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gros du marché intérieur des pays de la région, tout en constituant le terreau sur lequel se construit la « société civile ».

L’ouvrage, dans une troisième partie, revient sur les sources de tension en Asie du sud-est et du nord-est. Il rappelle que les attentats de New York font planer sur la région une nouvelle menace, celle de l’islamisme, qui s’ajoute aux trois points chauds traditionnels de la région : la péninsule coréenne, Taiwan et la mer de Chine méridionale. Pour le moment, note Tertrais, la réponse donnée à ces différentes menaces apparaît essentiellement nationale. Dans l’état actuel des choses, il semble impossible, en effet, qu’elles puissent recevoir un traitement régional de la part de l’ASEAN, en raison notamment de l’absence de volonté politique et d’une capacité commune d’intervention. Cette situation hypothèque les chances de paix durable dans cette zone, compte tenu de la course aux armements qui y règne et du déséquilibre des rapports de force. Celui-ci reste, en effet, largement en faveur du Nord, où Japon, Corée du Sud, Chine et Taiwan dépensent ensemble quatre fois plus pour leur défense que les dix pays de l’ASEAN réunis. Au total, ce livre présente une approche claire et détaillée de ce fait majeur que représente la crise asiatique. L’auteur en démonte les mécanismes de manière rigoureuse et effective un état des lieux dense, telle celle portant sur « Les dynamiques migratoires », auraient mérité quelques cartes ou schémas clarificateurs. On peut également s’interroger sur la pertinence du titre, sachant que l’analyse met principalement l’accent sur l’enjeu régional, l’approche mondiale restant, somme toute, relativement marginale. On peut aussi regretter un certain flou dans le champ géographique qui, tout en semblant vouloir se concentrer sur la seule Asie du sud-est, inclut des états situés géographiquement hors de cette zone, tels la Corée du sud, Taiwan et l’entité de Hong Kong. Il est aussi étonnant que l’auteur ne fasse allusion que d’une manière très superficielle au rôle économique important des Chinois dans cette région, alors que l’on connaît leur influence primordiale, dans ce domaine, dans certains pays. La carte intitulée « Les Chinois en Asie du Sud-Est » apparaît d’ailleurs relativement approximative, puisqu’elle ne fait mention ni de l’île de Hainan ni de la province chinoise du Guangxi parmi les régions d’origine des Chinois de la diaspora ; de plus, les indications qu’elle livre sont sujettes à caution, puisqu’elle suggère, par exemple, que les Chinois du Vietnam (Hoa) sont environ 4 millions, alors que les indications les plus optimistes les chiffrent à environ 1 300 000 individus. Enfin, on note que la carte qui détaille les contestations croisées sur la mer de Chine méridionale ne fait guère mention de la présence des forces taiwanaises sur l’îlot de Itu Aba, situé dans l’archipel des Spratleys, ni des revendications de Taiwan sur cet archipel.

Cela étant, ces quelques remarques n’enlèvent rien de la valeur de cet ouvrage, qui apporte des éléments précieux à tous ceux qui souhaitent mieux comprendre les défis économiques et politiques qui sont ceux de l’Asie du sud-est aujourd’hui.


By Cristina EGHENTER*

The book Conserving Nature in Culture. Case Studies from Southeast Asia surely offers an intriguing and thought-provoking title, playing on the reversal of the logic that has so far entrenched our way of thinking around the issue of nature conservation: Nature is separate from culture, and can be preserved as long as culture is not encroaching.

The authors of this edited volume invite readers to reconsider the stereotyped thinking based on “orthodox dichotomies” (p. 7) of nature vs. culture, and instead look at the possibility that culture as human actions may, under certain conditions, maintain critical dimensions of the environment (p. 2), and that nature may be actually conserved in the cultural traditions and practices of forest communities around Southeast Asia.

In the introduction, the editors argue that the real challenge is to inquire about the conditions that support conservation, including those social, economic, and historical factors that have helped preserve biodiversity. Culture embodied in the experiments and traditional management systems of communities living in and around forest areas helps conserve nature, and influences the level of
biodiversity. Traditional strategies are often based on the exploitation of diverse microenvironments and a wide array of resources, maintain a broad selection of cultivars, and are dispersed over the landscape. As Sajise et al. put it with reference to the Mount Makiling Forest Reserve in the Philippines, “the combination of subsistence use of forest resources and a highly diverse cultivation strategy produces an overall positive effect on floral and faunal diversity at landscape level” (pp. 266-267). The methodology must also be modified to measure biodiversity with a variety of tools and a combination of qualitative and quantitative techniques. About the Haliap-Panubtaban area in the Philippines, Ticsay similarly underlines how the dimension of landscape, as opposed to island or isolated forest areas, becomes the key unit of measurement for nature conservation and biodiversity assessment, “[..] agroforestry systems are viewed as components of diversity at the landscape level […] to contribute to the overall ecosystem health…” (p. 213).

What has been seen as human “disturbance” often played an integral part in the composition of the environment as we know it. For example, Puri provides a thorough description of “the role of humans in the creation and maintenance of vegetation communities in a rain forest” (p. 28) and, specifically, the ways in which the Punan's forest camps and related activities might have effects, some ephemeral and other more lasting, on the species composition and perpetuation of forest fruit groves and the distribution of hill sago. The chapter by Puri is also instructive with regard to the interdisciplinary methodological approach employed that can yield better and more comprehensive results on the complex interactions of human activities and natural ecosystems.

Yet, government policies have often failed to recognize the effectiveness of local practices for the sustainability of the environment, or denied that local people could be actively involved in the management of these resources. The outcome is that inappropriate policies might have some serious negative consequences on the overall preservation of the environment and its carrying capacity. This aspect is most convincingly discussed by Budhi et al. with regard to the management of the Citarum River Basin in West Java (pp. 119-143). The authors argue that government policies in forestry and agriculture do not reflect circumstances on the ground, and their implementation has not been coordinated. Moreover, policies often gave priority to short-term economic benefits over long-term sustainability (e.g., cultivation of vegetables). They have neglected to take into account local practices, like bamboo gardens and intercropping, which had valuable effects on the management of resources and the prevention of soil erosion.

Is this failure to recognize an indication of oversight or institutional denial? The chapter by Lye (pp. 83-115) suggests that we might be dealing with different ontological premises. The “ecocentric” scientific model has so far defined the conceptual boundaries of nature conservation. However, this is one way of looking at the issue and managing a protected forest. The author underlines the cognitive (and, maybe, practical) advantage of alternative models of conservation by describing the environmental knowledge of the Batek of Peninsular Malaysia.

For the Batek, people are part of the forest by definition (p. 83), they guard the forest (p. 116). The author also suggests that the Batek way of managing the forest might help recreate the conditions that promote a view of nature inside society, and therefore make it acceptable for the Batek to be involved in park management. But in order to do that, a shift in relations and flow direction must happen, and the conceptual and structural periphery be given center stage.

At the level of political economy, Dove presents a similar analogy (pp. 279-305). By describing the structural position of communities as the custodians of biodiversity and owners of genetic resources at the periphery of an asymmetrical system, he argues that proposed mechanisms like intellectual property rights and compensation for biodiversity conservation would have positive and lasting results for development and biodiversity conservation only if the inequities embodied in certain structural and unequal relations between the center and periphery, or between power and economic elites and marginal communities, are changed, and communities at the periphery are not incorporated into the system but more equitably re-positioned as political actors. In the case of rice farmers, as discussed by Frossard (pp. 144-166), this would mean more politically asserted peasant scientists (p. 161), plant breeders taking charge of rice
genetic diversity and germoplasm so far controlled or preserved in the cold storages of research centers in Asia.

The richness of case studies and cohesiveness of the overall theme make this volume an interesting reader for students and scholars in the social sciences, and a must-read for those conservationists who still harbor skepticism regarding the positive impact of human activities on natural ecosystems. Existing differences at the level of theoretical analysis and conceptual engagement among the various contributions can be understood in the context of an edited volume encompassing studies carried out independently, at different times, and with slightly different priorities, although under the umbrella of a single project.

At another level, however, a critical remark must be made. The authors seem to promote the view that “conserving nature in culture” is a new beginning, a fresh re-start in the debate on nature conservation. It might be, but only to some extent. The literature, among academics as well as practicing anthropologists, has long focused on the many ways of conservation away from the monolithic idea of conservation rooted in the “ecocentric” scientific model of the West.

In particular, many practitioners working with conservation organizations in Southeast Asia have increasingly come to recognize the value and role of local communities in the management of the forest and conservation areas. Community-based management of natural resources and collaborative management of national parks are some of the approaches that have become accepted and common practices in conservation. The rationale for these strategies is precisely the recognition that local people have devised techniques and ways that strengthen rather than hinder conservation, and these techniques could be incorporated in official policies. A few examples come to mind. A seven-year-long research project carried out in the interior of Indonesian Borneo, Culture and Conservation (1991-97), aimed at learning about “what communities are doing that supports environmental conservation and how [we can] strengthen these activities” (p. 2), which is the main question raised by the book. Similarly, an entire issue of the journal Policy Matters is devoted to “History, Culture and Conservation” (No. 13, November 2004) to show how conservation is embedded in history and society, as both a process and a product. The research results of the Culture and Conservation project were instrumental in developing a different, more people-centered management in the Kayan Mentarang National Park, in Indonesian Borneo. The authors also suggest that, “a better solution lies in identifying local institutions that have the potential to conserve the environment...” (p. 7).

Most practitioners would certainly agree with this approach, with the sole caveat of not romanticizing a revival of traditional arrangements, but focus instead on functional substitutes that fit present circumstances.

A redrawing of the boundaries of conservation and conservation priorities is already taking place within the conservation practicing community and various experiments in policy advocacy and policy making. From this point of view, the book might not break any new ground, but rather reinforce a notion that has already become established among practitioners: Preserving nature can only be done with or in culture.

One important question remains, which is indirectly tackled by Dove in his chapter, while most of the contributors come short of addressing it: Notwithstanding all the research results and information available, why have there been comparatively few achievements in terms of influencing policy towards more pro-poor, pro-conservation, and anthropocentric policies? The answer, however, might need to be sought in terms of power centers and economic relations rather than in concepts of nature and culture.

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Note