Global Environmental Crises and Asia

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Open to the general public

The term “Anthropocene,” coined in the 1980s by the ecologist Eugene F. Stoermer and popularized at the turn of the twenty-first century by the atmospheric chemist and Nobel laureate Paul Crutzen, has been used increasingly in the past decade to highlight human activity as a geological force and to underscore the rapidly escalating impacts of human behaviors on the planet—sufficient, many have argued, to launch a new geological age. While geologists and environmentalists continue to debate the validity of Anthropocene as a formal designation, climate change, mass extinctions of plant and animal species, and widespread pollution of sky, sea, and land make clear the extent to which humans have shaped global ecologies. An understanding of Asia—home to more than half the world’s population, an increasingly significant contributor to global carbon dioxide emissions, the site of the Third Pole, and an area acutely vulnerable to climate change and rising sea levels—is vital to an understanding of the physical, chemical, biological, and cultural processes that comprise the Anthropocene. This paper will give an overview of environmental concerns in Asia and then introduce the work of several Asian writers, exploring how literary works from the region have grappled with environmental crises from the local to the global.

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Karen Thornber is Professor of Comparative Literature and of East Asian Languages and Civilizations at Harvard University, where she has served as Chair of Comparative Literature and Chair of Regional Studies East Asia. Her research and teaching center on world literature and the literatures and cultures of East Asia (China, Japan, Korea, Taiwan). Thornber is the author of two international award-winning academic books: Empire of Texts in Motion: Chinese, Korean, and Taiwanese Transculturations of Japanese Literature (Harvard 2009 and Ecoambiguity: Environmental Crises and East Asian Literature (Michigan 2012), as well as about sixty articles/chapters in edited volumes on such topics as diaspora, trauma, transculturation (including translation), postcolonialism, world literature, and the environmental and medical humanities. Thornber is also an award-winning translator of Japanese literature and was guest editor for a special issue of the journal Literature and Medicine. Her current book projects include a monograph on global world literature and health, a global history of leprosy, and an examination of cultural interplays between East Asia and the Indian Ocean Rim, as well as a guest-edited issue of Humanities on global indigeneities.