Shibukawa, offers a historical account of the evolution of fish research in Suruga Bay, citing the arrival of the 'Black ships' led by the United States Navy Commodore Matthew C. Perry in 1854 as a turning point in the development of a local sector. According to the essay, Perry's expedition, originally aimed at forcing the then Japanese military government to lift trade limitations with Washington, was instrumental in stimulating a scientific interest toward the marine fauna off the coasts of Shizuoka prefecture. Knowledge amassed in the US was further expanded by studies conducted by Japanese zoologists since the early decades of the 20th century. A total 1,200 have been inventoried so far, but, more species remain undescribed. Finally, the author claims that the knowledge of such unknown species can be key for local authorities to build a biodiversity conservation strategy.

Chapter 3, by Kazuyoshi Yamada, discusses the significance of laminated sediments in Japanese lakes as indicators of climate change over a period of around 30 thousand years. Data obtained through the analysis of lake varves, in fact, reveal that the end of the latest glacial period, and the beginning of the Holocene, have been asynchronous with the North Atlantic region. The chapter further hints at the impact that human activities such as wood cutting around the tenth century AD has had on the environment as reflected on sediments.

Chapter 4, by Daisuke Sugawara, deserves attention for its approach to the study of Anthropocene focusing on coastal environments and tsunami deposits in Northeastern Japan. Sugawara traces historical trends in the human response to such dramatic natural events since the Yayoi period until March 2011 in terms of abandonment, recovery/development of coastal areas by human communities. The results point in the direction of a correlation between human activity and removal of sediments resulting in a diminished capacity to understand scientifically the impact of more recent tsunamis in the early modernity and modernity compared to ancient times.

Chapter 5 discusses the results of a series of studies conducted on bone collagen and tooth enamel retrieved in Jomon time human skeletal remains. Arguing for the effectiveness of a mixed methodology combining radiocarbon dating and stable isotope analysis, the author, Sōichirō Kusaka, outlines the dietary habits of a sample of Late/Final Jōmon period individuals whose remains were found in the Yoshigo shellmound (3,500-2,300 years before present, BP hereafter). Particularly, the chapter indicates a higher dependence on plants (ranging from 31 to 94 %) rather than meat (1-49), fish and shellfish (1-47 and 1-51, respectively).

Chapter 6 and 7 sensibly differ from the previous ones in that they deal with Japan's natural environment as represented in poetry and art. Specifically, Chapter 6 by Kazuha Tashiro, examines how the representation of Mount Fuji, Japan's highest and most celebrated mountain, has changed in waka poetry through the century and as consequence of politico-institutional changes. Comparing poems from the classical VIII century *Man'yōshū*, the *Kokin Wakashū* (905) and *Shin Kokin Wakashū* (1205), with those of Edo period authors such as Keichū, Tayasu Munetake and Abe no Nakamaro, the author argues that the lyricism of poets trekking along the Tōkaidō in ancient and medieval times has gradually made way to expressions of a sense of pride and belonging typical of early modern nationalism, especially in authors that were either Edo natives or strictly tied to the Tokugawa shogunate. Chapter 7 further elaborates on the relation between the Edo regime and the image of Mount Fuji. According to Jin Matsushima, in fact, under the Tokugawa, Mount Fuji became a 'device', employed by regime artists such as Kanō Tan'yū (1602-74), the bakufu's first official painter, to create a distinctive 'Tokugawa dynasty' style. Inspired by the style of 13th century Chinese landscape artist Xia Gui and 15th century sumi-e painter Sesshū Tōyō, Kanō succeeded in creating analogies between the centrality of Mount Fuji over the Kantō plain and, by and large, over Japan, and the suzerainty of the Tokugawa over the other federated warlords constituting the bakuhan system and 'satellite' foreign entities such as the Kingdom of the Ryūkyū, Ezo and Korea.

The discussion of Mount Fuji seen through poetry and art ends Part I of the book. In Part II, dedicated to "Movements in Nature and Culture", the focus shifts to an analysis of the diffusion of pantropical plants across the Japanese archipelago (Chapter 8) and of practices by mountain ascetics on Mount Fuji (Chapter 9). In the first one, Kōji Takayama describes the pioneer capacities of certain pantropical plants with sea-drifted seeds (PPSS), dispersed along a wide area connecting the South Atlantic to the South Pacific through the Indian Ocean, and limitations scientists face in their study due to the severe impact of human activity on coastal environments. In the latter, by Yasumasa Ōtaka, the ascetic practices performed by a sect of practitioners on Mount Fuji (the Murayama shugen) are illustrated in detail. This chapter seems to underline the importance of archaic rituals that have died out (the last Murayama shugen died in 1987 without passing secret ritual instructions to others) against the transformation of such areas into tourist destinations and the environmental decay that ensues.

Finally, Part III explores the concepts of Neolithization and environmental justice contrasting a so-called 'Eastern' with a 'Western' perspective. Chapter 10 by Junzō Uchiyama presents Neolithization as a global transformative process that has led many societies

around the globe to adopt an agrarian lifestyle. Uchiyama rightly criticizes Childe's concept of a "Neolithic revolution" (Childe 1983) showing that, besides being elaborated on the basis of evidence collected mainly in western Eurasia, it does not accurately describe the complexity of a process which involved climatic as well as socio-economic transformations. More specifically, it entailed a gradual substitution of complex foraging habits with sedentism and "complex farming" rather than the adoption of a single "package" of Neolithic tools, such as ceramics and adzes, and technologies.

Archaeological evidence from East Asian Inland Seas demonstrates that sedentism was widespread by 10,000 and 6,000 BP, during a global warming phase nearly 3 thousand years after western Eurasia, but that the diffusion of farming was relatively faster than other parts of the world. The rise of global temperatures caused sea levels to rise and increased accessibility to freshwater resources. Coastal environments were relatively richer and gradually attracted foraging communities as they offered multiple resources on which humans could sustain themselves and access to early trade routes through which goods and technologies were exchanged between the Japanese archipelago and the continent. It is certainly along these routes that inundated rice cultivation spread across the region. According to Uchiyama, for peoples who were already accustomed to small scale plant cultivation, this crop was relatively more efficient in terms of land use and food resources. Rice paddies were also ideal for fish (carp) rearing, with fish excrements being a useful fertilizer, and in dry seasons could attract small and large game like hares, deers and boars. In sum, the 9,000-year-long transition toward the emergence of full-fledged agrarian societies in East Asia may be best understood in terms of serendipity and cost-efficiency rather than a 'revolution'.

The final chapter, by Mark Hudson, discusses the main trends in Japanese archaeology and historiography in the postwar period and in light of recent debates on the need for an "integrated human and natural history" (159). Based on a careful literature review of Japanese history and archeology texts, Hudson maintains that nature has been either neglected or described as a mere background against which culture develops and evolves. Hudson ascribes this indifference to a number of reasons which may be summarized as follows: first, the compartmentalization of archaeology, history and anthropology; and second, the protracted influence of positivism, on the one hand, and Marxism, on the other, both of which have contributed to demeaning nature and the concept of 'natural'.

Hudson then discusses the role of social sciences, in particular human geography, which contrary to history and archaeology have contributed to reshaping a new scientific discourse around nature. Particularly, he reviews the work by Yoshinori Yasuda, one of the few Japanese academics who have extensively written on human-nature

interactions. Yasuda is renown mainly for maintaining that the Japanese, heirs of a forest loving and milkless civilization who has contributed to the spread of rice cultivation across Asia, have the knowledge the world needs to solve the current climate crisis. According to Hudson, despite Yasuda's overt and disappointing simplifications, he has helped shape a truly 'postcolonial' view of Japanese history that have been nevertheless ignored or ostracized by the Japanese and international academia.

In light of the preliminary considerations and the summaries above, the book deserves a praise as it is a rare example of "writing back the environment" (172) in the Japanese past. Fostering relations between single scientific fields is all but an easy task and the editors have reached one of their aims. The hybrid array of research brought together by the two editors of the volume is in line with the ambitions declared in the opening chapters. The history of the transformations undergone by the Japanese archipelago in the last couple of million years is as fascinating as it is omitted in classes on Japanese ancient history. For instance, the different path toward sedentism followed by the first inhabitants of the Japanese archipelago as illustrated by Uchiyama cannot fully be understood without shedding light on the effects of global warming on the region's water resources. At the same time, looking at how people in the Neolithic responded to global climate changes it is possible to learn more on what might expect us in the coming decades. In this sense, one might agree with the initial claim that there is no 'environment', but rather an 'invironment'. It is undeniable that, inasmuch as the humankind actively operates in history, so does nature at a more profound level. One of the merits of this book is in fact underscoring once more the role of nature in history. Putting nature back in its place in history is key to realizing a truly "grand and deep history" *à la* Braudel.

Nonetheless, a few aspects of the book remain problematic, most notably, its inconsistency. Despite the division in parts, the chapters arrangement in the book does not seem to follow a specific criterion, nor do the single chapters seem to 'communicate' the one with the other, although there often seems to be room for internal referencing (i.e. chapters 4 and 10). At the same time, as also noted by Hudson in the introduction, some chapters do not discuss intriguing aspects of the topics touched upon, such as the origin of the simile between love and active volcano in classical Japanese poetry or anthropocenic disturbances impacted on the distribution of PPSS. The reader may be inclined to think that these studies, apart from Chapter 10 by Uchiyama, are still work in progress rather than more detailed pieces of research.

Another problematic aspect of the book is its geographical focus on Honshū and, more narrowly on East Japan, which seems to be disregarding of the diversity of the ecosystem of the Japanese archipel-

ago and of its peripheries. This is an issue that should have been addressed considering the scope of the book to convey perspectives from Japan and not just from its main island. Concurrently, if it is true that Anthropocene affects the entire human community, it is short-sighted to consider only Japanese scholars, excluding Hudson, capable of conveying original perspectives on the study of Japan.

This leads to the most problematic feature of the book, i.e. the attempt at reconsidering Yoshinori Yasuda as a ‘postcolonial’ intellectual. In a lucid article, Reitan (2017), much in the same vein as Morris-Suzuki (1998), defines Yasuda a “reactionary ecologist”. He compares Yasuda and others’ desire for the dissemination of a so-called “Japanese environmental ethics”, even through international marriages, to the wartime Japanese imperialist discourse on having the Emperor worshipped in all other nations. As other imperialist desires, the will to convert the world to the Japanese view on environment is “couched in the language of benevolence” (Reitan 2017, 12). Paternalism is a distinctive feature of Japanese technocrats and of Japan’s foreign policy toward developing Asia (see Zappa 2020). However, if history can teach us something, that is that exporting models or views irrespective of the recipient’s entails a certain degree of violence. At the same time, in his own books (see for instance Yasuda 2013) and in the preface to this book, the Japanese geographer is vocal about the damages that the so-called ‘Western civilization’ – versus the positive model offered by a peaceful forest-loving milkless civilization – originated along the Yangtze river and spread to Japan. This dichotomy, which has helped Yasuda to justify the environmental catastrophes caused by indiscriminated industrial policies between the 1960s and 1980s, if it is true what Hudson claims in the Introduction to the volume, has to be overcome. Blaming the ‘Western civilization’ that had ‘hegemonized’ the minds of Japanese policy makers and entrepreneurs for domestic disasters is a simplification and a historical error. To sponsor it as an attempt to create a post-colonial discourse in Japanese archaeology is a major intellectual flaw.

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