

Book Notes

The Cultivated Forest: People and Woodlands in Asian History
edited by Ian M. Miller, Bradley Camp Davis, Brian Lander, and John
S. Lee. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2022. 274 pp.

Hominins have not been kind to forests. According to Michael Williams's magisterial 689-page *Deforesting the Earth* (Chicago, 2002), beginning about 500,000 years ago with *Homo erectus*, our kind have burned, foraged, chopped, selected certain species, eradicated others, and generally diminished and homogenized our planet's green mantle and the biota that relied on it. Within this larger trajectory, however, countless smaller stories exist. Most follow the arc of global destruction, but others point to regenerative practices and complexities that necessarily fall out of the larger picture. The editors of *The Cultivated Forest* highlight the intricate stories of both conquest and cultivation necessary to understanding the forces that have desecrated the Earth's woodlands to provide fuel, food, building materials, spiritual inspiration, aesthetic ecstasy, community identity, and so much else.

The enormity of forest predation in North China is brilliantly delineated in Brian Lander's opening chapter which states, starkly, "no forests remain in the lowlands" (3). Indeed, so total was the destruction starting at least seven thousand years ago that today it is difficult even to guess which varieties of vegetation once supported human communities on those vast plains. By the third century BCE, as the population grew and forests shrank, people lost both sustenance and fuel. Mencius wrung his hands, metaphorically connecting the barren landscape and its leeching soils with the destruction of humanity's innate goodness. Smelting operations and charcoal-making took place further and

further away from towns as forests disappeared over the horizon. Those who could afford it invested in building longer supply lines, floating timber down rivers. Eventually, the state claimed control, preventing commoners from appropriating forest products in some areas. Then, “no later than the Warring States Period, which ended in 221 BCE” (14), silviculture emerged on North China’s over-populated plains. Planting not only fruit- and nut-bearing trees but also timber for other needs (including one’s own coffin) joined the usual agricultural pursuits, but these trees were crops, not diverse biota-rich preserves. In sum, population growth, war, metal working, monumental building, and a host of other practices all sculpted the deforested landscape of North China and pushed migration to the south.

In the centuries to come, Southern China’s forest story, as told in an equally engaging essay by Ian M. Miller, followed the same general trajectory from deforestation to cultivation. Miller’s tale pivots around a joint environmental, conceptual, and institutional transformation. Propelled by wood scarcity starting 1,000 years ago, the diverse, self-seeding, varied broadleaf forests held in common and open to anyone willing to do the work of harvesting became homogenized, anthropogenic plantations owned by a few. The commons became property. The key to this silviculture revolution, Miller argues, is a documentary revolution. Without commercial contracts, agricultural manuals, and cadastral records, there would have been no effort at replanting. People needed the assurance that caring for young trees would be rewarded decades later. The guarantor of their rights was the state. Amazingly enough, by the thirteenth century both the silviculture techniques detailed in agricultural manuals and the state’s approach to cadastral record keeping were good enough that they lasted almost unchanged until the early twentieth century. Commercial contracts, on the other hand, shifted strategies throughout the centuries as new ways of sharing the risks and profits of logging emerged. Overall, here too “the fragmentation and commodification of forests were tied to the prevailing trends” of “population growth and market penetration” (35).

John Elijah Bender, in another marvelous contribution, looks beyond Japan’s well-known silviculture regimes, both positive and negative, of the Tokugawa period (1600–1868), to the earlier Warring States period (*sengoku jidai*). Bender argues that non-violent techniques for forest resource dispute resolution developed locally and that these techniques contributed to building peace throughout sixteenth-century Japan from the bottom up. John S. Lee asks how Chosŏn Korea managed to maintain its pine administration (*songjŏng*) system for 500 years. The key, he argues, is the rise of local mutual aid associations known as *kye* between the late seventeenth century and the mid-nineteenth century. *Kye*

administered forests both for state purposes and for their own. Although the pine forests were reserved for “state use,” because the state did not have the ability to manage its forests, Korea’s extraordinary system of protecting woodlands would not have survived without village stakeholders.

Other essays add to the complex picture of competing interests dominating forest use. Meng Zhang describes the tensions among timber interests in early modern southwest China. The various indigenous groups collectively called “Miao” had a state-granted monopoly that was opposed first by Han merchants and then eventually by international consortiums. All three groups seem to have been equally rapacious, raising the question of whether it makes much difference environmentally who does the harvesting. But forests provide more than commodities. Lest there be any doubt, David Bello shows us that during the rule of China’s Qing dynasty (1644–1912), forests were used for many other things besides woodland products including vast ritual sites and hunting grounds. In that multiethnic state, many different identities were negotiated in relation to China’s dwindling forests. Faizah Zakaria is also interested in different ethnic perspectives. She compares the Dutch East Indies and Taiwan, showing how indigenous views of kinship networks connecting people and trees were superseded by new regimes of extraction and ideas distinguishing the human from natural environments.

Turning to the twentieth century, Larissa Pitts insightfully analyzes afforestation in Republican China (1911–1937) arguing that “trees, as such, did not lose their enchantment with the rise of modernity in China. Rather they became re-enchanted with new political purpose” (157). As in Teddy Roosevelt’s America, Meiji and Taishō Japan, and other nations, China’s industrialization relied on expanded use of wood, not its replacement by coal and steel, and, as in these other places, forests were depleted. Faced with this challenge, alongside the need to strengthen patriotic bonds, Republican China combined tree-planting with the memorialization of Sun Yat-sen as “the Father of the Country” on Arbor Day. This connection between planting trees and honoring the dead has a long history going back to Confucius, a tradition despised by the Cultural Revolution when “one hundred thousand impassioned Red Guards felled five thousand of the cemetery’s ancient pines as they destroyed the graves and defiled the corpses of Confucius and his descendants” (146). As Pitts argues, Republican China’s tree planting was a political project meant to heal the nation economically, politically, and spiritually which meant that trees were anathema to Communist cadres.

Running like a red thread through all these essays is the contrast between ecosystem sustainability where the entire web of life is protected and social

sustainability where the protection of human livelihoods is foremost. As the big picture and every small picture shows, human wellbeing has been the primary concern of all societies. For much of human history, it appeared that these two forms of sustainability were separable: while we focused on social sustainability, ecosystems would take care of themselves. If an ecosystem became degraded, people could move; untouched forests could be accessed; new technologies could make exploitation more efficient; timber could be grown as commodity. As this book shows, the Earth's bounty withstood human ingenuity and enterprise for millennia even in densely populated Asia. Now this is no longer true. Today we are finally recognizing that social sustainability rests on ecosystem sustainability. If we lose the latter, the former becomes impossible. The big question is whether the overarching story of destruction foretells our destiny or whether histories might reveal that particular political, economic, and cultural formations and particular levels of population tend to protect forests, soil, and ecosystems, however imperfectly, for longer.

The final essay in the book, written by a team of social, ecological, and earth scientists led by Stevan Harrell, addresses this question directly by looking at three stages in the history of Nuosu people who live in the Cool Mountains of southwest Sichuan China. For two hundred years before 1956 and the coming of Communist reforms, their traditional short-fallow agriculture and herding combined with their "beautiful philosophy" (168) of relations with nature allowed the Nuosu to sustain their society, while at the same time causing deforestation, considerable soil erosion, and sediment build-up in the river valleys. Between 1956 and the decollectivization of the 1980s, Communist initiatives concentrated villages and worked to raise the standard of living although they, too, cut down biodiverse forests. In more recent times, the centuries of excessive use and decreased productivity have been very partially reversed not on unregulated common land or in the national forests where laws prohibiting logging go unenforced, but on the privately managed and policed plots where elders combine local knowledge with state-supported scientific expertise to replant despite depleted or non-existent soil. It would seem from this research that both indigenous ways and Communist modernity wreaked havoc on hillsides. Only active guardianship and the integration of local and scientific knowledge can begin to perform repairs—though it will take many centuries (if ever) before soil deep and rich enough to support bountiful forests can be recreated.

In short, a superb array of essays makes this fascinating collection invaluable. However, I'm less sure that the editors meet their goal of creating a "unified framework for Asian forest history" (x). On the one hand, many of the processes

and problems discussed here resonate with forest histories elsewhere so there seems little that is uniquely “Asian.” On the other, different “Asian forests” differ so greatly from one another that it is hard to discern a shared essence. A third problem is that the forests of South Asia and northeastern Russia are left out of this collection altogether although these places share the Asian continent. It may be time to set aside the troublesome category of “Asia” in our environmental histories and introduce new frameworks—perhaps particularly the framework of comparative governance structures. Nevertheless, this collection is a resounding success. The rubric of “cultivated forests” is enormously productive in helping us understand that human societies never developed separately from trees but in intimate association with them, shaping forests and being shaped in return.

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