

**Environmental Consciousness in Southeast and East Asia:
Comparative Studies of Public Perceptions of
Environmental Problems in Hong Kong (China),
Japan, Thailand, and Vietnam**

Preface

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Given the generally deteriorating state of the environment, both locally and globally, the question of the extent of popular concern about environmental problems in Asian countries has considerable importance. Government leaders often assume that the public is unaware of environmental problems and little concerned with their solution. Environmental NGOs, on the other hand, often assert that common people are deeply concerned about the state of their environment, reflecting traditional beliefs that people should live in harmony with nature. Empirical information on popular attitudes toward the environment in the countries of Southeast and East Asia is in short supply, however, so that no one really knows what the level of popular environmental consciousness actually is.

There is, of course, abundant anecdotal evidence that Asians care about environmental issues. For example, the rebellion that toppled Field Marshall Thanom from power in Thailand in the 1970s was triggered by popular outrage over media revelations that he and his cronies had been shooting wildlife in a national park from military helicopters. More recently, Thai farmers protesting against construction of dams have mobilized considerable public support, at least in part because of their argument that dams destroy the environment. Even in Japan, where people tend to avoid engaging in

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public controversies, voters in Nagano Prefecture recently overwhelming re-elected a maverick governor who had been forced out of office by the powers-that-be because he had ordered a halt to construction of more dams. Thus, we know that at least some members of the public in Asian countries do care about the state of the environment. But how people conceptualize the environment, what their attitudes are towards nature, and what measures they feel should be taken to protect the environment have all remained matters of speculation. It was to help fill this gap in our knowledge that the research reported in the following papers was undertaken.

The papers in this special issue of *Southeast Asian Studies* are the products of the second phase of a long-term multinational research project.¹⁾ The project was designed and managed by a steering committee composed of the authors of this preface. A. Terry Rambo served as a project coordinator and Otsuka Takashi was responsible for administering the project for IGES.

In the first and preceding phase of the project, we did a broad survey of environmental consciousness and factors affecting it in a number of localities in Asia and the Pacific, including Hong Kong, Indonesia, India, Japan, Malaysia, Palau, and Taiwan. The results were published as a special issue of *Asian Geographer* (Vol. 18, Nos. 1 and 2, 1999). These studies did not use a common methodology, however, and relied largely on sources other than the people in whose consciousness we were interested. We therefore decided to do a more intensive, interview-based study of attitudes at the cultural models they reflect in the four localities presented here, using a single methodology that had been used successfully in the United States.

Data collection for this portion of the project was carried-out in Hong Kong and Japan in 1999 and in Thailand and Vietnam during 2000. Initial reports of findings were presented by each of the national teams at an international seminar held at Mahidol University in Bangkok, Thailand in January 2001. Revised versions of these reports were then presented at a panel of the Kyoto Environmental Sociology Congress in October 2001. These papers were reviewed by the project steering committee at a meeting at the National Institute for Environmental Studies in Tsukuba, Japan, in February 2002 and suggestions for revisions made to their authors. Thanks to the wonders of the Internet and the enthusiastic cooperation of the authors responsible for the individual papers, we have been able to prepare this special issue.

1) This research was conducted as a sub-project of the ECO ASIA Long-term Perspective Project which was designed to provide information inputs to the Environment Congress for Asia and the Pacific (ECO ASIA), a ministerial-level policy forum organized by the Ministry of the Environment of Japan. This research was initially funded by the National Institute for Environmental Studies. Subsequently, additional funding was provided by the Ministry of the Environment of Japan and was managed by the Institute for Global Environmental Strategies (IGES) and Mahidol University, Thailand.