

# **Ecologies in Southeast Asian Literatures**

## Histories, Myths and Societies

Edited by

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Series in Literary Studies



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# **Bonding ASEAN together through Literary Studies, Ecological Criticism and the Environmental Humanities**

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The Association of Southeast Asian Nations or ASEAN is a regional inter-governmental organisation that includes ten Southeast Asian countries: Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Brunei, Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and Vietnam. While the foremost reason for creating this organisation was the facilitation of economic, political, security (military), educational and sociocultural interests, the environment is increasingly making its importance known within the organisation. While, arguably, the region's most high-profile environmental issue has been tackling haze pollution, the twenty-first century is seeing other pressing environmental concerns within the ASEAN region as well.<sup>1</sup> For example, deforestation, with Indonesia recording the largest loss of forested area in the region; plastic waste dumping, where five member states have been consistently ranked high in plastic waste pollution (as the region sees a high rate of tourism); threatened plant, fish and animal species; trash dumping from foreign countries such as Canada and Japan, which ASEAN has yet to resolve.

With such pressing environmental concerns within the region, there has been a concurrent rise in literary works centring environmental concerns. In response to this, the Association for the Study of Literature and the Environment-Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASLE-ASEAN) was set up in 2016 in Singapore, with the inaugural workshop being held in

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<sup>1</sup> ASEAN facilitated an agreement to tackle haze pollution in the year 2002, called the ASEAN Agreement on Transboundary Haze Pollution.

August 2016 at the National University of Singapore. The second ASLE-ASEAN conference was held in Vietnam in 2018 at the Vietnam National University in Hanoi. Through these conferences, several environmental issues within the literatures of the ASEAN region were discussed, and the second ASLE-ASEAN conference in 2018 raised issues that were not only particular to the ASEAN region but also have global implications. One has to keep in mind that though the ASEAN region is diverse economically, politically, culturally and linguistically, the environment in its broadest sense plays a crucial role in binding the region. This can be witnessed through the November 2017 ASEAN Conference on Reducing Marine Debris in ASEAN Region, held in Phuket, Thailand. At this conference, the head of the United Nations Environment Programme's Coral Reef Unit, Jerker Tamelander, remarked that "[i]t's clear now that this region is probably the single largest contributor of plastic litter into the marine environment in the world, which means that if we want to solve the marine litter problem as a global challenge, we have to solve it in this region" (quoted in Kaur, Web Source), highlighting the critical global importance of ASEAN's initiatives to tackle its environmental problems.<sup>2</sup>

Ecocriticism in relation to the Southeast Asian region is relatively new. So far, John Charles Ryan's *Ecocriticism in Southeast Asia* is the first book of its kind to focus on the region and its literature to give an ecocritical analysis. Published in January 2018, this edited volume compiles analyses of the eco-literatures from most of the Southeast Asian region. This volume provides us with a broad insight into the ecological concerns of the region as depicted in its literatures and other cultural texts. The current volume will go further to focus specifically on the prominent myths and histories and the myriad ways they connect to the social fabric of the region. Our book is an original contribution to the field in highlighting the mytho-historical basis of many of the region's literatures and their relationship to the environment.

It is important to recognise the fact that any attempt to cogently distil a holistic ecocritical and ecological imagination relevant to the Southeast Asian geo-space necessitates recognising the great cultural heterogeneity of the region and especially the diverse environmental cultures of its diverse ethnopolitical groups. Environmental cultures cannot be separated from myths and histories. Furthermore, while discussing myths

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<sup>2</sup> See: Satwant Kaur, "Tackling Plastic Pollution Priority at ASEAN Meeting", UN Environment, <<https://www.unenvironment.org/news-and-stories/story/tackling-plastic-pollution-priority-asean-meeting>>.

and histories, what gets foregrounded is the idea of continuity that comes with residing in a place, what Greg Garrard terms 'dwelling'. As Garrard stresses, this is not a temporary or transient state but implies the "long-term imbrication of humans in a landscape of memory, ancestry and death, of ritual, life and work." (p. 108). Thus 'dwelling' and the landscape of memory cannot and should not be disentangled. ASEAN nations like many other such political groupings of neighboring countries share a common landscape of memory even while retaining their unique histories and myths.

For one, several ASEAN countries share a common Sino-Indic ancestry, which emerges in the predominance of Buddhism in the region, with the subtle but pervasive influence of Hinduism that can be identified even in the native cultures of pre-Islamic Indonesia and Malaysia. The harking back to myth and teasing out its connection to history becomes an important exercise in environmental consciousness-raising. This occurs in many ways. Firstly, it makes us ponder about the stereotype of the harmonious, pre-political native, who supposedly lived in harmony with nature. Human history, as far back as we can go, appears to have been filled with violence and conflict. Therefore, one needs to understand that ideas of harmony, whether environmental or otherwise, need to be questioned and qualified. Simultaneously, however, one also needs to understand the importance and usefulness of myths and indigenous histories that offer an alter-vision to one increasingly driven by global capitalism and individual gain.

The political philosopher Murray Bookchin describes the concept of 'social ecology' in his book, *The Ecology of Freedom* (1982). Here, he emphasises the idea that ecological problems are caused by human social problems and they can be resolved only by reorganising society among ecological and ethical lines. Social ecologists therefore emphasise the importance of studying the myths and ideologies that are manifested in societies since they believe that these will lead to a clearer understanding of the reasons for the ecological problems that beset them. This idea becomes important to our current study.

The articles in this volume, varied though they are, together explore the idea of nature and its relationship with humans. The always problematic questions that surround such explorations, such as, "why do we regard nature as 'external'?" or "how is humankind a continuum with nature?" emerge throughout the volume either overtly or implicitly. As Pepper (1993) points out, what Karl Marx referenced as 'first' or 'external' nature, gave rise to humankind. But humanity "worked on this 'first' nature to produce a 'second' nature: the material creations of society plus its

institutions, ideas and values.” (Pepper, 108). Thus, our volume constantly negotiates this field of ideas and belief systems, in diverse ways and in various cultures, attempting to relate them to the current ecological predicaments of ASEAN.

### **Summary of Chapters**

The individual contributions to this collection which, with some exceptions, are mostly based on primary texts that emerge from ASEAN, touch on a range of environmental issues. A variety of themes, ranging from human-animal exchanges, trauma, risk and management, food security, myths and legends in children’s literature, nostalgia, war and post-war, postcolonial ecocriticism, dirty aesthetics, the combination of eco-narratives, a Vietnamese constitution of nature and humans, are touched on.

Helen Tiffin writes about orangutans that are found in the wild in Southeast Asia. She interrogates how fiction explores their decreasing numbers in the wild, and how it can contribute to the survival of this species. In her essay, she raises questions regarding what “narratives, myths, stereotypes, have been important” and “how these have changed during the last two centuries.” Her article examines how these narratives have influenced human (especially Western) perceptions of orangutans and highlights their current plight as a radically endangered species. Her paper elaborates on ways through which some contemporary writers are now using fiction in order to draw attention to the plight of the currently endangered population.

Chitra Sankaran uses the concepts of risk and management as an intellectual paradigm to manage the environmental crises and threats in the daily lives of the diverse ASEAN populations. Sankaran’s essay shows that through narrativising and imagining disasters, trauma and risk can be coded and interpreted, and therefore managed. Sankaran uses two narratives from Vietnam and Myanmar that imagine and narrate environmental disasters. Both narratives, being rooted in their national histories, highlight the scope of risk and its management through an ecocritical reading. As such, Sankaran’s essay brings forth the idea of a gesture towards possible futures through unacknowledged pasts and national histories, where these environmental futures are “possibly unwanted” and also remain “within the spectrum of plausibility”.

Jose Monfred C. Sy writes about the issue of food security in the age of the Anthropocene. Sy sees the Anthropocene as food-driven, where “food becomes a major driver of environmental change”. Using the tools of

environmental justice and highlighting the food-related crises experienced today due to neoliberal geopolitics, Sy analyses Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* and *The Year of the Flood*, and Merlinda Bobis' *Locust Girl: A Lovesong* to show that "these narratives destabilise the perverted conception of food in our era".

Sy's essay reflects the ongoing issues of food security that the ASEAN region faces. ASEAN member states recognise the importance of strengthening food security to maintain stability, peace and prosperity throughout the region, and to that effect held The World Food Summit in the year 1996. Food security was defined in the summit as "existing when all people at all times have access to sufficient, safe, nutritious food to maintain a healthy and active life".<sup>3</sup>

Gabriela Lee writes about children's literature in the Philippines, and the use of supernatural and fantastical elements which the child protagonists use to overcome social and physical limitations. These children then impact their immediate environments in empowering ways. Using the concept of the "numinous" by Brawley, Palumbo and Sullivan, Lee analyses Filipino writer Cyan Abad-Jugo's collection of short stories to show how myths and legends are retold for a contemporary generation and re-tooled so that "today's children may begin their own transformations".

Dang Thi Bich Hong discusses the use of nostalgia in Vietnamese poet Nguyen Quang Thieu's ecological poems. Hong writes that the poet makes use of a nostalgic past and desire to show the environmental problems the region is facing today, and how the poet brings out the changes in modern society via the use of metaphors of anxiety and the field.

Hoang To Mai uses the idea of 'dirty aesthetics' to re-read Vietnamese contemporary literary works, Y Ban's *Hoya* and Nguyen Huy Thiep's *Mr. Mong's Story*. Mai proposes that these texts, though not written with the specific intention of an environmentally-friendly reading, nonetheless offer important insights into the ecological problems Vietnam is facing in contemporary times and uses humorous revalorisation of traditional farming within the texts to show this.

Le Thi Huong Thuy, relying on literary analysis and context analysis, examines Đỗ Phấn's representation of environmental destruction and other potential ecological risks as consequences of urbanising processes in Vietnam. The paper demonstrates that Đỗ Phấn's ecological stories embody

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<sup>3</sup> See: World Health Organization, "Food Security", <<http://www.who.int/trade/glossary/story028/en/>>.

a deep sense among Vietnamese intellectuals of their responsibility for the national project of urbanising existing cities and countryside areas and for ecological issues. Moreover, the ways through which Đỗ Phần's stories address and attend Vietnamese public concerns over environmental costs and associated social problems that had particularly emerged since the Reform (1986) indicate the on-going practical role of ecological literature in political and social lives of Vietnam.

Nguyen Thi Nhu Trang uses Vietnamese writer Lê Minh Khuê's collection of short stories "The Tropical Monsoon" to show the narrative templates of 'Eco'. Trang proposes that the combination of 'Eco' in world narratives and Vietnamese narratives contributes to "the shift in the image of Vietnam from a country mired in war to post-war" and shows how the writer emphasises peace and harmony in the lives of individuals and the nation.

Christian Culas writes how Vietnam is trying to establish ideas of what constitutes nature and the relations between humans and non-humans. Culas uses a three-pronged approach to reconstruct the conceptions of humans and nature: (1) an historical overview of the conceptions of human/nature and human/human, (2) a hybrid way of thought and action which merges the traditional Chinese mode of worldview and the Western mode of worldview, and (3) what nature means in Sino-Vietnamese conceptions and practices that show the diversity of how nature is perceived and acted upon. Culas uses examples from Taoist conceptions of nature, the integration of man and nature through consumption, and Vietnamese conceptions of a 'nature garden'.

Timothy Ong's essay looks at how folk narratives interrogate the possibility of inquiring about the relationship of humans with the world through the mythology instantiated by folk poetics. He looks at the epic poem from Central Philippines entitled "Hinilawod" that is framed with and against nature. Ong's essay ultimately provides a way to reimagine and reconstruct indigenous epistemologies in Philippine folk texts from an ecocritical/ecophilosophical lens through a riverine discourse in the poem.

Nguyen Thi Mai Lien examines the ideas of animism in the myths of Southeast Asia and its impacts on environmental behaviours of ancient tribes in Southeast Asians. The paper also wonders whether animism is still alive today and, if so, how it can offer deep lessons for contemporary people regarding the protection of the environment.

### The Importance of ASEAN Literatures and Environment

This collection of essays is important in not only bringing to prominence the ASEAN region, its literatures and environment, but also in highlighting how our perception of the environment is culturally shaped through language and literature. While such literature reflects cultural values, it also resists them.

It is our hope that through this collection of essays, certain absolutes which form the foundation of our unconscious biases are challenged. These essays, by employing concepts such as hybridity, interdependency, and human and non-human exchanges, interrogate both the world that already exists and the comforting anthropocentric paradigms that humans are comfortable existing within.

Thinking about the environment through literature then allows us, as readers and writers, to imagine new worlds where it is important to re-think certain bedrock assumptions such as responsibility, action and selfhood, whether human or non-human, and to give expression to new cultural possibilities.

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**Chi Pham** (Ph.D.) is a tenure-researcher at the Institute of Literature in the Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences. She completed her Ph.D. in Comparative Literature at the University of California, Riverside (USA). Her dissertation, her researcher articles and conference presentations delve examine Vietnamese literature and politics. Of late, Chi has become increasingly interested in the field of literature and environment; she was the Chair of the organising committee of the second ASLE-ASEAN conference in Hanoi (January 2018), for which she put together the call for paper. Chi's native knowledge of Vietnamese culture and literature will add a dimension of authenticity.

**Chitra Sankaran** (Ph.D.) is an Associate Professor in the Department of English Language and Literature, NUS. Her research interests include South and Southeast Asian fiction, feminist theory and ecocriticism. In 2012 she published with SUNY Press, *History, Narrative and Testimony in Amitav Ghosh's Fiction*. Her other publications include monographs, edited volumes on Asian Literatures, chapters in books and research articles in IRJs including Journal of Commonwealth Literature, ARIEL, Theatre Research International, Journal of South Asian Literature, Australian Feminist Studies and Critical Asian Studies. She is an invited contributor to the Oxford History of the Novel in English (OHNE) series. She is currently working on ecofeminism in South Asian and Southeast Asian fictions.

**Gurpreet Kaur** (Ph.D.) has recently finished her Ph.D. in English and Comparative Literatures from the University of Warwick, UK. She did her B.A (Hons) and M.A degrees in English Language and Literature from the National University of Singapore. Her research, publications and conference presentations centre on postcolonial ecofeminism, South Asian and Southeast Asian fiction, film and gender studies.

**Helen Tiffin** Helen Tiffin is Honorary Professor of English and Animal Studies at the University of Wollongong, Australia. She previously held Professorships at the Universities of Queensland, Tasmania, and a Senior Research Chair at Queen's University in Canada. She has published numerous articles and authored, co-authored and edited ten books on

post-colonial literatures, environment, and animal studies. Her current research is on problems and conflicts in conservation philosophy, policies and practices in a world increasingly affected by the pressures of climate change and human overpopulation.

**Jose Monfred C. Sy** has recently become an instructor at the University of the Philippines. He earned a Bachelor of Arts (Comparative Literature), *summa cum laude*, from the College of Arts and Letters of the same University. His research interests include the intersections between digital humanities and video game studies; ecocriticism and nature writing; spatiality and travel writing; and Marxism and children's literature. He is also a student and human rights activist.

**Gabriela Lee** has been published for her poetry and fiction in the Philippines, Singapore, the United States, and Australia. Her first book of fiction is titled *Instructions on How to Disappear: Stories* (Visprint Inc., 2016). Her previous works include *Disturbing the Universe: Poems* (NCCA Ubod New Writers Prize, 2006) and *La-on and the Seven Headed Dragon* (Adarna House, 2002). She received her BA in English Studies: Creative Writing from the University of the Philippines and her MA in Literary Studies from the National University of Singapore (NUS). She currently teaches literature and creative writing at the University of the Philippines. You can find out more about her work at [www.sundialgirl.com](http://www.sundialgirl.com).

**Dang Thi Bich Hong** was born in 1986. She grew up in Ban Nguyen Village, Lam Thao District, Phu Tho Province, Vietnam. After graduating from Hanoi National University of Education in 2008, she began her career in Hung Vuong University as a lecturer. She completed her Ph.D. in literary theory in 2016. She is the co-author of a book entitled *Postmodern Literary Criticism in Vietnam* (2013). Her publications include: *Teaching French Literature for Students of Philology Teacher Education: Difficulties and Solutions* (2012), *Paul Auster's City of Glass: Myth of Labyrinth in the Postmodern Period* (2013), *The Authorship of The New York Trilogy: Labyrinth of the Intellectual Game in Paul Auster's Novel* (2015) and *The Anti-Detective Fiction* (2015), *The Characteristics of the Plot of Detective Fiction* (2016). In addition to her research, she is a lecturer in literary theory and foreign literature at Hung Vuong University.

**Hoang To Mai** is a vice dean of the Foreign Literature Department, Institute of literature. Her specialism is the romantic period in American literature. She also writes about contemporary Vietnamese literature, and recently she is interested in Vietnamese literature from an ecological perspective. She is the chief editor of two books, *Romantic literature from*

*other readings* and *What is Ecocriticism*. She is the author of some short story collections such as *White cloud menu*, *Hey, Blue shirt with white collar*, *A quiet song*. Many of her short stories have subtle ecological implications. She really wishes the Vietnamese people were more interested in the environment, especially writers and artists because their talents and fame can influence people's perception of serious environmental pollution in Vietnam.

**Le Thi Huong Thuy** is currently senior researcher of Vietnam Institute of Literature (Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences). She is the vice-chair of the Department of Contemporary Vietnamese Literature. She is the co-author of *Từ điển tác phẩm văn xuôi Việt Nam* [Dictionary of Contemporary Vietnamese Prose] (two volumes) (2006), *Tiểu thuyết và truyện ngắn Việt Nam từ 1975 đến nay* [Vietnamese Novels and Short Stories since 1975] (2012) and other books. She has published a number of articles in Vietnamese studying contemporary Vietnamese novels from perspectives of feminism, ecocriticism, and semiotics.

**Nguyen Thi Nhu Trang** is currently a lecturer of Department of Western Literature, Faculty of Literature, University of Social Sciences and Humanities (USSH), Vietnam National University (VNU), Hanoi. She was a student of honour program in USSH, VNU. She got a scholarship at Moscow State University (MSU/MGU), Russia in 2009. She earned her PhD in Russian Literature at the University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Vietnam National University, Hanoi in 2012. She teaches Russian Literature course for undergraduate students and some courses for graduate students such as 'Genre poetics of myth-novel', 'Theories of modernism and post-modernism', 'Film Narratology'. Her main research interests are national identity and religion in literature, migration and literature, spiritual deep ecology and religion. Her recent publication is "Master and Margarita by M. Bulgakov: a myth-novel". VNU press: 2016. She served as coordinator, ASLE-ASEAN coordinating committee for 'Ecologies in Southeast Asian Literature: histories, myths and societies' workshop, 26-27 January 2018. At present, she is the person in charge of VNU research project: 'Russian identity through Messianism in literature'.

**Christian CULAS** is an anthropologist at French National Center for Scientific Research (CNRS), Centre Norbert Elias, EHESS, Marseille, France. He spent 25 years of fieldwork about ethnic minorities groups and development projects research in Thailand, Laos and Vietnam. He has a thorough knowledge of lowland societies in Southeast Asia (Thai, Lao and Vietnamese) and highland ethnic groups (Hmong, Tay, Yao). Since 2005, He has specialised expertise in applied anthropology and sociology of

ecotourism, sustainable tourism and about relationships between societies and the natural resources (Local knowledge and governance on natural resources management, Non-Timber Forest Products (NTFP), slash and burn cultivation, agro-forestry, and Conservation Agriculture). His current research focuses on the emergence of environmental awareness in Vietnam among urban citizens, peasants, NGOs and associations, industrial firms and civil servants.

**Timothy F. Ong** teaches at the Department of English and Comparative Literature, University of the Philippines—Diliman. He graduated with the MA in Literary and Cultural Studies from Ateneo de Manila University last 2017. In 2014, he was awarded the Asian Graduate Student Fellowship from the Asia Research Institute, National University of Singapore for his research on the tropics of eroticism in travel literatures in Southeast Asia. His research interests include postcolonial eroticism, tropical studies, geopoetics, ecocriticism, Philippine literatures, corporeality, and world poetry.

**Nguyen Thi Mai Lien** teaches at the Faculty of Philology, Ha Noi National University of Education, Vietnam. She graduated with the PhD in Literature of Asian Nations from Institute of Literature, Graduate Academy of Social Sciences, Vietnam last 1999. In 2014, She was recognised as an Associate Professor by the Vietnamese State Council for Professor Title in 2014. Her research interests include Culture and Literature of Asian Nations, Comparative Literature.

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