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REPORT

The Duke Kunshan Conference on Environmental Justice and Sustainable Citizenship, 22–24 May 2017

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In the past decade, the environmental humanities have emerged as an exciting new rubric for examining relations between nature and culture. In large part, this development stems from the consolidation of the idea of the Anthropocene as an unprecedented epoch that demands new ways of thinking. It is widely agreed that the Anthropocene collapses the conventional separation of humans from their environment, and that its crisis of climate change calls for new forms of interdisciplinary work. Due to this epistemological emphasis, the environmental humanities have come into their own as a field that brings together the natural sciences, philosophy, literary criticism, history, geography, anthropology, and art in an attempt to integrate discussions that have hitherto occurred in largely separate spheres.

So far, discussions organized under the banner of the environmental humanities have generally occurred in North America and Europe, geographical loci that have shaped the character of the conversation as well. Recognizing the limits of a Eurocentric dialogue, even across disciplines, the University of Cape Town in South Africa has started an environmental humanities programme that tries to include perspectives from the Global South. However, scholars of Asian societies, and those based in Asia, have been slow to follow this lead even though this large continent, with its rich and varied ecologies and cultures, is fertile ground for delving into the subject.

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To address this gap, the Global Asia Initiative at Duke University, together with Duke Kunshan University, held a conference on environmental justice and sustainable citizenship in May 2017. The meeting brought together scholars and practitioners who work on environmental questions in China and India from a variety of disciplinary perspectives for three days of informative and stimulating discussion. The conference aimed at starting a dialogue on comparable and connected issues regarding the environment in China and India, Asia's largest nation-states on the highway of economic growth, whose ecological footprints will have an overwhelming impact on the future of the Anthropocene.

Prasenjeet Duara conceptualized and designed the conference. In keeping with the commitment to highlight Asian concerns as well as conceptual frames, Duara focused on 'sustainable citizenship', arguing that human welfare, or the right of citizens to develop their capabilities to the fullest, still constitutes the unfinished agenda of public action in the continent. Unlike the Global North—where levels of affluence enable most citizens to lead lives of relative comfort, dignity, and freedom—China and India still struggle to achieve social and economic well-being for many of their citizens. Both countries contend with extreme inequalities within their populations and ever-larger ecological burdens that are disproportionately borne by the underclass. 'Ecological justice', thus, emerges as a critical theme with which sustainable citizenship must be coupled. Since political and epistemological differences sometimes make it difficult to directly engage with either 'sustainable citizenship' or 'environmental justice' across Asia, the conference was careful to include a range of voices and vocabularies to address these themes. At the same time, the conference organizers recognized that the articulation of the problem in terms of citizenship and justice—concepts that transnational academic discourses usually derive from Western political philosophy—needs to be critically examined from the perspectives afforded by different philosophical traditions and political histories.

The conference began by focusing on contemporary urbanization in China and India, a process that encapsulates the pursuit of economic growth and prosperity and the persistent inequalities and ecological problems associated with it. In his overview of urbanization, Michael Douglass inserted climate change into the picture, complicating conventional analytical frames about environment and development. Ka-ming Wu and Amita Baviskar examined urban ecologies from the perspectives of migrant workers in Beijing and Delhi. They considered those displaced from rural areas and the systemic biases they encounter in cities—denied their civic rights while compelled to labour in insecure, ill-paid, jobs as waste recyclers, rickshaw pullers, vendors, and domestic workers. Environmental injustice in rural China was

the subject of Ralph Litzinger's paper on coal mining and its burden of disease and death, aspects that are not considered when discussing energy choices in the context of climate change.

Climate change has altered the conversation not only around cities but also around water. Now that dynamic hydraulic processes seem even more uncertain, efforts to capture and control water have accelerated. In a paper that resonated with Indian experiences, Pichamon Yeophantong looked at Chinese dam-building in Cambodia and Myanmar, its environmental and social impacts, and the counter-strategies used by anti-dam campaigns. Arupjyoti Saikia described the changing landscape of the Brahmaputra basin and its current challenges. Chris Courtney focused on the industrialization of the farm-fisheries complex in the Yangtze wetlands and the catastrophic advance of an invasive crayfish species.

How human interventions create new opportunities and vulnerabilities for animals and plants was also the subject of Jeffrey Nicolaisen's paper on the Galluscene (the Age of the Domestic Fowl), which discussed the environmental humanities injunction to replace human-centric analytical frames with multispecies ethnography. Pradip Krishen traced the career of *Prosopis juliflora*, a hardy tree from Central America that has taken over large parts of arid and semi-arid India, and described his work as an ecological gardener struggling to restore indigenous flora in degraded landscapes. Yuan-chih Lung addressed the threats faced by giant pandas due to natural events such as gregarious bamboo flowering and human-led habitat destruction.

Rapid and uncontrollable ecological change can evoke a range of responses. Robert Weller showed how the destruction of village temples and graves on the urban periphery has shaken the spiritual ecosystem, leading to pioneering species of religious practices that seek to establish themselves on disturbed ground. Chris Coggins described the revival of village-managed fengshui forests, sacred groves whose belief systems had been suppressed during the Maoist period, while Jianhua Ayoe Wang showed how sacred landscapes coincided with more recently constituted nature reserves. Sam Geall discussed the rise of environmental journalism in China and the negotiation of new partnerships between the state, corporations, and NGOs. Erika Weinthal explored the motivations of 'citizen-scientists', or local volunteers mapping human-wildlife conflicts in Rajasthan. Kathinka Fürst outlined how air pollution in China has provoked artists and film-makers. William Schaefer presented the work of Chinese photographers Zhang Jin and Zhang Kechun, whose techniques and artistic tactics mirror the altered states of nature on which they focus.

Among other topics discussed at the conference were the philosophical roots of animal activism (papers by Chia-ju Chang and Haiyan Lee); colonialism and the climate change debate (Rohan D'Souza); the insertion of Dalits into environmentalist narratives (Mukul Sharma); and the relationship between the material properties of wood and its social and cultural life (Meena Khandelwal). As the first attempt to chart the diverse elements that may be combined to constitute the environmental humanities in Asia, this was a remarkable endeavour that, wisely, did not end by attempting to tie everything together. Instead, it concluded with a visit to the historic water town of Suzhou where the multiple threads of conversations from the conference could be continued over dinner.