



**Review of John Charles
Ryan (ed.), *Southeast
Asian Ecocriticism:
Theories, Practices,
Prospects***

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John Charles Ryan (ed.), *Southeast Asian Ecocriticism: Theories, Practices, Prospects*. London: Lexington Books, 2017. xiii + 310 pp. ISBN 978-1-4985-4597-6.

This edited collection of essays is a crucial and exciting contribution to ecocritical scholarship for many reasons. The editor John C. Ryan has assembled a diverse group of Southeast Asian and international scholars and given them a platform from which to elucidate and critique the environmental literature of Southeast Asian countries, communities and traditions. This is no mean feat, considering the sheer complexity and variety of ethnic, linguistic, and cultural groupings which inhabit Southeast Asia as well as the vast array of both written and oral traditions found within the region. Ryan astutely points out that “articulating ideas of ecocriticism, sustainability, and ecological futures in the Southeast Asian spatial context necessitates recognizing the immense cultural heterogeneity of the region and, in particular, the environmental traditions of its diverse ethnic groups, many of which are minority indigenous populations negotiating their respective national mainstreams” (4-5). Certainly, this timely and important anthology facilitates critical debates around Southeast Asian environmental issues and highlights the creative and innovative work of both mainstream and minority writers and thinkers who might otherwise remain largely unknown to the rest of the world.

While ecocritics lament the lacuna in Southeast Asia where world ecocritical studies is concerned, especially with the prominence of studies on Indian and East Asian literatures, this book successfully addresses and fills that gap, hence fulfilling one of Ryan’s primary goals. Other key objectives include “[expanding] the field of ecocriticism through the volume’s devotion to the environmental writers, creators, theorists, traditions, and concerns of the region” and “foregrounding the multiplicity of approaches leveraged by scholars based in and located outside the region” (15-16). To both these ends, the volume does not disappoint. Chapters focusing on Thai, Filipino, Myanmarese, Vietnamese, and Indonesian environmental literature certainly expand the field for a methodology and discipline which, although comparatively new, continues, at its core, to challenge presumptions of human mastery over the natural world.

The approaches and strategies adopted in the interpretation of fiction, poetry, creative nonfiction, and other cultural forms attest to the scholars’ innovation and boldness in breaking new ground and extending the conversation in stimulating, new directions. For example, Ryan’s own theorising of “literary botany” as “both a genre and a framework for conceptualizing literary works that integrate knowledge of natural history, plant ecology, and botanical conservation, and that foreground vegetal life as an active and percipient narrative agent” (180) is both intriguing and convincing, while Ignasi Ribó cautions against the “literary presumption” of ecocriticism and advocates a hermeneutic turn which “would require ecocriticism to engage with the production, dissemination, and reception of all sorts of meanings, not just those that are conveyed through written or other textual media, both within and across the own-worlds of different species” (51).

Ryan’s study of the native padauk flower and the transplanted exotic water hyacinth in Myanmarese literature breaks new ground in considering plants as lively, intelligent, and possessing agency. The plant-centred works of poets Saya Zawgyi, Nyunt Thit and others demonstrate the imbrications of literature and botany as both the padauk and hyacinth “figure into contemporary poetry as embodiments of cultural identity, societal cohesion,

and spiritual actualization” (181). In navigating the polluted Irrawaddy or the political, cultural, social, and ecological currents of Myanmar’s colonial and recent turbulent history, literary botany “enables readers to imagine a collective future that considers plants and non-plants through the real possibility of intimate cohabitation” (195) while resisting the indigenous-exotic binary and xenophobic discourses of invasion ecology. The ethical and political implications of this desired “intimate cohabitation” inevitably evoke present-day events affecting the country, the region and the world. Literary botany could provide powerful insights into issues of displacement and marginalisation.

Ribó’s reflection on Thailand’s vanishing elephants raises pertinent questions about both the animal and its human handlers as both have been subject to “the dominant discourses produced from the top and center of national culture” (44). He argues that like the elephants they interact with, the mahouts who hail from the hill tribes and minority communities of Thailand have been rendered voiceless - despite their profound knowledge of plants and animals - by “the elites and middle classes living down in the valleys and cities that have the power to produce and disseminate relevant meanings about the environment, whether it is in the form of policy, science, literature, or criticism” (44). Ribó asserts that the conservationist and foresters themselves are implicated in this elitist system and proposes ethnographic and (yet to be formulated) zoographic methods to counter the literary presumption of much of ecocritical theory and practice.

For the unenlightened, reading the chapters on the Philippine Cordillera Region of Luzon in Chapter Four by Jason Paolo R. Telles and the Mekong bioregion in Chapter Six by Chaiyon Tongsupkaeng is akin to being educated in the environmental imagination and craft of artists who may not be accessible to both the general reader and the specialist-critic due to linguistic barriers. Both these scholars have painstakingly undertaken to provide translations to the works under scrutiny. Telles’s study of music videos depicting the relationship between the Igorot (indigenous tribes from the Cordillera region) and their environment is a deft interdisciplinary blend of ethnography, cultural studies, popular culture studies, postcolonial criticism, and ecocriticism. Carefully avoiding the pitfall of romanticisation, Telles argues that the videos of the Igorot’s music (an appropriation and indigenisation of American country and folk music) offer a glimpse into their cosmovisions which include animistic beliefs and ideas of stewardship and care.

In his essay, Chaiyon Tongsupkaeng delves into the ecopoetics of Thai poet Angkarn Chanthatip. He argues that Chanthatip’s poetic imagination is “oriented toward natural history and human culture, which are interactively shaped and informed by the poet’s environmental consciousness of local land- and water-scapes, especially the Mekong River bioregion” (133). The poetic sequence selected for the study is inspired by actual prehistoric cliff paintings and is narrated by three speakers: the Fish God, the Primitive Man, and the Earth. Tongsupkaeng asserts that “by asking rhetorical questions about history, the passage of time, the decline of religious beliefs, and the physical transformations of the environment over time, the poem investigates the role of cave wall paintings in retelling the interrelated stories of the Mekong River and Isan culture” (136). More specifically, the poet’s environmental concerns come to the fore in his allusions to the construction of hydropower dams along the Mekong that has resulted in the decline and near-extinction of the giant catfish amid other obvious threats to biodiversity.

The other contributions in the book encompass a wide scope of topics, tropes and genres, ranging from forests and rivers to travelogues and children or young adult literature, adding grist to the mill. This, along with the meticulous insertion of cross-references between chapters in the interest of coherence, adds to the book's many merits. All in all, this considered and insightful book is a landmark in ecocriticism and will doubtless draw critical attention to the environmental realities of Southeast Asia.